



Investigating the effect of quality of grammar and mechanics (QGAM) in online reviews: The mediating role of reviewer credibility



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ABSTRACT

Grammar and mechanics are important components of written communication and provide signals of credibility. Although past research has documented general effects of grammar and mechanics, to date, the influence of quality of grammar and mechanics (QGAM) of online reviews remains largely unexamined. Through the lens of ELM, the present research examines QGAM of a review as a peripheral cue influencing the perceived credibility of a reviewer, finding that reviews with high QGAM have higher perceived credibility and exert a stronger influence on purchase intentions. Meanwhile, reviews with low QGAM are not as credible, influencing purchase intentions less. Product type, review length, and review valence moderate these influences, such that QGAM is more important for reviews of experience goods and reviews of shorter lengths. Further, reviewer credibility fully mediates positive reviews but does not mediate negative reviews. Implications, limitations, and future research directions are discussed.

1. Introduction

Grammar and mechanics hold vital, foundational roles in effective written communication (Brown, 1997; Praise & Meenakshi, 2015). Proper use of grammar and mechanics often reinforces perceptions of the author's credibility, suggesting that the author is eloquent, well informed, and/or capable of higher-order thought. Meanwhile, low grammatical/mechanical quality can distract readers and signal that an author is uneducated, incompetent, and/or careless, undermining the persuasive ability of the communication (i.e., Appelmon & Bolls, 2011; Jessmer & Anderson, 2001; Schindler & Bickart, 2012).

Among written communications contexts, online fora hold a pervasive role in consumers' lives. For example, consumers often seek product information in online reviews, which serve as a major source of online information search (Buschken & Allenby, 2016; Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012; Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Moe & Trusov, 2011). Further, online reviews can influence purchasing behavior as well as perceptions of product attributes (Cui et al., 2012; Kostyra, Reiner, Natter, & Klapper, 2016). As with other written communications, online reviews differ in their efficacy based on several core and peripheral factors, including length, extremity, valence, and expertise of the reviewer (i.e., Baek, Ahn, & Choi, 2012; Chua & Banerjee, 2014, 2016; Filieri, 2016; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Lee, Park, & Han, 2008; Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Salehan & Kim, 2016; Schindler & Bickart, 2012; Weathers,

Swain, & Grover, 2015; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Despite the extensive research on influential factors in online reviews, past scholars have, to an extent, overlooked the influence of *quality of grammar and mechanics (QGAM)* – defined in this work as the quality of grammar, mechanics (spelling, punctuation, etc.), and overall technical skill in written communication – of online reviews. In fact, of these studies, only Schindler and Bickart (2012) appear to examine grammar and mechanics explicitly in online reviews. Even so, these authors did not isolate grammar and mechanics in their analysis, instead bundling these traits with other stylistic elements such as slang, qualifications, and repetition. Unlike other communications such as formal news articles, online reviews are consumer-to-consumer (i.e., peer-to-peer) in nature. Consumer expectations for how other consumers should use grammar and mechanics may differ from such expectations for firms, warranting investigation into how QGAM affects consumer-to-consumer communications.

Drawing from prior literature on grammar and mechanics as well as the role of peripheral cues from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), this paper conceptualizes QGAM in an online review context and determines its influence on purchase intentions through the mediation of reviewer credibility. Further, this study presents three potential moderators – product type, review length, and review valence – of QGAM's influence. This investigation contributes to the literature by directly focusing on QGAM and defining its role as a peripheral cue of reviewer credibility, deepening understanding of the

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relationship between ELM and online reviews as well as solidifying QGAM as an important characteristic in the online review literature.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Quality of grammar and mechanics (QGAM)

Grammar refers to the system of rules of a language describing the way verbal constructions are organized to convey meaning (Anderson, 2005). The rules of grammar ensure that the relationships among words are sensible and can be understood by the broader society familiar with the given language. Meanwhile, mechanics are the elements of a language that exist in written form only (i.e., spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and organizational elements of writing such as paragraphs). Together, the combined term “grammar and mechanics” refers to the summation of these two elements in written expressions, and the concept of QGAM refers to the quality (i.e., adherence to rules and norms) of grammar and mechanics.

For the purposes of this work, a high QGAM expression employs proper structures in phrases, clauses, sentences, and other verbal components as well as mechanics of written language. For example, “Bob likes the local supermarket due to its selection of fresh produce, butchered meats, and organic dairy products” is a sentence of high QGAM. Meanwhile, a written expression of low QGAM neglects, ignores, or violates the rules of the given language. The above sentence may be rewritten with low QGAM as “bob like the super market, it has fresh produce butchered meats and organic derry products.” Unlike the high QGAM sentence, this example violates several rules related to both grammar and mechanics, including improper clause connection, improper list structure, and errors of capitalization, spelling, and punctuation.

