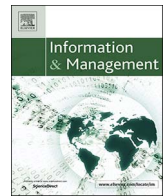




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Information &amp; Management

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/im](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/im)

Full length article

Online customer reviews and consumer evaluation: The role of review font<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Processing ease  
 Review valence  
 Online customer reviews  
 Credibility  
 Need for cognition  
 Accountability

## ABSTRACT

Inspired by the literature on processing fluency and the practical question of how to choose fonts for website design, we investigated the impact of customer reviews on consumer evaluation under an easy-to-read (vs. difficult-to-read) review font. We found that the feeling of ease in reading led consumers to judge the reviewers as more credible, thus increasing the impact of the reviews. Moreover, the effect of font diminished when consumers elaborated information more thoroughly (i.e., when high in need for cognition, or in an accountable situation) and thus did not use simple heuristics (reading ease) to make judgment.

## 1. Introduction

In electronic commerce (e-commerce), after a purchase has been completed, e-commerce platforms usually allow consumers to provide numerical ratings of the product or service and to write textual descriptions that serve as a justification for the ratings [1–3]. These online reviews function as a free “sales assistant” [4] which influences subsequent consumer purchase decisions and product sales [5,6].

As online reviews are becoming increasingly popular, researchers have focused extensively on analyzing their impacts and the determinants of these impacts (e.g., [7–12,6]. The number of customer reviews [13–16] and the average and variance of the numerical ratings [17,7,18] appear to influence online consumer behaviors. A more comprehensive understanding of the impact of online reviews can be found from text mining, sentiment analysis, and experimental examination of review texts [5,19–21]. Previous research has documented well that multiple textual features, including valence [22–24], two-sidedness (highlighting positive and negative aspects of a product) [25], text length [26,20], semantic characteristics [27], and the inclusion of elements of a good story [28], all alter the impact of online reviews. More recently, greater effort has been made to investigate how the effect of such review features can be moderated by contingent factors such as brand equity [24], consumption goals (prevention vs. promotion) [29], and product category (experience vs. search products) [30].

However, most prior research has focused on contents generated by users and thus has ignored contextual factors that do not change the review contents but nevertheless may alter the impact of customer

reviews. One exception is a study by Huang et al. [31] which found that ordering reviews into different types may affect their perceived diagnosticity. The present research focuses on the effect of another indispensable feature of customer reviews, namely font.

One issue that online retailers usually face when designing their websites is the choice of font. In practice, online retailers choose particular fonts to present their website information, including customer reviews. For example, Amazon uses *Amazon Ember* (13px, black), PetSmart uses *Proxima Nova A Regular* (11px, dark blue), and GameStop uses *Solido Book* (16px, black) to present customer reviews; Toys “R” Us uses *Avenir Roman* (16px, dark grey) for the most positive reviews and most helpful reviews. In addition, top online store designers, such as BigCommerce, WIX, and Woocommerce, provide support for online retailers to customize the appearance of texts when designing online stores. Unfamiliar typefaces, small fonts, and low-contrast colors are apparently more difficult to read. Yet despite extensive discussions of this issue, there has been limited empirical examination of the influence of font, and it remains unknown whether or not font chosen by online retailers alters the impact of customer reviews—and if so, how.

Inspired by the fluency literature in social cognition [32,33], the present research suggests that reviews with a font difficult to read may have only a small impact on customers, less than that of reviews with an easy-to-read font. This decrease in impact may occur because processing ease serves as a heuristic cue for consumers to assess credibility [34,35]. Increased processing difficulty lowers perceived reviewer credibility, decreasing the impact of customer reviews.

Persuasive positive (or negative) reviews should lead other potential consumers to evaluate a product or service as more favorable (or

<sup>☆</sup> This research is supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grants #71472084, #71272098, #71772083, #71502079, and #71602088), and the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2017.10.003>

Received 27 July 2016; Received in revised form 24 September 2017; Accepted 10 October 2017  
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unfavorable). Thus, in the present research, we measured consumers' product evaluations after exposure to positive and negative reviews. We inferred a greater impact of customer reviews from more positive consumer evaluation following positive reviews and more negative consumer evaluation following negative reviews. We found that reviews are likely to be less impactful on consumer evaluation when online retailers choose a difficult-to-read (vs. easy-to-read) font for customer reviews.

This research makes several important contributions to the literature. First, we provide empirical tests of whether and how font has an effect on perceived credibility and thus on the impact of customer reviews, deepening the understanding of the contextual factors altering the impact of customer reviews [31]. Second, we extend processing fluency to the context of online reviews, providing empirical support for the dual processing model of credibility assessment [35]. Third, our findings help online retailers to understand the possible effects of their choice of fonts for their websites.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we review the literatures on the visual elements of website design and on processing fluency. Hypothesis 1 is based on these theories. Then, from the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) [36,37] and the dual processing model of credibility assessment [35], we propose the moderating effect of elaboration motivation, which we operationalize through measuring people's need for cognition (Hypothesis 2a) or manipulating accountability for the judgment (Hypothesis 2b). After that, we report four experiments that compare consumers' product evaluations after reading either positive or negative reviews written in either easy-to-read or difficult-to-read fonts. In Study 4, the underlying mechanism of perceived reviewer credibility is tested, while alternative mediators of review diagnosticity, self-reviewer similarity, and ease of comprehending the reviews are ruled out. Finally, we discuss the contributions of our findings.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Fig. 1 depicts the research model described in this section.

