CROWD CONTROL: ORGANIZING THE CROWD AT YELP

by

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ABSTRACT

DAVID ANDREW ASKAY. Crowd control: organizing the crowd at yelp.
(Under the direction of DR. LORIL GOSSETT)

This dissertation investigates how businesses are able to align the collective actions of a disconnected crowd with the strategic goals of the organization. I examined this questions within the context of the business review website Yelp through a quantitative analysis of nearly 60,000 business reviews, 17 in-depth qualitative interviews with reviewers, and a two-year ethnography. Interpreting the results of this data within the framework of the collective action space (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012) indicates that Yelp is able to manage the contributions of a relatively small subset of reviewers through the Yelp Elite Squad. Rather than simply motivating more reviews, the Elite Squad encouraged reviewers to interact more personally with other reviewers and accept increased institutional engagement with Yelp. In encouraging members of the crowd to produce online reviews within this context, Yelp was able to use organizational culture as a control strategy for encouraging Elite reviewers to adopt a pre-mediated reviewing approach to their reviews. This increased the frequency of moderate reviews and decreased the frequency of extreme reviews. This behavior ultimately furthers the organizational goals of Yelp, as moderate reviews are considered to be more helpful for reviews of businesses. Finally, implications for crowdsourcing, big data analysis, and theory are discussed.

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questions that challenged me to think about the larger theoretical issues of participation and membership.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"How can you get crowds to do what your business needs done?"
- Malone, Laubacher, and Dellarocas (2010, p. 21)

People have long paid for product (e.g., Consumer Reports Magazine) and business reviews (e.g., Zagat) from experts to guide decisions about products to buy and businesses to patron. In the past decade, however, people have increasingly turned to a new communication channel for this information—the online reviews contributed by the crowd. Moving away from a single rating offered by an expert, these online reviews aggregate the range of opinions expressed by thousands of people in determining the quality of a product or business. Being perceived to be less biased and more trustworthy, online reviews have become one the most trusted sources of product and business information for the public (Jansen, 2010).

The study of online reviews has increased dramatically across disciplines such as information systems, management, communication studies, and advertising. On websites like Amazon.com, Yelp.com, Google Places, and TripAdvisor.com, online reviews produced by the crowd have become a powerful source of influence that guides the purchase decisions of the public. Although there are some exceptions (e.g., Bronner & de Hoog, 2011), the vast majority of these studies focus on online reviews as antecedents that predict outcomes such as sales, purchase decisions, or trust.

Yet, not all reviews are created the same, as some reviews may be considered more helpful than other by viewers. That is to say aspects such as extreme versus moderate ratings, persuasive tactics, and reviewer characteristics can all impact how helpful reviews are to viewers (Chen, Dhanasobhon, & Smith, 2006; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & de Ridder, 2011). This is an important consideration for businesses that design and maintain online review platforms, as they often compete with other review websites for advertising revenue. The notion that businesses rely on a "if you build it, they will come" strategy of designing crowdsourced platforms is both practically and theoretically unsatisfying. From a business standpoint, there is much uncertainty in relying on a crowd of volunteer reviewers to produce not just reviews, but helpful reviews. Yet contemporary theoretical thought on crowdsourcing online reviews have a binary conception of participation—people choose to contribute a review or they do not (see Malone et al., 2010). There is little theoretical room to consider how individuals might choose to participant in different ways, such as producing more or less helpful reviews.

From this gap emerges the question of how businesses organize the crowd to produce *helpful* reviews. Departing from the dominate functionalist approach to investigating how organizations motivate contributions to crowdsourcing platforms through incentives (e.g., Malone et al., 2010), this dissertation adopts an interpretivist approach to investigate the context in which online reviews are produced through both quantitative and qualitative data. Moreover, by situating the production of online reviews with the framework of collective action theory, this approach opens up theoretical space

to consider how businesses can influence the crowd to produce reviews that align with organizational goals.

1.1 Rationale for Research

The production of online reviews falls into the emerging line of research about crowdsourcing, in which businesses design a technological platform that enables anyone to contribute to some type of collective action effort, such as producing reviews, writing encyclopedia articles, or problem-solving. This dissertation is specifically concerned with collective action when crowds are mobilized through crowdsourcing platforms that are designed and controlled by firms with commercial interests. Such businesses often rely on the quality of contributions to attract viewers, which then provides advertising revenue. Given the existence of several online review websites with overlapping content areas, there is competition among these businesses to solicit the production of high quality reviews.

Yet, this is problematic because it is unclear how a business can influence the crowd to produce such desirable reviews. Crowdsourcing represents a dramatic shift from classical conceptions of collective action, which has traditionally relied on formal organizations to coordinate the actions of participants in the pursuit of collective goals (Walker, 1991). The crowd embodies the kind of "knowledge intensive, radically decentralized, participative, adaptive, flexible, efficient, and responsive" (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 350) organizing that has long been believed to flourish in the technologically connected environment (Hastings, 1993; Miles & Snow, 1986; Monge & Fulk, 1999; Nohria & Berkley, 1994; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 1993). In this way, crowdsourcing provides an alternate to hierarchy, bureaucracy, and traditional

management structures (Malone et al., 2010; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007) that have been used to control the collective action of individuals. In recognizing the ability for individuals to choose how to participate in collective action, scholars note that "people are now more able than ever to act however they see fit, readily acting beyond the constraints imposed by a context for collective action once largely dominated and controlled by organizations" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 179). In this disconnected, decentralized, and organization-less technological environment, it is unclear how organizations are able to coordinate the production of high-quality online reviews.

In contributing to collective action on Amazon.com, for example, individuals can write reviews, vote on the helpfulness of reviews, contribute in discussion forums, or even post product reviews on Facebook or Twitter accounts. While all of these actions arguably support the goals of the organization, the diversity in how people can choose to participate illustrates the increased agency for people to create their own experience of membership and participate in a style of their choosing (Bimber et al., 2012). This increased agency among individuals reflects a decrease in control for organizations.

A prime challenge of organizations is to coordinate the action of participants in the pursuit of collective goals. Control is an inevitable feature of organizing, requiring individual members to conform their actions to meet collective goals (Tannenbaum, 1962). Yet, in the relative absence of formalized routines, centralized decision-making, and specific roles in crowdsourcing platforms, it is unclear how organizational leaders are able to influence the collective actions of a crowd to meet the commercial goals of a

business. After all, not all forms of participation in an online crowdsourcing platform advance the commercial goals of a business.

Scholars are beginning to consider crowdsourcing and other social media websites "in commercial terms as products and services with costumers and users" (Youmans & York, 2012, p. 315). From this perspective, businesses attempting to harness the crowd must—to a degree—rely on the uncoordinated collective action of crowds to achieve organizational goals. Yet, the very agency available to individuals to pursue collective action also frees them to participate in ways that may not further—and might even run counter to—organizational goals. Indeed, the success of crowdsourced projects may rest not so much in the number of contributions, but in the right kind of contributions. Unsuccessful crowdsourcing platforms such as CrowdSpirit (Chanal & Caron-Fasan, 2010) and Cambrian House illustrate that often crowds do not always participate as intended. As the former-CEO of Cambrian House reflected "the wisdom of crowds worked well in the model, but it was our participation of crowds aspect which broke down" (as cited in Schonfeld, May 12, 2008).

These examples demonstrate the agency afforded to individuals in participating in crowdsourced collective action. Clearly, organizations wishing to harness the crowd have a desired way in which individuals can participate. Yet the same decentralized structures that enable their contributions also free them to participate in other ways. This harkens back to the opening quotation to this chapter, in which Malone et al. (2010) pose the question to businesses, "How can you get crowds to do what your business needs done?" (p. 21). This highlights the central inquiry of this dissertation: *in the absence of*

traditional control mechanisms, how do businesses align collection action of the crowd to organizational goals?

As the aforementioned failed crowdsourcing projects can attest to, businesses seeking to use crowdsourcing need not just participants, but the right kind of participation to be successful. Yet, in the absence of formalized routines, centralized decision-making, and specific roles associated with traditional collective action, how do businesses influence the crowd to participate in the desired way? It is unclear if and how organizational leaders influence the actions of a crowd.

1.2 Purpose of the Dissertation

With technology providing the tools to self-organize in the hands of individuals, the considerable concern emerges of "how formal organizations cope with the enhanced agency available to their members" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 184). This agency has significantly blurred traditional boundaries of membership, participation, and even conceptions of private versus public information. Consequently, these technologies enable people to "use this agency to enact different styles of participation, rather than just uniformly becoming more involved" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 179). This challenges traditional approaches to investigating collective action, in which traditional objects of study—such as organizational structures and strategy—may have less meaning when members can choose to participate in different ways. Rather, Bimber et al. (2012) advocate for investigating variations of how participants experience collective action within a single organization. In other words, scholars should examine how participants experience collective action differently, given the agency afforded to them.

In response to these emerging issues, Bimber et al. (2012) have developed the theory of the collective action space, which moves away from binary conceptions of participation to understanding the variance in how individuals experience collective action efforts. The two primary components of this theory—interaction and engagement—create a two-dimensional space which visualizes various participatory styles of individuals pursing collective action. In doing so, it presents a useful framework for investigating how individuals with various participatory styles make substantially different contributions to collective action.

1.3 Context of the Dissertation

Using the collective action space framework, this dissertation investigates collective action in Yelp. Yelp is a crowd-sourced platform that collects and displays reviews of businesses. Yelp is also a publically-traded company that relies on the collective contributions of the crowd to attract viewers in order to earn advertising revenue. Currently being the 46th most visited website in the U.S. (Alexa.com, 2013), the success of Yelp makes it an appropriate and compelling context to examine the extent to which the leadership at Yelp is able to influence the contributions of the crowd to produce helpful reviews.

This dissertation draws from both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate how participants experience collective action in Yelp. Specifically, it compares the experience and contributions between two groups of reviewers: the Elite and Non-Elite. While anyone may contribute a review, Yelp formally recognizes and rewards a small sub-set of reviewers with membership into the Elite Squad. Elite reviewers receive a digital badge on their profile and may also receive rewards, such as access to free

monthly parties and tickets to local events. The existence of this organizationally-sanctioned and rewarded group suggests that they further organizational goals by embodying a desired style of participation.

This dissertation investigates the collective action of reviewers on Yelp. An analysis of nearly 60,000 reviews revealed significant differences in the nature of reviews produced by Elite and Non-Elite members, with the Elite reviewers being far more moderate in their ranking and evaluations of businesses. Incidentally, research investigating helpful reviews for experience goods—such as businesses and restaurants—demonstrates that viewers of such goods find moderate reviews to be more helpful (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Interviews with 17 Yelp reviewers examined the mechanisms by which Yelp encourages Elite reviewers to contribute the moderate reviews the general public is seeking; increasing the value of Yelp and its dominance in the marketplace. Finally, I draw from two years of ethnographic participation as an Elite reviewer to triangulate qualitative findings and provide insight into local meanings of what it is to participate in Yelp.

The results of this study illustrates that through the Yelp Elite Squad, reviewers are encouraged to develop personal relationships with other reviewers and accept increased degree of institutional control. It is through producing reviews within this context that Elite reviewers adopt a pre-meditated approach to reviewing, which yields moderate reviews.

1.4 Organization of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, Chapter II presents a literature review divided into two parts. The first part describes the emerging research surrounding online crowds and

crowdsourcing, with specific attention focused on studies involving online reviews. The second part of the literature review then situates crowdsourcing within the framework of collective action and introduces the theoretical framework of the study. I conclude with my research question.

Chapter III beings with a rich description of the research site for this study—Yelp.com After this, I describe my interpretivist entomology and how this informs my approach to answering the research question. Next, I present my data collection and analysis procedures, which includes the over 60,000 reviewers produced by reviewers in Charlotte, NC and 17 in-depth qualitative interviewers with Elite and Non-Elite reviewers.

Chapter IV presents the results from the quantitative analysis of reviews. Through comparing the distribution of reviews produced by Elite and Non-Elite reviews, this analysis demonstrates that these groups of reviewers produce fundamentally different kinds of reviews. Specifically, Elite reviewers produce more moderate reviews. Through qualitative analysis of 17 interviews with reviewers, Chapter V provides insights as to why Elite reviewers tend to produce more moderate reviews and how Yelp is able to encourage this behavior.

Chapter VI offers a discussion and integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings. Framing these findings within the context of the collective action space reveals that, rather than simply motivating reviews, the Yelp Elite Squad motivates reviewers to develop relationships with other reviewers and accept a degree of control from the organization. This in turn fosters the development of a pre-meditated approach to

reviewing among Elites, as opposed to a reaction reviewing approach experienced by Non-Elites.

Chapter VII concludes the study with a discussion of implications for theory, practice, and methodology. Limitations of the study are presented and opportunities for future research are discussed.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation is concerned with how businesses organize online crowds. Yet, 'the crowd' is a somewhat vaguely defined term in the literature. It generally refers to activities that "can be undertaken by *anyone in a large group who chooses to do so*, without being assigned by someone in a position of authority" (Malone et al., 2010, p. 26, emphasis in the original). In this way, online crowds embody elements of decentralization, distribution, and self-organization. While crowds certainly occur in offline settings (e.g., the Occupy Wall Street Movement), this dissertation is concerned with crowds that are enabled through technology (e.g., Wikipedia, Threadless, Amazon, etc.).

In the first half of this literature review, I describe online crowds and how businesses are increasingly interested in harnessing them through crowdsourcing platforms. Given the great diversity of crowdsourcing platforms, I then narrow the focus to a discussion of online review websites. A review of the online review literature suggests that crowdsourcing firms have a financial interest in producing not simply large quantities of reviews, but reviews that are considered helpful to the public. This discussion reveals that commercial online review websites often have a financial interest in encouraging the production of moderate reviews, as the public finds these more helpful. The second half of the literature review situates crowdsourcing as a form of collective action organization and introduces the theoretical framework for the study.

2.1 Part I: The Crowd

As described by Surowiecki (2004), crowds consist of diverse, independent, and decentralized individuals. When organized through technology to pursue some task—usually innovating, evaluating, or problem-solving—crowds can produce outputs that are generally superior to any single individual in the crowd (Howe, 2008; Malone et al., 2010). This is because many dysfunctional social and group behaviors (e.g., information cascades, groupthink, homophily, etc.) are suppressed when the diverse knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and abilities of independent and decentralized individuals are collected and aggregated (Surowiecki, 2004). While the wisdom of crowds has existed before contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs), recent ICTs have expanded the scale at which potential participants can be harnessed—effectively including anyone who wants to participate (Malone et al., 2010).

The capacity to harness crowds through technology at a massive scale quickly and inexpensively has led business to use crowdsourcing for meeting many organizational goals. For example, the website InnoCentive.com enables the crowd to compete to solve research and design problems of organizations, while other websites like TripAdvisor.com collect online reviews of hotels. The collective actions of the crowd financially benefit the business (e.g., through advertising revenue), while the crowd is rewarded for their efforts with incentives such as status, money, or social benefits (Malone et al., 2010). However, participants are very seldom paid—one of the prime organizational motivations of using the crowd is to "save money by finding people willing to do the tasks for free" (Malone et al., 2010, p. 26).

This underscores a central idea to this dissertation: that many crowdsourcing platforms are designed and controlled by a commercial firm with a profit motive. There are of course examples of successful non-profit crowdsourcing projects (e.g., Linux and Wikipedia). However, this dissertation focuses on crowds that are harnesses and incorporated into the core operations and strategies of a business. For example, Google Places and TripAdvisor.com both rely on advertising for revenue, which places pressure on these competing businesses to curate the most helpful database of reviews to attract the largest audience. It is these types of commercial crowdsourcing platforms that are the topic of this dissertation.

Still, there is great diversity among crowdsourcing platforms. While they tend to share similar elements, these elements are often combined and used in different ways depending on the various goals of the platform (Malone et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study, I am interested in crowdsourcing that involves the production of online reviews. Becoming extensively studied across disciplines, examples of these platforms include Amazon, Yelp, TripAdviser, Google Places, and IMBD, which generally earn revenue through sales and/or advertising. These online reviews consist of a numeric rating (e.g., 1-5 stars) and unstructured open-ended comments. In addition to enabling the crowd to contribute reviews, many of these websites also provide other features through which participants can participate—such as community forums, badges, comments, votes for reviews, and private messaging. These features are often a part of an incentive system for contributing, as they provide opportunities for social interaction and also for gaining status and recognition.

2.1.1 Online Reviews

According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 78% of U.S. adults that use the internet look for product or service information (Jansen, 2010). Frequently, this information is in the form of a consumer review posted to websites such as Amazon, IMBD, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Citysearch, Epinions, and Google Places. These internet websites crowdsource online reviews such that anyone that wants to contribute is able to submit reviews of products, movies, businesses, and hotels. Not originating from paid marketers, the opinions expressed by the crowd are highly trusted by the public and can have significant influence on attitudes towards products, services, and businesses (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991).

Not surprisingly, research on online reviews has increased tremendously recently, with topics including sales (Chevalier & Goolsbee, 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008), trust (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002), reviewer characteristics (Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Otterbacher, 2012), motivations (Mackiewicz, 2008; Yew, 2009), rhetoric (Otterbacher, 2011), and biases (Dellarocas & Wood, 2008; Hu, Pavlou, & Zhang, 2007; Jøsang, Ismail, & Boyd, 2007; Mackiewicz, 2008; Otterbacher & Hemphill, 2012). Some of these studies have identified different outcomes based on the kind of things that are being reviewed. Specifically, the categories of search goods and experience goods are frequently used.

2.1.2 Search versus Experience Goods

Scholars investing online reviews often specify the types of goods being reviewed. A categorization of either *search goods* or *experience goods* developed by

Nelson (1970, 1974) remains useful for making these distinctions (e.g., Huang, Lurie, &

Mitra, 2009; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Park & Lee, 2009; Willemsen et al., 2011).

Whereas *search goods*, like electronics, can generally be evaluated effectively through

objective specifications before using the product (e.g, knowing the screen size and

resolution of a smartphone), *experience goods*—such as wine, music, and recreational

activities—have intangible qualities that are difficult to evaluate without subjective

sampling first.

A key finding from studies of online reviews is that not all reviews are considered

equally helpful (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Park & Lee, 2009). Different kinds of reviews

(moderate versus extreme) have been shown to be more or less helpful for experience

versus search goods. Specifically, a study of the helpfulness ratings of products on

Amazon demonstrates that consumers find moderate reviews more helpful than extreme

reviews (either entirely negative or positive) when evaluating experience goods

(Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). This means that people find moderate reviews to be more

helpful when evaluating things like food, recreational activities, and wine. This is

because moderate reviews are perceived to be more objective, and thus more credible,

than subjective reviews written by people with extreme opinions. They also generally

tend to be more balanced by including both negative and positive aspects of the

experience. Additionally, being presented with both sides of an argument is generally a

persuasive tactic in marketing (Eisend, 2007).

The production of helpful reviews by the crowd, then, becomes an important

factor for businesses that design and maintain online review platforms. It follows that

websites found to have more helpful reviews will attract a larger audience, which has

direct consequences for advertising revenue. Indeed, the success or failure of a crowdsourced online review system may rest not simply on the number of contributions, but the contribution of helpful reviews. Given that viewers find moderate reviews of experience goods to be more helpful (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010), there is significant pressure on websites like Yelp, TripAdviser, Google Places, and IMBD—which cater specifically to experience goods—to promote the contribution of moderate reviews. This focuses attention away from examining the number of contributions made by the crowd. Rather, it emphasizes the need to consider the types of reviews being produced by the crowd, which focuses attention towards examining the distribution of reviews.

2.1.3 Distribution of Reviews

While moderate reviews may be considered more useful by the public, they are often the least contributed type of review on websites. Studies frequently observe nonparametric distribution of reviews on Amazon.com, Barnesandnoble.com, Citysearch, and Yahoo Local (Chevalier & Goolsbee, 2003; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas & Wood, 2008; Hu et al., 2007; Hu, Zhang, & Pavlou, 2009; Mackiewicz, 2008; Wang, 2010). This nonparametric distribution is referred to as the *J-shaped distribution* because it is marked by high levels of extremely positive ratings, some negative ratings, and very few moderate ratings (see Figure 1).
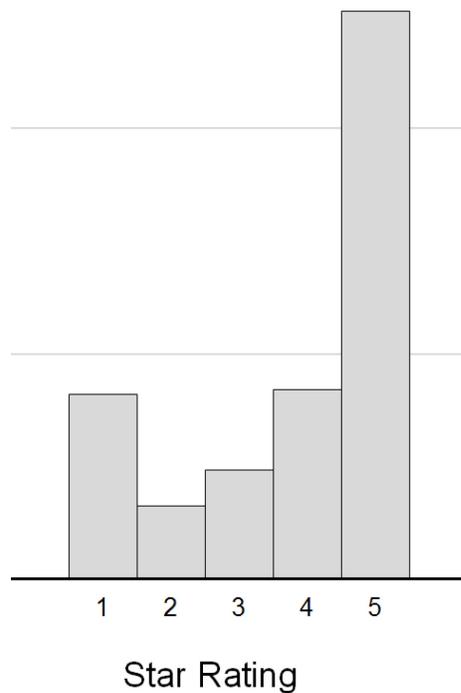
Figure 1: Example of a J-shaped distribution

This J-shaped distribution is problematic because online review websites often display the aggregate mean rating of all contributed reviews to show the overall quality of a product. Consequently, it is the mean rating that is used by both consumers to make purchase decisions and also by scholars when conducting research. However, when distributions are J-shaped, the mean rating is a biased estimate of the overall quality of a product. This impedes the ability of consumers to effectively evaluate the overall quality of a product. It also has contributed to inconsistent results in studies of online reviews. For example, while some studies find that higher *ratings* of online reviews predict higher sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Li & Hitt, 2008), others find that it is actually the sheer *number* of reviews—independent of rating—that is associated with higher sales (Duan et al., 2008; Liu, 2006).

Through a comprehensive analysis of product reviews on Amazon.com, Hu, Pavlou, and Zhang (2007; 2009) investigated the J-shape distribution and identified two sources of bias are attributed to creating this J-shaped distribution: *purchasing bias* and *under-reporting bias*. The purchasing bias occurs because people who anticipate enjoying a product are the ones that tend to purchase it, while people who do not value a product are not likely going to buy it. This prevents many people from having a negative experience to review in the first place, which to contributes to the positive skewing (more positive reviews than negative reviews) commonly found in online reviews (Dellarocas & Wood, 2008; Hu et al., 2007; Mackiewicz, 2008). At the same time, online reviews are often contributed by those with more extreme opinions (1 and 5-stars), while those with more moderate opinions will often not devote the time and effort to contributing a review. This under-reporting bias contributes to the comparatively few moderate reviews for products.

Together, the purchasing bias and under-reporting bias act to elicit reviews in a J-shaped distribution. This was tested through an experiment by Hu, Pavlou, and Zhang (2007) in which research participants were asked to contribute a review of a given product. Including the opinions of all participants yielded a normal unimodal distribution, showing that the majority of people held moderate opinions about this product. However, the reviews on Amazon of the same product yielded a J-shaped distribution, indicating that moderate reviews are seldom produced in real-world settings. In other words, people who produce online review tend to either "brag or moan" about the product, but mostly brag. Importantly, this biased distribution has been commonly found across several

online review websites including product reviews on Amazon and BarnesandNoble.com, but also business reviews on Citysearch and Yahoo Local (Wang, 2010).

Perhaps most notable is the *absence* of the J-shaped distribution for business reviews on Yelp.com—indeed in both Byers, Mitzenmacher, and Zervas (2012) and Wang (2010) report that a negatively skewed but more normal distribution was observed for reviews on Yelp. Moreover, the absence of the J-shaped distribution was specific to Yelp and not shared by other, similar business review websites. Wang's (2010) study found that Citysearch and Yahoo Local—which are also crowdsource reviews of businesses—both have J-shaped distributions of reviews. This suggests that the crowd at Yelp is somehow organized to overcome the under-reporting and purchase bias. This provides a very compelling context in which to investigate how the crowd can be influenced to produce reviews that are desired by the organization.

Still, the literature surrounding the J-shaped distribution reveals two things. First, while people find moderate reviews of experience goods to be most helpful, these are the least contributed kind of reviews. Second, the dearth of moderate reviews biases the aggregate mean rating of product reviews. This produces a mean rating that is a poor estimate of product quality and contributes to the inconsistency of findings across studies about online reviews (Hu et al., 2007). Together, these two findings suggest that competitive businesses have a financial interest in encouraging the production of moderate reviews, particularly if they focus on reviews of experience goods.

2.1.4 Business Interests in Crowdsourced Platforms

While many studies of crowdsourcing focus on the incentives used to motivate participants, few consider the profit motives of the businesses that design and maintain

these platforms. Scholars are beginning to consider crowdsourcing and other social media websites "in commercial terms as products and services with customers and users" (Youmans & York, 2012, p. 315). When considered in this light, the J-shaped distribution poses a significant problem for businesses relying on the crowd to produce online reviews for experience goods. If people are not contributing moderate reviews, it not only biases the overall mean rating for products (Hu et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2009), but also provides few reviews that the public finds most helpful (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Businesses attempting to harness the crowd must—to a degree—rely on the uncoordinated collective action of crowds to achieve organizational goals. Yet, there is also a need of control on the part of the business to ensure that the contributions are helpful. This reveals a theoretical gap in the literature regarding how businesses can manage what the crowd contributes. This is problematic because contemporary models of crowdsourcing implicitly embody a technological deterministic view of harnessing the crowd—simply attract the crowd and reward their participation with an incentive (Malone et al., 2010). Drawing from classical approaches to collective action (Olson, 1965), this conceptualizes participation as binary—the crowd contributes or it does not. There is little room in this theoretical perspective for motivating the crowd to make specific kinds of contributions as each individual in the crowd is viewed as interchangeable.

There is both practical and theoretical need to develop an understanding of how to organize—not simply motivate—the crowd. However, this area is theoretically underdeveloped. Crowdsourcing provides an alternate to hierarchy, bureaucracy, and traditional management structures (Malone et al., 2010; Zammuto et al., 2007). Indeed, it

is the diverse, decentralized, and unconnected nature of crowdsourcing that gives the crowd its wisdom (Surowiecki, 2004). In absence of the traditional organizational structures, it is unclear how businesses can influence the types of contributions the crowd makes to online review websites.

2.1.5 Summary of Crowdsourced Online Reviews

In the first half of this literature review, online review platforms were situated as a form of crowdsourcing, which are often designed and controlled by businesses with commercial interests. These organizations aim to harness the crowd to produce reviews that drive traffic to their website and earn advertising revenue. Yet, not all reviews are found equally helpful by the public. When evaluating experience goods, such as food, wine, and activities, consumers tend to find moderate reviews more helpful than extremely positive or negative reviews. However, several studies routinely demonstrate that online crowds contribute predominantly negative or positive reviews. This is not only unhelpful for evaluating experience goods, but also biases the average rating of goods. While there is a need to understand how to organize the crowd to produce helpful reviews, contemporary theories about crowdsourcing are under-prepared to address how businesses can influence the types of contributions made by the crowd.

The next section of the literature review addresses this gap by situating crowdsourcing within the framework of contemporary collective action. In doing so, this moves the crowdsourcing discussion away from an organization-centric view to focus more on the diversity of individual participation. This not only provides firm theoretical grounding for how to manage the crowd, but also advances the literature of collective action.

2.2 Part II: Crowdsourcing as Collective Action

This section begins with a definition of collective action, followed by descriptions of frequently studied types of collective action organizations. Next, I introduce emerging issues in how contemporary technology is changing how people pursue collective action and how this leads to the development of the theory of collective action space. Finally, I situate crowdsourcing within this theoretical framework and state my research question.

2.2.1 Collective Action

Collective action generally refers to the creation of public goods that are both nonexcludable and nonrival. This means that even people who do not contribute can benefit from the good and that the consumption of the good does not reduce the amount available to others (Hardin, 1982). This includes such efforts as creating parks, changing national policy, and contributing to information databases.

Collective action occurs by "a formally organized named group, most of whose members—whether persons or organizations—are not financially recompensed for their participation" (Knoke, 1986, p. 2). The power of collective action organizations lies in coordinating people with common interests and goals. The challenges of organizing collective action—such as locating sufficient people with shared interests, allocating resources, providing means for contributing, and coordinating actions—has traditionally been the purview of organizations (Benkler, 2006; Walker, 1991). In these ways, organizations can overcome the free-riding problem, in which people consume but not contribute to a public good (Olson, 1965).

Thus far, collective action emerges as a suitable framework for understanding the production of online reviews. Indeed, online reviews can be considered a public good that

can be used by anyone, yet, they depend on the uncompensated contributions of voluntary reviewers. To illustrate how the framework of collective action can further understanding of how organizations can influence crowdsourcing, I introduce two types of the most frequently studied collective action organizations: civic associations and interest groups. Following this, I introduce the growth of collective action through informal networks and self-organized crowds.

2.2.1.1 Civic Associations and Interest Groups

Two predominate types of collective action organizations in particular have received much scholarly attention: civic associations and interest groups. Civic associations stem from the social capital literature in the tradition of Tocqueville (2003) in that they are primarily composed of members that regularly interact and develop personal relationships with one another. As members interact with each other, boundaries between them break down and thus enable the building of trust, development of norms, and formation of common identities. Social connections drive participation in collective action and overcome free-riding by increasing the visibility and absence of participant contributions. In other words, social connections enable participants to hold each other responsible. Yet this reliance on social connections also limits the operational size of civic associations, as participation is dependent on maintaining frequent interactions among members. However, as argued by R. D. Putnam (2000), these types of close-knit associations have steadily declined in society in favor of more impersonal interest groups.

Contrary to civic associations, interest groups are epitomized by clear boundaries between members where mobilizing collective action results from the organization aggregating sheer numbers of unconnected people. As Bimber et al. (2012) explain:

> The power of an interest group lies in the highly circumscribed, bounded member roles and relations that permit scaling to large numbers. Interest groups work in this view by recruiting as many interested people as possible across external boundaries into membership; once inside, members are generally separate from each other but readily accessible to the organization for recruitment and calls to action. (p. 86)

In the absence of strong ties between members—which can yield dysfunctional routines, homogeneity, redundant information, or relational expectations—the root of power in interest groups lie in their ability to mobilize large numbers of diverse and unconnected people for collective action (Marwell & Oliver, 1993).

In sum, both civic associations and interest groups both offer effective paths to collective action. As explained by Bimber et al. (2012):

> Groups with personal interaction can offer significant advantages of attraction, motivation, and rhetorical sensitivity, but are limited in size to the scope of people's ability to manage interactions and relationships. Groups not dependent upon social interaction are free to scale much larger, with resulting gains in clout, but social-capital theorists argue, at the cost of cohesion, trust, identification, and other prosocial consequences of personal interaction. (pp. 86-87)

More recently, however, collective action efforts facilitated through contemporary ICTs has increased the prevalence of collective action efforts with much less need for organizational structure.