QGAM is a documented factor in perceptions of written communications (Areni, 2003). For example, according to Appelmon and Bolls (2011), published works (such as news articles) with poor grammar and mechanics suffer from lower perceived quality, reduced readability, and impaired memory of content when compared to works with good grammar and mechanics. In a consumer-to-consumer (i.e., online review) context, Schindler and Bickart (2012) found that negative stylistic elements (which include grammatical/mechanical mistakes) reduce the helpfulness of online reviews. Interestingly, Gearhart and Kang (2014) found no difference between use of correct grammatical structure and “internet lingo” (i.e., commonly used yet grammatically incorrect verbiage in online fora) in judgments of message credibility in a social media/journalism context. However, due to the typicality – and, therefore, higher expectancy – of less-than-perfect messages written by individuals and posted on social media, it is not surprising that there was no significant difference between low and high QGAM on perceived credibility in Gearhart & Kang's study.

Given the scantily documented influence of QGAM on perceptions of written communications, a theoretical understanding of why QGAM has such an effect is important in guiding research on QGAM in online reviews. Thus, the next section offers a viable theoretical explanation for the role of QGAM in online reviews: ELM.

2.2. QGAM and ELM: peripheral persuasion

The role of QGAM in online reviews is solidly linked to the peripheral route to persuasion described by ELM (Areni, 2003; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). ELM is a dual-process theory of persuasion that describes two key routes to persuasion: the central route, in which the logic and substance of the argument itself persuade the individual, and the peripheral route, in which cues surrounding the argument (the spokesmodel's attractiveness, the jingle of an advertisement, the linguistic style of an online review, etc.) have a greater influence on persuasion. Prior research has documented the importance of linguistic characteristics in the peripheral route of ELM, especially in an online

context (i.e., Areni, 2003; Gearhart & Kang, 2014; Schindler & Bickart, 2012).

Within ELM, QGAM is a peripheral element in that the grammar and mechanics of a review signal certain traits about that reviewer (such as lack of education, lack of attention to detail). Low QGAM seriously detracts from the ability to focus on a core argument, leading a consumer to interpret the peripheral cue of QGAM as a signal of credibility and shifting attention from the central argument (Appelmon & Bolls, 2011; Areni, 2003; Schindler & Bickart, 2012). Meanwhile, high QGAM is an indicator of greater quality of the communication and enhances its core persuasive power. Therefore, while two communications may propose identical core messages or arguments, differences in QGAM can lead to differences in persuasiveness.

Following the arguments of Areni (2003) and others, this work seeks to demonstrate that QGAM directly influences credibility judgments of online reviews as a written communications medium. Although contextual factors can alter the extent of QGAM's influence, these reviews are subject to the same evaluative criteria as other written communications, including QGAM. Further, consumers evaluate QGAM as a signal of reviewer credibility, especially since QGAM is one of the few signals of an online reviewer's knowledge and experience with a product.

This study focuses on purchase intentions as a key downstream outcome of QGAM for two reasons. First, purchase intentions represent the last stage prior to actual behavior, making this variable a sensible proxy for actual purchases (i.e., Bagozzi, 1981). Because a chief goal of marketing is to generate sales through consumer purchases, purchase intentions play a vital role as a measurable outcome in this study. Second, consumers typically utilize online reviews in order to ultimately assist with purchase decisions, and in the context of this work, the purchase intentions variable adequately captures what a consumer would purportedly do in an actual product context (i.e., Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Weathers et al., 2015).

2.3. Moderators of QGAM

This work proposes three key moderators of QGAM: product type, review length, and review valence. Each of these factors may contextually alter the relative importance of QGAM. While additional elements such as reviewer agreement and number of reviews may exert some influence on QGAM, the focus of this work is on characteristics inherent in the review itself.

2.3.1. Product type

Several researchers have documented substantive differences in the way consumers process online reviews based on product type. Much of this research focuses on the dichotomy between search and experience goods (Nelson, 1970). Search goods are associated with low costs and low difficulty in acquiring product quality information prior to consumption and typically involve more objective evaluative statements in online reviews. Meanwhile, ascertaining product quality of experience goods prior to consumption is more difficult and costly, and reviews for experience goods tend to be more subjective in nature. Further, sensory information arising from actual consumption tends to be more necessary for experience goods (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Weathers et al., 2015).

Past findings have revealed that consumers process online reviews for each product type differently (i.e., Chua & Banerjee, 2014, 2016; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Weathers et al., 2015). Because experience goods are more subjective and are difficult to evaluate without actual product trial, consumers engaging in pre-consumption information search must focus greater attention on the peripheral cues of online reviews when gathering product information (i.e., Areni, 2003; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Chua & Banerjee, 2014, 2016; Weathers et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the more objective nature of reviews for search goods enables the ability to

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