



# Why posters contribute different content in their positive online reviews: A social information-processing perspective

Liping Yan\*, Xiucun Wang

School of Management and Economics, Beijing Institute of Technology, 5 South Zhongguancun Street, Haidian District, Beijing 100081, China

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## ABSTRACT

It is becoming increasingly important for service managers and marketers to understand motivations for posting online reviews. Previous studies mainly focused on factors influencing consumers' willingness to post online reviews, but paid little attention to why posters contribute different content in their reviews. This study aimed to identify various types of positive online reviews in terms of their content and to investigate the mechanisms that influence them. Study 1 conducted a content analysis to verify three types of positive reviews: complimentary, constructive, and prosocial. Study 2 developed a scale to evaluate the three types of reviews and surveyed 526 members of online travel websites in China to test our hypotheses with structural equation modeling. Both complimentary and constructive reviews were positively related to posters' beliefs about firms' appreciation and sincerity, which were promoted by firms' responses to online reviews. Complimentary reviews were positively associated with posters' positive emotions, but negatively affected by belief about a firm's performance-driven motive, which was induced by a firm's request for online reviews. Service quality moderated this negative relationship. Appreciation from peers and peers' prosocial information contributions had a positive effect on the belief that peers' need information-support, which in turn, positively affected prosocial reviews.

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## 1. Introduction

### “We love this hotel”



Excellent welcome and very comfortable stay in a hotel located in the 7th arrondissement. Unlike other hotels Le Walt offers great facilities and service. Loved it! Rooms were air conditioned, calm and tasteful. (Example 1).

### “Thank you”



Very nice and clean hotel. Small room but adequate as I am a single traveler. Nice dinner on Saturday night. Very pleasant staff and helpful. Very close to underground station. The only one tiny drawback is that the bar is closed at 11pm. The hotel is trying very

hard to get an extension of its license. I wouldn't let it put me off staying there because there are facilities around. Room Tip: I was on 3rd floor at the front; it was good, didn't notice any noise. (Example 2).

These two online reviews, which are posted on [TripAdvisor.com](http://TripAdvisor.com), represent just two examples of the ways customers currently use online opinion platforms to post information about their service experiences. Online reviews posted on social media sites such as [TripAdvisor.com](http://TripAdvisor.com) are increasingly affecting service businesses (Moe & Schweidel, 2012). Approximately 49% of customers read online reviews before booking a hotel (Wu, Mattila, Wang, & Hanks, 2016), and 35% change their travel plans after reading online reviews. As a result, online reviews have a significant impact on service companies' profitability. For example, a study by Anderson (2012) showed that a 1% improvement in a merchant's online reputation would increase revenue by 1.4% per available room. Due to the impact of online reviews on firms' performance, service managers are increasingly concerned about consumers' motivations for posting in order to develop appropriate strategies to promote positive online reviews (Wu et al., 2016).

In recent years, several academic studies have investigated the antecedents of online reviews (Dellarocas, Gao, & Narayan, 2010;

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [yanliping11@163.com](mailto:yanliping11@163.com) (L. Yan), [wangxiucun@bit.edu.cn](mailto:wangxiucun@bit.edu.cn) (X. Wang).

Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Nambisan & Baron, 2007; Picazo-Vela, Chou, Melcher, & Pearson, 2010; Schlosser, 2005; Wu et al., 2016; Zhou & Duan, 2015). Most of these studies have treated online reviews as a unidimensional construct (Dellarocas et al., 2010; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008; Nambisan & Baron, 2007; Picazo-Vela et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2016), while a few have treated online reviews as a multidimensional construct based on their valence or publication-based factors. For example, Schlosser (2005) compared the motives behind positive reviews and negative reviews. Zhou and Duan (2015) investigated the interplay between retailer-hosted online reviews and online reviews hosted by third-party websites. However, several questions remain regarding the characteristics and motivations of online reviews. For example, both of the online reviews in examples 1 and 2 have “excellent” ratings, which indicate that posters’ overall evaluation of the hotels is positive. However, it remains an emerging question how individual posts differ in terms of specific content (Bone, Fombelle, Ray, & Lemon, 2015). To fill this gap, the first aim of our study was to investigate different types of positive online reviews in terms of their specific content.