2.2.1.2 Informal Networks and Crowds

With the increased ubiquity of technology, there has been an increase in collective action in the form of informal networks and self-organized crowds. Websites like MeetUp.com, for example, have enabled the formation of grassroots clubs and meetings among informal networks of people. At the same time, self-organized crowds have used websites like Facebook and Twitter to mobilize protests and revolutionary movements. Increasingly, these actions are taking place in the absence of formal organizations,

instead connecting, communicating, and organizing with each other through opportunities afforded to them by contemporary technologies. Given the incredible accomplishments of these examples of organization-less organizing, researchers have recently been given much scholarly attention to these forms of collective action (e.g., Hara & Estrada, 2005; Sessions, 2010; Stepanova, 2011; Weinberg & Williams, 2006; Youmans & York, 2012).

2.2.2 Crowdsourcing as Collective Action

From this heritage, crowdsourcing emerges as a form of collective action organization. As described earlier, crowds consist of diverse, independent, and decentralized individuals that can be mobilized to pursue some task determined by an organization. From this account, crowdsourcing appears embody elements of interest groups and self-organized crowds by aggregating the contributions of large numbers of people in the pursuit of collective action. Both interest groups and crowds also generally comprised of loosely connected people who lack regular interactions with each other. Indeed, it is the absence of personal relationships that makes the crowd wise. Where they diverge, however, is that crowdsourcing is designed and controlled by a commercial firm with a profit motive.

2.2.3 Contemporary Collective Action

While collective action efforts have traditionally relied on formal organizations to coordinate the action of participants in the pursuit of collective goals (Walker, 1991), the decentralized structure of the internet combined with contemporary ICTs have provided increased agency to individuals in choosing how to participate in collective action (Bimber et al., 2012). This challenges scholars to consider crowdsourcing platforms as

not just a platform for making binary choices about contributions, but rather as a context for participating in collective action.

In mobilizing collective action through ICTs, the boundaries of membership have become more porous. Whereas once organizational membership had clear criteria, emerging organizations—such as those that draw from the crowd—have much less clear criteria. In other words, people have the agency to create their own experience of membership and participate in a style that they choose (Bimber et al., 2012). Recognizing the ability for individuals to choose how to participate in collective action, Bimber et al. note that "people are now more able than ever to act however they see fit, readily acting beyond the constraints imposed by a context for collective action once largely dominated and controlled by organizations" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 179).

This increase in agency among individuals also reflects a decrease in control for organizations. A prime challenge of organizations is to coordinate the action of participants in the pursuit of collective goals. Control is an inevitable component of organizing, requiring individual members to conform their actions to meet collective goals (Tannenbaum, 1962). Yet, without formalized routines, centralized decision-making, and specific roles, it is unclear how organizational leaders are able to influence the uncoordinated collective actions of a crowd to meet the commercial goals of a business. After all, not all forms of participation in an online crowdsourcing platform advance the commercial goals of a business.

Take, for example, the following case of Google Places, the service which links business information and reviews to locations on Google Maps. In 2011, Google solicited the crowd to contribute to its database of businesses information. As an official Google

Maps Blog posts says "[b]ecause we can't be on the ground in every city and town, we enable our great community of users to let us know when something needs to be updated" (Russell, 2011). One of the options that Google enabled the crowd to contribute to is reporting closed businesses. However, many people abused this option, reporting open businesses as permanently closed and causing much frustration among business owners (Segal, 2011). While Google had intended that the crowd participate one way, the crowd also had sufficient agency to use the technology in an unintended and dysfunctional way—namely the malicious and false reporting of closed businesses. This example demonstrates the agency afforded to individuals in participating in crowdsourced collective action.

The very nature and structure of contemporary technologies enables them to be used differently by different individuals. However, organizations wishing to harness the crowd likely have a desired way in which they should participate—producing well-written reviews, providing unbiased opinions, and writing reviews instead of simply conversing in discussion forums, etc. Yet, the very decentralized structure of the internet and ICTs that enables their uncoordinated contributions also frees the crowd to participate in other ways. In the apparent absence of traditional control mechanisms, how do businesses influence collection action efforts to meet organizational goals?

Indeed, recent scholarly attention has questioned "how formal organizations cope with the enhanced agency available to their members" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 184). This agency has significantly blurred traditional boundaries of organizational membership and participation. Consequently, these technologies enable people to "use this agency to enact different styles of participation, rather than just uniformly becoming more involved"

(Bimber et al., 2012, p. 179). This challenges traditional approaches to investigating collective action, in which the objects of study—such as structures and strategy—may have less meaning when individuals have agency to participate in different ways. Rather, Bimber et al. (2012) advocate for investigating variations of how participants experience collective action within a single organization. In other words, scholars should examine how participants experience collective action differently, given the agency afforded to them. With these challenges in mind, Bimber et al. (2012) developed a theory of the collective action space to help scholars better conceptualize and investigate collective action in the contemporary technology environment.

2.2.4 Collective Action Space

In introducing their theory of collective action, Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012) emphasize changes in the contemporary technological environment. They argue contemporary technology has fundamentally changed the capacity for collective action by granting increased agency to individuals, which emerged from the decentralized structure of the internet. This has pushed power and control outward toward individuals and away from central organizers, empowers individuals to "more easily act on their own interests and styles of participation" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 48).

In this contemporary technological environment, then, collective action can be viewed as "recognizing how people are interacting and what opportunities are afforded them, along with examining what organization and structure fit their behavior and help facilitate collective actions" (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006, p. 30). These two dimensions, (1) how people interact with one another and (2) the opportunities for engagement afforded to them, form the framework for this theory. Indeed, they assert that

all collective action efforts can be represented within a two-dimensional space of interaction and engagement (see Figure 2), and it is variation across these dimensions that impacts how collective action is pursued.

Entrepreneurial
Engagement

Personal
Interaction

Impersonal
Interaction

Institutional
Engagement
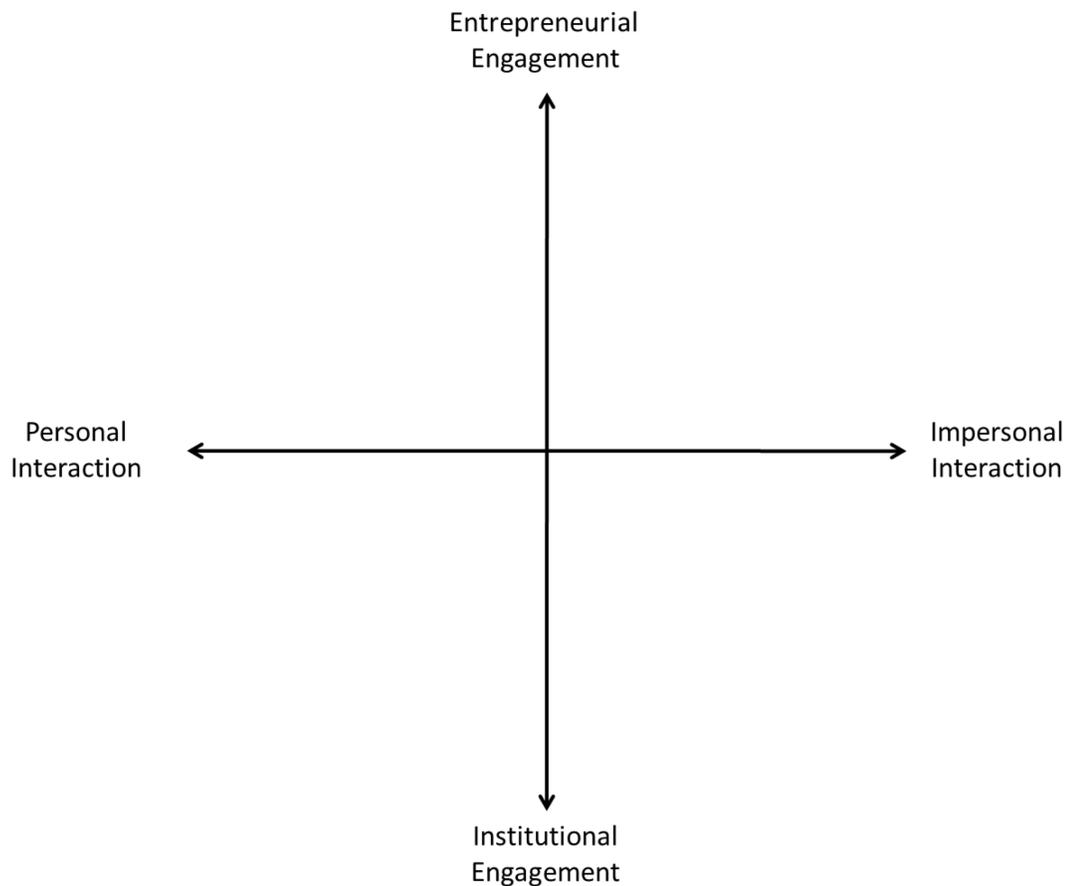
Figure 2: The collective action space

2.2.4.1 Interaction

The interaction continuum encompasses the degree to which people in collective action efforts have repeated and intentional contact with each other. On one end of this spectrum lies *personal interaction*, in which individuals involved in collective action get to know and develop interpersonal relationships with one another through organizing

interaction. This type of interaction is likely to generate strong ties among participants, which in turn foster trust, shared norms, and close identification (Granovetter, 1973). In collective action efforts embodying personal interaction—such as civic associations like local chapters of the Masons—relationship development and maintenance often become a central component of participation and driving force in motivating contributions.

On the other end of the dimension lies *impersonal interaction*, in which participants do not intentionally interact with known others and the pursuit of common interests is the core concern for participants. While individuals are largely unknown to each other, the power of collective action stems from the "sheer number of people expressing a position in common, by making their private preferences public en masse" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 90). Interest groups like the World Wildlife Fund embody this type of interaction, in which the organization can call to mobilize members for some type of collective action effort.

Bimber, et al. (2012), stress that while collective action efforts may cluster around one end or the other on the interaction continuum, often organizations have some elements of both impersonal and personal interaction. For example, the Sierra Club uses "a chapter-based structure that provides opportunities for regular face-to-face meetings and outings with other members who would otherwise be anonymous" (Flanagin et al., 2006, p. 35).

2.2.4.2 Engagement

This dimension embodies the extent to which "participants' individual agendas may be enacted within the group context" (Flanagin et al., 2006, p. 35). This concept is rooted in how traditional organizational structures—such as central leadership, hierarchy,

and bureaucratic—are likely to constrain the extent to which individual members' goals become a focus for the organization's efforts (Walker, 1991). Engagement as conceptualized by Bimber et al., (2012), however, focuses on the actions and experiences by individuals rather than observable structures of the organization. This is because different people may experience the same organization differently, depending on how they pursue collective action.

On one end of this spectrum is *entrepreneurial engagement*, in which individuals have great autonomy in designing collective action efforts without approval or control by a central authority. In this type of collective action organization, "[s]elf-organizing mechanisms predominate, whereas bureaucratic mechanisms of coordination and control are minimal" (Flanagin et al., 2006, p. 37). Recent revolutionary movements enabled through Twitter and Facebook embody this type of engagement with collective action efforts. Additionally, crowdsourcing—providing alternates to hierarchy, bureaucracy, and other traditional management structures (Malone et al., 2010; Zammuto et al., 2007)—is likely to fall at this end of the engagement spectrum.

On the other end of the spectrum lies *institutional engagement*, in which individuals are subject to a patterned set of normative rules and practices that they are expected to follow. Moreover, these rules and practices are determined by central leadership and framed in the perspective of what benefits the organization. Participants are socialized to organizationally-desired values, rules, and obligations through formal communication artifacts (e.g., magazines, newsletters, and annual reports), rituals, and stories.

Collective action efforts can again embody both institutional and entrepreneurial modes. Bimber et al., (2012) illustrate this through the example of Howard Dean's 2003 presidential campaign, which consisted of both centrally coordinated campaign staff and uncoordinated coalition of local and regional groups and MeetUps (Wolf, 2004).

2.2.4.3 Quadrants of the Collective Action Space

Aligning the dimensions of interaction and engagement orthogonally creates a two-dimensional space with four quadrants that incorporates "fundamental features of human behavior: how people interact with one another and the opportunities for engagement afforded them in collectivities" (Flanagin et al., 2006, p. 33). This moves away from traditional approaches to studying organizational structure, which emphasizes identifying "semifixed, predictable organizational structures and examine how these shape behavior" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 96). Rather, this approach emphasizes "what people are doing, how are relating to one another, and what opportunities are afforded to them, and from these examining what organization and structure fit their behavior and help facilitate collective action" (p. 96). This provides scholars with a dynamic framework for understanding influences that may facilitate or impede collective active.

This model is particularly useful for considering variations in how people pursue collective action within the contemporary technological environment. Each individual's experience corresponds to a fixed point on this two-dimensional space, while the organization is represented by aggregating all of experiences together. This means that rather than being represented by single point in this space, organizations create a 'footprint' of experiences which allows researchers to visualize the degree of variation among participants within a single organization (see Figure 3). Additionally, this allows

scholars to consider the collect action space as a three-dimensional space consisting of concentrations of where participants fall.

Each quadrant of this space embodies the various forms of collective action organizations that have been well-studied in the literature: civic associations, interest groups, informal networks, and self-organized crowds. However, while various quadrants may be associated with traditional types of organizations (e.g., online crowds would primarily be in quadrant I), the collective action space is developed at the individual-level. As such, each individual's participatory style within the organization is broadly defined by the quadrant they fall in. These participatory styles include traditionalist, enthusiast, minimalist, and individualist and any organization is likely to contain individuals with each of these participatory styles—though the distribution of participatory styles is likely to be different. A comprehensive study of several collective action organizations conducted by Bimber et al. (2012) revealed significant differences in individual-level outcomes (i.e., contributions, tenure, organizational trust, organizational identification, etc.) depending on which quadrant their participatory style fell in. These will be discussed in detail below.

2.2.4.3.1 Traditionalists

Quadrant III is typical of civic associations, such as the American Legion, which is "a chapter-based organization with strong in-group identity, sustained social interaction over time, a patterned set of normative rules of engagement and routine practices, and formal and informal mechanisms for socialization" (Flanagin et al., 2006, p. 39). Participants falling within this quadrant—referred to as traditionalists by the authors— tend to contribute the most of any other participatory style and have the longest tenure in

the organization (Bimber et al., 2012). However, the study also reveals that they appeared

disconnected with the organization's goals, suggesting that they participate because it

seems like the right thing to do or for reasons other an achievement of collective goals.

Rather, Bimber et al. (2012) suggest that social interactions are most important to

individuals with this kind of participatory style.

2.2.4.3.1 Enthusiasts

Quadrant II consists of informal networks of people who personally interact with

one another, yet lack institutional engagement with a formal organization. The Grameen

Bank serves as one example, in which grassroots groups of individuals receive

microloans and hold each other accountable for loan recovery (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal,

1995). More contemporary examples include MeetUp.com, which enables groups of

people with shared interests to form offline clubs and meetings. Labeled enthusiasts,

individuals with this participatory style tend to have the highest goal alignment with their

organization and value the relationships with other members in the organization (Bimber

et al., 2012). Consequently, they have the highest levels of contribution, identification,

and organizational trust and are less motivated by instrumental incentives than other

participatory styles.

2.2.4.3.1 Minimalists

Classical conceptions of collective action organizations reside in Quadrant IV,

which embodies interest groups like the AARP and NRA. In these organizations,

members typically never see or interact with each other, yet are powerful because of the

large scale of members that can be mobilized to engage in collective action efforts. Of the

participatory styles, minimalists tend to contribute the least, identify the least, and trust the organization the least (Bimber et al., 2012).

2.2.4.3.1 Individualists

Finally, Quadrant I represents self-organized crowds of people who pursue collective action. For example, the protests in Seattle during the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999 involved a "loose, ephemeral, unbounded, self-organizing" (Flanagin et al., 2006, p. 39) group of people that lacked central control. Similarly, the more recent Occupy Movements and revolutionary demonstrations of the Arab Spring would fall within this quadrant. Bimber et al. (2012) found that these participants are idiosyncratic and difficult to predict. While they may have few friends within the organization and may appear to be disconnected with or even isolated from social and community networks in the organization, they are somewhat trusting of the organization and supportive of the organization's goals and can contribute substantially.

The online crowds that are the focus of this dissertation are composed of diverse, independent, and decentralized individuals (Surowiecki, 2004). Within the framework of the collective action space, this indicates impersonal interaction (i.e., independent and diverse individuals) and entrepreneurial engagement (i.e., decentralized). While some variation may exist, it is within this quadrant that people who contribute online reviews would pursue in collective action. An example of what the collective action of online crowds would look like, then, is visually depicted in Figure 3 as the cloud.

In summary, situating how individual participants experience collective action within this framework enables scholars to investigate and draw comparisons between

different types of organizations by accounting for the variability of participation they enable.
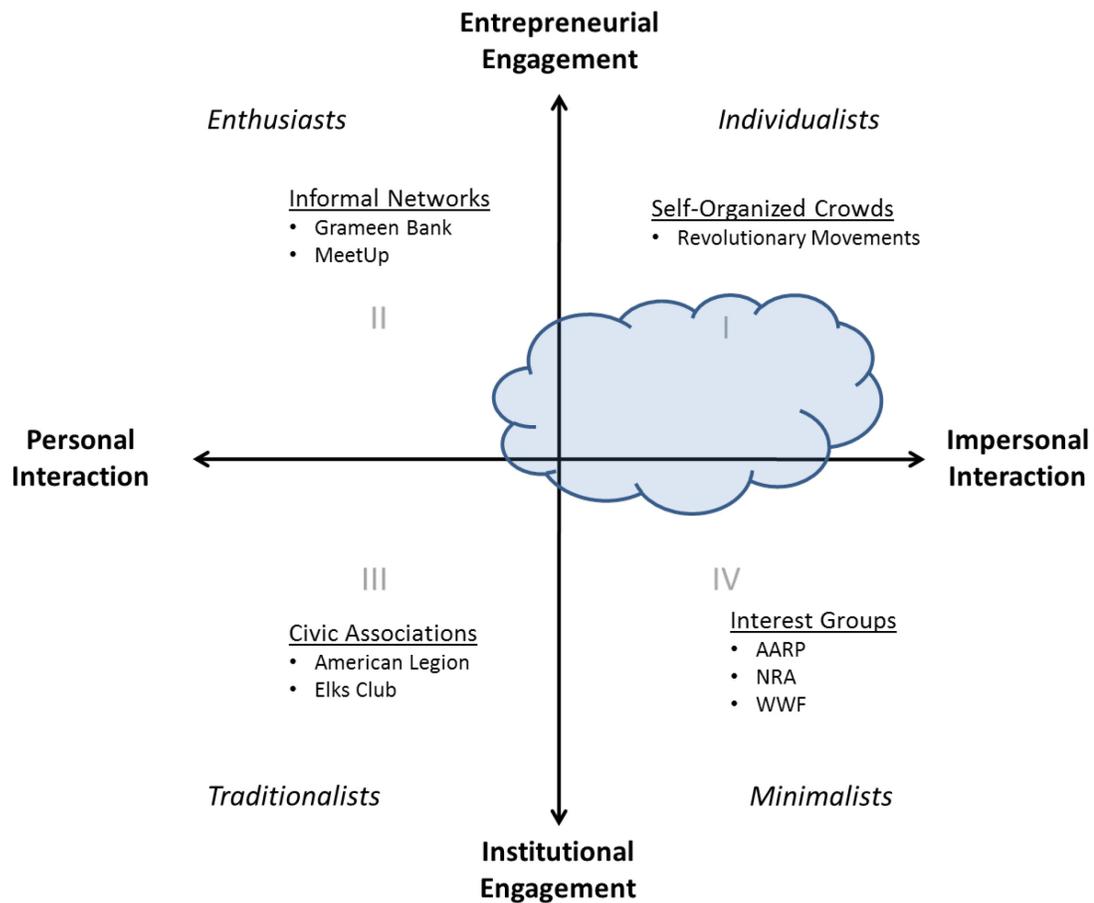
Figure 3: The collective action space (adapted from Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012)

2.2.5 Interaction and Engagement in the Context of Crowdsourcing

Of particular relevance to this study is the assertion by the authors that factors which change the conditions of interaction and engagement "should shape collective action" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 69). Extending the model to the context of a crowdsourced online review platform, this suggests that opportunities afforded by the platform for interaction and engagement can influence what and how the crowd produces

reviews. It has, after all, been long contended that designers of computer 'code' are able

to permit and forbid certain kinds of behaviors and interactions (Grimmelmann, 2005)

from occurring. Likewise, Lessig (2006) stating, "Codes constitute cyberspaces; spaces

enable and disable individuals and groups. The selections about code are therefore in part

a selection of who, what, and, most important, what ways of life will be enabled and

disabled" (p. 88). Similarly, Youmans and York (2012) recently stated that technological

design of communication channels on websites ultimately change "…the communicative

structure of social media sites, ultimately affecting who connects with whom" (p. 316).

While not being technological deterministic, per se, it is clear that a crowdsourcing

platform can be designed to facilitate or inhibit the level of interaction between

participants.

This study extends this concept to consider the extent to which businesses that

design and control crowdsourcing platforms selectively enable, constrain, and encourage

opportunities for interaction and engagement for a crowd of volunteer reviewers. By

altering the context of online review production, groups of individuals that experience

crowdsourcing differently—according to the theory of the collective action space—may

contribute differently.

Drawing from the collective action space provides a cohesive framework that is

sufficiently broad to capture the variety of participation styles afforded to individuals

through technology. It also directs attention to aspects relating to interaction between

participants and the capacity for influencing organizational goals. Moreover, these

mechanisms of interaction and engagement are in control of the business the design

crowdsourcing platforms—many provide space for discussion forums, comments, voting,

and private messages. Previous studies have considered the context of review production, such as a study of the top 1,000 Amazon.com reviewers by Pinch and Kesler (2011). They concluded that the interaction between reviewers enabled by Amazon's internal social networking platform (Amazon Friends) kept "its reviewers happy by providing a way for them to contact each other" (p.80) which ultimately "strengthens the ties between respondents who use it. The social networking aspects of Amazon thus further reinforces it as a community where reputations are garnered, recognized, and matter" (p.73). This suggests that in designing a crowdsourcing platform, how an organization fosters interaction may have an impact on how collective action is pursued.

2.2.6 Summary of Crowdsourcing as Collective Action

This section of the literature review situated crowdsourcing within the framework of collective action organizations. It then introduced the collective action space—which focuses on differences in how individuals experience interaction (from person to impersonal) and engagement (institutional to entrepreneurial)—as a particularly well-suited theoretical framework for investigating how individuals participate in collective action differently. Variation across these dimensions has been associated with differences in such outcomes as tenure in the organization, organizational trust, identification, and contribution (Bimber et al., 2012). Finally, theoretical descriptions of online crowds—defined by their decentralized structure and independence from others (Surowiecki, 2004)—indicates that the participatory style of contributors to online review websites would predominantly fall within quadrant I of the collective action space. Having described the theoretical framework for this study, I will next describe the guiding research question of this study.

2.2.7 Research Question

Where current theory of crowdsourcing focuses broadly on motivating people to contribute, this study uses the theory of collective action to consider how organizations are able to encourage the 'right' kind of contributions. Based on the assertion by Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012) that contemporary technology enables multiple ways of participating in collective action, I contend that organizations have a vested interest in influencing *how* the crowd participates in order to further organizational interests and goals. The central concern of this study is concerned with organizational strategies for influencing the action of already motivated participants. This leads to the overarching research question for this study:

RQ1: How does a business align the collective actions of the crowd with organizational goals?

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This study investigates how organizations may attempt to influence the collective action of the crowd within the context of an online review platform. Part 1 of Chapter II established that businesses which design and maintain crowdsourcing platforms have a financial interest in the crowd participating in certain ways. Part 2 of Chapter II situated crowdsourcing within the framework of the collective action space, which emphasizes the impact of variation across opportunities for interaction and engagement on shaping collective action efforts. Drawing from these theoretical foundations, this chapter introduces the business review website Yelp as the context for this study.

In reviewing relevant literature about online reviews in Chapter II, Yelp emerged as a unique case for online reviews because studies reveal fundamental differences in the distributions of reviews on Yelp compared to other crowdsourced review websites—specifically, that reviews on Yelp are normally distributed while other business review websites have a J-shaped distribution of reviews (Wang, 2010). This is important not only because it deviates from what theory would predict—that under-reporting bias and purchase bias would yield a J-shaped distribution (Hu et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2009)—but it is also practically relevant because people searching for information about experience goods find moderate reviews more helpful (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Given Yelp's success over the past decade, this does not appear to be coincidence.

For these reasons, Yelp was chosen as the research site for this study. Through a description of the aims, goals, and features of Yelp, two groups of reviewers emerge as both practically and theoretically interesting: Elites and Non-Elites. As such, this study will investigate differences in how these two groups participate in and contribute to Yelp.

3.1 Research Site

This study investigates collective action on Yelp.com, a website that collects and displays reviews of businesses from the crowd. On the Yelp FAQ, it is self-described as:

> Yelp connects people with great local businesses. Our users have contributed more than 39 million cumulative reviews of almost every type of local business, from restaurants, boutiques and salons to dentists, mechanics, plumbers and more. These reviews are written by people using Yelp to share their everyday local business experiences, giving voice to consumers and bringing "word of mouth" online. The information these reviews provide is valuable for consumers and businesses alike. Approximately 102 million unique visitors* used our website, and our mobile application was used on approximately 10 million unique mobile devices, on a monthly average basis during the quarter ended March 31, 2013. Businesses, both small and large, use our platform to engage with consumers at the critical moment when they are deciding where to spend their money. Our business revolves around three key constituencies: the contributors who write reviews, the consumers who read them and the local businesses that they describe. Yelp communities have taken root in major metros across the US, Canada, UK, Ireland, France, Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Singapore, Poland, Turkey and New Zealand. ("Investor Relations," 2013)

Founded in 2004, Yelp is incredibly successful collective action organization. As of March 2013, it has a presence in 21 countries, hosts 39 million reviews of businesses, and gets 102 million unique monthly visitors ("Investor Relations," 2013). In this way, Yelp has succeeding in motivating the production of a massive number of reviews with seemingly no tangible benefits. Additionally, Yelp has traditionally performed well on the stock market (Fowler, August 29, 2012), particularly when compared to many other internet companies of its era. By practically any metric, Yelp is an effective business and

collective action organization. This provides a compelling context and a long history of archival data for examining how the collective action of crowds are organized and managed.

As introduced in Chapter II, a comprehensive comparison of business review websites demonstrates that Yelp has a fundamentally different distribution of reviews than either CitySearch or Yahoo Local. Wang (2010) compared 1.5 million reviews on Yelp, 435,407 reviews from Citysearch, and 57,900 reviews from Yahoo Local. The distribution of each of these business review websites are shown in Figure 4. While Citysearch and Yahoo Local both have a J-shaped distribution of reviews (mostly 5 and 1 star reviews), reviews on Yelp are notably moderate and more normally distributed (Wang, 2010).
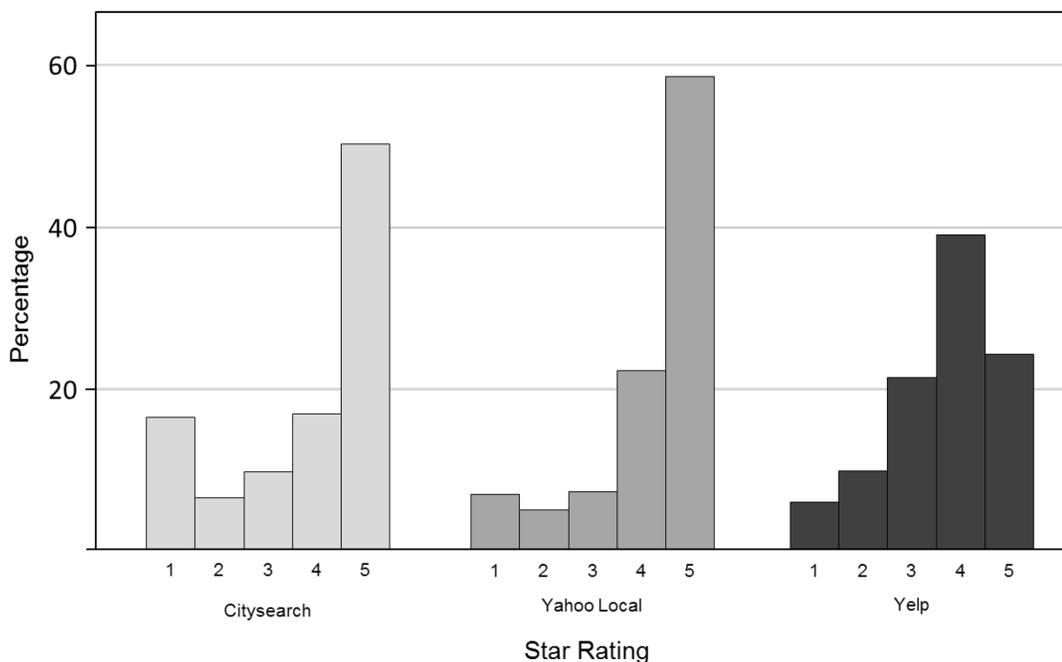
Figure 4: Distribution of reviews from Citysearch, Yahoo Local, and Yelp (adapted from Wang, 2010)

The normal distribution of reviews on Yelp is remarkable for two reasons. First, all three of these websites focus on reviewing local businesses—which are generally an experience good (Nelson, 1970, 1974)—and scholars have previously identified that viewers of reviews consider moderate reviews of experience goods to be more helpful (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). As Figure 4 shows, Yelp is comprised of predominantly moderate or mid-range reviews. This signifies that—despite the same goal of crowdsourcing business reviews across these websites—the crowd at Yelp contributes reviews in a fundamentally different way. Moreover, they contribute in a way that aligns with the information preferences of viewers for experience goods.

Second, nearly all studies of online reviews note that there is a frequent J-shaped distribution across products and businesses. Yet Yelp stands out as a notable exception to this finding (Wang, 2010). It appears that Yelp has somehow escaped from the under-reporting and purchase bias found in other crowdsourced review platforms. This suggests that something is different about how the crowd at Yelp is organized, opening up the question of how this is accomplished.

Given the research goal of this study—to investigate how businesses influence contributions from the crowd to align with business goals in the absence of traditional organizations structures—these two unique aspects of Yelp make it a fruitful context in which to study how individuals experience collective action.

3.2 Description of Yelp

3.2.1 How Yelp Makes Money

Yelp earns most of its revenue from of advertising. This comes primarily from businesses that pay Yelp for improved visibility on its website ("Advertising on Yelp,"

2012). Yelp also engages in brand advertising, in which national brands and agencies may pay for space on relevant pages. Yelp describes its audience as "a diverse and socially active group of consumers who use Yelp.com to make informed buying decisions. Tech-savvy and curious, they are also active travelers, foodies and trendsetters who want to discover what's new in shopping and entertainment trends. Most importantly: they're always hungry (and thirsty) for more." ("Audience," 2013). With 102 million unique visitors to Yelp each month, these visitors provided Yelp with $46.1 million of revenue in 2013 ("Yelp Announces First Quarter 2013 Financial Results," May 1, 2013).

