Negative reviews: Formation, spread, and halt of opportunistic behavior

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that companies conduct compensation strategies in times of service failure to enhance recovery satisfaction and purchase intention. The role of compensation strategy in individuals' propensity to leave fake negative reviews, however, has not been well studied. Accordingly, the present conceptual study addresses this gap. First, we present how customers' deviant behavior is the result of companies' service recovery strategies (i.e., compensation strategy) themselves. Next, we present how deviant behavior spreads out in a network and then comes to a halt. The paper concludes with a presentation of the conceptual model of the manifestation of individuals' online deviant behavior. The research is important from both theoretical and managerial perspectives. From a theoretical outlook, this study adds to the literature on the dark side of guest services by investigating deviant behavior of customers and their strong ties. The research provides practitioners with a new perspective on how their service recovery strategy of compensation can lead to individuals displaying online deviant behavior and how they should address the issue.

"[…] Thinking you have the power in your hands to crush the joint. That your good or bad review can make or break the place…The sweet taste of power!!! Then world domination will replace the thoughts of reviews because that will be the ultimate in power! Controlling the whole entire world!!! Every single person doing your dirty deeds!!! […]"

"Talk"–Yelp.com

1. Introduction

Misbehavior (deviant/dysfunctional behavior) is defined as a behavior that intentionally violates the general norms of actions in a consumption situation (Schaefers et al., 2016). More specifically, the reasons for which some behaviors are categorized as 'deviant' are because they exert a negative influence on stakeholders and would potentially harm them. In the online world, digital piracy, e-mail scams, online pornography, identity theft, and so forth (Harris and Dumas, 2009) are examples of deviant behavior. Within the particular context of tourism web 2.0 technologies (e.g., online review sites), Sigala (2017) found that there are four main online customer deviant behaviors that are significant and common: fake online profiles, fake personal data, fake and inaccurate user-generated content (UGC) of any formats, fake check-ins, and finally, engagement in discussions on fake/wrong UGC. In fact, business websites, social media, blogs, and business or product review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor are the online platforms where deceptive reviews are mostly posted (Hunt, 2015).

The fast growth of fake reviews has caused the credibility of review websites as respected sources of information on service providers and suppliers to be questioned. The general ballpark figure is that one-third of reviews are fake. In September 2015, Amazon threatened to take legal actions against 1000 fake reviewers in Seattle, and Yelp confirmed that 25% of reviews on its website are dubious (Munzel, 2016). Detecting fake reviews, therefore, is important to keep the integrity and usefulness of review sites (Yoo and Gretzel, 2009). Accordingly, some review sites such as Yelp try to prevent the publication of deceptive reviews by issuing a 'consumer alert' banner for offenders for 3 months (Wilkes, 1978; Luca and Zervas, 2016) and, in a similar vein, previous studies have tried to detect fake reviews by analyzing the content and the review writers' profiles (e.g., Yoo and Gretzel, 2009; Wirtz and McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Feng et al., 2012a; Lappas, 2012; Munzel, 2016). That being said, despite the aforementioned efforts, it is still difficult to identify deceptive reviews and reviewers due to two reasons: First, unless deceptive review writers leave trails by mistake (account names associated with the company which they left a review for), it is almost impossible to track them (Feng et al., 2012a), Second, there is a fine line between trolling and other online antisocial behaviors (Mkono, 2015). Stated differently, the anonymous nature of social media could lead to the exhibition of negative behavior, such as online harassment (trolling/deception) (Lappas, 2012; Mkono, 2015), which in case of companies is called 'online corporate harassment,' where businesses are aggressively the focus of personal attacks on social sites and blog postings by "trolls" and "cyber-bullies'" (Mkono, 2015, p. 6).

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Most of the literature on the subject of deceptive reviews are from the computer science field, focusing on behavioral evidence of deceptive online review posting (e.g., Feng et al., 2012b; Xie et al., 2012) or the text- and data-mining algorithms to pinpoint molds (Lappas, 2012; Luca and Zervas, 2016). There is a lack of research, however, on individuals' motivations to post deceptive reviews in general (Schuckert et al., 2015; Sigala, 2017; Thakur et al., 2018) and in hospitality and tourism contexts in particular (Sigala et al., 2017). A study on negative fake complaints (here negative fake reviews) is imperative because a lack of knowledge convergence exists between the studies that have been conducted in online contexts with those of offline contexts. In other words, despite the seminal works of Reynolds and Harris (2005); Baker et al. (2012), as well as Macintosh and Stevens (2013) on consumer on-site complaining behavior, the opportunistic behavior of online negative review writers has barely been addressed. This matter is specifically important as the negative review writer doesn't necessarily need to be a "customer" with most review sites letting anyone leave comments. This implies that existing social media studies either indicate that negative reviews are written by 'dissatisfied customers' (e.g., Balaji, and Sarkar, 2013; Clark, 2013; Ferguson and Johnston, 2011) or when taking on the outlook of fake reviews, it is from the perspective of 'competition' (e.g., Choi et al., 2016; Luca and Zervas, 2016; Mayzlin et al., 2014; Yoo and Gretzel, 2009). In fact, the definitions of negative fake/deceptive reviews, as well as the publication purpose of fake negative online reviews, has always been considered from the 'competition' perspective (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Xu and Zhang, 2015; Munzel, 2016; Luca and Zervas, 2016; Schuckert et al., 2016). Furthermore, most studies have approached the concept of fake reviews from a positive perspective (e.g., a fake positive review for promoting a restaurant) rather than negative (e.g., Xu and Zhang, 2015; Luca and Zervas, 2016; Schuckert et al., 2016). Likewise, economic incentives have been the focus of positive deceptive reviews' research (Hunt, 2015; Luca and Zervas, 2016; Thakur et al., 2018), and has less been considered in negative deceptive reviews studies. Moreover, only a few studies (e.g., Mkono, 2015; Tham and Wang, 2017; Xu and Zhang, 2015) have paid attention to the collective behavior patterns of individuals who post deceptive online reviews, let alone the question as to how this collusive deviant behavior forms in the first place. Finally, unlike previous studies (e.g., Baker et al., 2012; Reynolds and Harris, 2005) that used the psychological explanation of the social learning theory—learning takes places through observations of other people—to explain that destructive behavior is contagious, this study explains the detailed dynamics of opportunistic behavior spread by taking on the outlook of sociology and criminology.