Two aspects of the antecedents of consumers’ willingness to post online reviews were analyzed in previous research: internal motivations and external factors. Internal causes include posters’ expectation of helping companies (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008), concern for other consumers (Litvin et al., 2008; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Verhagen, Swen, Feldberg, & Merikivi, 2015; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008), seeking a sense of belonging to online communities (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Nambisan & Baron, 2007), exerting power over companies (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004), achieving self-enhancement (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Nambisan & Baron, 2007; Verhagen et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2016; Yoo & Gretzel, 2008), obtaining an economic reward (Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015), expressing positive emotions, and venting negative feelings (Baldus et al., 2015; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). The other line of investigation addressed the effect of external factors on posting online reviews, such as pressure from sellers (Picazo-Vela et al., 2010), peer members’ postings (Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Schlosser, 2005), and the perceived market popularity of a product (Dellarocas et al., 2010). While most existing studies have focused on why customers are willing to post online reviews, little research has examined why posters contribute different types of content in their online reviews. In addition, although most early investigations identify psychoanalytic and motivational factors that may induce the behavior of posting online reviews, few trace the process of creating online reviews. The social information processing (SIP) model proposed by Dodge and Crick (1990) maintains that an individual’s behavior is usually contingent on information-processing patterns. This processing involves an individual’s perception of, interpretation of, and responses to social cues. In the context of online reviews, posters are usually embedded in a broad social network structure in the virtual opinion community (Wang & Li, 2013) in which service providers and community peers are important sources of social influence that provide setting-specific cues (Cheng & Guo, 2015; Moe & Schweidel, 2012; Schamari & Schaefer, 2015; Verhagen et al., 2015). According to SIP, the response style of online review posts displays a zone of plasticity that is conditioned by the processing of setting-specific cues. Hence, the second aim of the current study was to use the SIP model to elucidate posters’ social information-processing patterns involved in their contribution of different types of positive online reviews.

This paper intends to make several contributions. First, it responds to Bone et al.’s (2015) call to examine whether posts differ in

terms of content, and to our knowledge, this is the first attempt to identify the various forms of positive online review content. As such, this study deepens our knowledge of the qualitative nature of positive online reviews. Second, we develop scales to measure different forms of positive online reviews, which will provide operators and business practitioners with a tool to measure posters’ contributions in positive online reviews. Finally, we use the SIP model to elucidate posters’ psychological processes that affect their contribution of different types of positive online reviews. Specifically, posters’ interpretations of situational cues are tested as intermediate variables within our framework, which has seldom been attempted in past research. This step should improve our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the specific social information processes involved in posting online reviews. Thus, our results should enable researchers and managers to better understand posters’ motivations and should provide platform operators and business managers with practical guidance for customizing strategies to motivate posters to make valuable contributions in their positive reviews.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. In the second section, we provide a review of the literature related to online review posting behavior and the SIP model. The third section introduces our research’s theoretical framework and develops our hypotheses. In the fourth section (Study 1), we verify three forms of positive online reviews (i.e., complimentary, constructive, and prosocial online reviews) by conducting a content analysis. In the fifth section (Study 2), we develop scales to measure positive online reviews as multidimensional constructs. Then, we estimate our theoretical hypotheses and report on the findings using survey data collected via two online travel websites in China. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of this study’s implications for theory and practice.

## 2. Research background

### 2.1. Online reviews

Online reviews are defined as “user-generated contents that are posted on e-vendor or third-party websites” (Elwald, Lü, & Ali, 2016). Previous studies have classified online reviews mainly from the perspective of a firm or of a potential customer, and most have categorized them as positive or negative (e.g., Pan & Zhang, 2011; Wei, Li, & Huang, 2013; Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2014). Other scholars have identified the attributes of online reviews. For example, Sparks, Perkins, and Buckley (2013) proposed that online hotel reviews can be divided into specific content and vague content. Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, and Law (2016) indicated that text readability is a crucial characteristic of hotel reviews, while Xiang, Du, Ma, and Fan (2017) explored the data quality of online reviews in hospitality and tourism, including their linguistic characteristics, semantic features, sentiments, and ratings. A recent study by Filieri (2015) focused not only on the informational cues of online reviews (e.g., the quality and quantity of information) but also on the normative cues (e.g., overall ranking score) that help consumers infer product performance. Filieri (2015) measured the information quality of online reviews in terms of the dimensions of depth and breadth, factuality, relevance, and credibility, and an interview study by Filieri (2016) found that a customer’s perception of the trustworthiness of an online review is influenced by its characteristics, including the length of the review, the type of information, the type of detail, the writing style, and the consumer’s perspective. Liu and Park (2015) found that the usefulness of an online consumer review could be positively predicted by its enjoyability and readability. In the context of electronic commerce, Korfiatis, García-Bariocanal, and Sánchez-Alonso (2012) classified product reviews

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