Moreover, Yelp competes for consumer traffic for its advertising revenue. Competitors include traditional business guides that "range from yellow pages listings to direct mail campaigns to advertising and listings services on local newspapers, magazines, television and radio" ("Yelp 2012 Annual Report," 2012, p. 11) and also include online competitors like internet search engines (i.e., Google, Yahoo!, and Bing) and other "online service providers and review websites" (p. 11). The success of Yelp depends in part on its "ability to attract users through unpaid Internet search results on search engines like Google, Bing and Yahoo!" ("Yelp 2012 Annual Report," 2012, p. 15). Finally, the leadership at Yelp realizes that their success depends on "our ability to provide consumers with the information they seek, which in turn depends on the quantity and quality of the content provided by our users" ("Yelp 2012 Annual Report," 2012, p. 16). In other words, leadership at Yelp recognizes that its success depends on their ability to solicit reviews deemed useful by the public.

3.2.2 Yelp's Organizational Structure

3.2.2.1 Yelp, Inc.

Yelp employs roughly 997 people across 21 countries. Estimates suggest that around 643 of these are salespeople ("Yelp Investor FAQ," 2012) . The remaining employees are product managers, community managers, marketing interns, accountants, and engineers. This company supports the website that hosts 39 million reviews of businesses and 102 million unique monthly visitors ("Audience," 2013).

3.2.2.2 Reviewers (The Crowd)

Yelp does not reveal how many reviewers contribute to the site. However, one estimate suggests that 190,000 unique users contributed reviews to Yelp globally in June 2012 (Agrawal, 2012). He also indicated that in San Francisco, 1% of reviewers contributed 25% of all reviews and 5% of reviewers contributed 50% of reviews.

Yelp reviewers volunteer their time, effort, and money to visit a variety of businesses (e.g., restaurants, hair salons, movie theatres, etc.) and then write reviews about their experience. These reviews are indexed by cities and consist of a 1-5 star rating and written comments. In addition to writing reviews, users may self-police content on Yelp by flagging reviews, photos, forum posts, profiles, etc. that they deem "inappropriate." Finally, some reviewers have special badges, signifying 'Elite' status or employment by Yelp. There are important distinctions between these groups of reviewers.

3.2.2.3 Scouts

Yelp occasionally uses temporary employees called Scouts to provide content in new markets, such as reviews, photos and business information. Given their status as paid

contributors, they are closely monitored to "prohibit them from reviewing businesses with which they have a conflict of interest and identify them in their public profiles as paid contributors" ("Yelp 2012 Annual Report," 2012, p. 6). Reviewers that have been Scouts are identified by a badge on their profile.

3.2.2.4 Elite Squad

Some users on Yelp have an 'Elite' badge on their profile, designated by year (e.g., Elite '09, Elite '10, Elite '11, etc.). In describing Elite users, the Yelp website says "You've heard legends about their reviews, their shiny profile badges, and—of course— their epic parties. But the Yelp Elite Squad is even more than that. Members of this exclusive, in-the-know crew reveal hot spots for fellow locals, act as city ambassadors, and are the true heart of the Yelp community, both on and offline" ("Jeremy S.'s Profile," 2013). Many of the monthly parties attended by Elite reviewers are paid for by local businesses as a way to directly market themselves to this community. While number of Elite Yelpers is not published, industry estimates place it in the low thousands ("Yelp's Online Reviewing Mafia," 2011). Additionally, as alcoholic beverages are regularly served at Elite Events, only reviewers over 21years old are allowed to become Elite.

While some previous research has investigated Yelp, many scholars have viewed the Elite Squad as simply an achievement badge without a clear description of the associated rewards and criteria of achieving this status (Luca, 2011; Otterbacher, 2011). One notable exception (Kuehn, 2011) examined how Yelp's promotional discourse constructed the meaning of being an Elite member. These omissions are in contrast to how critical the Elite Squad is considered by Yelp: Nish Nadaraja, the Yelp brand director that devised the Elite Squad Program, says that: "[t]he nucleus of Yelp is [the

Elite Squad]. Anything coming in—advertising, sponsors, etc.—is all based on that"

("Yelp's Online Reviewing Mafia," 2011, p. 1). Likewise, the Yelp VP of European

Marketing remarked that "[w]e want Yelp to be the most useful local guide, and to do

that we need to have a deep, real community" (as quoted in Bryant, Apr 16, 2011). The

community manager for Manchester, England says that developing this community is

accomplished by "phone calls and emails to business owners, writing reviews and the

weekly newsletter, reaching out to new Yelpers; attending restaurant openings, bar crawls

or art exhibits. Anything to keep a continuous connection to the community" (as quoted

in Bryant, Apr 16, 2011). Indeed, the impact of Elite reviewers is significant: one study

demonstrated that reviews written by Elite members had nearly double the impact on

restaurant revenue than other reviews (Luca, 2011).

However, business insiders speak to the "Skull and Bones-like process" of

choosing which members become Elite, which is "proffered by a governing body known

as The Council, which is also shrouded in mystery" ("Yelp's Online Reviewing Mafia,"

2011, p. 1). Through anecdotal experiences with active Yelp users and reviewers—from

the general public to prominent social media scholars—it appears as though Yelp's Elite

Squad is somewhat hidden within the crowd. Given the central role of the Elite Squad,

this group of participants appears to play an important—yet unclear—role in achieving

collective action at Yelp.

3.2.2.5 Community Manager

Finally, the Community Manager (sometimes referred to as an Ambassador[1]) is a paid employee of Yelp that works in a specific city and also receives stock in the company (Bryant, Apr 16, 2011). Not all cities have a Community Manger, as they are generally found in larger cities with many active reviewers. For example, while Charlotte, NC has a community manager, El Paso, TX and Asheville, NC do not. Yelp describes the community manager as "here to help the community get the most out of Yelp - answering questions, facilitating, getting folks involved. They are Yelp employees, but also real people with real reviews too!" ("Jeremy S.'s Profile," 2013). They are described in more detail in Yelp's Annual Report, which says a community manager's primary responsibilities include "getting to know our users and helping them get to know one another as a way to foster an offline community experience that can be transferred online" ("Yelp 2012 Annual Report," 2012, p. 6).

3.2.3 Structure of Yelp Website

3.2.3.1 Localized Homepage

The Yelp website is primarily organized around viewing and contributing business reviews. Reviewers create profiles that can be filled out with optional information (e.g., photo, city, etc.). In addition to these features, Yelp also has a community discussion forum call *Talk*, capacity to send private messages to other reviewers, and also an *Events* page. It is worth noting that Yelp provides a localized experience on its website. This means that it displays information (reviews, forum posts, events, etc.) within a geographically bounded area around a specific city. For example,

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[1] Despite the online badge saying 'Ambassador', the official job title and more frequently used term for this type of employee is Community Manager (CM).

going to *yelp.com* from a computer in Charlotte, NC will redirect the URL link to

yelp.com/charlotte-nc-us and only display content specific to that area (see Figure 5). It

is, however, possible to visit another cities localized Yelp webpage through adding it to a

search query on the webpage or selecting the city from a list.

Figure 5: Yelp homepage, localized to Charlotte, NC

3.2.3.2 Review of the Day

The review of the day (RoTD) is a featured review on the homepage of a

localized Yelp homepage for a specific city (see upper right of Figure 5) and the review is

also marked with a special badge. According to the Yelp Website, the RoTD is chosen by

the following criteria:

See these buttons [referencing *Useful*, *Funny*, *Cool* buttons]? When you use them to vote on another user's reviews, it helps us figure out which reviews people love the most, and we can feature them on places like the homepage or on that given business's page. ROTD is primarily vote-based, but we also consider a few other editorial factors; namely it needs to represent real people, real reviews (so real photos and names are weighed), and the review typically isn't a rant (it's on the front page and sets the tone for the entire site, after all!). ("Review of the Day Archive for Charlotte," 2013)

3.2.3.3 Business Reviews

Anyone may look at reviews on Yelp, which can be found through browsing categories or searching for specific information (e.g., tacos, dinner, Japanese, etc.). Upon browsing or searching, a list of businesses is viewable. A user may then find more detailed information and reviews from these businesses by clicking on that business. Business information may include its name, address, hours of operation, and other attributes. Additionally, Yelp displays the average star rating of all reviews to approximate the quality of the business. Below this information are the reviews that have been contributed concerning this business (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Yelp business profile and reviews

Business reviews consist of a ranking of 1 to 5 stars, with 1-star representing the lowest evaluation and 5-star being the highest. Paid advertisements from competing businesses may appear on this page if those businesses subscribe to Yelp's sponsorship program. Below this the open-ended description of the reviewers experience at this business. Anyone with or without a user account may vote for a review as being *Useful*, *Funny*, or *Cool* by clicking on corresponding buttons, which are displayed under the open-ended comment of the review.

When a user with an account is logged into Yelp and searches for reviews, the order of the information displayed is personalized. The system defaults to first display reviews from people who have a relationship with the user (accomplished by becoming a *Fan* of the reviewer or a *Friend* of the user on the website). This sorting function pushes reviews from people a user is likely to know to the top of the queue.

3.2.3.4 Contributing a Review

To contribute a review, an individual with a Yelp account can click a button from the business profile page. This brings up a webpage where a user must choose a star rating between 1 and 5 (see Figure 7) and then write an open-ended comment. While there is no minimum requirement for these open-ended comments, they may not exceed 5001 characters. Also visible on this page is information about the business and reviews of the business provided by other members (see Figure 8). The order of these reviews matches the default sort for the business, so the writer will see the reviews contributed by their *Friends* and people they are following as *Fans*.

Figure 7: Explanation of Yelp's star ratings

Figure 8: Submitting a review

3.2.3.5 Review Filter

Yelp has a software-based review filter which aims to "protect consumers and business owners from fake, shill or malicious reviews" (Stoppelman, 2009a). This software looks "at a wide range of data associated with each review and reviewer in order to determine the review's relevance and reliability" ("Yelp 2012 Annual Report," 2012, p. 12). Reviews deemed to be illegitimate are placed in a separate page and not factored into the businesses overall rating, but remain viewable by clicking on a link at the bottom of a business page. Reviewers are consistently being re-evaluated based on new information (e.g., the reviewer produces more reviews, makes friends, and fills out profile information, etc.), which can result in reviews moving to and from the Filtered Reviews page.

3.2.3.6 Flagging Content

In addition to the review filter, "Yelp relies heavily on our community members to catch shills and point out things that look suspicious" (Stoppelman, 2009a). Only users that have an account and are logged in to the Yelp website are able to do this. Users are able to flag content as inappropriate by clicking on a button with a flag icon near the offending content. This includes photo, reviewer profiles, individual reviews, forum posts, events, and business profiles. Upon writing a justification, the flagged content is reviewed by someone at Yelp and may be removed.

3.2.3.7 Reviewer Profiles

A viewer may also visit the profile page of a reviewer, which may contain a profile image, name, number of reviews they have written, friends, badges they have earned, and compliments that have received from other reviewers (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Yelp reviewer profile

3.2.3.8 Compliments

Compliments are small notes that users with accounts can send to one another, but are publically displayed and counted on one's profile page. Figure 10 shows the 11 available labels for compliments (*Thank You, Good Writer, Just a Note, Write More, Great Photo, You're Funny, Cute Pic, Hot Stuff, Like Your Profile, You're Cool,* and *Great Lists*), each with their own default open-ended text (e.g., *Good Writer* compliments default to 'You've got the write stuff, baby!' and *Write More* defaults to 'In the words of Oliver Twist...Please, sir, I want some more.'). The default text of a compliment can be over-ridden to any other text a user wishes to add (see Figure 11). Giving and receiving compliments are also one of the activities which are encouraged for people seeking Elite status ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013).

Figure 10: Yelp Compliment options
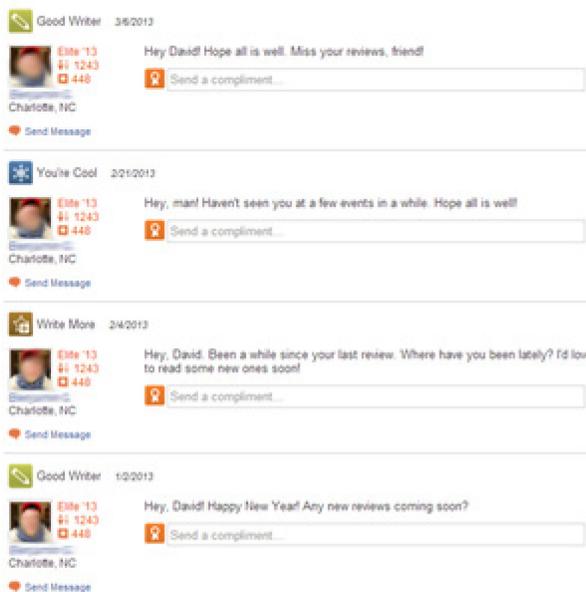
Figure 11: Examples of Yelp Compliments

3.2.3.9 Talk Forums

Yelp provides a space for discussion forums, which anyone may read. Adding or responding to a post requires a Yelp account. As described earlier, the forums are localized to individual cities, meaning if a user were to log in from Charlotte, NC, they

would only see discussions occurring within this city. This means that discussions occurring on a Talk forum in New York will never be viewable in the Charlotte Talk forum. However, users are able to specify another city's Talk page in which to view and post discussions. Topics of the forums include such categories as Local Questions & Answers, Events, Food, Shopping & Products, Relationships & Dating, Humor and Offbeat, Yelper Shout-Outs, and Site Questions & Updates (see Figure 12). Occasionally, give-a-ways organized by the community manager are offered through the forums, in which a random user that has posted a response to a question (e.g., what is your favorite kind of hot dog) will be invited to the grand opening of a new restaurant or tickets to a local event (e.g., theatrical production).

Figure 12: Yelp Talk discussion forums

3.2.3.10 Events

The events page allows anyone with a user account to create a local event and include information such as photos, details, dates, cost, etc. (see Figure 14). People may express their interest in attending an event by clicking on a button labeled *I'm In!* or *Sounds Cool*, which then publically lists that user's photo and name with a link to their profile (see Figure 15). In investigating the website, it emerged that the localized Yelp webpages for some cities completely lacked an Events page (see Figure 13). A discussion forum response from a long-time Elite Yelper suggests that only cities with a community manager have the Events page enabled: "You need to have a community manager in order to have an events section. In order to have a CM, the city's site has to grow. Tell your friends about it or write to headquarters and ask for some "You've Been Yelped" cards to leave at various local businesses. Grow your Elite squad and you'll be on your way" ("How do we get Yelp to put up an events section?," 2012).

Figure 13: Examples of localized city webpage with and without Events page

Occasionally, the community manager announces a Community Manager Yelp Event (CMYE) through this webpage, which may include such things as free tickets to advanced screenings or invitation to free parties. Users with Yelp accounts may RSVP for these events, but there is limited space and Yelp does not provide a detailed

explanation for how people are selected. However, these types of events often include a statement expressing a preference for Yelpers who are using a real name, photo, and are recently active—such as "Yelpers using a real photo and real name will get first dibs!" ("Complimentary Advanced Screening: Jack Reacher," 2012). Users can also create an Unofficial Yelp Event (UYE). Anyone with an account can create a UYE, but it is incumbent upon that individual to organize and promote the event.

Figure 14: Yelp Charlotte Events Page

Figure 15: Example of Yelp Event

3.2.3.11 Yelp Elite Squad Page

Reviewers with Elite status have access to a special section of the Yelp webpage, which describes and allows reviewers to RSVP for upcoming Elite Events. There are between one to four events each month to which Elite reviewers may RSVP along with a +1 or a +2 (see Figure 16). Elite Events hosted by Yelp began in 2005, through which leadership at Yelp discovered that:

> (1) meeting in person tended to keep everyone more accountable and civil in their online communication than we were used to seeing in other online-only forums and (2) the events were fun because the well-written, local adventuring people who were attracted to Yelp made great company. (Stoppelman, 2009b)

These events generally include free alcohol, food, and activities, which are often provided and paid for by sponsors (Stoppelman, 2009b). A photographer generally

attends these events and posts photos to the city's Yelp Facebook page (e.g.,

https://www.facebook.com/yelpcharlotte) and to Yelp's official Flickr Photostream

(http://www.flickr.com/photos/yelp/).

Figure 16: Elite Squad Calendar of Events

Below this calendar, there are photo slideshows from previous events, a place to

nominate friends for Elite status, and rotating guidelines for being a good Elite review

(see Figure 17). Examples of these guidelines include not demanding special treatment

from businesses, being respectful at events, and contributing tips about businesses from a

mobile device (see Figure 18).

Figure 17: Elite Squad Webpage

Figure 18: Examples of Elite Squad behavior guidelines

3.2.3.12 Mobile Application

In addition to the website, there is a mobile application for smartphones. Through this "app," people are able to find businesses, check-in to a location, upload photos, contribute short tips, and draft reviews It is notable that while users are able to use the note taking feature of this mobile app to draft their reviews, they are unable to actually submit their reviews without using the desktop version of the website. Although it is possible to access the desktop version of the Yelp website from a mobile smartphone or tablet, this requirement heavily encourages reviewers to write and submit reviews from a desktop or laptop computer.

3.2.4 Summary of Yelp's Structure

This general description of Yelp's website introduces and describes many of the opportunities for interaction and engagement available to reviewers. Consistent with the theory of the collective action space, these features afford reviewers great latitude in how to participate in Yelp—such as writing reviews, uploading photos, attending face-to-face events, talking in forums, sending compliments, submitting events, winning prizes, and voting on reviews.

Emerging from this description of Yelp is the clear distinction between Elite and Non-Elite reviewers. The presence of an organizationally-sanctioned Elite group of reviewers that are recognized through a badge, as well has given special rewards (e.g., monthly parties, tickets to concerts, access to restaurant openings, etc.), suggests that these members participate in an organizationally desirable way. Yet, it is an oversimplification to suggest that Elite members merely contribute *more* reviews— indeed, a recent study found that Elite status had no impact on the production of future

reviews (McQuarrie, McIntyre, & Shanmugam, 2013). Rather, I take this to suggest that Elite members participate in *different* ways than non-Elite members. In support of this claim is the vague and secretive process by which members are annually selected for Elite status: it is not simply a matter of achieving a quota of reviews; it requires participating in the right way.

Before discussing the methodological approach used in this dissertation, I will describe my epistemological orientation and then describe how my methods help to answer my research question.

3.3 Philosophy of Science

I conduct research in the interpretivist tradition described by L. L. Putnam (1983), which emphasizes understanding how people make sense of the world through their communicative behaviors. When applied to organizational contexts, this approach focuses on relationships that form from human interactions and that have consequences for behavior. While recognizing formal structures as a feature of organizations, interpretivists assert that behaviors in practice often run outside these boundaries— sometimes supporting or resisting these structures. Additionally, I identify with being a naturalistic researcher within the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to "generate insights, explain events, and to seek understanding" by investigating "symbol systems, rules, and norms that account for everyday routines and organizational practices" (L. L. Putnam, 1983, p. 47). Accomplishing these goals involve studying communication and behavior in real-world settings.

This epistemological approach is embodied in the theoretical framework of this study. While the majority of current research concerning crowdsourcing embodies a

functionalist approach to the collective action of the crowd (e.g., collective action resulting from rewards for completing various tasks; see Malone et al., 2010), the theory of collective action space acknowledges that individuals are involved in creating their own experiences and have a role in shaping collective action (Bimber et al., 2012). Likewise, this study focuses on comparing how two groups of reviewers at Yelp—Elite and Non-Elite—pursue collective action. This follows the advice of L. L. Putnam to treat the organization "as an array of factionalized groups with diverse purposes and goals" (p. 37). In understanding how the purposes and goals of subgroups in the crowd understand their participation and form their goals, I seek to understand how organizational leaders influence reviewers to pursue collective actions that align with the goals of the organization.

An interpretivist orientation also guides my methodological choices. While a "Big Data" approach to studying online reviews generally encompasses analyzing massive datasets of millions of reviews, I am limiting participants and quantitative data to a single city. This approach addresses the emerging concern of 'data fundamentalism', which is "the notion that correlation always indicates causation, and that massive data sets and predictive analytics always reflect objective truth" (Crawford, April 1, 2013). Crawford advocates for pairing computational social science with traditional qualitative methods in order to link quantitative questions of 'how many' with the cultural and physical contexts in which the data are produced. By situating quantitative findings within rigorous qualitative analysis, I strive to accomplish this balance in this dissertation.

As described earlier in this chapter, Yelp localizes its website content and social features (i.e., forums, events, community manager) to an individual city. This digitally-

federated structure largely constrains social interactions to a specific geographical context and suggests that understanding collective action on Yelp should likewise be bounded to participants residing within that geographical area. Through this approach, I can provide in-depth analysis of online review production in the physical and cultural contexts in which they are produced.

Finally, I also must acknowledge my positionality on this topic area and research site. In reporting qualitative data about Yelp, I strive to preserve the voice of the participants. While I draw from my own ethnographic observations while being an Elite reviewer for Yelp, I primarily use this knowledge to provide necessary interpretation and context for understanding this culture.

My dissertation encompasses both qualitative and quantitative methods. Following the advice of B. C. Taylor and Trujillo (2001), quantitative methods will be used to identify appropriate participants. In this way, my use of quantitative methods is not to infer causality, but rather identify meaningful differences between groups of reviewers and how they contribute. As such, quantitative analysis will focus on description rather than prediction to glean insight into why and how reviewers experience collective action differently and how this impacts their contributions.

Researchers using qualitative methods and taking an interpretive approach often face questions of validity and analytical rigor (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Additionally, as I have participated and have friends in Yelp, I took steps to address the fact that my own experiences might make it difficult for me to see other patterns in the data. To that end, I engaged in the process of negative case analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to ensure a rigorous examination of the data collected for this project. More specifically, after

developing my findings, I went back through the data to look for examples that might disconfirm my expectations and run counter to my conclusions. According to Lindlof and Taylor, "negative case analysis gives you a better explanation—'better' in that the sense that it stands up to repeated attempts to disconfirm it." (2010, p. 278).

Finally, I used member checks to ensure interpretive validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involved sharing samples of my results with current Yelp members in order to confirm or disconfirm my interpretations of the data. During my final Elite Event and after having completed my qualitative data analysis, I discussed my key findings with two Elite reviewers and asked for their feedback.

3.4 Research Design

Leading up to the qualitative and quantitative research methods used in this study, I conducted background research. Before the start of this dissertation project in 2010, I had written a single review on Yelp in 2008. This was my only contribution to the website until 2010, which marked my ethnographic entrée into this study. An *entrée* into the field serves to guide research questions and form connections to the group being studied (Kozinets, 2009; Warren & Karner, 2005). I was encouraged to participate in Yelp through a personal friend who is an Elite member of Yelp. This friend invited me to several Yelp Elite events as a +1 and led me to be better acquainted with my friend's circle of personal friends, many of whom were also Elite Yelpers. Having these contacts assisted me in gaining legitimacy within the community, introducing me to the local Community Manager, and learning the language and culture of Yelp. I attended three Elite events as a +1 of my friend. After contributing 44 reviews in four months, I earned Elite status on Yelp in January of 2012.

As an Elite reviewer, I attended 19 events over a period of two years. Five of these were Community Manager Yelp Events (CMYE), which any member of Yelp (Elite or non-Elite) can RSVP to attend. CMYEs are usually limited to around 20 people, so users must RSVP through the website and wait for notification from the community manager as to whether they were selected to attend or not. I also attended 12 Elite events, three of which I attended as the Non-Elite +1 of an Elite member. Finally, the community manager occasionally offers awards for winning competitions either on the forums (e.g., best answer to a question) or at Elite events (e.g., best costume). I was selected once to attend to the opening of a new restaurant and another time to attend a pub-crawl using a 14-person group bicycle for transportation. In addition the events I attended, there were several other CYMEs and Elite events that I was unable to attend because they either conflicted with my schedule or because I was not selected to attend.

After attending these events, I wrote a ethnographic memos of my feelings, experiences, and observations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) which were assisted in formulating my research questions and designed interview questions. I continued to actively write reviews for about 2 years, at which point I stopped writing reviews to disengage from the research site and prepare for the dissertation. Despite having ceased writing reviews for four months, I was reselected for Elite status in 2013.

3.4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

During July of 2012 a corpus of data from Yelp.com was collected. This included information from all reviewers residing within a 50-mile radius of Charlotte, NC and all of the reviews that these reviewers have contributed. This yielded a dataset of 61,429

reviews produced by 5,686 people in the Charlotte, NC area. Through this dataset, I could compare the reviewing behavior of Elite and Non-Elite reviewers on Yelp.

A data collection strategy was employed using the Scrapy software package to collect a corpus of user data. Scrapy is "a fast high-level screen scraping and web crawling framework, used to crawl websites and extract structured data from their pages" ("Scrapy," n.d.). This software automates the process of visiting a webpage, extracting data (e.g., username, number of reviews, dates, reviewing rating, review open-ended comments, etc.) and outputting this data as a spreadsheet which can be used for qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The spreadsheets created by Scrapy were inserted into a Microsoft Access relational database and connected by a member ID key. Database queries were used to code whether reviews were written while the reviewer held Elite status. This was determined through a match of the year a review was written with an Elite badge for that same year. Additionally, the distance that each user was from Charlotte, NC was calculated through Google Maps using self-reported location information on their profile. A dataset was created to include all reviews contributed by members within a 50-mile radius of Charlotte.

These procedures yielded a final dataset consisting of 6,667 members. Of these people, 5,365 have contributed at least one review. Collectively, these reviewers produced 61,429 reviews between December 19, 2004 and July 31, 2012. Of these reviewers, 4% (n=214) have had Elite status for at least one year in the Charlotte region.

3.4.2 Qualitative Interviews

Additionally, 17 in-depth qualitative interviewers were conducted with seven Elite, seven Non-Elite, and three former Elite reviewers about their participation and experiences in Yelp.

3.4.2.1 Recruitment

A combination of targeted and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for interviews. This process involves "referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). The key characteristic of interest for this study was the status of reviewer (Elite or Non-Elite).

With a research focus of understanding how people experience collective action of Yelp differently, I sought to maximize the variation of participants across these categories. This strategy of combining targeted and snowball sampling is a useful recruitment method for creating a purposeful sample that is comes close to being representative of a population (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010).

I recruited Elite reviewers while attending Elite Events. To get a range of participants, I purposefully recruited reviewers that had a range of tenure in their Elite status—ranging from having just received it in the prior week to being one of the first in Charlotte to have received this status. Additionally, these individuals had written between 26 to over 2,000 reviews. I asked these reviewers to recommend other potential interview participants, which actually led to identifying and interviewing a previously unconsidered group of participants: *former* Elite. These are Elite reviewers that for one reason or another stopped contributing reviews. In total, this recruitment strategy yielded interviews with seven Elite reviewers and three non-Elite reviewers.

In addition to targeted recruitment, I solicited seven Non-Elite reviewers from snowball referrals made by Elite reviewers and personal contacts. Non-Elite reviewers recruited by this process proved to be an incredibly diverse group, including friends of Elites that attend events as a +1, one-time reviewers, prolific reviewers (having contributed over 1,000 reviews), reviewers seeking Elite status, and reviewers having given up on attaining Elite status.

The overall goal of the recruitment strategy used for the dissertation was to include a wide range of reviewers to maximize the variation of experiences. Given the range of circumstances, number of contributions and tenure on Yelp that emerged from this sampling procedure, it appears to have accomplished this. Moreover, this recruitment strategy allowed me to identify a previously unconsidered group of participate that might otherwise have been inaccessible—former Elites, some of whom have deleted all of their reviews and profile information.

At the same time, it is worth noting the gap in knowledge about the composition of crowds. Indeed, it is likely that there is no clear "typical-case" participant as the purpose of harnessing a crowd is that is enables anyone to contribute. Yet it is difficult to recruit interview participants from this population. A previous study of Yelp found that use of the Talk forums to be unproductive for recruiting interview subjects, stating that:

> While Yelpers from the northeastern Talk thread generally ignored the recruitment posting, Yelpers on the west coast Talk thread showed no mercy with a long strain of snarky, "witty" and at times, mean-spirited responses until finally devolving into a string of inside jokes between local Yelpers. (Kuehn, 2011, p. 202)

Ultimately, the single shared characteristic of all reviewers on Yelp is that they have contributed a review. Indeed, it is for this kind of population—those with shared

characteristics and that are hard to recruit—that snowballing is well-suited (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010).

3.4.2.2 Interviews

This recruitment strategy yielded 17 interviews with a diverse cross-section of Yelpers, consisting of 11 females and 6 males. After gaining IRB approval, interviews were conducted between February and April of 2013. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide designed to assess how participants think of their participation in Yelp, why they write reviews, and what influences their review decisions (see Appendix A). A flexible interview guide is appropriate when there is variety in the experiences of participants: "Especially when it comes to informants, whose experience and expertise may vary widely, the interviewer can reshuffle the topics and questions to find the best fit for an individual" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 200). The purpose of these interviews was to gather thoughts and feelings associated with their participation in Yelp, making the interview guide appropriate as this strategy of interviewing "emphasizes the *goals* of the interview in terms of the topics to be explored and the criteria of a relevant and adequate response" (Gorden, 1969, pp. 264-265).

Fifteen interviews were conducted face-to-face, with three being conducted via Skype or phone at the convenience of the participant. In all cases, interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed by the author. The length of interviews ranged from between 8 minutes to 2 hours. The transcribed interviews consist of 336 pages of double-spaced text. Altogether, I spent 2 years as an active Yelp reviewer and was a member of the Elite Squad for two years. I have spent around 40 hours writing 69

reviews of businesses, attended 19 Yelp events, and integrated myself into the Yelp

Charlotte community.

3.4.3 Organizational Documents

Finally, I drew from organizational documents collected during my ethnography,

including Yelp webpages such as the Yelp FAQ (http://www.yelp.com/faq), Content

Guidelines (http://www.yelp.com/guidelines), Yelp Investor Relations

(http://ir.yelp.com), Official Yelp Blog (http://officialblog.yelp.com/), 2013 Annual

Report, and the Yelp Elite Page (http://www.yelp.com\elite). These documents contain

relevant information on rules for behavior and criteria for joining the Yelp Elite Squad.

Additionally, documents such as the annual report provide insight into organizational

goals and strategies. These documents together total 56 double-spaced pages.

3.4.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher and imported into Nvivo10,

along with the organizational documents. I read through all of the qualitative data to

familiarize myself with the content and write initial thoughts and potential themes in

memos (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Through a process of open coding, I identified

emergent themes which explain why Elite and Non-Elite reviewers would review

differently and how Yelp was able to encourage these behaviors among the Elite.

Hierarchical coding was used to group similar themes into "types" of things. For

example, several sub-types of incentives to participate (i.e., status, instrumental, soapbox,

and social) emerged from the interviews, which were combined under the major theme of

motivation. After this coding process, I then situated these emic themes within the

dimensions of the collective action space theory by using interaction and engagement as sensitizing concepts.

Sensitizing concepts were first described by Blumer (1954) and have since been used frequently by qualitative researchers (e.g., Bowen, 2008; Charmaz, 2003; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Padgett, 2004). They are an entry point to data analysis that draws from theory to help "see what may be important to study in a social scene" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 78) by drawing "attention to important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research in specific settings" (Bowen, 2008, p. 14). Moreover, the flexibility of sensitizing concepts make them well-suited for inductive analysis of naturalistic inquiry (Bowen, 2008).