This study responds to the recent call on the need for further investigation of deviant behavior in online service environments (Choi et al., 2016; Sigala et al., 2017). Drawing on the disciplines of criminology, psychology, and sociology, the current article conceptualizes the link between compensation strategies of service recovery (an economic incentive) and individuals' online deviant behavior by denoting that *consumers and their strong ties* could be as detrimental as *competitors* in posting negative reviews for *monetary* motivations. Accordingly, the present paper's objectives are: 1) to show how customers, in the online environment, can turn into opportunistic customers, 2) to show that negative reviews are not only generated by customers or competition but can be written by any opportunistic individual regardless of their affiliation, 3) to synthesize the literature of deceptive complaining behavior for economic motivations, and 4) to provide an integrated conceptual framework to examine the formation, diffusion, and halt of individuals' opportunistic behavior.

The rest of the paper is organized as follow. We first provide an overview of studies that have been conducted on deceptive online reviews. Then, we use Emerson's social exchange theory to explain how customer deviant behavior is formed. After this, we employ Akers' theory of crime and doctrines of social network theory to explain how and in what pace online deviant behavior is transmitted to deviant's social group. Next, we use neutralization theory to explain the adoption behavior of new deviants. Finally, we discuss the managerial implications of the proposed conceptual framework and provide suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature review

In the context of online review sites, Sigala (2017) defined online customer's deviant behavior as "any online customer behavior that is against law, organizational policy and/or social norm that can harm the firm, the employees and/or other online users" (p. 609). According to this definition, a review could be false but not necessarily deceptive (Yoo and Gretzel, 2009) if the truth has not been distorted intentionally (Munzel, 2016). To make it clearer, reviews written by 'happy' customers as the result of businesses encouraging them to do so (Luca and Zervas, 2016) or the positive reviews posted by dissatisfied customers only to avoid any future hassles (Schuckert et al., 2015) are considered as devious because these fake comments would harm the review readers who are looking for recommendations as where to go or eat as well as the firm which is looking for areas to improve.

Only recently researchers have started investigating deceptive online review postings. For example, the study of Chang et al. (2015) highlighted the roles of vocabularies and quantifiers in detecting deceptive reviews, and the study of Munzel (2016) underscored the importance of review writers' profiles in identifying fake online reviews. Table 1 includes the list of studies on online deceptive reviews.

By looking at Table 1, it is apparent that studies have mostly focused on the statistical and mathematical methods with which fake reviews can be identified and separated from real ones. A few studies in between have considered the legal initiatives of such behavior, the profiles of those who write deceptive reviews, and the way that they justify their deviant behavior. However, these studies have not examined the reasons as to why online deviant behavior would form in the first place and how this behavior would spread out in a network and then come to a halt. Accordingly, this study proposes a conceptual model to explain this behavior.

2.1. Emerson's social exchange theory

From a theoretical perspective, social exchange theory has greatly contributed to the analysis of social psychological phenomena. Social exchange theory can be approached from the three perspectives of Homans, (1961), Blau, (1964), and Emerson, (1972) (Cook et al., 2013). Homan's approach to study social behavior was within the framework of rewards and punishment which was criticized for being too reductionist and applying the pure concepts of psychology to social psychological phenomena. Blau, similar to Homan, incorporated the concepts of costs and rewards but took a more economic and utilitarian stance. In other words, Blau's utilitarian perspective concentrates on how to maximize one's benefits while minimizing the costs, which both depend upon power distribution. Emerson's important contributions to this theory is an interesting mix of Homan's and Blau's works. In part I of his theory, Emerson focused on Skinner's behaviorism perspective, and in part II, he focused on the analysis of dyadic exchanges to develop a framework. Accordingly, Emerson, (1972) and Cook and Emerson, (1978) proposed that within a particular dyad of exchange actors, dependence of actor A on actor B for resources determines the power of actor B in addition to its position in the network of exchange (Cook et al., 2013).

Existing studies of motivations to post online reviews have adopted the perspectives of Blau's social exchange theory where people participate in producing reviews to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. For instance, Pan and Crotts (2012) suggested that the reasons as to why people engage in a social exchange on social media are reputation, an expected reciprocity on the part of others, and altruism. On the same note, Cui et al. (2014) mentioned that the