



## Examining psychological effects of source cues and social plugins on a product review website



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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the psychological effects of heuristic cues on a product review website to gain a better understanding of online agency. A between-participants experiment of 458 college students confirmed the formation of more positive attitudes toward a product review website when an expert rather than a computer/website served as the source of product review information, specifically when the expert source was accompanied by a rating of four stars vs. one star. A product review authored by other users also induced more favorable attitudes toward the website when it was presented with a higher level of star ratings than a lower one. The study also revealed perceived authority and bandwagon heuristics mediated the relationship between the presence of social plugins and favorable attitudes toward the website via credibility perceptions. Findings not only underscored the power of the authority and bandwagon cues when users make quick judgments on product review sites but also discovered a theoretical path that explained the role of social plugins—a seal of credibility—on e-commerce sites. Theoretical and practical implications are also discussed for designing information-based websites.

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## 1. Introduction

Web 2.0, an ideological shift marked by user-generated content being continually modified by a community of participants rather than static content being created by individuals (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), has left its conspicuous trace on e-commerce (Leitner & Grechenig, 2008). Rather than manufacturers and providers acting as singular voices of information regarding their products and services, editors, consumers, and specialized websites are continually creating and contributing to online reviews. These reviews are widely available on sources such as Yelp, CNET, Consumer Reports, and Amazon.com and are referenced frequently. In 2012, for example, 78 percent of online Americans between the age of 18 and 64 reported that online reviews affect their purchasing decisions (MarketingCharts, 2012), and in 2014, 88 percent of individuals reported using online customer reviews to determine the quality of local businesses (Anderson, 2014). Online reviews have become so critical to purchasing decisions,

in fact, that they have proven to influence consumers more than price and brand (ShareThis, 2014).

Since online reviews emerged, scholars have sought to uncover their power and effect (e.g., Chen & Xie, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). The resulting literature suggests that factors such as product type (Bae & Lee, 2011), number of reviews (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008), valence of reviews (Ivanova, Scholz, & Dorner, 2013), length of reviews (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006), and source of reviews (Chen & Xie, 2008; Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Wei & Lu, 2013) influence the effect others' opinions have on consumers. Little literature, however, looks at how source attributions (i.e., indications on whether or not ratings are generated by an editor, a consumer, or the website) interact with visual signals of ratings (e.g., star ratings) and sharing icons (e.g., social plugins). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to better understand these relationships through the lens of heuristic cues.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Exploring information source and heuristic cues

Heuristics are relatively instant and less cognizant judgment rules individuals use to help reduce complex problems into simpler, snap judgments (Chaiken, 1987; Fiske & Taylor, 2008;

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Kahneman & Tversky, 1972; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). They are particularly helpful for interpreting information when individuals are not highly motivated to process a message (Chaiken, 1987). Blogs, online news websites, and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) sites all contain technological affordances that cue heuristics and help readers quickly interpret information (Sundar, 2008). Specifically, star rating systems on eWOM sites are among the visual cues consumers rely upon for identifying a product or service's quality. These value-laden cues offer consumers more than product descriptions and an evaluation of the pros and cons of a product or service, they provide a quick snapshot into what others think about the product or service and influence online purchases (Chen, 2008; Sundar, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Xu, 2008).

The content source on product review sites serves as another heuristic cue. Thus, the question of "Who is the source of information?" becomes meaningful as source attribution influences information assessments (Sundar, 2008; Sundar & Nass, 2001). Depending on which source the information is attributed to (e.g., expert, lay person, user, consumer, computer/system, or website), outcomes of credibility and attitude formation differ (Go, Jung, & Wu, 2014; Sundar & Nass, 2001; Winter & Krämer, 2014; Xu, 2013). In some instances the user or reviewer who rated the product or service is identifiable. In other instances ratings are not labeled and appear to come from the website or computer itself. This study focuses on the impact of such heuristic cues on consumers.