As a guide for the formation of themes, I developed a list of sensitizing concepts derived from collective action space. At the core of this theory are the dimensions of interaction (impersonal versus personal) and engagement (institutional versus entrepreneurial), which the authors assert form the basis for understanding contemporary collective action (Bimber et al., 2012). Given the exploratory nature of this study, this theory provides a cohesive framework that is also sufficiently flexible to account for emergent emic themes.

Personal interaction is defined as "repeated, intentional interaction with known others over time and the concomitant development of interpersonal relations" (p. 89), which is accompanied by trust, norms, reciprocity, and identification. Moreover, these relationships tend to "embody additional shared links with significant others, and are multiplex, thus including mutual involvement in other personal and organizational contexts" (p. 89). The data was coded for themes that embody these aspects of personal

interaction, such as development of relationships, norms, common values, and identification.

In contrast, *impersonal interaction* consists of pursuing collective action in the absence of "personal, direct contact with known others" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 89). As a result, individuals are largely unknown to each other and the power of collective actions is due to the "sheer number of people expressing a position in common, by making their private preferences public en masse" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 90). Indeed, this conception of impersonal interaction closely reflects the predominate perception of Yelp as a crowdsourced platform for collecting and displaying the aggregated opinions of the crowd. The data was coded for themes that reflect impersonal interaction through such things as lack of developing relationships and pursuit of personal interests.

Engagement is the second dimension of the collective action space, which encompasses the "the extent to which participants are offered opportunities to shape the organization's direction, regardless of where in a hierarchy decisions are finally made" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 93). While entangled with traditional concepts of centralization, formalization, and hierarchy, the concept of engagement remains distinct. Indeed, "even some highly centralized organizations have means by which participants might shape the organization's agenda, if not decide explicitly on its strategies and tactics" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 109). This dimension is anchored by institutional engagement on one end and entrepreneurial engagement on the other.

Institutional engagement refers to organizations that limit "member participation to formally designed and sanctioned activities in a well-bounded environment" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 92). Embodied by traditional bureaucratic organizations, institutional

engagement is reflected by patterned set of normative rules and practices which "situates members' actions in the framework of 'what is good for the organization' as it is determined by central leadership rather than by members" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 94). In these types of organizations there are usually both formal routines, procedures, and artifacts and informal communication mechanisms through which members are socialized to values, rules, and obligations. Interviewers were coded for themes embodying knowledge of rules, practices, hierarchy, and artifacts.

Entrepreneurial engagement occurs when "individuals have a high degree of autonomy and may design collective organizational action efforts in ways that are not sanctioned or controlled by any central authority...organizational members do not act within constraints or rules of action associated with the organization or group. Self-organizing mechanisms predominate" (Bimber et al., 2012, pp. 93-94). Data were coded for emergent themes that reflect aspects of self-organizing and autonomy in collective action.

Together, these sensitizing conceptions provide a framework for categorizing emic themes to emerge from the analysis that is sufficiently broad to capture a range of emergent themes. Moreover, it follows the recommendations of Bimber et al. (2012) by focusing "on what people do and how they communicate rather than on organizational structure per se" (p. 96). Given the flexibility of interaction and engagement afforded by contemporary technologies, these data analyses approach can identity similarities and differences in how different groups of reviewers use Yelp.

3.4.5 Coding

The constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to compare codes to look for distinctions and overlapping categories. During this immersive process, I engaged in memo-writing to aid in crystallizing the information (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), this procedure for open-coding diminishes potential for researcher bias by increasing the precision and consistency with which the data is coded. Next, I engaged in focused coding to collapse initial codes into larger-meta themes (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

I took care to analyze the qualitative separately from the quantitative data, as I wanted to ensure that quantitative results did not bias the patterns that emerged. In other words, I did not want to look for qualitative themes that confirmed the findings of the quantitative analysis. In line with this, quantitative analysis was not conducted until all of the qualitative data had been coded.

CHAPTER IV: QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The data collection from the Yelp website in the Charlotte, NC area yielded a

final dataset consisting of 6,667 members. Of these people, 5,365 have contributed at

least one review. Collectively, these reviewers produced 61,429 reviews between

December 19, 2004 and July 31, 2012. Of these reviewers, 214 have had Elite status for

at least one year, two had been Community Managers, and eight had been Scouts.

Additionally, 484 of these reviews were written about Yelp Events rather than businesses.

Like previous research on Yelp (McQuarrie et al., 2013), some of these reviews

and reviewers were removed from analysis. First, individuals attending Yelp Events are

able to write a review about that event, which appear on a separate page than the business

profile page. Yelp encourages this because the consumer experience one has at a free

party is likely to be different than that of a regular consumer. As a result, these reviews

were removed from consideration in this analysis. Second, as both Community Managers

and Scouts are paid employees of Yelp, their participation in and relationship with Yelp

is fundamentally different than the crowd. As this study is interested in the collective

action of the crowd, the reviews of these two groups were removed from the analysis.

Overall, 946 reviews from two Community Managers 1,893 reviews from eight

Scouts (two of whom also had Elite status), and 484 Event reviews were removed. This

yielded a total of 58,106 reviews from 212 Elite and 5,141 Non-Elite reviewers. Despite

removing reviews from Scouts and Community Managers from the overall analysis,

descriptive statistics for these groups will be presented separately because it may provide

insights into the goals of the organization.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

A series of descriptive statistics were conducted on relevant subsets of the data.

First, I describe the nature of the data from CMs and Scouts that were removed from

further analysis. Next, I provide overall descriptive statistics for all of the reviews,

followed by comparing reviews produced by Elite and Non-Elite reviewers.

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Community Managers and Scouts

Although not included in any further analysis, descriptive statistics of review

contributed by the two Community Managers (CMs) and eight Scouts were computed

(see Table 1). While reviews produced by both CMs and Scouts are positively skewed,

standardized kurtosis coefficients for both groups are within recommended range of +/- 3

for normality (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2002). Visual inspection of frequency percentages

for these two groups shows that they produce comparatively few 1 and 5 star reviews (see

Figure 19).

Statistic	CMs Reviews	Scout Reviews
N	946	1,893
M	3.96	3.69
Median	4	4
Mode	4	4
SD	.691	.933
Variance	.477	.870
Skewness	-.337	-.510
Std. Error	.080	.056
Kurtosis	.138	-.003
Std. Error	.159	.112

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for community managers and scouts
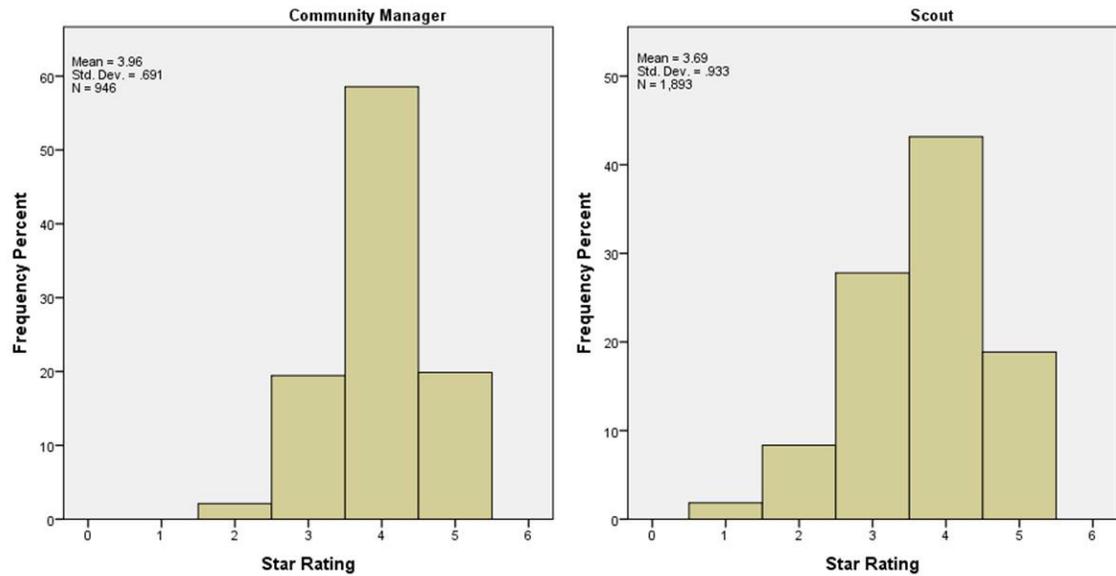
Figure 19: Frequency percentages for community manager and scouts

4.1.2 Descriptive Statistics for All Reviews

Descriptive statistics were conducted on the entire dataset of 58,106 reviews (see Table 2). The mean star rating for all reviews was 3.69, while both the mean and median was 4 stars. The standardized skewness coefficient (i.e., skewness divided by the standard error of skewness) of -77.4 and standardized kurtosis coefficient of -11.8 far exceeds the recommended range of +/- 3 for normality (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2002). As can be seen in Figure 20, these coefficients indicate that Yelp star ratings are narrowly distributed around negatively skewed reviews. This distribution very closely resembles the one seen in previous studies of Yelp (see Figure 4; Wang, 2010), suggesting that reviews produced in Charlotte do not differ significant from those produced by the population of all reviewers.
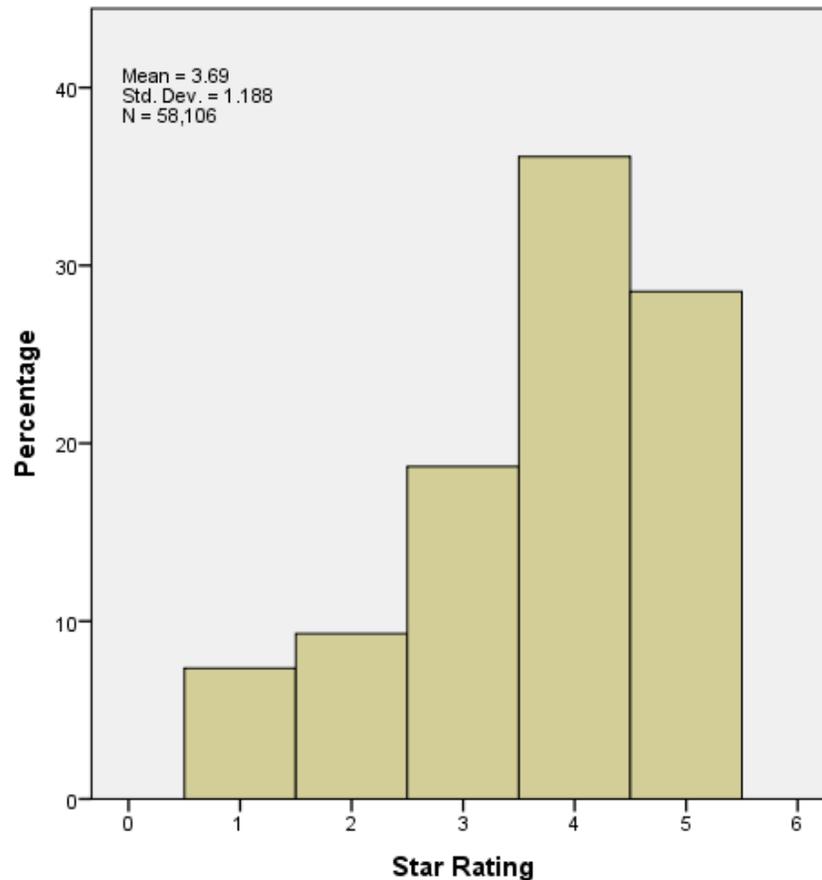
Figure 20: Frequency percentage of all reviews

4.1.3 Descriptive Statistics of Elite and Non-Elite Reviewers

To determine whether Yelp Elite members tended to review differently than non-Elite members, the entire dataset was further divided by whether the reviews were written by a user while they had Elite status. Of the 58,106 reviews, 35,023 (60%) have been written by Non-Elite reviewers and 23,083 (40%) have been written by Elite reviewers. A total of 5,353 individuals have contributed at least one review in the Charlotte area, of which 212 (3.9%) have been Elite reviewers. Together this reveals that Elite reviewers produce an inordinate amount of the reviews in the Charlotte area—Elite reviewers represent 3.9% of participants, yet produce 40% of all reviews.

Having established that Elite Yelpers produce an inordinate amount of reviews compared to non-Elite members, the next step investigates the extent to which reviews produced by these groups differ. As Elite members produce an inordinate amount of reviews, significant differences in how they review (e.g., star ratings) may have significant impact on the overall rankings of businesses. To examine this, the dataset was split by reviews written by group (Elite and Non-Elite) and descriptive statics were calculated (see Table 2).

Statistic	All Reviews	Non-Elite Reviews	Elite Reviews
N	58,106	35,023	23,083
M	3.69	3.7	3.67
Median	4	4	4
Mode	4	5	4
SD	1.188	1.295	1.004
Variance	1.382	1.677	1.008
Skewness	-.774	-.811	-.625
Std. Error	.010	.013	.016
Kurtosis	-.236	-.459	.052
Std. Error	.020	.026	.032

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of review ratings

4.1.3.1 Descriptive Statistics of Non-Elite Reviewers

Reviews written by Non-Elite reviewers have an average rating of 3.7 stars. Standardized skewness and kurtosis coefficients—as well as visual inspection of the distribution (see Figure 21)—reveal that reviews written by Non-Elite members are nonparametrically distributed.
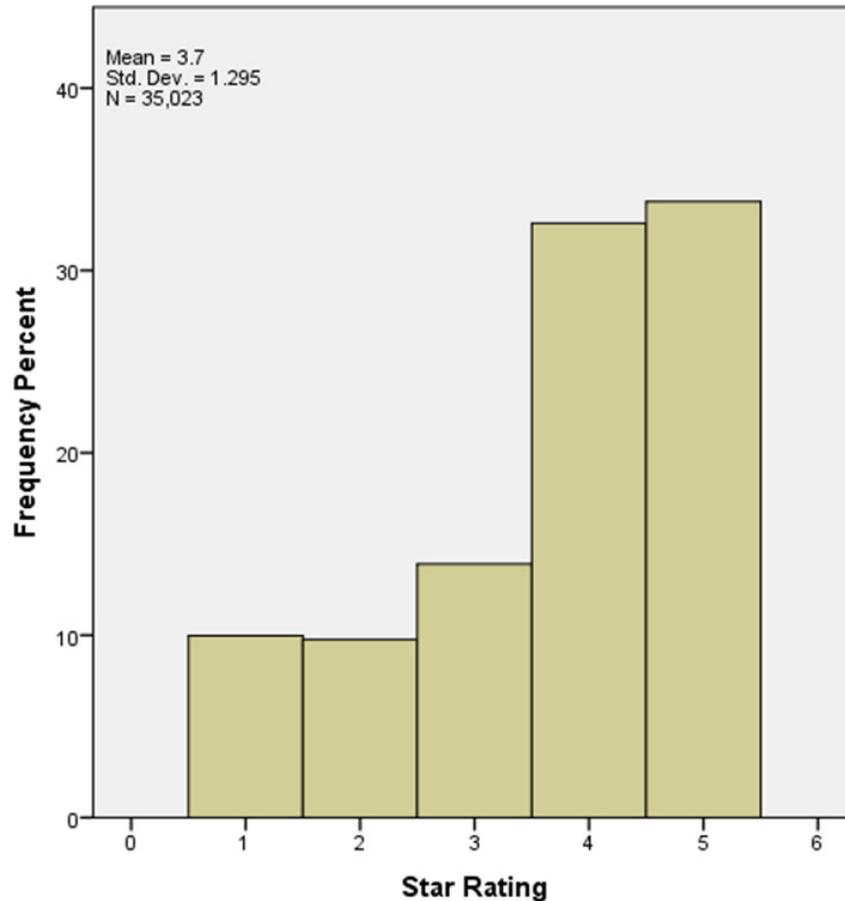
Figure 21: Frequency percentage of Non-Elite reviews

4.1.3.2 Impact of Filtered Reviews on Non-Elite Distribution

Notably, the distribution of Non-Elite ratings is similar to the J-shaped

distribution of product reviews found in other studies; however, a classical J-shaped

would anticipate a greater number of 1 and 5 star reviews than is observed. Further

literature review revealed a likely explanation for why this distribution is not in the J-

shape. Yelp uses an automatic review filtering system, in which reviews deemed to lack

credibility are removed from the business page. For businesses just in Charlotte, there

were 15,148 filtered reviews. These filtered reviews were not included in this dataset

because they require manually entering a CAPCHA phrase for each business, which

could not be automated. However, a recent study of Yelp investigated the distribution of

these filtered reviews (Byers et al., 2012) and found that overall, they are comprised

predominately of 1 and 5 star reviews, with few moderate ratings. Indeed, although not

explicitly discussed in their study, the filtered reviews exactly resemble a J-shaped

distribution (see Byers et al., 2012, p. 11). This suggests that adding the 15,148 filtered

reviews to the distribution of Non-Elite[2] reviews would likely lead to an observed J-

shaped distribution.

4.1.3.3 Descriptive Statistics of Elite Reviewers

Elite reviews, on the other hand, have similar mean of 3.67 stars, yet descriptive

statistics and visual inspection (see Figure 22) reveal a vastly different distribution.

Reviews by Elite members are still negatively skewed (standardized skewness coefficient

= -39.1), but the standardized kurtosis coefficient of 1.63 is with the normal range of +/-

3. This demonstrates a negatively skewed but normal distribution of reviews. There is a

noticeable drop-off in the relative number of 1 and 5-star reviews, while a marked

increase in the number of 3-star reviews. Indeed, this review distribution is nearly

identical to the one produced by paid Scouts (see Figure 19).

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[2] While it is certainly possible that the reviews of Elite members are filtered, given their status and reputation within the community it is unlikely that they would occur in sufficient numbers to skew their distribution. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that filtered reviews are primary comprised of single reviews from untrustworthy reviewers.
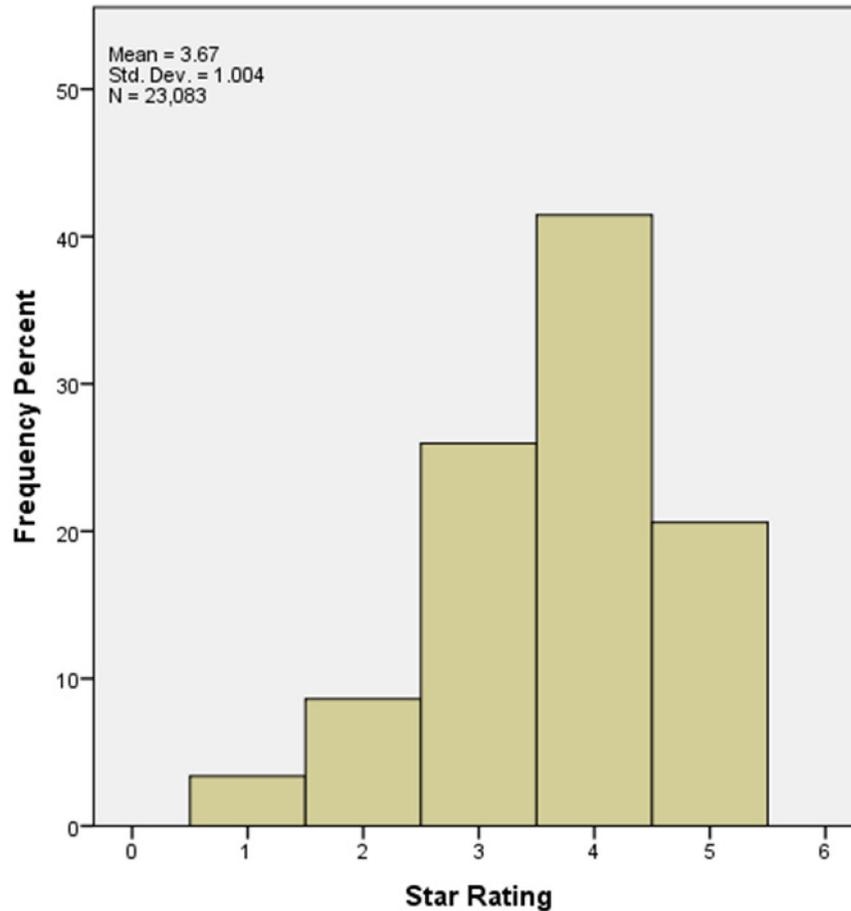
Figure 22: Frequency percentage of Elite reviews

4.1.4 Impact of Elite Reviews on Overall Distribution

Taken together, the comparison of descriptive statistics and visual inspection suggest that the distribution of reviews produced by Elite Yelpers differ from those produced by Non-Elite Yelpers. Because Elites produce 40% of reviews, despite being only 4% of reviewers, this difference appears to change the shape of the overall distribution of reviews. The largest change appears to be at the middle of the distribution, drastically increasing the number of 3 and 4 star reviews. Figure 23 visually shows the additive impact of Elite reviews, demonstrating that the contribution of reviews by Elite

reviewers can fundamentally change the overall distribution of reviews away from a J-shaped distribution by producing more moderate reviews. However, visual inspection along is not sufficient to establish significant differences in reviews. In order to establish whether statistically significant differences exist between these groups, further analyses were conducted.
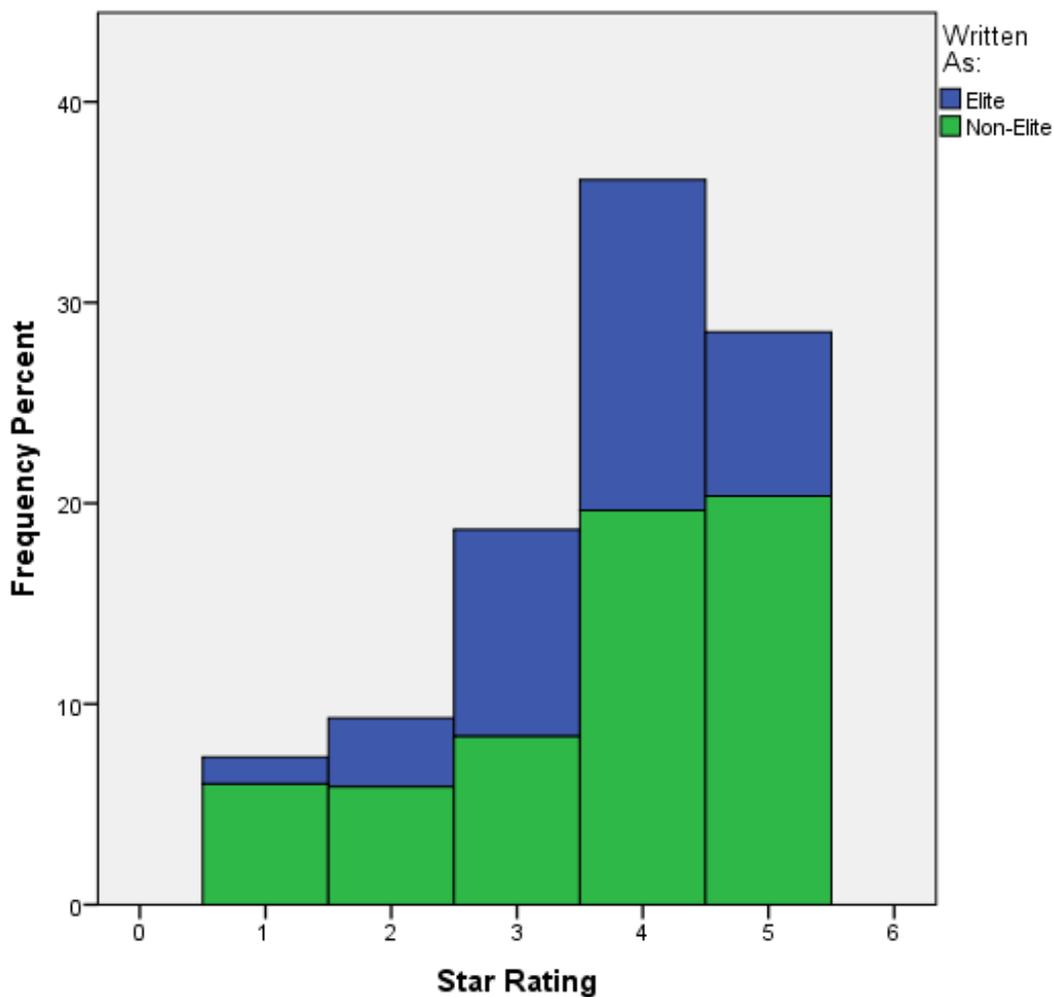
Figure 23: Additive impact of elite reviews on overall distribution

4.2 Mann-Whitney U-Test and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

In establishing whether two distributions differ significantly, two procedures—the Mann-Whitney U-Test and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test—are often used. While the Mann-Whitney test is believed to be more sensitive to differences in location (means and rank order), the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test is believed to be more sensitive to differences in distribution shape (dispersion, skewness, etc.). Both of these procedures were followed to determine if Elite and Non-Elite members produce different kinds of reviews. These procedures were also followed to compare the distributions of reviews produced by Elite reviewers and those produced by paid Scouts.

The Mann–Whitney U-test is an appropriate procedure to examine mean rank differences between two independence samples of ordinal variables, particularly for non-normal distributions (Mann & Whitney, 1947). On the other hand, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test (Lilliefors, 1967; Massey Jr, 1951) is based on the maximum absolute difference between the observed cumulative distribution functions of two samples, making it particularly sensitive to differences in the shape of distributions between groups.

4.2.1 Comparing Distribution of Elite versus Non-Elite Reviews

First, these tests were used to test the null hypothesis that the distribution of reviews produced by Elite reviewers was the same as Non-Elite reviewers. The Mann–Whitney U-test shows that the two groups differ significantly ($U = 373,388,511.50$, $Z = -16.228$, $p < .001$, $r = -.07$) and rejects the null hypothesis. Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test also rejected the null hypothesis, indicating that the distributions of Elite and Non-Elite members are significantly different from each other ($Z = 15.543$, $p < .001$).

Together, these results demonstrate that Elite Yelpers and Non-Elite Yelpers produce

statistically different distributions of review rating.

4.2.2 Comparing Distribution of Elite versus Scout Reviews

Next, the same tests were used to test the null hypothesis that the distribution of

reviews produced by Elite reviewers is the same as reviews produced by Scouts. The

Mann–Whitney U-test shows that the two groups do not differ significantly ($U =$

21,910,962.50, $Z = -12.216$, $p = .826$). Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test also

indicate that the distributions of Elite and Scout reviewers are not significantly different

from each other ($Z = .755$, p $= .619$). For both of these tests the null hypothesis could not

be rejected, indicating that Elite reviewers and paid Scouts produce statistically similar

distributions of reviews.

4.3 Chi-Square

To better articulate how reviews produced by Elite and Non-Elite members differ,

a Pearson chi-square was conducted. The results show that the frequency of ratings

produced by Elite versus Non-Elite Yelpers were significantly different, χ^2(4, $N = 58,106$

) $= 3,070$, $p < .001$. The effect size of this finding, Cramer's V, was moderate, .230

(Cohen, 1988). As can be seen in Table 3, 81.7% of all 1-star reviews were written by

Non-Elite members, 63.2% of all 2-star reviews were written by Non-Elite members,

55.2% of 3-star reviews were written by Elite members, 54.4% of all 4-star reviews were

written by Non-Elite members, and 71.3% of all 5-star reviews were written by Non-Elite

members. Overall, reviewer status is shown to have a significant and moderate effect on

the distribution of reviews.

	Non-Elite	Elite	Total
1-Star (%)	3,493 (81.7%)	781 (18.3%)	4,274
% of Total	6.0%	1.3%	7.4%
2-Star	3,416 (63.2%)	2,147 (36.8%)	5,405
% of Total	5.9%	3.4%	9.3%
3-Star	4,870 (44.8%)	5,991 (55.2%)	10,861
% of Total	8.4%	10.3%	18.7%
4-Star	11,416 (54.4%)	9,568 (45.6%)	20,984
% of Total	19.6%	16.5%	36.1%
5-Star	11,828 (71.3%)	4,754 (28.7%)	16,582
% of Total	20.4%	827%	28.5%

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of review rating and Elite versus Non-Elite status

4.4 Summary of Quantitative Analysis

A series of quantitative procedures were followed to compare reviews produced by Elite versus Non-Elite reviewers. Emerging from this analysis, Elite and Non-Elite reviews do indeed produce different kinds of reviews, with Elites producing more moderate and less extreme reviews. Surprisingly, the distribution of reviews produced by Elites matched the distribution of reviews produced by paid Yelp Scouts.

While these analyses establish clear statistical differences between Elite and Non-Elite reviewers, they do little to explain why Elites tend to review differently and the extent to which the organizational leadership at Yelp is able to encourage this. The next chapter reports findings from the qualitative interviewers to answer these questions.

CHAPTER V: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The guiding research question of this study is to examine how businesses are able to influence the collective actions of the crowd to align with organizational goals. The previous chapter demonstrated clear quantitative differences in how Elite and Non-Elite reviewers produced reviews, namely that Elite reviewers tend to produce more moderate reviews and fewer extreme reviews. Elites constituted only 4% of reviewers, but produced 40% of all the reviews in the Charlotte area. While reviews from Non-Elites have more of a J-shaped distribution, the reviews from Elites help to change the overall distribution to be more normally distributed. This suggests that leadership at Yelp is able to encourage some reviewers to overcome the under-reporting commonly found in online reviews.

Having established meaningful differences in how Elite and Non-Elite reviewers actually produce reviews, this chapter presents the findings from the qualitative analysis of 17 interviews of Yelp reviewers. In doing so, I seek to answer the research question for this study of: *How does a business align the collective actions of the crowd with organizational goals?* Data were coded using an open-coding procedure to capture emic themes emerging from the interviewers. Through this analysis, I will provide the rationale for why Elite reviewers produce different kinds of reviews and also identify how Yelp encourages this behavior. The next chapter will situate these findings within the framework of the collective action space and explicitly answer the research question.

In reporting interview data, participants are referred to by a pseudonym to protect their identity. Additionally the names of businesses that participations mention in interviews are given pseudonyms to further protect the identity of reviewers and businesses. Overall, four broad categories of themes emerged from the dataset which explain why Elites produce more moderate reviews. These include Being *Yelpy*, Eliminating Anonymity, Peer Pressure, and the drive to Review Everything. Within each of these categories, sub-themes emerge which illustrates how Yelp is able to encourage moderate reviews and also why Non-Elites tend to produce more extreme reviews.

5.1 Being *Yelpy*

> I find the Elite program to be a little bit of recognition of people who participate a little more heavily in Yelp and are more ambassadors of the site as opposed to people who might have just as many reviews but aren't...maybe a bit more representative of what Yelp would like to achieve. (Ash W.)

A difference between Elite and Non-Elite reviewers that quickly emerged from the interviews was a strong sense of goal alignment with Yelp. During the interviews, for example, Elite reviewers would often express awareness that Elite reviewers should be "*Yelp-like*" (Wyatt E.) and conduct themselves in a "*Yelpy kind of way*" (Katy P.).

