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Delight the experts, but never dissatisfy your customers! A multi-category study on the effects of online review source on intention to buy a new product

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ABSTRACT

Online reviews are a pervasive form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that potentially accelerate—or slow down—the diffusion of recently launched services in the marketplace. While empirical research largely supports the effects of online reviews on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, less is known about the impact the source of the review—i.e., if it comes from a peer consumer or an expert—has on the recipient. Two experiments that combine reviewer- (expert, consumer), service type- (mobile package, restaurant, car repair), consumer- (level of general innovativeness), and review-related (positive, negative) characteristics reveal a challenging interaction between the review's source and its valence: while—compared to an established baseline—a positive expert review seems more effective in increasing the recipient's intention to purchase than a review by a peer consumer, a negative consumer review lowers the recipient's intentions to a larger extent than a negative expert review. We further find effects of the consumer's innovativeness and the service category across the experiments. Our research contributes to the topical and increasing body of empirical research on the effects of involved characteristics within online reviews across several product types.

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1. Introduction

The Internet and developments in information and communication technologies have enabled consumers to overcome one major friction the offline world imposed on them: the lack of information (Bell, 2014). The Internet provides consumers with new opportunities to conduct pre-purchase information searches and consumers have become increasingly dependent on online sources to find decision-related information (Brown et al., 2007). An important amount of websites provide access to a number of information sources that are often perceived as being independent from the influence of marketers and more trustworthy. One type of those independent sources of customer-induced electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that has received increasing attention from both researchers and managers is online reviews. The existing research shows that consumers prefer this source of information over traditional marketing-induced means of communication, such as TV commercials and newspaper ads (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Furthermore, research shows the impact

of online reviews on sales (Zhu and Zhang, 2010), purchasing intentions (Park et al., 2007), and product choice (Senecal and Nantel, 2004).

However, the literature neglects to a large extent another potential source that is perceived as being independent from marketing: online reviews by commercially independent experts. The lack of studies on different review sources (i.e., consumers and experts) is somewhat surprising as review sites increasingly assign status levels to reviewers (e.g., Amazon.com) or include reviews by experts or critics on their sites (e.g., movie websites such as IMDb.com). Recently, researchers have started to question the use and impact of reviews by peer customers when expert reviews are easily available (Bertrandias and Vernet, 2012). However, more empirical insights are needed to investigate the effects of the review source on subsequent behavioral outcomes.

Therefore, the present research concentrates on comparing online reviews written by experts with those written by peer customers and examines their impacts on purchase intentions across three product categories. As recently suggested by the literature that differentiates the time horizons of eWOM communications (Berger and Schwartz, 2011), our research focuses on the immediate (as opposed to ongoing) communication on recently

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launched products and their success soon after consulting the reviews.

The results provide further support for the influence of online reviews on the behavioral intentions of its readers. Expert reviews seem to be more effective for the promotion of new products with qualities that are more difficult to assess prior to purchase, whereas a negative review from a peer consumer deteriorates the recipient's intention to buy the new product to a larger extent than an expert review. Furthermore, the experimental studies highlight the differences among the different types of products and the valence of reviews with regard to their effectiveness in influencing the consumers' purchase intentions. Finally, we highlight the importance of knowing the target client as consumer characteristics moderate the online reviews effectiveness.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. Online reviews from customers and experts