### 2.1. Visual elements of website design

Website design has been well documented as important to the success of commercial websites [38–40]. Previous research has found that website content [41] and the features associated with the content, such as ease of access [41], are central for website design. In addition, visual elements irrelevant to website content might have an impact on consumer behaviors. For example, visual complexity and order enhance users' positive emotional reactions toward a website and facilitate desirable psychological states and behaviors [42]. For another example, visual aesthetics and appeal facilitate enjoyment, evaluation, and loyalty to an Internet interface [43–45]. These studies provide evidence that consumers consider the visual features of a website and are likely

to be influenced by them.

Online retailers share with researchers the idea that visual features of a website are important. As one determinant of visual features, fonts are carefully chosen by online stores. Their impact beyond aesthetic pleasure, however, has rarely been discussed. In the current research, we focus on whether and how fonts alter the impact of customer reviews. We propose that the font of customer reviews may affect the impact of these reviews.

### 2.2. The effect of processing fluency

The impact of information depends not only on its content but also on the metacognitive experience of processing [32]. Processing fluency, or the subjective experience of ease, is one such metacognitive experience. It may derive from incidental sources, such as perceived ease or difficulty of reading information presented in certain fonts, and then be misattributed to aspects of a product or a brand, affecting perception and judgment [45,46]. For example, performing a novel behavior seems more difficult if the instructions are written in a difficult-to-read (vs. easy-to-read) font [47], and perceived choice difficulty increases when options are presented in a difficult-to-read (vs. easy-to-read) font [46,48].

Interpretation of processing fluency depends strongly on context; to inform their judgment, people utilize their naïve theories about how their fluent processing experience relates to aspects of stimuli or to properties of their own knowledge [49]. Because it should be easy to make a categorization when an exemplar represents a category well, people tend to judge an exemplar to be a worse category member if it is presented in a smaller typeface, and thus, the experience of processing is less fluent [50]. Because textbooks contain profound concepts and knowledge and are difficult to read, disfluent content is judged to be of higher quality when it is thought to come from a source that focuses on conveying information [51]. Similarly, experienced fluency increases people's perception of liking [52], intelligence of the text writer [53], confidence [54], and moral correctness of moral violations [55] but decreases the perceived importance of decisions [56] and the specialty of a product [57].

The present research proposes that processing fluency (ease of processing) strengthens the impact of customer reviews because it increases reviewer credibility. Information credibility refers to the believability of information and/or its source [58]. While these two aspects intertwine and function concurrently, the believability is heavily influenced by its source credibility [59]. As customer reviews describe subjective experiences rather than knowledge or facts, the incredibility of a review is most likely to originate from its source. Moreover, fake reviews of ostensible consumers on online review platforms also gain more attention [60], which makes the source credibility more salient in people's mind. Therefore, we focus on source credibility. Previous research has well documented that source credibility increases consumers' information adoption [35,61–63]. If processing fluency increases perceived reviewer credibility, it should strengthen the impact of customer reviews.

Easy-to-process material is usually perceived as more familiar [49,64–66] because people hold a naïve (and usually correct) theory that familiar material is easier to process than unfamiliar material [33]. Hence, fluently processed stimuli seem more familiar than disfluently processed stimuli, even when the fluency experience is due solely to incidental factors, such as visual features of the material (e.g., [67]). Therefore, reviewers in fluent reviews might be judged as credible because they seem familiar, and it is relatively easy to trust those with whom we are more familiar [68–70].

At the same time, although there is lack of direct evidence that fluency increases perceived source credibility, previous research has provided support for the fluency-truth association. For example, people are more likely to judge repeated statements as true. They do so because they hold the theory that well-accepted and accurate statements are

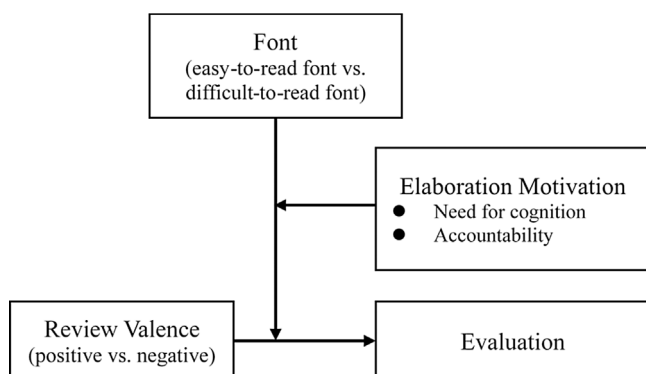


Fig. 1. Research model.

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