Interviews indicate that being *Yelpy* entails several things: being a role model for the community, having a positive attitude, encouraging others, participating in the community, and producing high quality reviews. While all of these areas provide valuable insights, it is the remarkably constant conception of what constitutes a high quality review that is of prime concern for answering the research question. Indeed, living up to this *Yelpy* standard emerged as contributing to the decrease in extreme and increase in moderate reviews produced by Elites. This is because they felt that *Yelpy* reviews needed to be balanced and detailed. This is in contrast to how Non-Elite

reviewers approached reviewing, namely in reaction to some negative or positive aspect of their experience. Moreover, I describe how Yelp is able to encourage these types of behaviors through affordances available on its website and mobile phone app, such as drafting reviews and uploading photos.

5.1.1 Balanced Reviews

When asked what made a good Elite Yelper, all eight of the Elites stressed the importance of being fair, objective, and balanced in their reviews. Elites describe this balanced review rather consistently: avoiding "*one-sided*" (John J.) reviews that focus solely on either negative or positive aspects of an experience and being "*well-rounded*" (Holley P.) by including both negative and positive aspects. Elites reported this influencing the structure of their review, which Tegel A. describes as:

> you have taken the time to give those thoughtful reviews and be objective about them. Not let your emotional side I guess kinda come into play so like just because I might be really upset with an experience doesn't mean that I am going to write an entirely bad review I'm also going to give—ok, like this was bad but this was also pretty good in this area so I think just being balanced.

> Striving for balanced reviews has a clear impact on the decisions of Elites to

contribute extremely positive or negative reviews. Indeed, Shane M. reflects:

> It seems that people that wrote as many negative reviews as positive or people that reverse the bell curve, so all 5 and all 1 rarely made it to Elite status. People that, for whatever reason, people that wrote more middle of the road…definitely looked like more balanced…and more likely to get the badge, for sure.

This understanding was pervasive among Elite reviewers. For example, Katy P. says that when deciding to write about a negative experience, she was "*worried that writing too many bad ones will make me seem like a not very good Elite Yelper.*" Likewise, Tegel A.

reflected that while she was trying to get Elite status she "*tried to give a very average, maybe didn't want to rock the boat review.*"

Striving to be balanced also impacted the decision to contribute extremely positive reviews. When discussing 5-star reviews, Hayley H. says "*I think that sometimes 5 is like the unattainable 5.*" Likewise, John J. explains "*I just tend to be of the mind-set that, to be a 5-star the experience has to be super great for me to really want to write a 5-star review.*" Elite reviewers express the obligation to be *Yelpy*, which entails, in part, a balanced approach to writing reviews. Emerging from the interviews, this goal simultaneously decreases negative and positive reviews and increases moderate reviews; encouraging Elites to push their rating inward.

On the other hand, Non-Elite and even Former Elite reviewers did not express similar sentiments about balanced reviews. Former Elite reviewer Alecia M. reflects how her criteria for reviews changed after leaving the Elite Squad:

> So I think maybe as an Elite member, maybe I took it more seriously. You know like 5-stars are sacred, where now I am like whatever… I think of a 5-star as places that I loved that I go back to continuously, like that's kinda my thing. I like simple things, fresh ingredients, nice service, affordable, and I would go eat there all the time.

Similarly, Non-Elite reviewers expressed the possibility of more attainable 5-star reviews. Stewart L. says:

> I mean, so many people leave a negative review because it had to do with the service or the attitude of the place. Or the attitude of the service person. And I am almost going to completely overlook that and write a 5-star review.

These passages illustrate clear difference in how Elite and Non-Elites approach reviewing, specifically that Elites strive to produce balanced reviews.

5.1.1.1 Elite Bumping Up Reviews

Emerging as a meaningful sub-theme within producing balanced reviews was the practice of Elites bumping up negative reviews to a more moderate rating. For example, John J. says:

> I feel bad for 2-stars restaurants because they kinda tried but they failed horribly. So I just gave them an extra star for effort most of the time. Because they actually tried, like oh, we're so sorry. Stuff like that, I'll give them an extra star.

This is also the case for 1-star reviews, with Ash W. saying that "*so I'll go to a place that was just bad. But I didn't get food poisoning. Sooooo, it's a 2.*" While Elite reviewers felt compelled to bump up negative reviews to more moderate ratings, this theme did not emerge from the Non-Elite reviewers.

5.1.1.2 Non-Elite Overcorrecting Reviews

In contrast to being balanced, Non-Elite reviewers expressed using extreme reviews (i.e., 1 or 5 stars) as a way to over-correct for a perceived inaccuracy of the quality of a business. For example, Portia R. describes her reaction to a positive experience with a car salesperson:

> …it made me want to give feedback because there had been so many negative feedback reviews on that company before. So I wanted to push the arrow towards the more positive direction.

Similarly, Lemony S. expresses:

> And I read so many stupidly optimistic reviews and I felt that they are not fair to consumers … A few times, here and there. I did write an honest, but negative review. But it wasn't just being contradictory, it was setting things straight…I was not so much as reviewing, as my reviews were a correction to other peoples' reviews. And when I found a place that was really great, I was happy to write about it. But most of the time, it is "this is a great diner" you got to be kidding me. It's a dive.

While Elites feel the need to provide balanced reviews in the spirit of being *Yelpy*, these

ideals were not shared among Non-Elites. Rather, Non-Elites had a tendency to overstate

their opinion with the intention of having a larger impact on the average star rating. This

helps to explain why Non-Elite reviewers produce significantly more 1 and 5-star ratings

compared to Elite reviewers.

5.1.2 Detailed Reviews

Another aspect of being *Yelpy* is the belief that reviews should be detailed. For

example, Katy P. expressed wanting "*to make sure that I got every little nuance of my

experience…I felt some responsibility with that status.*" Likewise, John J. says that "*After

I became an Elite Yelper, I started feeling like I needed to be more detailed in my

reviews.*" As described by Ash W., detailed reviews involves saying:

> …not 'these people suck. You should never go here,' but 'I went and this is
> what happened'…be explicit with your experience: the waitress did this,
> the food tasted good, I enjoyed the way it was presented on the...whatever
> it was while you were there, share that with other people so they can
> benefit from your experience.

In pursuit of detailed reviews, Elite Yelpers would often visit a business with the intent of

reviewing their experience. Consequently, they begin thinking about their experience

from the start. In doing so, Elites make note of both negative and positive aspects,

fixating on:

> the experience from beginning to end. So like, how's the service? How
> was I greeted? Was it comfortable? Are the booths ok? Was my silverware
> clean? Was my server friendly? And was the food good? Was dessert
> good? Did I get dessert? How are the drinks? And then, the area and
> environment, like the decor. And the parking. (Holley P.)

While striving to be detailed, it emerged in interviews that concisely attending to

the details of their experience primed Elites to be particularly sensitive to negative

aspects of their experience. Alecia M. says that "*I'm definitely hard-core in my thinking*

about every aspect ...and I just remember everything that doesn't sit right." This level of attention to details prepares Elites to find at least some aspects of their experience lacking. For example, Stefani G.—the Non-Elite friend of an Elite reviewer—noted the impact of attending to details while at a restaurant:

> Sometimes it's fun to talk about our restaurant experience and frame it in the context of how many stars would you give it and what are you going to put in your review. Sometimes I get into it, but sometimes I find it a bit frustrating. Like let's just enjoy this experience and not pick it apart and just take it for what it is. So sometimes I don't like that aspect of analyzing every little detail. It's like, let's just enjoy each other's company, let's enjoy the food, and let's enjoy those positive aspects of it and try to let everything else go just so we can enjoy the moment.

In contrast to Elite reviewers, this theme did not emerge from the interviews with Non-Elite reviewers. It appears that concern for contributing a detailed review did not enter into their thought process. However, several Non-Elite reviewers did express that the reviews of Elites did tend to be more detailed. For example, Elaine S. said that "*I know when reading an Elite review it will be more thought out and more detailed review in general*." Moreover, Non-Elite reviewers also expressed that paying attention to details detracted from their experience. This is expressed in both Stefani G.'s quotation above and through Gina T.—a Non-Elite reviewer hoping to earn Elite status. She echoes this sentiment, saying "*like I was eating my meal and I was taking pictures and I was not really enjoying anything and it kinda detracted from my experience*."

Entering a business with the intent of reviewing it sensitized Elite reviewers to noting fine details of their experience. In turn, this helps to explain why Elites produce so few 5-star reviews—when looking for something negative, something often is found. On the other hand, Non-Elite reviews did not express this same strategy. Indeed, the above passages suggest that Non-Elites were even demotivated by paying attention to the details

of their experience. In this way, this requirement of being *Yelpy* serves to be an effective

boundary for keeping out reviewers that do not embody these values.

5.2 How Yelp Enables Balanced and Detailed Reviews

Thus far, I described emic themes that explain why Elites choose to produce

balanced and detailed reviews. This section seeks to explain mechanism by which Yelp

was able to encourage this behavior.

5.2.1 Organizational Messages

First, Elites are socialized to Yelp values through formal communication

channels. For example, the Yelp Elite page specifically states that Elites should be

"*consistently posting quality content,*" adding that "[*d*]*epth and breadth of reviews is key*

to submitting a successful Elite application, but ideally, you're a yelpy good citizen as

well" ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013). It further exemplifies this through statements such as

encouraging Elites to "[*c*]*hoose diplomacy and intelligent wit over crassness and mean-*

spiritedness; Yelp's a big bowl of cherries, but nobody likes the pits" ("Yelp Elite Squad,"

2013). These messages embody and reinforce—to a degree—the idea that Elites should

produce quality reviews that are free from meanness. For example, Wyatt E. says that

"*Yelp has policies on being Elite with things like real pictures, being Yelp-like, which is*

being polite not rude." Avoiding this meanness may help to explain why Elites had the

tendency for bumping up 1 and 2-star reviews.

5.2.2. Technological Features

In addition to organizational messages, Yelp also provides technological features

in the website and the mobile app that help reviewers produce detailed and balanced

reviews. During interviews, both Elite and Non-Elite reviewers remarked about the

difficulty of writing detailed reviews. This is because remembering the relevant

information is hard, particularly if the review is not written quickly. For example, Holly

P. says:

> So I try to, when I get back to write the review in the next 24 hours. If not,
> I struggle to write it because I have bad short-term memory. So if I do
> write it later, my review is not as descriptive. So if I write it within a
> shorter time frame, my review is a lot more descriptive and a lot
> more...like little details that you don't really remember once you've been
> gone out of the experience for a while.

While details may be difficult to remember, Yelp has enabled several technological

features on its mobile app that facilitate reviewers' ability to be detailed and balanced.

This is done by enabling reviewers to draft a review and take photos through the Yelp

App on a mobile device. Several Elite reviewers expressed making use of these features

to remind them of the details of their experience. For example, Ash W. explains:

> So, I'll take a picture on the way in of what [the restaurant] looks like, so
> when I get to [pictures of] my food, I can go 'oh, this picture of pulled
> pork goes to Jules BBQ, as opposed to this picture of pork goes to Mama
> Bears,' which was another review of a BBQ place in Columbia. I try to be
> discrete with the picture-taking, at least up until the point where the
> restaurant can't influence it anymore. I want my experience to be honest. I
> think if they see me taking a picture of their restaurant or their menu
> board, or whatever that they might go either 'why is this person taking a
> picture of the food' or 'oh, this guy might be posting the review, we want
> him to say nice things about it, give him more food, or be extra polite'. I
> try to keep it from being influenced from the restaurant, as being a part of
> a review.

In addition to photos, Ash W. describes make use of the mobile app to write down details

of his experience:

> I'll usually draft a couple words on my app to remind me what my
> experience was like. Get home. When I have time to fill in reviews, and
> I'll go ok I have the picture to remind me what I had, I have my few words
> that I saved so I'll fill in the rest of the review 'oh, now I remember, it was
> a Thursday afternoon and I was looking for a BBQ place and I popped into
> Jules BBQ at 5:30pm. I was the only person there…'

By providing reviews with the ability to take photos and make notes about their experience, Yelp is able to facilitate the production of detailed and balanced reviews.

5.2.3 Community Enforcement

Reviewers in Yelp are also able to reward and sometimes even punish each other for not being *Yelpy*. One of the guidelines for being Elite is to send compliments to users and vote on reviews: "*We're looking for model Yelpers that engage on the site by sending compliments*" and "*voting Useful, Funny, and Cool (UFC) on reviews*" ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013). By doing this, Yelp enables reviewers to reward each other for well-written reviews. For example, Ash W. says that:

> I want people to know in some way, so that they'll keep doing the same thing. Not just generic 'hey, good review', but 'this was a good review because…' and give them a reason in why I found it to be especially noteworthy. It was really detailed or you said nice things about the staff…So that people understand what's useful so that they can continue to repeat the same behavior. If you don't know what you've done right, it's hard to know how to do it again.

Additionally, Holly P. expressed voting on reviews that are "*really detailed-oriented and covers things that I never thought to write...or just it was good, well-rounded review. I'll give them votes*." In allowing reviewers to reward desirable reviews (i.e., detailed and balanced reviews), it fosters an environment where Elite reviewers can model behavior so that others know what are expected of them. Moreover, one of the requirements for becoming Elite in the first place is to engage in these types of community enforcing behaviors by sending compliments and voting on reviews.

While votes and compliments are generally considered positive, they have also been used as a form of punishment of public shaming. Again, Ash W. says that:

> I've seen two line reviews that irritate me, so like that's not fair...I've actually written and taken effort to do it. As opposed to 'yeah, the food

here was great.' So I'll send them the little *Write More* compliment of 'hey, short and sweet, nothing else needed to be said?". Hahaha, you know.

Similarly, Shane M. expressed using the *Funny* vote specifically for poorly written reviews:

> Funny is the easiest to use if you are trying to be a jerk. So if somebody is reviewing like a TGI Fridays and talking about how amazing it is. If there was some terrible review and it was all caps and like all "yeah, bike night!'. Funny, you know…I would use Funny as a derogatory, as often as I felt like I needed to.

In contrast to this approach, Non-Elite reviewers largely expressed disinterest over leaving compliments, such as Elaine S. who said "*I notice them, but I don't* [send them]." Other times Non-Elites contributed votes and compliments in effort to earn Elite status, but then this motivation quickly dissipated. Stefani G. says:

> I basically started using them because I heard you had to use the votes and compliments on people's reviews to become Elite. So I did that for a short period of time, more so as a way to bolster my activity level on the site so that I would potentially be selected for Elite. Then eventually, I just kinda stopped.

While many Non-Elites simply do not bother with sending votes or compliments, some indiscriminately send them in effort to become an Elite reviewer. This indicates that it may be in the interest of Yelp for Non-Elite reviewers *not* contribute many votes and compliments. When lacking organizational socialization to Yelp values and voting indiscriminately, it may inadvertently encourage non-*Yelpy* reviews.

5.2.3.1 Yelp Jail

Reviewers are also able to enforce *Yelpy* values in the Talk forums through flagging other users. Elite reviewers believe—although there is no stated policy—that when they flag content, it is pushed to the top of the queue for review. They also believe

that if many Elite reviewers flag the same content, it will automatically be banned. This is

described by Ash W., who said:

> I think that Yelp treats Elite slightly differently when we flag things on the
> forums or in reviews, that they get a little more weight to them. That
> they'll, when they evaluate, well who has flagged such and such comment
> in the forums that more the Elites will bubble up to the top of someone in
> support looking at them.

Upon being flagged, the contributor of offending content may also send to what is

colloquially called *Yelp Jail*. I was unable to find any official documents describing Yelp

Jail; however, a seven-time Elite reviewer posted a FAQ on a Talk forum describing the

process ("Yelp Jail FAQ," 2008). When an individual violates guidelines for the Yelp

Talk forum, their ability to post in any Talk thread is disabled from anywhere between 1

and 7 days and further offences may lead to permanent banning of the ability to post in

the Talk forums. An offender may still, however, at any time contribute reviews and

communicate through private messages.

One of the Non-Elite reviewers interviewed for this study described his

experience being sent to Yelp Jail. Lemony S. describes his frequent conversations in the

Talk forums that question the motives of Yelp. He said that:

> I'm the sand in the wheels. They wish I wasn't here because I make noise. I
> make unfriendly comments. Criticism. Not too many accusations but
> negative comments. They don't want to hear anything negative; they want
> everything to be positive.

When voicing some of these criticisms in the Talk forum of another city, he continues to

describe the response from Elite reviewers saying that:

> …immediately the clique [of Elite reviewers] jumped and emailed each
> other to flag me to have me banned. And they did in like 2 hours. I was
> banned for a while, 2 or 3 days in Yelp Jail. And somebody else would
> send me an email with a copy of the emails explaining why it happened,
> why it happened so quickly. They all jump in and said, 'everybody flag
> Lemony, he's trying to destroy Yelp as we know it'…Even if you're

> banned, you can private message. Some people are banned from Talk
> forever, but they can still post reviews. But they can communicate through
> private messages. Even when I was in Jail, I was able to send and receive
> private messages through Yelp.

While there is little information available about Yelp Jail, it does emerge as another way

in which the community can enforce behavioral norms among each other. In other words,

if someone is not being *Yelpy*, they may be censored on the website.

However, it should be noted that other reviewers like Shane M. acknowledge that

some monitoring is indeed useful when some conversations get out of control:

> I think it was good because honestly there was a lot of interactions that
> were happening that weren't really good for us or anybody. It's an online
> forum right, you're going to attract the crazies and the cools. That's kinda
> beautiful, but it also kinda crazy.

In summary, reviewers are obliged to produce reviews and interact with each

other in a *Yelpy* way in order to earn and maintain Elite status. A part of being *Yelpy* is to

write balanced and detailed reviews, which tends to privilege the production of more

moderate reviews. Moreover, Yelp is able to facilitate this through organizational

messages, technological affordances, and community enforcement. While writing

balanced and detailed reviews can impacting both negative and positive reviews, the

descriptions of Elites suggest that this impact is primarily in pulling down extremely

positive experiences.

Writing *Yelpy* reviews also triangulates with my ethnographic experience. When I

first began contributing to Yelp, I would spend anywhere from one to two hours writing

and revising my reviews because I felt the need to be very descriptive of my experience

and justify my rating. After submitting a review, I would spend the next few hours

frequently (every 5 minutes sometimes) checking my review to see if it had received any

votes. Two of my more detailed reviews received many votes (over 15) and were selected

as Review of the Day. Recognition from the community and from Yelp encouraged me to continue spending long periods of time producing detailed reviews. Indeed, these efforts were even recognized by one of the Non-Elite interview participants, who said "*I love reading how people have experienced particular a service. I love those long detailed reviews. Like yours.*"

5.3 Eliminating Anonymity

The second major theme to emerge from the interviews that explains why Elite reviewers produce more moderate reviews is concerned with privacy. Indeed, Bimber et al. (2012) note that while "historically the chief problem to overcome in information sharing was how to publicize information effectively, individuals must now take affirmative steps to maintain privacy and control of their personal information," (p. 48) adding that "new forms of social practice actually require greater effort for people to achieve privacy than publicness" (p. 49). On Yelp, people make private thoughts about local businesses public. While the previous theme of being *Yelpy* appeared to have a greater impact on positive reviews, the theme of eliminating anonymity appears to primarily impact negative reviews.

5.3.1 Real Photo and Name

In the description of what it takes to join the Yelp Elite Squad, there are ambiguous references to writing frequently, providing quality reviews, participating in the community through forums, and avoiding meanness ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013). However, there one thing that Yelp is unequivocally clear: reviewers must use their "*real name*" and "*a real (and clear!) profile photo.*" While Elite reviewers have acquiesced to this requirement, interviews with Elites expressed discomfort with associating reviews

with their real name and photo on Yelp. In particular, they express hesitance to write

negative reviews.

First, Yelp takes the real photo and real name requirement seriously and is closely

monitored and enforced. Ash W. explains that:

> My first pictures before I was Elite was a lot less—a lot more anonymous.
> They said there had to be a real picture. My first picture was…a little Lego
> guy. And then they said it had to be a real picture of you. So I went,
> alright. So I had a picture that my wife took of me looking out at the
> ocean, but it's from behind. Ok, and then when I started going, 'ok I want
> to be Elite. I want to be special'…it needs to be a real picture of you and
> show your face. And I'm like 'oh man!' cuz I like to hide in the
> background. I don't want people to really know who I am. So I had to
> search and find pictures that were not a close-up of my face.

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss the impact of having a pseudo-anonymous photo and

first name and last initial on a profile. After all, while last names are required to be

provided to Yelp, only the last initial is displayed publically on Yelp. Still, Elite

reviewers expressed deep concerns over this issue throughout the interviews in various

contexts. In each case, Elite reviewers remarked how it influenced them to not only

produce more moderate reviews, but also deter them from writing some negative reviews.

For example, Hayley H. says this about having her name and photo on her profile:

> To be honest, that makes me feel slightly uncomfortable. Because I don't
> like it being so public and especially because you forget that your face is
> really attached to these things. Especially after a while. It is just a part of it
> that I personally don't like. But I think that it also does keep people
> somewhat accountable because you have your picture there…I take care
> when I write my reviews.

Through requiring that one's identity is associated with their reviews, Yelp is able

to encourage Elite reviewers to be more discriminating with the opinions that they

express. For example, Stefani G.—a reviewer that was pursuing Elite status—says that a

real name and photo "*creates a sense of accountability. You're attaching your identity to*

these reviews, so it makes you feel like you need to be more balanced." In this sense, revealing one's identifying information feeds somewhat into the previous theme of being *Yelpy*. But beyond that, several Elites described situations in which they were recognized by others—other Elites, personal contacts, and even business owners. Through having these experiences and sharing these stories among each other, Elites describe being more moderate in their reviews.

5.3.1.1 Recognized by Elites

Two Elite reviewers said that being recognized by other Elites at Yelp events as a reason for moderating their opinion. Specifically, attendees of Yelp events and parties are given a name badge, connecting them to their 'online' identity. Ash W. describes this by saying:

> it has my name on my shirt, so even at these events I'm an ambassador for
> Yelp" adding that "it makes me… I can't hide in the shadows so much. I
> go to events and people can know who I am.

Anticipating that they will be recognized at these events creates pressure to have well-written reviews that embody the *Yelpy* values of balance and details. As Tegel A. says:

> I think knowing that I am going to see other Elite members at events, I
> want to make sure that my reviews are not sub-par like I want to make
> sure that they are good because I guess I feel like I have a reputation in
> that community to sustain.

Through organizing social events that connect the Elites, Yelp produces opportunities for peers to hold reviewers accountable for their reviews. This fosters concern for how reviewers are being perceived by the community. With the previously discussed finding that Elites have norms of writing detailed and balanced reviews suggests that these events then provide a mechanism for enforcing this writing style.

5.3.1.2 Recognized by Personal Contacts

Other Elites say that they were recognized by people external to Yelp, such supervisors at work, clients, and friends. Katy P. explains:

> Before, I didn't filter as much and I didn't have my actual name and picture on there. But when you become Elite an actual picture has to be up there so I know that clients could see it. I know that professors could see it. My supervisor saw it.

With the potential of being recognized by people in their daily life, Katy P. expressed that being Elite made her "*more careful of the words I use and how I talk about it. I am also less personal about it*." Moreover, using a photo and name also influences the types of businesses that she is willing to review. For example, Katy P. said *"before I reviewed my waxist. I wouldn't do that now*." Concern over the impression it would make on personal contacts external to Yelp encouraged this Elite reviewer to be more objective and balanced in her reviews.

This resonates with my own ethnographic experience using Yelp, at various times personal friends and professors expressed reading the reviews that I had written. Indeed, one of my professors made a comment that perhaps the time I spent writing lengthy reviews may be better used to make progress on my graduate studies. While a good-natured—and perhaps not inaccurate—comment, this clash of my professional and personal spheres made me somewhat embarrassed and heightened my awareness over what I had written and how my reviews might be perceived by people in other spheres of my life. Indeed, since that time, I wrote reviews with the acute understanding that my professor was likely going to read it. Being followed by unnamed fans may be flattering online, but being followed by a colleague, as it turns out, can be rather awkward when they have access to my thoughts about businesses.

5.3.1.3 Recognized by a Business

Several Elites told stories about being recognized—both positively and negatively—by business owners. Wyatt E. described this happening to him twice:

> There's actually a guy around the corner from us who has a Chinese Restaurant and another guy that owns a pizza place. And I've reviewed both of them…they both thanked me for the reviews when I went in. They are both aware of Yelp and they read the reviews.

At the same time, the potential for Elites to be more easily identified through their name and photo creates an awkward social dynamic, particularly among businesses like salons or health professionals. For example, Hayley H. says:

> Like my hair dresser. Cause like you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings... But I'm just careful before I review people that I have a really one-on-one interaction with several times. Like if you have a more personal connection with that person, you want to give it a couple times.

Lacking the ability to anonymously review these kinds of businesses, Elite reviewers were careful about the opinions they express and expressed an interest in being balanced in their reviews of businesses. Indeed, it is conceivable that a negative—or even moderate—review may somehow result in retaliation from a business.

During the interviews, retaliation from a manager or business owner emerged twice. First, Hayley H. reported that a manager—after receiving a 3-star review—"*was very upset and went on his public Facebook page and wrote 'I'd like to bitchslap Hayley H.'*" adding that "*some other person on the Yelp board found out, I don't know how. He put the link of his Facebook page on the board and told me about it. So we did contact the owner because that's extremely inappropriate.*" The manager in this case was upset with a moderate review 3-star review and sought retaliation. While apparently rare and not always extreme, Elite Yelpers do associate their identity with their reviews and do open themselves up to repercussions from angry business owners.

John J. describes a less dramatic response from a business owner. He says, "*sometimes the owners will recognize me. That kinda happened at Bakery Place. Actually and she ended up stuffing a petit four in my face. Saying, "Excuse me, it's not dry*." Here, the owner of the business recognized John J. from his photo and remembered a critical comment in a review about dry baked goods. This produced a somewhat awkward situation in which the business owner held the reviewer accountable for the review and challenged the content.

Through these experiences, Elite reviewers have a heightened awareness of the public availability of their name and photo. While the examples that emerged through the interviews were comparatively inert, more dangerous responses have occurred. Illustrating this is the case of a business owner in San Francisco that allegedly tracked down the home address of a reviewer "*via clues in his Yelp profile, like his occupation as a veterinary technician, and via some searches on Google and online white pages*" (Tate, Nov 4, 2009). There was a violent confrontation, ending with the police citing the business owner for battery. While likely an uncommon occurrence, it is one that may cross the mind of reviewers.

Ironically, researching reviewer identities is something that even Elite sometimes engaged in. For example, one Elite would try to identify fake profiles of people being paid to write reviews. Ash W. found that:

> …you can take the link from their picture on help, feed it to Google image search, and search for that face through Google image search. And I think people, some of them, are using stock photography because they are trying to do reputation management or whatever it is that people use Yelp to get better reviews as shills.

This same strategy can just as easily be applied by business owners to discover more about reviewers.

5.3.1.4 Anonymity and Non-Elites

Eliminating anonymity, on the other hand, appeared to demotivate many Non-Elite reviewers. For example, Gina T. expressed using her middle name because:

> I used to work as a loan collector and I did a lot of skip tracing, so I know how much information is out there. I am a little hesitant putting things out publically cause… I don't know, I always do this, I go to Google, type my name and see what's out there. And if I don't like what's out there, I start deleting. So, umm, knowing that Yelp would be a public things, I decided to go with my middle name [because it is] too generic to be linked to me, so that's why I keep some privacy going on.

Similarly, Stewart L. says that he does not want the attention associated with displaying a real photo on his profile:

> They may not want to interact that much with someone that doesn't have a real photo. I had some real photos about two years ago. I took them down. I got a friend on Yelp that does the same thing, it's just like. I mean a lot of people don't mind the attention or whatever. But I don't look at Yelp as like a dating site or a hookup site. I know it can be that and if it is that, that's ok. That wasn't my intention of joining or writing or anything like that.

These two Non-Elite reviewers expressed concerns over revealing their identity on Yelp because of potential consequences later. A third example also emerged in which the reviewer actively wanted to disidentify with the Elite Squad. Lemony S. says that:

> [The CM] would say, 'Oh, you are just wonderful. Oh keep on writing. Oh, and put a photograph of yourself. And make friends.' At first, I thought [this person] was another weirdo that--there are a lot on Yelp--but then I realized that [the CM] is an organizer they were just getting everybody for that. And I was not interested.

These examples demonstrate explicit concerns and objections to revealing personal information on Yelp. In not providing this information, it suggests more freedom to express extreme opinions without fear of being recognized.

In sum, requiring the use of a real name and photo for Elite status influences the way that reviewers engage in collective action behaviors. In this case, the prospect of

being identified by other reviewers, businesses, and even personal contacts encouraged

Elites to be less negative and more balanced in their reviews.

5.4 How Yelp Encourages Eliminating Anonymity

The previous section describes why lack of anonymity among Elite reviewers

sometimes causes them to inhibit negative reviews. Also emerging from the interviews

are themes relating to how Yelp explicitly encourages this behavior.

5.4.1 Vetting by the Community

Yelp requires and enforces the requirements for using one's real name and clear

photo of themselves in order to join the Elite Squad ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013). This is a

clear institutional policy and is verified by the Community Manager. However, in

addition to this requirement is the need to become known in the community. For

example, messages from Yelp say that hopeful Elites should "*Welcome new members and

watch out for your community*" in addition to "*participating respectfully on Talk*" ("Yelp

Elite Squad," 2013). Moreover, reviewers must be nominated to become Elite. Although

people can nominate themselves, the interviews suggest that potential Elites are vetted by

the community. As Ash W. says:

> You don't just raise your hand and say 'Yes, I'd like to be Elite.' Someone
> has to say 'Yes, Joe's a great guy, Joe should be Elite.' And in order to get
> that, you have to know people who are willing to nominate you.

While the Elite selection process is secretive, piecing together interviews of Elite and

Non-Elite reviews does provide evidence that being known by the Elite community

increases the odds of being selected for Elite status.

In describing how they were nominated for the Elite Squad, reviewers generally

said one of two things. First, one Elite said that they were particularly active in the Talk

forums, which gave people in the community the opportunity to get to know and

eventually nominate her for status. Hayley H. says:

> It's based on how often you interact cause I definitely would like ask
> questions and be involved in the chat board before I came Elite too. So I
> got to know the people that were on the boards at that point, so I think
> that's also how I got in. There is definitely I think a social aspect to it,
> where you kinda have to become involved in order to be asked to be Elite.

In this case, interacting with others on the forum was a way to be known and potentially

gain the attention of the community manager.

The second way that Elite's felt they were nominated was through going to Yelp

Events and meeting people face-to-face. One way this happens is by being the +1 of a

current Elite member. This was the case with Tegel A., who says:

> I found out from a friend. I didn't know when I first started what Elite
> even meant. I didn't even know that there was like an Elite culture. But my
> friend became Elite and then she let me be her +1 to an event, so I was
> able to learn about the community.

Other times, people go to a community manager Yelp event (CYME), which anyone is

able to attend. John J. recommends that reviewers "*go to one of the events or something*

or talk to the CM and say 'hey, I want to become an Elite, can you help me out?'".

Whether through the online Talk forums or face-to-face events, personal

interaction with other Elite reviewers and the community manager emerged as important

for gaining status. Shane M. sums this up by saying:

> if you really want it, then you have your comrades—because everyone
> makes friends—you have your comrades to harass the community
> manager and either get an answer or get them Elite status…I saw [the CM]
> act on some advice...I think there's a way around it. But you need to have
> some community around you. You know, people are important.