The existing literature on the topic of online reviews has focused on the comparison between consumer- and marketer-generated online content and has, to a large extent, neglected the investigation of different information sources that are commercially independent. We aim to fill in this gap: in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis of review source effect we investigate and compare the impact of both positive and negative online reviews on purchase intentions. It was found in the literature that the occurrence (Chiou and Cheng, 2003) and interrelation with product type (Pan and Chiou, 2011) of online reviews differ depending on their valence. Based on the body of prior research a positive eWOM improves the attitude towards the brand (Lee et al., 2009), willingness to recommend (Lee and Youn, 2009), and booking intention (Sparks and Browning, 2011). The eWOM effect on purchase intention directly depends on the valence of the message (e.g., Park et al., 2007; Park and Lee, 2009). The effect is quite intuitive: positive feedback increases purchase intention, while negative opinion or experience decreases consumer's purchase intention. Despite some evidence that expert's (editor's) reviews are negatively related to consumer's intention to visit a restaurant (Zhang et al., 2010) we find that there are more findings that support the direct relation of any online review on consumer review (e.g., Amblee and Bui, 2007). The reason we stick with this intuitive relation lays in the nature of expertize as defined in the article: we compare the effect of independent established professionals among different product types. Not for every product type there is a culture of professional critics, as it is for movies, books, and restaurants. Thus, we do not deal with an opposition to a critic, but rather test whether professional expertize has a different effect on purchase decision than a peer opinion. In this case the studies on recommendation systems (Senecal and Nantel, 2004) and website reputation (Park and Lee, 2009) that did not find inverse impact of expert opinion are closer to our context. Therefore, as a baseline for further investigations, we expect to support the following hypotheses:

H1a. : Consumers exposed to a positive (negative) online review written by an expert will have a higher (lower) purchase intention than consumers who are not exposed to online reviews of new services.

H1b. : Consumers exposed to a positive (negative) online review written by a customer will have a higher (lower) purchase intention than consumers who are not exposed to online reviews of new services.

Despite the scarce literature on review source effect there are

some studies that shed light onto this topic: thus, Senecal and Nantel (2004) proposed a recommendation emitter framework and found that expert systems were more influential in terms of product choice even though they were less trustworthy than messages from other consumers and possessed less expertize than human experts. Although the question of professional expertize, especially in largely anonymous exchanges over the Internet, is a complex issue (Dellarocas, 2003), expert status could still be identified through an affiliation to an independent entity (e.g., online media) or could be attributed by the consumers themselves (e.g., notorious blogger). From a practical perspective, differentiating those two types of online reviews (i.e., expert versus consumer reviews) is important as this potentially influences the marketing strategies when targeting interactions with the usual consumers or influential experts (Bronner and de Hoog, 2010). The expertize in this study is an imposed characteristic and is in this regard different from concepts such as opinion leaders or lead-users, which have their origins in interpersonal influence and are acquired through the peer consumers' perception of their expertize and notoriety (Bertrandias and Vernet, 2012).

The dilemma of expertize influence is quite simple: do consumers trust more the people 'like them' (Sparks and Browning, 2011) or people who have, presumably, more knowledge (Reinstein and Snyder, 2005). We decide to stay in accordance with Dellarocas (2003), Chakravarty et al. (2010) and the growing excitement to consumer-generated content (Gruen et al., 2006) and assume that an online review from an expert will have a smaller impact on the purchase decision of other consumers than one from a peer.

H1c. : When compared, the level of the consumer's intention to purchase will be more (less) impacted by a review from a consumer (an expert).

2.2. Customer characteristics

According to our focused literature review, customer characteristics are just as important (Zhu and Zhang, 2010) as the environmental variables (i.e. the product type and the message). Thus, our framework is inspired by the psychological models of consumer choice analyzed by Hansen (1976), who suggests that the influencing power (i.e., in our case of an online review on the purchase intention) is moderated both by the environmental and by consumer characteristics.

One of important consumer characteristics is innovativeness, which could be defined as need for variety (e.g., Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996), search for new information (Hirschman, 1980), or as a purchase of new products (Robertson and Myers, 1969). Baumgartner and Steenkamp (1996) decomposed innovative behavior into the acquisition of products (i.e., the exploratory acquisition of products) and information-seeking (i.e., exploratory information-seeking). Thus, both facets of the customer innovativeness—acquisition and information seeking—might heavily impact his purchase behavior especially in the context of new products and products that are hard to evaluate before the actual purchase. As the innovative customers are more willing to purchase a product at their own risk we expect that they will be more encouraged by positive reviews and less discouraged by the negative ones than the less innovative customers.

H2. : The consumer's level of innovativeness positively influences his intention to purchase a new product.

Furthermore, we expect that the consumer's innovativeness moderates the effect of the online review on purchase intention. By definition, highly innovative individuals have an increased tendency to purchase new products and want to be among the

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