#### 2.1.1. Expert, website, and other users as sources of product review information

When the source of information comes from an official authority or expert, individuals process information using the authority heuristic (Sundar, 2008). This heuristic plays a role in users' source attribution of information online and affects how the information is subsequently evaluated. Research shows individuals make quick judgments about the credibility of a source based on whether or not it comes from an official authority or expert (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

To the extent the interface agent or even simply a website identifies itself as an authority of some sort, it is likely to directly confer importance, believability, and pedigree to the content provided by that source and thereby positively impact its credibility (Sundar, 2008, p. 84).

Likewise, messages that come from an authority figure are often considered more trustworthy and considered to be of higher quality (Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002). For example, by examining the auto-generated news site Google News, Sundar, Knobloch-Westerwick, and Hastall (2007) found that the content author or news source, which was located just below the headline and lead, served as a heuristic cue. This cue triggered the authority heuristic, helping individuals determine the news item's level of credibility. Even the domain name of a website can trigger the authority heuristic. In the context of e-commerce websites, when consumers considered purchasing wine from specialized websites such as wines.com rather than a more general consumer site like costco.com, the more specialized website was perceived as the more expert source (Koh & Sundar, 2010). Additionally, when examining the popular review website (i.e., Yelp), source expertise positively impacted perceptions of the review's helpfulness (Zhu, Yin, & He, 2014). Based on this line of research, it seems plausible that when individuals are not deliberately processing the text, an authority or expert source will trigger the authority heuristic and cause individuals to evaluate the information more favorably.

In the online environment, however, information is not always perceived as coming from an individual. It is often perceived as

coming from a computer, machine, or technology device (e.g., iPod, phone, etc.). In these instances, the machine heuristic is used to process and judge information. When using this heuristic, the message is judged as being free from bias and even considered to maintain an objective and fair perspective (Sundar, 2008). Edwards, Spence, Gentile, Edwards, and Edwards (2013), for example, found that individuals with high Klout scores (computer-generated ratings measuring an individual's influence on social media) were perceived as being more credible sources than those with moderate or low Klout scores. These scholars attribute this finding to the machine heuristic.

In their early work on the source of news, Sundar and Nass (2001) found that when news stories were perceived as being selected by the computer terminal, they were thought to be of higher quality than when the same stories were selected by news editors or the receivers of the information. In this same study, participants reported that news stories were of higher quality when either a computer or some other user selected the news than when news editors selected the news stories (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Similarly, the present study expects that when the source of a product review is attributed to the website itself, individuals will evaluate the information more favorably than when an expert reviewer serves as the source.

Consumer-created content also has the potential to impact information-judgment processes. eWOM is "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). This form of communication is characterized as indirect public communication between consumers, typically in the form of an online rating or review (Lis, 2013). The value of eWOM from consumers is evident. Chen (2008) examined online book purchases and found consumer reviews to be more influential on consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions than expert reviews. Similarly, Cheong and Morrison (2008) found website users trust product information generated by other consumers more than product information generated by product manufacturers.

In addition, other scholars found when the source of information was other users, overall ratings toward the news stories were greater than when the source was news editors, an expert source (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Winter and Krämer (2014) found other users' opinions mattered more than experts' opinions when people gathered information from Web 2.0 venues such as blogs. However, for typical online news websites, the expertise of the information source has been found to induce stronger effects on positive evaluations of information than aggregated opinions from lay people (Winter & Krämer, 2014). Considering the nature of online product review websites to be open to everyone and resemble online forums where anyone can contribute, when users serve as a review source they are likely to elicit more positive psychological reactions from site users than expert reviewers.

#### 2.1.2. The bandwagon heuristic and source cues

The bandwagon heuristic is triggered when a person perceives that something is popular or good for other people. When this occurs, the person also thinks it is good for himself/herself (Sundar, 2008). Therefore, website cues suggesting the popularity of a product or service are capable of activating a heuristic for users as they evaluate information and make purchasing decisions. For product review sites, the bandwagon heuristic can be triggered by the presence of star ratings as well as the number of consumer reviews.

Research confirms the positive effects of the bandwagon heuristic on online behaviors. Fu and Sim (2011), for example, found that online videos with higher view counts attract more future viewers

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