These Elite reviewers express that personal interaction with other reviewers is an important element of earning status. Through his observations of Elites in another city, Lemony S. explains that is may also be important for maintaining status:

> There is an over-abundance and people who are Elite get dropped all the time because they are not friendly with the inside core of the Elite's. You'd be surprised to see what's going on there. So, [in other cities] it's a lot harder to be made Elite. Pretty much you have to be approved by the— they vote for each other. It used to be called the dirty dozen. Then they become the dirty 20. Now there is more and we don't know how many. And what they do is they vote for each other all the time. And they are able to get status and when you get status the community manager listens more to them. And if you are not friends with them you cannot be a part of it. And if you are not friends with them and you are Elite, the next year they'll drop you out of Elite.

While this cannot be confirmed, discussion forums describing these actions that include contributions from the Elite testify to the accuracy of these claims.

Emerging from the theme of being vetting by the community is the idea that those seeking Elite status are actively breaking down their anonymity by interacting with others. They express that being known be other reviewer and the CM are both important for earning the status. Perhaps most notable is that it is through these activities in the first place that reviewers are nominated for Elite status. In other words, interacting personally appears to be a requirement to become Elite.

5.4.2 Connecting Personal Contacts

Another way that Yelp encourages people to reveal their identity to others occurs when creating a profile. Like many social networking sites, Yelp asks permission to search through one's email contact to find other users that the individual might know. In doing so, Stefani G., a reviewer seeking Elite status, noted that she added her co-workers and supervisor to her friends list. Only later, she realized that this publicized her reviews

to these people. She noted that this was frequently on her mind when she wrote reviews,

as she was uncertain of how her reviews might be interpreted by these people. She says:

> These are people that might decide to promote me or provide a reference.
> While I am professional and balanced at work, I wondered how their view
> of me would change based on the content of my reviews and the place I
> choose to review.

Indeed, there appears to be mixed feelings among Elite reviewers about

publicizing their reviews to their friends. Some expressed simultaneously posting their

Yelp reviews to their Facebook page, for example. Meanwhile, others expressed

discomfort with their identity being known. This was also a finding of a previous study of

Yelp, which noted that many reviewers were "*secretive about their Yelping practices*"

and "*did not reveal to many of their 'real-world' friends that they regularly engaged on

the site*" (Kuehn, 2011, p. 201). As opposed to social networking websites like

Facebook.com and Google+, which provide some control over who can view the content

they produce, Yelp broadcasts all reviews publically. In this way, Yelp differs from both

other social networking websites and online review websites and may explain some of

the hesitance of attaching their identity to their reviews.

5.4.2 Local Reviews

A theme emerging from my ethnographic observations is the rather unique

context of producing reviews on Yelp. As opposed to other geographically dissociated

review websites (e.g., Amazon.com, IMDb.com, etc.), Yelp is focused on local cities.

This is reflected in the digitally-federated structure of the Yelp website which localizes

content to a specific city. Given the staggering popularity of Yelp—with 102 million

unique visitors each month, it is the 46th most trafficked website in the United States and

187th in the world (Alexa.com, 2013)—Elite reviewers appear to have an appreciation that the likely audience of their reviews will be other people in the same city.

While requiring a real photo and name provides some level of anonymity from complete strangers; however, it was sufficient enough to be recognized by supervisors, co-workers, professors, friends, clients, and business owners. In requiring the use of a real name and photo within this highly local context, Yelp bridges the public and private domains of Elite reviewers and this ultimately may influence opinions that Elites are willing to express.

5.4.3 Libel

The final way in which Yelp encourages Elites to produce more moderate reviews is through its policies on libel. While Elites expressed concern about judgments from friends, co-workers, and business owners, they also expressed concern over libel. Indeed, it is Yelp's official policy that reviewers are responsible for the consequences of their reviews. Specifically, the Yelp FAQ states:

> We like to hear about the good, the bad, and everything in between. Be sure to include all the relevant facts and details, and don't embellish your story for effect. We are big believers in freedom of speech, but beware the legal consequences if you post false information. ("Yelp FAQ," 2013)

In this statement, the words "*legal consequences*" are a hyperlink to the Wikipedia entry for Libel, emphasizing accountability for one's reviews. Through this policy, Yelp is also able to influence the content that reviewers produce.

Elites interpret this statement on libel as not receiving assistance from Yelp in the event of a libel lawsuit. Several of the Elite and former Elite reviewers spontaneously expressed explicit concern over libel issues relating to online reviews. For example, former Elite reviewer Alecia M. says that:

> First off, I have an old photo of myself, not how I really look...and I don't write negative things because I'm scared, but sometimes I am worried about people. Like, they write such mean things and then it's your real name. That could be libel.

There is a clear concern that a negative review could result in a lawsuit. Moreover, this reviewer believed that Yelp would not support them in the event of a lawsuit. The uncertainly surrounding the potential of a libel lawsuit encourages Elite reviewers to be careful and objective in their reviews. Ash W. says:

> I have a Google search on Yelp lawsuits. The whole libel/slander—I don't know what the right term of it is—of people that write reviews and then get sued. So they sue Yelp and they lose. Yelp has deep pockets and the some public communications says "Yelp is just a broker. It's not their fault that people say negative things." So they'll turn it around and sue the Yelp reviewer.

> So, I pay very close attention that what I write is fact… I go to a restaurant and I have a poor experience because the food's cold or the coffee was weak—that I think is a legitimate feedback on a restaurant.

> I think people should be aware that what they say on Yelp in public. It could be determined that a business says "you have slandered me in public, so I'm going to sue you for a million dollars." I don't want to pay my lawyers for that. I have better things to spend money on than defending myself from a lawsuit.

> But I think that people should be aware that, no, Yelp is not going to come to your defense when you say bad things about a business. You're on your own. And when they show up to Yelp with a subpoena that I need you to tell me who Ash W. is. They're going to say, 'oh Ash W. is so and so.' I hope that Yelp has the decency to also tell me that they've told them who I am so that I can prepare.

Perceiving lack of support from Yelp in the event of a libel lawsuit, Elites are particularly attuned to providing balanced and detailed reviews. This approach to writing reviews is perceived to be more defensible in the event of a lawsuit.

Additionally, reviewers have no power to influence the direction of Yelp in this matter. Shane M. explains:

>I [was concerned] how negative reviews would [be perceived]. You know for lots of reasons. Like libel stuff, there is still no definitive law around any of this. I still don't trust Yelp to get people's back because laws change all of the time…If I were CEO of Yelp I think I would. I think it would be very important to me to protect the users that I am courting, so like the libel stuff, makes me nervous. One day a law will be written either pro-internet reviewer or not. It will be definitive. It will be a Roe versus Wade. And I hope that they are thinking about it…obviously if somebody's successfully sued for a negative review, people will stop writing.

Recognizing the implication of libel laws for writing reviews, this former Elite reviewer expresses the desire to shape the organization. However, Shane M. is unaware of what, if anything, Yelp is doing in this matter. This demonstrates how collective action on Yelp is bounded tightly by the goals of the business, rather than the desires of the crowd.

Yelp's policy of not defending reviewers in cases of libel reflects both a constraint to collective action—particularly for Elites who use their real name and photo—and a limitation of their ability to influence the organizations goals. Producing reviews in this uncertain environment makes Elite reviewers cautious about contributing negative reviews. This helps to explain why their distribution is more moderate. By contrast, no Non-Elites interviewed expressed awareness of or concern for libel lawsuits.

5.5 Peer Pressure

Previously, I described how Yelp encourages people to interact with other reviewers in the community to foster ties that can lead to being nominated for Elite status. Related to this is peer pressure that reviewers expressed feeling when leaving reviews. Yelp encourages reviewers to add friends to their user profile. This not only helps people become nominated, but also increases their legitimacy in the community.

There is general consensus across Elite Yelpers that friends are people they see at events and know personally. For example Katy P. says "*usually it's people that I met at an event*," Wyatt E. says "*for the most part, it's people that I know, that I've met in*

person," and Holly P. says "*I use friends if it is someone that I actually know*." Moreover,

Elite reviewers expressed hesitance to adding strangers as friends because they may be

fake profile of people being paid to write reviews. Ash W. explains:

> The friend invites that I get, I only accept them… I have a bunch of them
> that are pending because these people have written 2 reviews. And, I'm
> like 'Is this a real person?'. I can't really tell. Let's wait a little bit. So I'll
> look at their profile and see that they have 35 friends and 20 are people
> that I know, but they've only written 2 reviews, I'm not going to add.

This is relevant because Yelp personalizes the order of reviews displayed for a business

based on one's Friends list—it displays reviews from one's friend first. Because of this

and because Friends are generally known others, Elite reviewers often expressed

awareness of what their friends have said about a business. In turn, Elites described that

this influenced their rating of that business. Specifically, Elite reviewers expressed

hesitance to leaving a review for a business that diverges from what their Yelp friends

have written.

Elite reviewers mentioned that the opinion of others can influence their review,

particularly if they had a negative experience. It is difficult to voice a dissenting opinion,

especially when the prevailing opinion is from one's personal contacts. For example,

Hayley H. mentions that:

> I'll read though the other reviews especially if it is a really positive or
> really negative experience. Those are generally extremes and if I notice
> someone else had that same experience or someone else said something
> that I completely agree with…it'll make me feel like, "this must be really
> bad because even this person had a really bad experience" … so that kinda
> changes it I guess. What other people write.

When writing about negative experiences, Elite Yelpers look for validation of their

experience through other reviews.

This resonates with my own ethnographic experience. There is a particularly high-

rated restaurant that I went to at the recommendation of my friends who were also Elite

Yelpers. While I did not enjoy my experience and would have given a 3-star rating, I

withheld this review because I did not wish to offend or have to explain to my friends

about this experience. During my struggle in decided to leave this review, I was

concerned that perhaps it was a sign that I was perhaps not sophisticated enough to be a

good Elite Yelper. Much like the imposter syndrome that graduate students often face, I

was concerned that I would be found out as unqualified for being an Elite Yelper if my

opinion did not fall in line with other Elites.

5.6 How Yelp Encourages Peer Pressure

The emergence of peer pressure in the interviews highlights the complex social

context under which Elite reviewers tend to operate. Interestingly, Elites also remarked

how an aspect of Yelp's interface actually enhanced the peer pressure they felt when

writing a review.

As stated before, Yelp personalizes the order in which reviews are displayed for a

restaurant. As shown in Figure 24, reviews from one's Friends appear first. Additionally,

on the screen when actually writing a review for a business, the right 3rd of the screen

shows previously written reviews for that business. But moreover, it displays them in the

same order. This means that the opinions of Yelp friends—who tend to be people who

they know in person—are displayed alongside the box for writing a review. This is

shown in Figure 25. Elite reviewers explicitly talked about this feature and its influence

on them when contributing reviews. For example, Ash W. says:

> I try not to read what other people have written when it's time for me to
> write my review because I don't want to be biased. But then when you are
> writing it and they have "This is What Other People Have Written" down
> on the screen, I find that sometimes that slants me a little bit. So if people

have written lots of 2-stars, I'll feel more comfortable writing a 2-star review. But if people have written a bunch of 4s and 5s, and I had a bad experience, it's going to be harder for me to say negative things. Peer pressure. Herd mentality…I'll try not to be influenced by the reviews that are at the right side, but that will usually cause me to say one thing versus another.

Notable in this passage is that Ash W. felt this way even in the absence of reviews being from his friends. While research has suggested it is difficult to voice a dissenting opinion, it is often amplified when dissenting from the opinions of one's social group. In this way, the design of Yelp's interface subtly enhances the influence of peer pressure, which several Elites expressed as leading them to be less negative about a review.
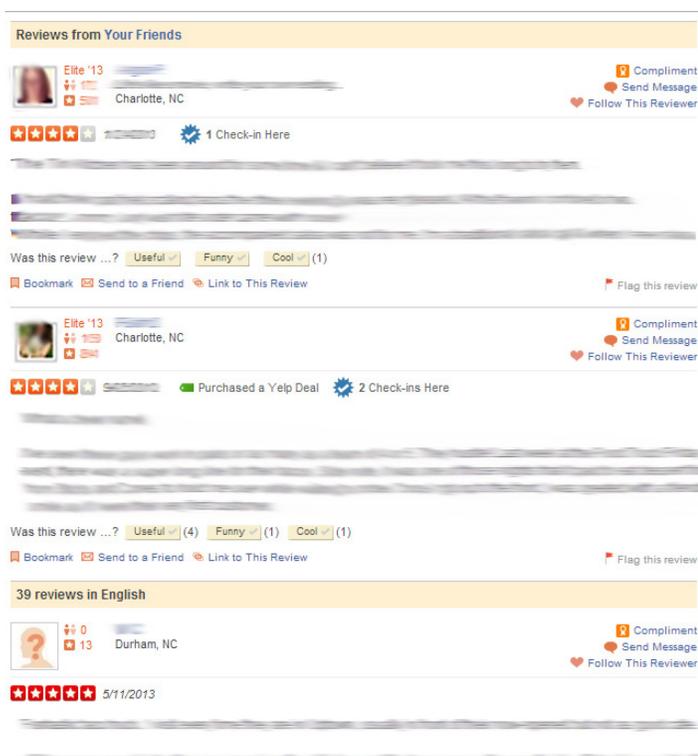
Figure 24: Personalized order of reviews showing Friends first

Figure 25: Contributing a review showing reviews from Friends

5.7 Reviewing Extreme versus Reviewing Everything

The previous themes have described why Elite reviewers may lower or raise a review rating to be more moderate and how Yelp is able to influence reviewers to do this. While this helps to explain why Elite reviews tend to have fewer 1 and 5 star reviews, there is a comparatively larger increase in the number of moderate reviews. Indeed, the under-reporting bias predicts that reviewers will generally not contribute reviews of moderate experiences. However, emerging from the analysis is the thematic category of Review Everything, which demonstrates that Elites have overcome the tendency to under-report. This is in contrast to how Non-Elite reviewers approach moderate reviews.

5.7.1 Non-Elite Review Extreme Experiences

Consistent with what the under-reporting bias predicts, Non-Elite reviewers expressed disinterest in writing moderate reviews. Instead, they would often describe producing a review in reaction to an extreme experience. For example, Portia R. describes writing reviews "*only in situations where I absolutely hated the way I was*

treated, hated a company and felt like people needed to be aware of it would I. Or vice

versa, if it was really good." Elaine S. echoes this, saying "*it's like I go somewhere and I*

had a good or bad experience and want to review it."

Indeed, many Non-Elites reported that their reviews were in response to either an

extremely positive or negative experience. For example, Stefani G. describes her negative

experience at a business:

> I planned this Mother's Day brunch for my mom. We went to this nice
> place and it was a pretty pricey brunch. The food was actually pretty good,
> but the service was horrible. It took forever to get seated and it took
> forever to bring the different courses. And it pretty much ruined the whole
> experience because the service was so bad. And I felt like I wanted to let
> other people know about this experience. Especially on a special occasion
> when you are trying to plan something nice for someone and they can't
> pull through, I thought it was something I wanted other people to know.
> Because if I had read a review reflecting what I had put down in my
> review, I would not have gone.

Likewise, Portia R. describes her review for an extremely positive experience:

> I told them that I would post feedback on places that ask for feedback
> from people or will portray the company in a positive light and my
> experience there. So I told them that and you know, I want to give back in
> some way to a company that treated me very well because that doesn't
> have to be done by companies. I know they are looking for my business
> and trying to drive sales but they could have dealt with things a lot
> differently than they did and going that extra mile for me...um...made me
> very...uh...willing to review and put forth my opinion. But, then again, I
> can see how that might skew all of the results either really positively or
> really negatively like people that...maybe people only review when, you
> know, they have a really memorable experience, either positively or
> negatively.

When asked why she had not written a review since this experience, Portia R. replied that

"*There haven't been things that really compelled me write a review for a company since*

that time."

Reflected in these passages is the overarching theme of Non-Elite writing in

response to an extreme experience. At the same time, Non-Elites expressed disinterest in

producing moderate reviews. Elaine S. says: "*The ones in the middle you're just like 'meh' you know. I don't feel as inclined or passionate about writing a review.*" This sentiment was also shared by Alecia M., the only former Elite interviewed that is still producing reviews. She stated that "*the average places that I don't care about, I'm not going to write about.*"

5.7.2 Elites Review Everything

On the other hand, Elites frequently described their tendency to review—literally—all of their experiences. Ash W. explains:

> I review EVERYTHING…ABSOLUTELY EVERY business that I ever ever…from restaurants to gas stations to some of the silly stuff. I've reviewed the moon. It's in San Francisco. Someone created the business 'the moon' and so I thought, 'that's funny, I'm gonna review that too'…I have reviewed every tube station in Zone 1 of the London underground...that was an effort. And sometimes, yes, I would go to a place just because I'm going to be in the neighborhood and I'm going to need to review this station. So I would find something near there, a museum, as something, and on my way to it I would experience the station and write my review of Paddington Station. Everything. Absolutely everything.

Similarly, Wyatt E. challenges himself to write one review every day. He says:

> I was going to do it every day—I didn't quite make it. I did 362 reviews. But I missed 2 days. One, I don't know how I missed it…just missed a random Thursday. Just missed it… Then last year, I started doing it one a day, but only week days.

When asked whether or not she left a review about a moderate experience, Hayley H. says that "*I did leave a review, but I always leave a review.*" Together, these passages demonstrate that Elite reviews have a strong tendency to contribute reviews regardless of their experience.

In particular Elite reviewers expressed that, despite some disinterest, they would eventually get around to writing reviews of moderate experience. For example, John J. says:

> The moderate review. I just don't feel like I need to write them right away because they are fairly uninteresting. And the restaurant is probably going to do fine either way with a moderate review. Most moderate reviews are all the same: the food was ok, the service was ok, everything was ok. And that's it. So there's not as many interesting things happening in a moderate review

Yet, despite the somewhat lackluster effort behind moderate reviews they still are written—it may take "*a couple days before I review it or it can take a couple of weeks. Or it can happen after a couple of months*," (John J.) but eventually they will get to it. Indeed, Ash W. describes producing moderate reviews: "*I've written lots and lots of 3s because it was, meh, it was ok. You're middle of the road. It was 'ehh'.*" Upon reflecting about their reviewing, other Elites recognized that they were writing about experiences that they would not have otherwise reviewed if not for having Elite status. For example, Tegel A. says:

> With Elite status I found myself doing quick little things. I now search for things to write reviews about like I said I've already written reviews of like the main places I go so sometimes I'll just write a quick little paragraph to make sure that I get a review in there because I haven't written in a long time. So I suppose that has changed. I did more of the quick stops where I wouldn't have reviewed things like that previously…and I probably did review some places that I wouldn't have review if I were not Elite status.

Together, these examples demonstrate the tendency of Elites to write reviews about all of their experiences—including the often under-reported moderate reviews. In doing so, this theme emerges as significantly contributing to the distribution of reviews that Elites produce. The next section describes mechanisms through which Yelp is able to encourage this behavior.

5.8 How Yelp Encourages Elites to Review Everything

The previous section describes the tendency of Elites to write reviews about their moderate experiences. Through interviews with these reviewers, three predominate themes emerged which help to explain how Yelp is able to accomplish this. The first theme is concerned with the sense that their activity is being monitored. The second theme is concerned with the ambiguous criteria for attaining Elite status. The third theme involves organizational messages targeted at Elite reviewers.

5.8.1 Monitoring by the Community Manager

During the interviews, Elite reviewers consistently described the sense that their activity was being monitored by the community manager, who is perceived to be the local representative of Yelp Headquarters (HQ). Given this authority within the community, the sense of pantropic monitoring of the CM impacted both the frequency of reviews produced by Elites and also the types of reviews that they produce.

First, a CM is perceived by Elite reviewers to be a paid employee of Yelp and, in that capacity, is a representative of Yelp HQ whose voice has power. Giving legitimacy to the CM is the authority they have in organizing Official Yelp Events, providing Yelp swag, and answering questions about Yelp. At the same time, reviewers have no voice in the hiring decision of the CM. When asked during interviews, Elites expressed either lack of awareness or lack voice in the process. Ash W. says that:

> I have NO idea. The CM is an official Yelp employee, they get a Yelp paycheck, they have connectivity into the little hamsters that run all of the yelp things. So they are, um, able to reward us with yelp tchotchkes - wristbands, hats, T-shirts, type of stuff

Other Elites like Hayley H. expressed lack of voice in the selection process, saying "*We have none. We do not choose our community manager. It would be great if we did.*"

At the same time, reviewers expressed limited upward communication to Yelp

HQ. When asked how they could reach someone in Yelp above the local CM in the event

of an emergency or complain, reviewers expressed that their communication was limited

to the CM. For example, Tegel A. says:

> That's a really good question because no, I haven't [thought about
> contacting someone above the CM]. I wouldn't know how to do it. I
> haven't taken the time to research how to do it and I guess I also would
> feel scared that it wouldn't be confidential.

Similarly, Lemony S.—a Non-Elite reviewer—expresses that:

> That's really what I don't like about the pretense that there's that… the
> Wizard of Oz behind the curtain. Yelp has got this like big curtain, 'oh this
> is only you guys, we're not here, we're not here.' But it's not possible. The
> corporation could not run this way. There's just a wall of communication
> because they can get to you but you can't get to them. It stops at the CM.

These passages illustrate that the CM is viewed as not only having legitimate authority in

the community, but that their interactions with Yelp HQ occurs largely through the CM.

Being perceived as a legitimate representative of Yelp, comments from the CM are taken

seriously. Moreover, comments from the CM are often perceived as a form of

monitoring, which contributes to the drive of Elites to review everything.

Most frequently, Elites described feeling monitored because of the Compliments

sent by the CM. While the CM certainly sends compliments with messages like "*nice*

seeing you," Elites most frequently described compliments receiving with messages like

"*hope to see more reviews soon*," and "*miss your reviews*." This heightens a sense of

guilt and obligation in Elite reviews. As Tegel A. describes:

> I can almost always expect for the community manager to make some
> comment for probably like at least one over every two posts that I make.
> Like either 'glad to see that you are writing' or I actually got one that was
> like 'hope to see you write more' because I hadn't written a lot in the past 6
> months. So I kinda feel like they have an eye on like what people are

doing… I knew that [the CM] was really paying attention to what I was writing.

In response to receiving this compliment, Tegel A. says that:

I got the one that said 'wish you were writing more' or something like that, right before I went to a Yelp Elite event I was feeling kinda guilty that I hadn't written anything so like that day I wrote a review cause I was like ehhhhhh to show face you know later so I just wanted him to know that I was still active.

Several other reviewers expressed receiving these types of compliments. Gina T. talked about receiving ones that "*said the same things, 'keep writing, your reviews are great,'*" and Katy P. described ones "*like 'thanks for your review, we missed you.'*" These compliments, while generally supportive and positive, still carry with it the sense that their activity—and inactivity—is noticed by Yelp.

Even Elite reviewers that were consistently active were aware of these types of compliments. For example, Wyatt E.—who writes one review everyday—says that:

[The CM] does that a lot, but I don't get them because I write every day. There's a few people I talk to where you can see that. Your friends are listed by participation: by how frequently they are on the site. If you look at the less frequent ones and you look that their compliments, you should see something like 'Hey David, haven't seen you write a review. Looking forward to seeing the next one.' I guarantee you it works, to some degree…if you look at that person you see that they respond and say, 'Oh yeah, I've been meaning to get to it. I'll start writing again soon.'

And Hayley H. was also aware of this because:

other friends I have Yelped with have said if they haven't Yelped in a while that they get a message from the community manager encouraging them in a positive way to keep writing things.

During the end of my ethnography, I eventually received such a message in an email from the CM because I had ceased actively producing reviews. It said that:

I just wanted to check in -- I got a note from Yelp HQ that said you were at risk for losing your Elite badge since you weren't writing reviews anymore. There are only so many spots that can go to Elites and they look

at it a few times a year to make sure they shouldn't shift them around to other Yelpers. I hope everything's okay your way...Come back to us if you can!

Look forward to hearing from you and knowing how everything is going! You know we need your yelps in Charlotte.

Soon thereafter one of the interview participants received a similar email, which they forwarded to me. It read:

Just wanted to let you know that I got a note from our Elite Council mentioning you hadn't written a review in a while.

I know life, work, and other things can put Yelp on the backburner, and that's totally understandable. I just wanted to check in and make sure that all is well.

I'd love to keep you on the Elite Squad, though! Remember, being Elite means that you are a model Yelper for the rest of the community in adding the most useful, funny, and cool reviews, photos, and tips. You're a great writer and we need you!

Let me know if you have questions. I hope you can come back to us!

These emails make it clear that activity is being monitored by Yelp and by the CM. By reminding people that they need to be producing reviews to maintain their status, Yelp is able to encourage Elite reviewers to review everything. Not only does monitoring by the CM contribute to the drive to review everything, even attending Yelp Events appears to do this as well. Ash W. says, "*By having the Elite Events and the other Not-Elite Events. That sorta reminds me, 'Yep, there's Yelp. I need to do things.'*"

5.8.2 Ambiguous Criteria for Elite Status

The second theme to emerge that describes how Yelp encourages Elite reviewers to review everything is the ambiguous criteria of what is needed to attain Elite status. The Yelp FAQ says that "*Elite-worthiness is based on a number of things, including well-written reviews, great tips on mobile, a fleshed-out personal profile, an active voting and*

complimenting record, and playing nice with others" ("Yelp FAQ," 2013). As Elite status

lasts for one calendar year, Yelp adds that "*the Elite Council spends many a sleepless*

night with pizza, beer, and 5-Hour Energy shots to pore over individual profiles and

figure out who deserves another coveted term in office" ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013).

Among these various criteria, the quality and quantity of reviews are likely among the

most heavily weighted. However, an exact number is not provided.

Given this ambiguity, Elites consistently expressed uncertainty over how they

became an Elite Yelper and what it takes to be re-selected. When asked how Elite status

is determined, for example, Ash W. says "*I have no idea. Supposedly there is a*

committee of people back in SF that they evaluate your reviews…I have heard all sorts of

things. I have no idea actual facts." Adding to this, John J. describes the air of mystery

surrounding even the existence of Elites, "*I would say that it's not advertised very well. I*

knew about them, that there were Elites. But I didn't know how to become one or what

they did or anything like that." Faced with reaching an unknown number of reviews to

earn or retain their Elite status, the main strategy Elites was "*just writing a lot of reviews.*

That was it. It was just to write a lot of reviews" (Holly P.).

Faced with ambiguity over what it takes to maintain their status, Elites and those

seeking Elite status focus on writing a lot of reviews. This feeds into the drive to review

everything because they were uncertain if they would be selected again the following

year.

5.8.3 Organizational Messages

Moreover, Elites receive organizational messages at Elite Events that are not

received by Non-Elites. Frequently at events, the CM will thank the Elites for coming and

for their contributions to Yelp. These messages can be more direct. Stefani G. describes

that the CM is sometimes:

> encouraging people to review and saying, 'Hey guys, you gotta review.
> And I really encourage you to start writing more.' And saying things like,
> 'Even if you aren't Elite and are with an Elite tonight, you can be Elite
> too!'

These kinds of messages reinforce the idea that:

> it's kinda just a part of the deal. You sorta know that's how you got Elite
> status, so in order to keep it I mean you can't just stop [writing reviews]
> you know what I mean. You have to continue on with it. (Katy P.)

Similar messages are also present in emails that announce Elite Events. Near the

end of my ethnography, for example, emails would include the note that "*Only Elites with*

recent reviews will be given admittance/confirmation for events going forward."

Messages like this suggest that the review production of some Elites has not been

satisfactory, while also introducing a level of competition to being included in Elite

Events.

In summary, monitoring by Yelp, ambiguous criteria for joining the Elite Squad,

and organizational message foster an environment where reviewers are driven to review

everything. While some interview participants truly embody this—such as Wyatt E. and

Ash W. who write one or two reviews each day—not all reviewers are necessarily this

passionate. Rather for many Elite reviewers, these strategies produce sufficient guilt and

uncertainty to eventually review their moderate experiences.

During my tenure in the Elite Squad, I felt pressure to produce reviews often

because of comments I would overhear during Elite Events. For example, I heard a CM

say that they recommend starting off with writing one review each week and seeing

where it goes from there. Additionally, I would feel guilt whenever the CM would send

me a compliment asking how my reviews were coming. This guilt was heightened when I

RSVP'd for and attended Elite Events. Finally, I also felt mounting pressure at the end of

the calendar year because I knew that Elite Squad memberships were expiring. I not only

had a dissertation that needed ethnographic data, but I also wanted to continue attending

the free events. On more than a few occasions, this inspired me to produce review when I

otherwise would not have done so.

5.9 The Elite Squad: Everything to Everyone

Underscoring the themes that emerged from this analysis is the general desire to

be a member of the Elite Squad. This raises the question of why reviewers find this to be

so desirable. Recent studies of Yelp reduce the Elite Squad to status-seeking behavior

(McQuarrie et al., 2013), given the appearance of a badge on one's profile. However,

emerging from the results so far, the Elite Squad appears to be much more multifaceted.

In this section, I present the emergent themes of what being a member of the Elite Squad

means to members. In doing so, I put forth how Elite status means different things to

different people and describe how Yelp has created a reward system that encompasses

elements of multiple sources of motivation. In doing so, the Elite Squad can

simultaneously satisfy various incentives to different reviewers, being essentially

everything to everyone. The multifaceted aspect of the Elite Squad is evident in how

Yelp answers the question of what is in it for people becoming Elite:

> Only a shimmering smorgasbord of stuff that'll change your life: Nifty
> new friends, über-local gatherings, invites to fun (and free!) parties at least
> once a month, and a shiny profile badge. Most importantly, you'll join the
> ranks of some of the most influential tastemakers on the site and in your
> city. Desperately seeking schwag? You'll have first dibs on everything
> from Yelp sunglasses and lip balm to sweatbands and temporary tattoos.
> Represent! ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013)

Within this one paragraph, Yelp describes the Elite Squad as the Swiss-army knife of

motivational tools, including status, social contact, free stuff, and even a soapbox.

5.9.1 Status-Seeking

Some reviewers have expressed being extremely motivated to join the Elite Squad

because of a comprehensive array of various badges and compliments. First is the Elite

badge, which in addition to being required for accessing the free monthly parties, is a

source of motivation in and of itself. Ash W. says that:

> …and maybe I'm participating more because I'd like to be Elite next year,
> if only because I get that little badge on my profile and next year will be
> my fifth year, so I'll get a gold badge. I can't wait.

Figure 26: Elite badges

As Figure 26 shows, the badge signifying Elite status is stacked on each user's profile

for each year it is attained, culminating into a gold color after 5 years of Elite status. Ash

W. continues saying that

> I have a streak now, I don't want to break the streak. I have 4 little red
> badges. Well, three red badges and one kinda light-red badge. I'd like that,
> I want that gold badge. So I see people on Yelp who have a string! I mean,
> they've been Elite for years. I don't even know how long they've been

doing that. I'm like, that's awesome! Eight years of Elite Yelping. Yes! So I play nice. I try to be a good Yelper.

In addition to this badge, increasing the First to Review (FTR) count also emerges as a sought after activity. This badge counts and displays the number of times the reviewer was the first person to review a business or event. After attending an Elite Event, Ash W. describes:

> I have a desire, a need, a craving to be the first to review a Yelp Event. So I will come straight home and I will write my review right then because I want that little First to Review on the Yelp Community Event. Cause I'm...hehehehe. It's motivating.

Echoing this desire for the FTR badge, Shane M. says "*I was also kinda a dork about first review. It's amazing, the culture sucks you in. It's well-built.*" Ironically, the absence of having new businesses to review emerged as demotivating, as in the case of Clyde B., a former Elite, who says:

> I really enjoyed when I got to review something for the first time, like I was the first person to review a place. Which is obviously a lot easier to do back then, but…I was motivated by the novelty by being the person who was reviewing new things and things I had a niche interest in. I mean I personally reached a personal saturation point where I didn't have much to review anymore. And that was also when I achieved Elite status I think for 2 years, but in the third year, because I had stopped being motivated to review stuff because I didn't have new stuff to review.

For members like these, the desire to be the first to review keeps them looking for new businesses to review.

Moreover, Elite Events also emerged as a significant embodiment of status. When going to an Elite event, which have included venues such as high-end restaurants, bowling alleys, and movie theaters, attendees expressed the high level of service and personal attention they received. Businesses hosting Elite Events tend to provide experiences above and beyond the typical consumer experience: the chef coming out to

introduce each course of food, attentive servers that pour graciously, and even access to

limited edition items. For example, Ash W. notes:

> So we did a beer tasting event last year. Blue Moon was there and they
> have 4 beers that are paired with Blackfinn entrees. So like the hot dog
> with beer, I don't remember what they were. But they had a chocolate
> dessert with a Blue Moon Peanut Butter Beer. It was awesome! Peanut
> Butter Beer! So it's a dessert beer, not something you drink out at a picnic.
> I didn't know there could be such a thing as a dessert beer. And it was...I
> had a half…I was like, where do I get this and they said 'Well, we only
> make it...' and I was like NOOOOOO!!! It was so good! So they actually,
> as they brew it, they mix peanut butter through the beer and it just has this
> peanut butter flavor and I thought it was just. It was amazing. And it was
> paired with this chocolate dessert. It was insane.

Adding to this thought, Stefani G. says that at events:

> They do make you feel like you are special because when you go to an
> event, the staff is on best their behavior. They're extremely polite. They're
> very welcoming. Much nicer than if you were their average customer.
> They treat you really nice, there is plenty of food and drinks and
> appetizers and free stuff and you are treated really well. So you feel almost
> like a rockstar when you go.

Some reviewers on Yelp expressed being particularly drawn to the status aspects

of being Elite—shiny badges and rockstar treatment at businesses. In this way, Yelp is

able to motivate some reviewers with access to exclusive and otherwise inaccessible

experiences.

5.9.2 Instrumental Rewards

Many Elite reviewers also expressed being motivated to produce reviews because

of the many tangible rewards given to them. These extend beyond just Yelp's "*epic*

parties" ("Yelp Elite Squad," 2013), which is organized by the Yelp's local Community

Manager (CM). Rewards also include tickets to music or theater shows, restaurant

openings, and swag.

When asked what motivates them to produce reviews, Elite reviewers would

nearly always mention the Elite Events. Katie P. said that these events have "*free food*

and drinks and stuff like that, so that's why I do it now." Similarly, Tegel A. says that

often her guests to events:

> would start writing on Yelp because they had gone to these events and
> they are like 'hey this is really cool, you get this for free and like, maybe I
> should start writing reviews' you know, so that has happened.

These events provide Elite reviewers with an experience at restaurants that might

otherwise be beyond their budget. For example, Shane M. said that:

> I never would have back in those days making like $15k a year—like not a
> lot of money days. Probably never would have gone to Vivace if it was not
> for that Elite Event. I remember joking with [my friend] being like 'ehhh,
> it's a fancy-pants place for the two of us' kinda stuff.

For these reviewers, being Elites means access to free food, alcohol, and experiences.

In additional to event, Elites also mentioned other rewards as being motivating as

well. There are many kinds of Yelp swag available at Elite Events, including Yelp-logo

shaped mints, lip balm, sweat bands, sunglasses, tattoos, playing cards, and bottle

openers. There is even a new special yearly gift, which have included Yelp socks and a

Yelp-branded tin lunchboxes in years past. These types of rewards also appeal to Elites.

Hayley H. is "*obsessed with the Yelp mints*," while Ash W. says:

> I have a really cool bottle opener, that's very useful for me for when I
> travel and I go and buy a 6-pack of beer, get back to the hotel, and go 'oh
> these aren't twist offs'. Damn it! Oh wait, I have Yelp to the rescue.
> Because I've been to things and picked up a few tchotchkes. I have three
> of the wrist bands. I have some of the mini-pens. Shop local or shop Yelp,
> whatever they say on them. I have the Yelp shopping bag…

> Beyond tchotchkes, other rewards include free tickets to theatrical productions.

Alecia M. mentioned receiving free tickets to things like:

…plays, Cirque du Soleil and movie passes. Sometimes, like charity events. I mean like anything that happens in Charlotte, [the CM] might get like 5 or 10 passes. And let's say like 20% of anything. So [the CM] would ask me to go to and sometimes these tickets would be like $200 tickets. And I'd get to go!

This is echoed by John J., who says:

There's a ton of free tickets up for grabs…It encourages them to write more reviews, so that they can stay Elite and keep going to events or something like that. It's a reward system.

Instrumental rewards emerged as being very important for the participation of

Elite reviewers. Indeed, several mentioned that without these rewards, they would stop

writing reviews. For example, Wyatt E. says "*there's just all kinds of stuff. So then, it's*

definitely worth it. That really pays off. I'd say that if I wasn't Elite, I may stop writing…I

like Yelp because they give me free stuff."

5.9.3 Social Rewards

While some reviewers focus on the instrumental and status aspects of being Elite,

others see it as opportunities for social interaction. Indeed, many of the Elite reviewers I

interviewed and spoke to at events were not from Charlotte and began reviewing on Yelp

when they moved to the area. Not knowing anyone, these Yelp events appealed to them

as a way to get to know people. For example, John J. says that:

At first I started using it to find restaurants and stuff. But it wasn't until that I moved to North Carolina and I had more free time on my hands. I didn't really know that many people when I moved there. So I decided I'd check out one of the CYME events, which are open to everyone. And from there, I started writing reviews.

Since becoming busier in life, John J. expresses joy in:

Going to dinner with friends and comparing reviews kinda keeps me more motivated to keep writing reviews. I can't actually make it to many events anymore, but I can still compare my reviews with my friends and stuff. That's what keeps it interesting actually. Sometimes we have wildly

different opinions of what a place is like. And other time we have the
exact same sentiments.

For John J., reviewing has become a fun social activity among friends.

Other reviewers see the Elite Events as opportunities to enhance their friendships.

Tegel A. notes that "*they are able to bring usually a +1 or a +2 who are not Yelpers*" to

Elite events. After attending these events, Tegel A. added that:

My guests would start writing on Yelp because they had gone to these
events. They are like 'hey this is really cool, you get this for free and like,
maybe I should start writing reviews' you know…I guess I just feel like,
oh it's just a fun community and you know, get free dinners and you know
what I mean and it's just like friends are in it. Social.

Opening access to these events to the friends of Elites blurs an interesting boundary

between member and non-member. Yelp actually encourages people to bring friends to

events. While this certainly works as an effective recruitment tool, it also serves as a

venue for doing things with friends. Katy P. expresses this in her statement that "*now I*

participate because it's become a social kinda process where a lot of my friends do it, so

it's a way to go out and do things."

Being encouraged to bring one's personal friends to these events also contributes

to the development of cliques at the events. For example, Hayley H. says "*I tend to keep*

to my own little group at Yelp Events generally," while John J. noticed that "*certain*

people always sit with each other. Feels like the lunch room back in high school." Rather

than developing strong ties with the rest of the Yelp community, this actually seems to

enhance the bonds between existing friends. This is precisely what Elaine S.—a frequent

+1 guest to Elite Events—had to say:

I didn't have like any good friends come out of it. But I definitely met like
friends of friends. You know what I mean. But at every event I talk to
someone new. But probably not any serious friendships. Like for instance,
I've met some of Hayley's friends and hung out with them outside of Yelp.

> But generally Hayley is there. I will say that like Demi, I've hung out with her. I feel like I've gotten to know her better through Yelp and going to these events. Like Aimee and some of them, who I knew were Hayley's friends but like since they all go to the Yelp events too, we've become better friends because of it.

For these reviewers, the development of social relationships external to Yelp seems to predominate, while meeting new people are not of much interest. Yet, being Elite provides opportunities to have fun interactions with people who are meaningful friends and may even be recruited in to the Elite Squad.

5.9.4 Soapbox

For others still, Yelp serves as a soapbox for expressing opinions and being heard.

For example, Holly P. remarked about being Elite:

> You are the top reviewers. In my mind, you're out there, you're writing reviews, you're giving good feedback, you're covering good details that matter to people. And you're doing it in a way that's entertaining, that's captivating. You're making people either want to go to that place or making them not want to go to that place if you have a bad experience. But you're just providing an accurate description of what a potential experience could be inside that establishment. And you get some sweet perks.

Similarly, Klyde B. said that:

> At the very beginning when I was very active, a lot of it was, I had these niche interests and I've always been someone who had the self-satisfaction of sharing my mind. I'm one of those people that's always starting a blog. I'm not necessarily maintaining a blog for long. But I'm always thinking that, I'm going to share my point of view. So Yelp...that was my general affinity for Yelp. That's what I liked about Yelp.

While this theme emerged somewhat among Elite reviews, it was most pervasive among Non-Elite reviewers. For example, Portia R. said that she would write a review "*only in situations where I absolutely hated the way I was treated, hated a company and felt like people needed to be aware of it would I...or vice versa if it was really good.*" Similarly, Stewart L. says that "*The way I look at it, I'm giving information to everybody*" and

Lemony S. says "*I used to enjoy writing them. I don't anymore because I feel that I'm kinda giving into this exploitation thing, so it's taken the joy out of it. But I used to enjoy being on a soapbox.*"

It is notable that that Holly P. had earned Elite status a week before the interview and Klyde B. had never attended an Elite Event despite being Elite for three years. In this light, these two Elite reviewers may embody the perspective more in-line with Non-Elite reviews, which suggests that the primary motivation for Non-Elite reviewers may be a having soapbox.

5.10 Methodological Rigor

After coding the data into themes, I went back through and searched for examples that disconfirmed my findings. Despite the relative consistency in which Elites described their experience of Yelp, there were rarely absolute cases where all reviewers completely agreed. For example, when describing the community enforcement of *Yelpy* reviews, only 3 of the 10 Elite and Former Elite reviewers described explicitly using votes and compliments as a form of self-policing. However, other Elite reviewer expressed an infrequent use of votes and compliments. When discussing votes, Tegel A. expressed "*I don't really use that feature too often because it really have to stick out as like, you know, warranting me to go that extra step.*" Additionally, she expressed using compliments more often for social exchanges. For example, she said:

> Interestingly enough, my experience with the compliments have been less compliments as they are more exchanges 'oh yeah, I had that happen to me' or something that they actually want to comment on, but it's done in the form of a compliment.

In conducting a negative case analysis on this theme, it highlighted the need for some people to use these features as simply votes and compliments, otherwise they may

be perceived as overt mechanisms for reward or punishment. This suggests that using votes and compliments may actually function better when only a subset of the community uses it for self-policing purposes. Otherwise, they may appear to be too contrived. In support of this, several interviewees cited superficial compliments as a demotivator. For example, Klyde B. says:

> …one of those signs that I was going to throw my hands up into the air and be done with [Yelp] was that there were these compliments from [the CM] and it just seemed superficial. And when you already assume and accept a level of superficiality, when then seem superficial still. That was kind of the turn off there.

So while Yelp provides opportunities for community enforcement through the features of the website, not all reviewers used them in this way. In conducting a negative case analysis, I was encouraged to consider the desirability of lacking a negative case.

Broadening this example to the rest of the dataset, the negative case analysis indicated that there is no single theme that can be expected to apply to all reviewers. Indeed, this claim would be in direct opposition to the theoretical framework of the collective action space, which explicitly expects there to be a "great deal more variation in approaches to goals, in motivations for belonging, and in styles of membership" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 79). This suggests that because one mechanism may not work for one reviewer, does not mean that it will be ineffective for another. Most likely, no reviewer is influenced by all of the mechanisms identified from this analysis. But a reviewer is likely to be influenced by at least one and this may be sufficient to encourage a shift towards more moderate reviews.

In addition to the negative case analysis, I conducted member checks. At the last Elite party I attended after completing my qualitative analysis, I presented my key themes to two Elite reviewers. While there was general agreement with themes, the Elite

reviewers expressed being unfamiliar with the Yelp Jail and one described not having thought about libel lawsuits. Upon describing what other reviewers had said, however, this reviewer agreed that it was something they should think about.

5.11 Summary

In summary, four broad themes emerged from the dataset which encompass the reasons why Elites decided to produce more moderate reviews. Within each of these categories, I provided specific examples of how Yelp is able to encourage this behavior. Finally, where relevant, I provided alternate themes that explain why Non-Elite reviewers have a tendency to produce more extreme reviews.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

This dissertation has drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research question of how businesses can align collective actions of the crowd with organizational goals. When competing for web traffic and advertising revenue, businesses have a financial interest in providing the most helpful reviews to attract the largest audience. This means that websites like Yelp, IMDb, Citysearch, and Google Places have an interest in encouraging reviewers to produce moderate reviews because they are perceived to be more helpful. This is problematic because much research has described the under-reporting and purchase bias of reviewers, which very commonly yields a J-shaped distribution in online review websites. However, Yelp emerges as an exception to the J-shape distribution of reviews with more normally distributed reviews, even when compared to other business review websites. This suggests that Yelp somehow influences reviewers to contribute reviews about their moderate experiences. Indeed, this may help to explain Yelp's success as the 46th most visited website in the U.S. with 102 million unique visitors each month. Consequently, this study investigates the research question within this context.

The collective action space serves as the theoretical framework for this study. This perspective conceptualizes online review production not as a binary decision of whether or not to contribute a review, but rather as individual variations in how collective action is experience along the dimensions of interaction and engagement. Within the

contemporary technological environment, participants pursuing collective action have greater agency in choosing how they participate. This shift enables questioning not simply how to motivate more contributions, but how to encourage the right kind of contributions. To understand this, the theory of collective action space focuses on the opportunities afforded to participants for interaction (from personal to impersonal) among one another and engagement (from institutional to entrepreneurial) with the organization, as it is the weakening and strengthening of these areas the ultimately influence the shape of collective action. For example, outcomes such as the number of contributions, levels of organizational trust, and identification were all found to vary based on where individuals fell along these continuums. I extend this theory to consider how these dimensions provide a different context for collective action and how this variation along these dimensions can influence what people produce.

This chapter continues this discussion through situating the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses into this collective action space framework. In doing so, I describe an alternative interpretation of the purpose of an incentive system in a crowdsourcing platform. Rather the conceiving of it as a motivator to overcome a binary decision to free-ride or produce reviews, the incentive system of Yelp instead motivates reviewers to cross critical boundaries of interaction in engagement. In crossing these boundaries, the context of review production shifts by making reviewer identities known, encouraging interpersonal interaction, and following organizational rules and policies.

6.1 Discussion of Quantitative Analysis

Chapter IV describes the quantitative analysis of 61,429 reviews produced by 5,686 reviewers within a 50-mile radius of Charlotte, NC. The observed distributions of

reviews and composition of reviewers were found to be consistent with previous studies

of Yelp in other cities, indicating that the findings of this study may be generalized

outside of the Charlotte area. The major finding of the analysis is that Elite reviewers

produce a significantly different distribution of reviews than Non-Elite reviewers.

Interestingly, Elite reviewers produce reviews in distributions similar to paid Scouts of

Yelp. Finally, based on the associated themes of libel and using one's real name and

photo that emerged from the qualitative data, I conduct a post-hoc analysis of the data to

investigate the impact of uploading a profile image and the production of moderate

reviews.

6.1.1 Consistent with Previous Studies

The descriptive statistics and distribution of reviews observed in Charlotte match

those of previous studies of Yelp, specifically the negatively skewed and normal

distribution of 1.5 million Yelp reviews in a study by Wang (2010). Moreover, Wang

found that Elite reviewers produced 43.9% of all reviews in his sample, aligning with the

finding of 40% observed in Charlotte. However, Wang found that Elites comprised 7.3%

of the reviewers, which departs slightly from the 4% observed in this dissertation. I

believe that this difference—although minor—can be explained by our different data

collection strategies. While Wang (2010) gathered *all* reviews in 21 metropolitan areas

(regardless of where the reviewers originated from), this dissertation is concerned with

the reviews *produced* within a specific geographical area. This means that Wang's

dataset includes Elite reviewers from other cities that contributed a review to a city in his

dataset. However, the dataset of the present study does not include reviewers from

outside the Charlotte region because of the research goals for this study. Yelp localizes its

website to specific cities and creates boundaries around the content, community manager, and Talk forums to this geographical area. Consequently, the number of Elites represented in the present study includes only those local to Charlotte. Despite this difference, then, the data observed in this study is consistent with previous studies of Yelp.

6.1.2 Elite Produce Reviews Differently

The reviews in the dataset were divided by whether or not the review was produced while the reviewer was in the Elite Squad. The resulting distributions of reviews show that Elites produce fundamentally different reviews than Non-Elites. Specifically, Elite reviewers produced fewer extreme reviews and more moderate reviews, while Non-Elite reviewers tend to produce extreme reviews. Statistical comparisons between the distributions of Elite and Non-Elite reviewers further supported this finding.

This is noteworthy because it is not simply that Elite reviewers are producing *more* reviews—if this were the case the expected distribution would still be J-shaped due to the under-reporting and purchasing bias. Rather, Elite reviewers are producing reviews *differently*—they are not only providing reviews about their moderate experiences, but also writing fewer extreme reviews. Producing reviews in this way aligns with the interest Yelp has in the production of moderate reviews, which are considered to be more helpful (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Moreover, the combination of Elite and Non-Elite reviews produces a distribution that—while negatively skewed and narrowly distributed—is remarkably distant from the J-shaped distribution commonly observed in other review websites. This provides some insight into how Yelp was able to quickly

surpass two other established businesses review websites—Citysearch and Yahoo

Local—in popularity (Wang, 2010).

6.1.3 Elite Produce Similar Reviews as Scouts

Consistent with previous studies of Yelp, reviews contributed by employees of

Yelp—including Community Managers and Scouts—were removed from the analysis

because contributions were not considered to reflect the collective action of the crowd.

However, in reporting the descriptive statistics of these groups, incidental similarities

emerged between the reviewing patterns of paid Scouts and Elites. They are not only

visually similar, but analyses of their distributions demonstrate no statistical differences

between them.

Certainly, there is a limited number of Scout reviews to draw from (n=1,893) and

this falls outside the scope of this study. Yet it is notable that while Elite reviewers are

not directly paid for reviews, they tend to produce reviews in a similar pattern as Scouts.

Still, this lends some support to the notion that Yelp has an interest in the production of

moderate reviews, as this is what their paid employees produced after training and

instructions. Moving from paid Scouts to the Elite Squad also brings increased—although

still questioned—legitimacy to the reviews produced by Elite reviews.

6.1.4 Personalized Profile Images and Moderate Reviews

During the qualitative analysis, libel lawsuits emerged as a concern for many Elite

reviewers. This concern was also frequently associated with discussions of having a

photo and real name on Yelp. While beyond the primary scope of this dissertation, this

suggests that there may be a connection between personalizing one's profile with

identifying information and expressing moderate reviews.

Inspired by this emergent theme, I conducted a post-hoc analysis of the quantitative data to compare reviews produced by people with and without a personalized photo. During the quantitative data collection, one of the variables captured was whether users had uploaded a photo to their profile or whether they were using the default blank user image. This was possible because the filename for the default blank images is called "blank_user_medium.gif," while photos uploaded by a user had a unique filename. This image name was included in the data collection process. While a rough estimate—as many users upload profile pictures that are not 'real photos' of themselves, but rather an avatar of some kind—profiles that have this blank user image certainly do not constitute a real photo.

Reviews were dummy coded using the variable *RealImage*, which indicated whether or not the profile photo was blank. The dataset was split using this dummy variable and the distributions examined. A visual inspection of the distribution frequency suggests that, indeed, reviews produced by reviewers with an uploaded a profile image (whether real or not) were more moderate that those with simply a blank image. Indeed, there is a clear J-shaped distribution for reviews contributed by people without an image.
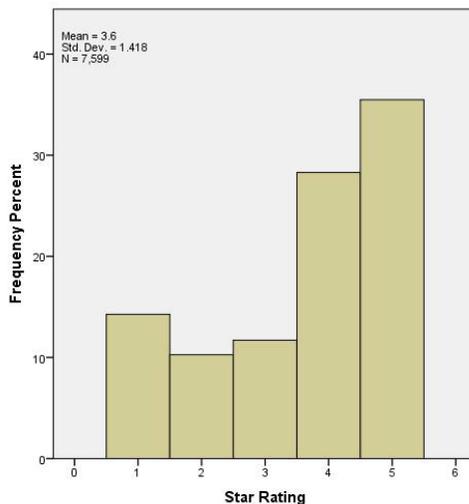
Figure 27: Distribution of reviews from users with a blank profile image
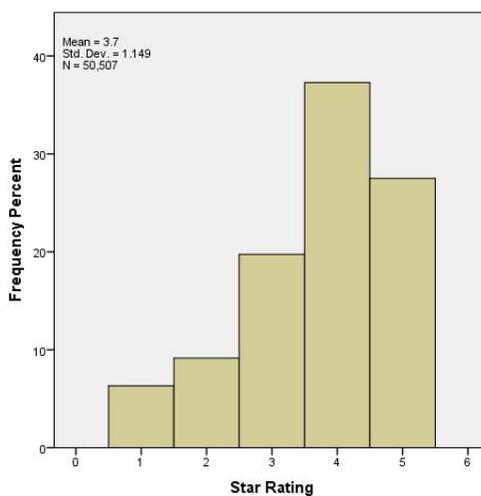
Figure 28: Distribution of reviews from users with a personalized profile image

These distributions must be interpreted with some skepticism. First, there is covariation between Elite status and having a real photo. Second, many of these uploaded images are not actually real pictures of the reviewer.

However, this post-hoc analysis does suggest two things. First, is that reviewers who have merely uploaded a personalized profile image (whether of themselves of not)

tend to produce more moderate reviews. Conversely, what can be asserted more confidently is that reviewers who do not upload a profile image are more like to produce extreme reviews with a classic J-shape distribution. This provides insight as to why Yelp so heavily encourages reviewers to upload a real photo of themselves for attendance to Events and joining the Elite Squad. Further research, however, is required to fully test the strength of these claims.

6.2 Summary of Quantitative Findings

In summary, significant differences exist between the reviews produced by Elite and Non-Elite reviewers on Yelp. Uncovering this finding supports the assertion that businesses are able to influence the contributions of the crowd to align with organizational goals. However, given the lack of traditional organizational structures associated with crowdsourcing, it is unclear precisely how Yelp is able to influence collective actions. The next section addresses this through a discussion of the qualitative findings of this dissertation.

6.3 Discussion of Qualitative Findings

Chapter VI presented emic themes that explain why Elites choose to produce more moderate reviews. This included producing balanced and detailed reviews in effort to be *Yelpy*, eliminating anonymity, peer pressure, and the drive to review everything. Moreover, the analysis described how Yelp facilitated these behaviors among Elite reviewers through organizational messages, technological design, monitoring, and policies. These emic themes coalesce around the different approaches that Elite reviewers take to producing reviews compared to Non-Elite reviewers. While Non-Elite reviewers

described a reactionary approach to reviewing, Elites described a more pre-meditated approach to reviewing.

6.3.1 Reactionary versus Pre-Meditated Reviewing

A common thread tying together the themes emerging from Non-Elite reviewers is the idea of *reactionary reviewing*. During the interviews, Non-Elite reviewers would often express disinterest in writing the uninteresting moderate reviews. At the same time, they did report using strategies of over-correcting and responding to extreme experiences. This indicates that Non-Elites do not necessarily visit a business with the intent of reviewing it. Rather, they more frequently described reacting to an aspect of an experience that either violated their expectations or reacting to other what other reviewers posted about that business. This means that Non-Elite reviewers are unlikely to have been attentive to the details of their holistic experience until something extreme happened, explaining why reviews from Non-Elites tend to be less balanced and often extreme. Indeed, this reactionary reviewing style aligns with what is predicted by the under-reporting and purchase bias, explaining why the distribution of Non-Elite reviews is J-shaped.

In stark contrast to Non-Elite reviewers, Elite reviewers expressed much more enthusiasm about producing reviews. They approached a business with the intent of being detailed and balanced, often taking notes and photos using the Yelp App. They also described the drive to review all of their experiences due to organizational monitoring and the ambiguous criteria for maintaining their Elite status. Together, this fosters a different approach to producing reviews in which they are attentive to their experience from the beginning with the intent of producing a review. This embodies a concept I label

pre-meditated reviewing, in which Elites visit a business with the intent of reviewing it. This focuses their attention to their holistic experience at a business—both good and bad aspects—and even discussing these aspects with their companions (sometimes to their dismay). Adopting this reviewing strategy goes far in explaining why Elite reviewers produce more moderate reviews.

Moreover, this pre-meditated reviewing strategy does not appear to be an accident. Rather, it emerges from the personal interactions that foster shared norms and peer pressure in addition to organizational messages and monitoring resulting from increased institutional engagement with Yelp. At the same time, the technological affordances designed by Yelp—such as the ability to draft reviews and take photos— support Elites in this pursuit of pre-meditated reviewing. This suggests that it is through the Elite Squad that Yelp is able to encourage reviewers to adopt a pre-meditated reviewing strategy by encouraging reviewers to interact personally and engage institutionally. In this way, Yelp is able to align the collective actions of the crowd with organizational goals.

6.3.2 How Yelp Organizes the Crowd

This section addresses the research question of this dissertation: *How does a business align the collective actions of the crowd with organizational goals?* As the literature review in Chapter II described, online review websites that focus on experience goods have an incentive to encourage the production of more helpful moderate reviews. This is precisely what Yelp was able to achieve among reviewers in the Elite Squad. Yet, it is not as simple as traditional theories of collective action would suggest, that through an incentive participants would overcome the tendency to free-ride and produce helpful

reviews. Nor was it the case that organizational messages from Yelp explicitly requested moderate reviews, as this might infringe too much on a reviewer's sense of autonomy.

If I were to draw from traditional conceptions of collective action and apply them to Yelp, the crux of my argument would lie in the role of Elite status in overcome free-riding. In this view, the Elite Squad is simply a reward in the form of status and a badge on a profile. Yet this was not supported by the quantitative data. If Elite reviewers simply produced *more* reviews, the under-reporting and purchase bias would likely still result in a J-shaped distribution with more 1 and 5-star reviews. However, this is not what was observed. Rather, Elite reviewers actually reviewed in a different way, which classical theories of collective action and contemporary theories of crowdsourcing (see Malone et al., 2010) are under-prepared to explain given the binary conception of participation as a decision to free-ride or contribute.

When participation is conceived of as binary—as a decision to free-ride or to contribute (or to produce a review or not)—this frames the Elite Squad as a badge on a profile signifying status, which in turn motivates more contributions. Status—while perhaps more effective—could just as easily be replaced with other types of incentives (e.g., money, social, instrumental) to motivate participation. However, the leadership at Yelp quickly discovered that motivation alone is not sufficient. For example, the CEO of Yelp, Jeremy Stoppelman, commented on a New York Times article, saying:

> We don't pay for reviews directly anywhere anymore. There was a time in
> our earlier days where we experimented with paying for reviews directly
> in cities outside of San Francisco to help get the ball rolling in our
> otherwise empty site. Competitors (InsiderPages and Judysbook) were
> doing it nationwide (offering $5 Starbucks or gas cards) so we thought
> we'd emulate in specific cities to see what would happened, the result?
> Relatively low quality participation from people that didn't care all that
> much about Yelp. (Hansell, May 12, 2008)

What this passage highlights is that from the perspective of Yelp, simple motivational incentives only promoted poor quality reviews from uncaring reviewers. Yet, to suggest that the success of Yelp resulted from switching from gift cards to a digital badge is too simplistic and both theoretically and practically unsatisfying.

The collective action space framework runs counter to the classic notion that incentives simply motivate contribution. Indeed, Bimber et al. (2012) reject the classic approach of understanding collective action as:

> the individual's choice made in relation to requests and opportunities…
> these choices involve free riding: discrete decisions by potential
> participants regarding whether to contribute to the provision of a public
> good or just take advantage once it is established by the actions of others.
> (p. 77)

Instead, these scholars assert that:

> the choice to contribute to collective action efforts, or to free ride on the
> efforts of others, is most explicit where costs of action are obvious and
> nontrivial and where boundaries between action and nonaction, or between
> private and public, are clear and not easily crossed. When boundaries are
> permeable and easily navigated implicitly or explicitly, such that the costs
> are trivial or unobservable, then the choice is no longer the sole useful
> rubric to understand participation in collective efforts. (Bimber et al.,
> 2012, p. 78)

Here, Bimber et al. (2012) instead argue that contemporary information and communication technologies have weakened these boundaries and in doing so have fundamentally changed the context of collective action, which has enabled a "great deal more variation in approaches to goals, in motivations for belonging, and in styles of membership than in the ideal-type portrait of collective action theory" (Bimber et al., 2012, p. 79).

What emerged from the qualitative analysis is consistent with what is predicted by the collective action space. Through the Elite Squad, Yelp motivates reviewers to change

their participatory style within the two-dimensional space collective action space (see

Figure 29). In doing so, it significantly changes the context in which reviewers are

produced—Elite reviewers pursue collective action in an environment steeped in personal

interactions and institutional engagement.
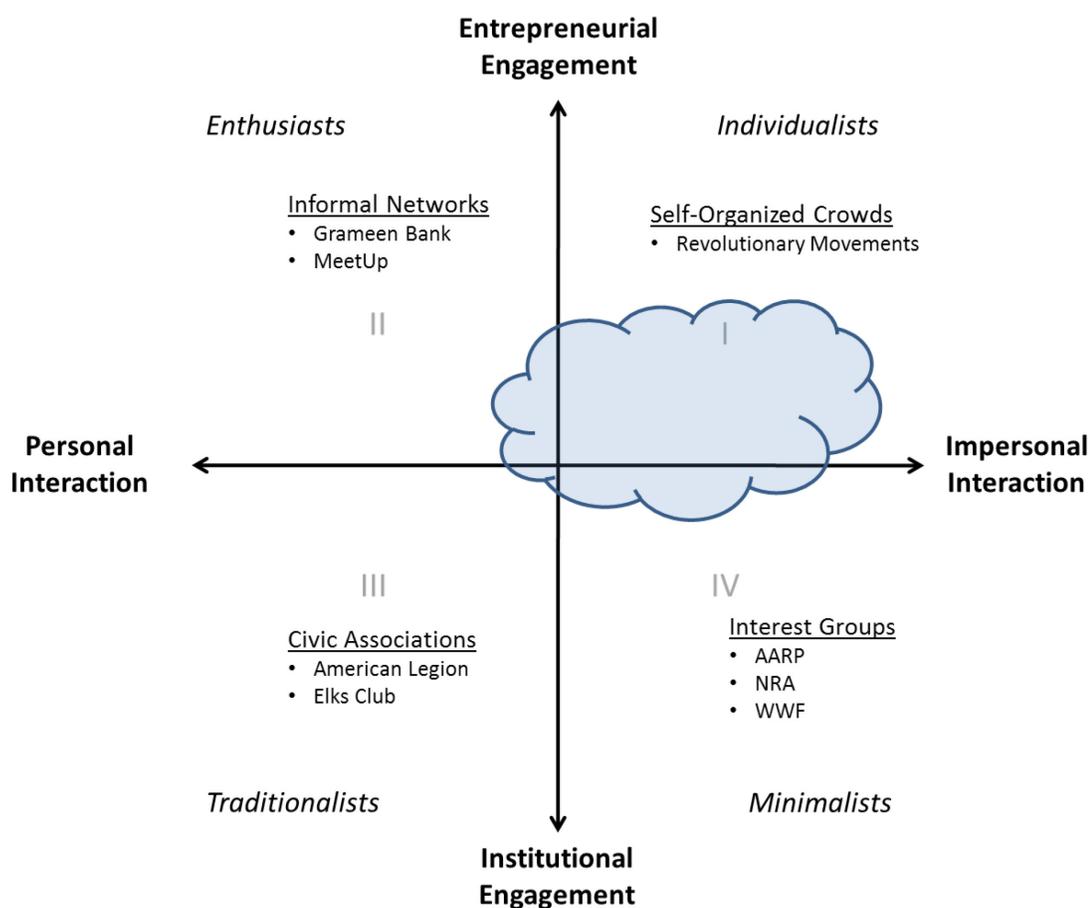
Figure 29: The collective action space

6.3.2.1 From Impersonal to Personal Interaction

Contrary to the Non-Elites, the experience that Elite reviewers provided about

Yelp places them in a different quadrant of the collective action space. This was evident

in such themes as eliminating anonymity through real photos and real names, in addition

to being vetted and nominated by others Elite reviewers during Events and in the Talk forum. Moreover, Elites often invited non-Yelp friends to Events as guests and added them to their Yelp Friends list, which increased feelings of peer pressure. Through these interactions, norms of being *Yelpy* developed and are enforced by the community through selective rewarding or punishing reviewers through votes and compliments for their reviews. These social interactions take place within a localized webpage and through local events that generally includes co-located reviewers. Perhaps most importantly, engaging in these behaviors is required for becoming Elite in the first place.

Among the range of themes to emerge from the qualitative analysis, the general experience of interaction among reviewers in the Yelp Elite Squad is certainly much more personal than Non-Elite reviewers. This suggests that rather than motivating contributions of reviews, the Elite Squad appears to motivate reviewers to change their participatory style to involve more personal interaction. After all, posting a real photo, attending events, and being vetted by the community are important prerequisites for joining the Elite Squad. Crossing the boundary from impersonal to personal interaction situates the participatory style of Elites within the quadrants on the left side of the collective action space, which is associated with opportunities to generate strong ties with others, contributing to trust, shared norms, and close identification (Granovetter, 1973).

6.3.2.2 From Entrepreneurial to Institutional Engagement

Elite reviewers also frequently described institutional engagement with Yelp. This includes being subject to rules and policies (i.e., requirement of photo and name, being *Yelpy*, ambiguous criteria for Elite status, etc.) and feeling that their activities were closely monitored by the CM. Indeed, the Hawthorne Effect has long suggested that

monitoring behavior alone is sufficient to change one's actions (Adair, 1984). Additionally, they are socialized to organizational values through formal communications at events and through the Elite Squad webpage (see Figure 18). Even after becoming a member of the Elite Squad, reviewers must RSVP for events where there are additional requirements of recent activity in order to attend. Meanwhile, Elite reviewers also expressed lack voice in determining goals of the organization (i.e., response to libel lawsuits) and in selecting their community manager.

These themes are consistent with a more institutional experience of engaging in a collective action organization. While many of these rules may apply to Non-Elites just as much as Elites, it appears that Elites are more aware of and more concerned with the consequences. For example, after his time in Yelp Jail, Non-Elite Lemony S. continues to voice criticism about Yelp saying "*there are people that get… nothing gets them more pissed off than being censored*." On the other hand, upon being flagged for a review, Elite Ash W. said "*I don't do that anymore because I'd like to be Elite next year and I don't want them to be 'oh, that's one black mark*.'" Similarly, Wyatt E. describes that after receiving a message from the CM about a "harsh" review, he "*reread it and it was pretty bad, so I rewrote that one*."

These passages indicate that in joining the Elite Squad, reviewers are more aware of and more willing to accept institutional monitoring and constraints on their actions. This makes sense when considering the range of incentives that are associated with the Elite Squad, including status, instrumental rewards, social interaction, and a soapbox for one's opinion. Under these conditions, Elite reviewers have more to lose than Non-Elite reviewers by sanctions from Yelp—whether being unable to attend Events with friends or

not receiving a shiny badge on their profile the following year. When considering

engagement with the organization, incentives offered by Yelp appear to encourage

reviewers to accept a certain level of control from the organization and to align their

actions to the goals of the organization.

6.3.3 Quadrants of Control

The previous sections describes how the Elite Squad encourages reviewers to

cross boundaries from impersonal to personal interaction and from entrepreneurial to

institutional engagement while pursuing in collective action. While the participatory style

of the crowd tends to fall in quadrant I of the collective action space, Elites tend to fall

more in quadrant III (see Figure 30). The theory of the collective action space suggests

that it is producing reviews from within this context that ultimately encourages moderate

reviews. This occurs not from direct organizational requests for moderate reviews, but

because reviews are produced in a context where social norms, community enforcement

and vetting, and organizational messages and policies influence what and how people

communicate in their reviews. In this section, I argue that quadrant III of the collective

action space is associated on a theoretical level with cultural management strategies.
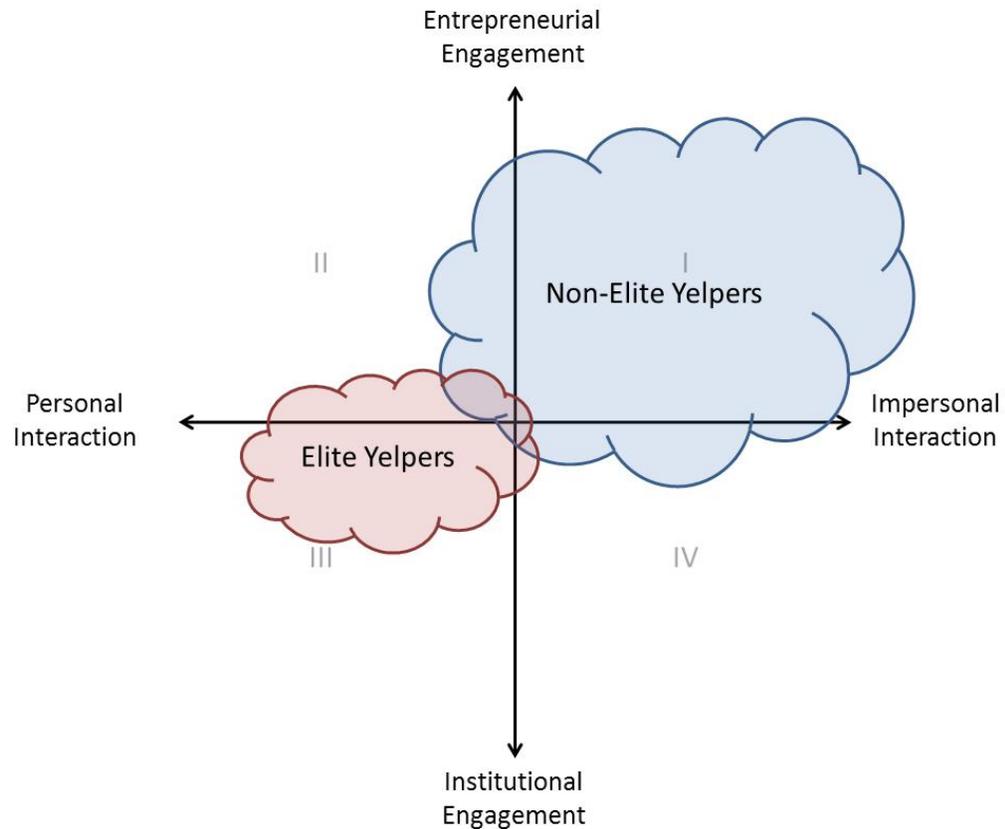
Figure 30: Elite and Non-Elite Reviewers in the collective action space

Cultural control can be exerted by an organization through encouraging members

"to embrace organizational values as their own and use them to guide (direct) their

behavior" (Gossett, 2009, p. 708). In addition to being socialized to organizational

values, cultural control requires that members feel strong identification with the

organization and opportunities "to interact regularly with each other to maintain a

cohesive sense of community" (Gossett, 2009, p. 708). These requirements map

remarkably well upon the collective action space, as socialization to organizational values

entails institutional engagement and the development of a sense of community

corresponds to personal interactions. From this description, cultural management

strategies would be effective for participants with a participatory style falling within quadrant III of the collective action space.

Integrating this observation with the findings of this study enables me to explicitly answer the research question of this study. Stated simply, businesses can align the collective actions of the crowd with organizational goals by motivating a small subset of the crowd (in this case, 4%) to interact personally and engage institutionally, where socialization to organizational values encourages these participants to monitor their own behavior. In the case of Yelp, this strategy encouraged Elite reviewers to adopt a pre-meditated reviewing strategy which increased moderate reviewers through organizational monitoring, ambiguous criteria for status, self-policing, peer pressure, and shared norms. Perhaps most importantly, Yelp designed technological affordances that enhanced the impact of these factors.

Stated like this, Yelp appears to be rather unremarkable: they organized a part of the crowd into what could be defined as a civic association. Yet, what is remarkable about this is the dramatic impact this has on the overall distribution of reviews. These 4% of Elite reviewers produce 40% of all the reviews, which is sufficient to overcome—to a degree—the under-reporting bias of the J-shaped distribution. In doing so, Yelp is able to provide more helpful reviews to viewers in the form of moderate reviews. Also, in helping to overcome the J-shaped distribution, the mean rating of businesses is likely to be a more accurate estimate of its quality. Indeed, this may help to explain the success of Yelp in becoming one of the most visited websites on the internet.

CHAPTER VII: IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The previous chapter provided an in-depth discussion of the data addressing this study's primary research question. Through this discussion emerged several implications for theory, methodology, and practice.

7.1 Implications for Theory

7.1.1 Community in the Crowd

First and foremost, this study demonstrates how classic conceptions of collective action are under-prepared to account for the increased complexity of participation in crowdsourcing. In contrast to binary conceptions of participation and membership, the collective action space is demonstrated to be a useful framework for investigating variation of contributions in collective action efforts made by the crowd. This approach provided the theoretical space to consider how not all members of the crowd are identical. Indeed, this study reveals that the notion of *the* crowd is inaccurate descriptor to describe reviewers at Yelp. Rather, what emerged was a community within the crowd.

Crowds are often defined as being comprised of diverse, independent, and decentralized individuals (Surowiecki, 2004). However, so-called crowdsourced reviews at Yelp are produced by at least two distinct groups—Elite and Non-Elite reviewers. These groups appear to be intentionally divided through mechanisms used by Yelp to change the context of review production. It is this difference that contributes to the success of Yelp by encouraging a subset of reviewers to produce moderate reviews. This

stresses the theoretical need for crowdsourcing scholars to overcome the assumption of an unstructured disconnected crowd.

This study revealed that in Yelp there are at least two modes of organizing simultaneously taking place. One of these organizational strategies embodies the diverse and independent structure commonly associated with "the crowd." The other, however, manifests like a traditional civic association with chapter-based membership. These two forms of organizing reflect a common divide in the literature over more effective forms of collective action. While Olson (1965) has argued that smaller groups are better able to overcome free-riding, other theorists assert that larger diverse groups are better able to provide public goods (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). There is a connection between these two lines of thought and the type of organizational structures frequently used in collective action—while civic associations are comprised of smaller groups of connected individuals, interest groups have influence due to massive scalability of membership.

While collective action organizations generally fall into one of these two categories, Yelp illustrates an effective integration of both these organizational strategies. First, it gains critical mass and legitimacy through large numbers of contributions from diverse independent reviewers. However, Yelp also is able to mobilize high-quality contributions from smaller groups of connected reviewers through the civic association-like Elite Squad. This embodies the concept of organizational hybridity which was developed by Chadwick (2007) to describe new approaches of political movements that "sometimes behave like an interest group, sometimes like a social movement, sometimes like the wing of a traditional party during an election campaign" (p. 284).

7.1.2 Extending the Collective Action Space Theory

Bimber et al. (2012) theorize that a collective action organization's 'footprint' may move and morph across the collective action space over time. This study extends this idea to demonstrate the movement of individuals within this footprint (see Figure 31). Specifically, this study demonstrates that organizational mechanisms can encourage people to voluntarily change their participatory style from quadrant I to quadrant III of the collective action space. This highlights the dynamic nature of collective action efforts, that people may not simply have a chosen participatory style, but that the organization may be strategically moving participants across this space.
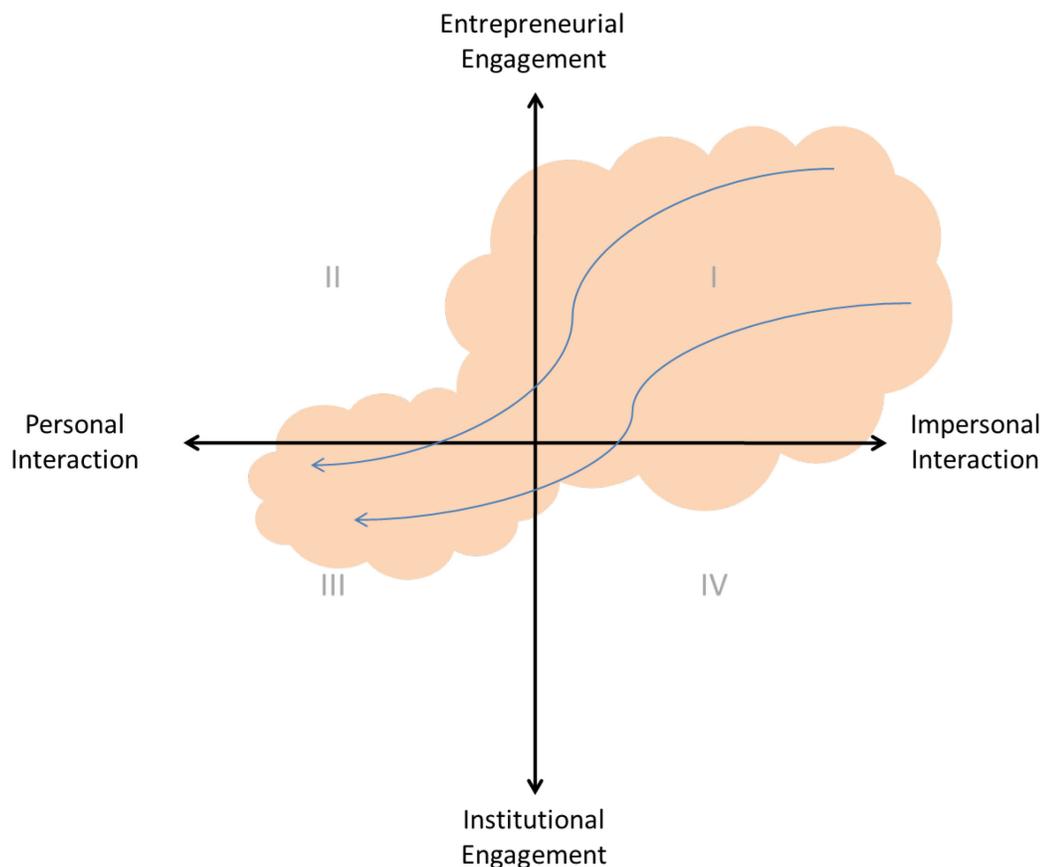
Figure 31: Movement of individuals within the collective action space

This indicates theoretical interest in understanding the "paths" that individuals take within a footprint—why they move and how an organization can encourage them to do so. Indeed, paths may reflect grassroots trailblazing or planned trails that were designed to meet some organizational goal. This distinction is important. While much research on crowds views them as a proverbial forest, this study indicates that there is much to be learned from seeing the trees from the forest and even considering the paths that may lie underneath. Variation in the paths that people take may indicate strategic structuring and division of the crowd that together collectively further organizational goals.

7.1.3 The Role of Incentives

The findings of this study challenge the role of incentives in crowdsourcing platforms. While classical applications of collective action theory suggest that incentives motivate people to contribute rather than free-ride (Knoke, 1988; Oliver, 1980; Olson, 1965), this study found that other methods also encourage member participation in groups. The creation of a small "Elite" community within the larger Yelp crowd also encouraged individual reviewers to change their participatory style and engage in more pro-organizational behavior. Members of the Elite Squad interacted personally with others and engage institutionally with the larger Yelp organization. This finding suggests that material incentives are not the only way to motivate people in the crowd—peer pressure can also be a strong motivator when bonds are developed between members. There is need to disambiguate precisely what behaviors and actions are being rewarded in crowdsourcing platforms, as this has significant influence on how people participate.

Moreover, interviews revealed that the Elite Squad is a multifaceted source of motivation, encompassing aspects of instrumental rewards, status, social interaction, and a soapbox. This finding asks for scholars to more fully consider the meanings individuals place on the incentives available to them. Distilling down an incentive to a single category risks less precision in making claims about what might motivate different types of individuals to participate (or not participate) in a larger group effort.

7.1.4 Personalizing Profiles

Another theoretical implication of this study comes from the concerns expressed by reviewers about posting identifying information on their profile. The post-hoc analysis comparing the review distributions of people who have uploaded a profile image with those who have not suggest an association with the willingness or reluctance to express extreme opinions. Specifically, reviewers without an image uploaded to their profile tended to express more extreme opinions, while those have not tended to express moderate opinions.

This finding adds to the emerging research associated with real name policies on social media websites. A real name policy refers to websites in which posting comments to forums or newspaper articles require signing in with their profile on social networking sites like Facebook and Google+—sites that require users to use their real name. The intent behind real name policies appears to be to limit trolling and offensive language.

While a nascent field of research, real name policies have been shown to reduce the occurrence of offensive words in comments in online newspaper articles (Cho & Acquisti, 2013; Cho, Kim, & Acquisti, 2012). The results of this dissertation suggested that simply encouraging a user to personalize their profile with an image was associated

with—to a degree—more nuanced reviews. This indicates that further research is needed to study the impact of real name policies on expressing extreme opinions on online review websites.

7.2 Implications for Methodology

7.2.1 Big Data

Concurrent with the central research question of this study concerning the organization of the crowd is a quickly emerging methodological issue concerning Big Data. Much of the previous research on online reviews come from what Kate Crawford—principal researcher at Microsoft Research and a visiting professor at the MIT Center for Civic Media—calls 'data fundamentalism', which is "the notion that correlation always indicates causation, and that massive data sets and predictive analytics always reflect objective truth" (Crawford, April 1, 2013). While much can be learned from massive datasets, Crawford advocates for pairing computational social science with traditional qualitative methods in order to link quantitative questions of 'how many' with the cultural and physical contexts in which the data is produced.

An issue concerning data fundamentalism emerged during this study, dealing with how the Yelp Elite Squad was considered in previous studies of Yelp (Luca, 2011; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Otterbacher, 2011; Wang, 2010). Lacking triangulation with qualitative methods, a troubling assumption of some of these scholars has been to conceptualize the Elite badge strictly in terms of status. Consequently, "Elite" is often used as a variable in hypotheses to test the impact of status on review production. However, emerging from the qualitative data collected in this study were the multifaceted incentives associated with being a member of the Elite Squad—tickets to events, social

interactions, soapbox, and status. In overlooking these details about how badges and features of the website are actually used and understood by the community of Elites, scholars impose assumptions onto the meanings of badges and can make unfounded claims on the role of status within Yelp.

A recent study, for example, sought to identify what motivated the crowd at Yelp to produce reviews. In the literature review of this study, community was defined as "a relatively small number of individuals, who know each other and are rough peers of one another, and who share multiple bonds, often emotional, and sometimes of longstanding" (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p. 10). However, in describing reviewers on Yelp, they concluded that "[n]one of these descriptors applies to the experiences of the bulk of the millions of Yelp members" (p.10). This assertion does not resonate with the findings of this study. While not inaccurate—indeed Elites represented 4% of reviewers in this study—they certainly expressed these descriptors of community during interviews. Moreover, Elites also produced 40% of the reviews on Yelp.

Lacking this knowledge, it may be easy to dismiss Elites as a fringe group among the millions of reviewers; however, these assumptions may also bias interpretations of quantitative analysis. Despite demonstrating strong methodical rigor, conducting regression analyses using three longitudinal datasets to identity what motivates production of reviews, this study was perhaps conceptually underdeveloped through assumptions made about the composition of reviewers and treating all reviewers as the same. Indeed, McQuarrie et al. (2013) concluded that "Yelp offers consumers willing to produce reviews one thing: a soapbox, an opportunity for the public expression of taste judgments" (p. 38). While this finding may apply to the majority of Non-Elite reviewers, it overlooks the possibility that the same opportunities for incentives are not available to all reviewers—such as those of a small

but powerful group of Elites who are separated from the Non-Elite by different opportunities for interaction and engagement. A more nuanced analysis, informed by knowledge of these reviewers on Yelp, may have revealed key differences in what motivate these different groups.

This highlights two areas of methodological importance. First, it demonstrates the need for scholars to have rich qualitative understanding of their research contexts, particularly when drawing from massive datasets. This provides opportunities to differentiate between critically important types of participants within the crowd. In doing so, scholars can make more informed and nuanced assertions about their findings. Second, it draws attention to an assumption made by many researchers—that the variable of interest in crowdsourced platforms is merely the quantity of contributions. This forces a blind eye to the consideration that what a business is motivating is not simply a matter of quantity, but of quality. This emerge as a prime challenge to big data scholars whose methodological toolkit tends to privilege quantifying differences and changes in means. There is certainly much to learn from this approach, but also much to overlook. The ease with which scholars can now aggregate massive amounts of data about people and their contributions enhances the need for these findings to be tempered with qualitative understanding of the context of their production.

7.2.2 Distributions, not Means

A second implication to emerge from the quantitative analysis is that studies of online reviews need to consider the distributions of contributions. A common approach to investigating online reviews involves regression analysis, which carries with it the assumption of normality and focuses on means and variances. Given the tendency of online reviews to have a J-shape distribution, these methods have led to inconsistent findings across studies. For example, while some studies find that higher *ratings* of

online reviews predict higher sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Li & Hitt, 2008), others find that it is actually the sheer *number* of reviews—independent of rating—that is associated with higher sales (Duan et al., 2008; Liu, 2006). Through a comprehensive analysis of product reviews on Amazon.com, Hu et al. (2007) implicate the J-shape distribution as contributing to these inconsistent findings. This is because scholars often use mean ratings of products in their analysis, which as Hu et al. (2007) argue, is a poor estimate of the quality of a product.

The quantitative analysis of the present study demonstrates the importance of moving beyond statistical methods based on summative statistics like means and variances for investigating online reviews. For example the mean review rating of Elites (*M*= 3.67) and Non-Elites (*M*=3.7) were nearly identical, meaning any statistically significant differences between the means of these groups would lack much practical significance. However, in practice we can see these two groups are quite different in the distribution of their scores.

In response to this, I echo the concerns expressed by Handcock and Morris (1998) that "In social science research, theories regarding differences among groups or changes over time often imply properties of distributions that are not well captured by the usual summary measures of location and variation" (p. 1). These authors have consequently developed a nonparametric framework for analyzing distributional differences between groups (Handcock & Morris, 1998, 1999). Application of these relative distribution methods are a promising avenue for future research of online reviews that can make use of the detailed information inherent in distributions.

7.3 Implications for Practice

7.3.1 Overcoming the J-Shaped Distribution

A primary practical contribution of this study is that it illustrates how

organizations might be able to influence member behavior within a seemingly

autonomous crowd. The findings demonstrate that Yelp was able to overcome—to a

degree—the J-shaped distribution of reviews by influencing a relatively smaller

percentage of the overall population of reviewers. Overcoming the J-shaped distribution

is significant on its own merit, as it is believed this will make the average business rating

more accurate (Hu et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2009). However, in addition it is particularly

important to Yelp because of the nature of business reviews. Being an experience good—

which have more intangible qualities that are difficult to evaluate—readers find moderate

reviews to be more helpful in guiding their purchase decisions. By encouraging a group

of reviewers to overcome this dysfunctional distribution, the mean rating of businesses on

Yelp may be a better estimate of quality compared to other business review websites. The

accuracy of a business's average rating may indeed help to explain the current popularity

of Yelp, and how Yelp quickly surpassed two other established businesses review

websites—Citysearch and Yahoo Local—in popularity (Wang, 2010).

7.3.2 Quadrants of Control

Revisiting the quotation at the beginning of this dissertation, Malone et al. (2010)

posed the question, "How can you get crowds to do what your business needs done?" (p.

21). This study found that through the Elites Squad, Yelp was able to encourage

reviewers to interact personally among each other and engage institutionally with the

organization. This enables Yelp leadership to use cultural control strategies to manage reviewer contributions.

This suggests that businesses interested in influencing the crowd should consider precisely what behaviors and actions their incentive systems are rewarding. While Yelp appeared to focus moving participation to quadrant III of the collective action space where cultural control strategies prevailed, other control strategies may also be suitable in other quadrants (for a review of control theory, see Gossett, 2009).

For example, quadrant II is associated with entrepreneurial engagement and personal interaction. In this context, concertive control strategies (Barker, 1993) may be the most effective way of influencing the crowd. Likewise, the impersonal nature of quadrant IV would make bureaucratic control the most effective strategy. This suggests that businesses can benefit by knowing the variation in participatory styles among participants, as this enables the organization to better align its control strategies with how its participants are participating. Moreover, it opens up considerations of developing different control strategies for various kinds of participants. Finally, the collective action space also provides businesses with a framework for visualizing and strategizing how they might encourage participations to move across quadrants.

7.4 Limitations

The findings and implications of this study must also be weighed in relation to its limitations. First, the procedure for selecting interview participants limited the types of reviewers that could be recruited into the study. For example, there are Elite reviewers that have never attended a single Elite Event, which suggests that the themes emerging from this analysis may not be applicable to them. Likewise, it is difficult to assess a

representative sample of Non-Elite reviewers was recruited as there is little demographic information available about participants in Yelp, as variables like age and gender are not displayed on user profiles. Despite these limitations, the interview participants still provided a range of experiences with Yelp and add to our understanding of contemporary collective action within crowdsourced platforms.

Second, while the quantitative data collective procedure reported in this study was comprehensive, the Yelp Review Filter is always reevaluating reviews so it is possible that not all relevant reviews were included in the analysis. This means that the full spectrum of reviews provided by the crowd is unavailable and introduces the possibility that differences between Elite and Non-Elite reviewers are not as large as observed in this study. Finally, it is possible that the extent to which the observed differences in reviews between Elite and Non-Elite reviewers differ in various cities. Still, both the large number of data points in this study and the consistency with previous studies of Yelp in both the frequency of reviews and composition of Elite reviewers in other contexts suggests that scholars researching Yelp are drawing from the same population of reviews.

My own role in collecting data also needs to be addressed, as I have participated as a member of the Elite Squad for nearly two years. While this helped me to learn the language of Yelp Elites and enabled me to observe aspects of Yelp not frequently reported by scholars, it also influenced my interpretations of the data. In preparing for the data analysis, I made efforts to disengage from the Yelp Elite Squad by ceasing my production of reviews. This enabled me to get some distance from my research site before coding and analyzing the data. Additionally, I engaged in frequent discussions

with scholars not directly involved in the study to gain an outside perspective on the topic and question my own assumptions.

7.5 Conclusion

This dissertation investigated how businesses are able to align the collective actions of the crowd with the strategic goals of the organization. The findings indicate that businesses are able to effectively use traditional management strategies (i.e., cultural control) for influencing the behavior of at least a small subset of the crowd. Influencing even a small subset of the crowd was found to be sufficient to impact the overall distribution of reviews. When organizations organize some members of the crowd for collective action, scholars need to consider the extent to which this group may still be practically or theoretically a crowd and if this distinction even matters. Nonetheless this study demonstrates that crowds may be more organized than initially considered and advances the need to better understand the nuances of what it means to participate in collective action that financially benefits a business.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How would you describe Yelp to someone that has never heard of it? *How is it like a community? A group?*

2. How did you find out about Yelp?

3. How do you decide on what businesses to go to?

    a. How does the opinion of Elite reviewers impact your decision?

    b. What do the various star rankings mean to you?

4. How do you participate on Yelp? Why do you participate in Yelp?

5. How is the Community Manager chosen?

6. What is the role of the Community Manager?

    a. How did things change when the first community manager came?

    b. How have things changed since the second CM took over?

    c. How has the community manager influenced how you participate in Yelp? *Writing reviews? In the forums? Writing compliments?*

7. How did you become an Elite Yelper? How would you tell others how to become Elite?

    a. What does it mean to be an Elite Yelper?

    b. What is your duty?

    c. Have you recruited anyone into Yelp? Into Yelp Elite?

    d. What are the benefits of being Elite? *Events, tickets, contests?*

    e. What kinds of people are good Elite Yelpers?

    f. What happens if you do not live up to this?

8. Tell me about Elite Events? *What kind of people come to these events?*

9. Do you/have you ever worry about losing your Elite status? Why?

10. Do you know of anyone losing their Elite status? Why did they?

11. Why do you write reviews?

    a. How long does it take you to write a review?

    b. Who do you write to? Who reads your reviews? Who votes (funny, useful, cool) on your reviews?

    c. What are meaningful businesses to review? *Less Meaningful?*

12. Please walk me through your review process? How do you decide where to go? What happens when you arrive? When do you decide to review? When/where to you write reviews?

    a. How has becoming Elite changed this process*? Longer? More positive? Funnier? More of them? Types of places?*

    b. How has having your photo and name public influenced how/what you review?

13. I would like to ask you a few questions about features on the Yelp Website.

    a. How do you use funny, useful, cool votes?

    b. How do you use Compliments?

    c. How do you use Events?

    d. How do you use the forums (Talk)?

    e. How do you use Messages?

    f. What are Friends for?

    g. What kind of reviews do you flag?

14. Do you socialize with people from Yelp OUTSIDE of Yelp Events?

15. Tell me about a time when you chose NOT to write a review about a business.

16. Tell me what you know of the business strategy of Yelp. How does Yelp make money? What role do Elite members play in this?

17. Is there anything else you would like to add?