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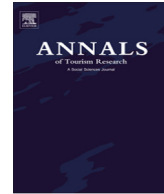
What makes an online consumer review trustworthy?

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Online consumer reviews (OCRs) are increasingly used by consumers to make informed decisions about tourism-related products. However, there is an increase in concern about the level of trustworthiness of OCRs. As yet, little is known about how consumers assess trustworthiness and untrustworthiness of OCRs. This study aims to fill this gap by using a grounded theory approach based on 38 interviews with users of OCRs. Results show that consumers primarily use cues related to the *message content and style* and *review extremity* and *valence* to assess trustworthiness. Findings indicate that moderating variables such as consumer involvement and experience as well as the type of website affects the way consumers assess trustworthiness. Reviews perceived as untrustworthy are discounted by consumers.

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Introduction

Online consumer reviews (OCRs) are becoming increasingly popular among travel consumers worldwide who read them to make informed decisions about products and services (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Websites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, Open Rice have changed the way consumers decide where to go, what to see and do on holiday, where to eat, and so on.

Research in tourism has established that OCRs influence consumers' decisions (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011), consumer awareness and attitudes towards hotels (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), and product sales (e.g. Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009).

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The topic of trustworthiness of online reviews has acquired particular relevance in the last years considering that the mass media all over the world frequently document scandals in the online reviews industry, especially in the tourism sector, revealing the practice of some managers of posting promotional reviews about their business and offering discounts or freebies to consumers in exchange for glowing reviews (Smith, 2013).

It has been suggested that the rise of promotional reviews requires an in-depth investigation of consumer perceptions of trustworthy and untrustworthy content in online reviews from an academic perspective (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). However, most of the existing studies in electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) adopt quantitative methods and focus on source credibility and how it affects consumer decisions (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009; Park, Xiang, Josiam, & Kim, 2014; Xie, Miao, Kuo, & Lee, 2011).

Thus, there is a dearth of studies that use qualitative methods to inductively explore consumer information processing of online reviews (Cox et al., 2009; Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2013; Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011) and even fewer studies have attempted to investigate how consumers assess credibility, trustworthiness and deception in e-WOM (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). The present study aims to fill this gap and to answer the following research question: What makes OCRs trustworthy *vs.* untrustworthy in e-WOM communications?

In order to acquire an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and to inductively develop an empirically grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this study adopts a qualitative method of investigation based on interviews with users of consumer review websites.

The findings of this study are expected to have several theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical point of view, this study contributes to understanding travellers' information processing of OCRs as well as to knowledge on consumer perception of trustworthy and untrustworthy reviews. By doing so, the study advances credibility theory in online settings. This research has practical implications for managers of accommodation and restaurants, for consumer review websites, and potentially for companies that develop software to detect fraud in OCRs.

Literature review

e-WOM

e-WOM refers to 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former consumers 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). Consumer reviews and ratings are the most accessible and prevalent form of e-WOM (Chatterjee, 2001). OCRs are one-way asynchronous communications between one reviewer and many readers (one-to-many communication) (Litvin et al., 2008). OCRs can be defined as any positive, negative or neutral comment, rating, ranking of a product, a service, a brand, or a person supposedly made by a former customer and that is shared with other consumers in an unstructured format such as a blog post or in a more structured format such as consumer reviews published on an independent consumer review website (e.g. TripAdvisor.com), third-party e-commerce website (e.g. Booking.com), or corporate website (e.g. Thomson.co.uk).

Tourism scholars have dedicated much attention to travel-related reviews, for example showing the influence that they have on hotel sales (e.g. Ye et al., 2009), on how they affect consumer awareness and attitude towards hotels (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), and consumer purchasing intentions (Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Researchers have also investigated the antecedents of perceived review helpfulness (Park & Nicolau, 2015), of perceived website trust (Filieri et al., 2015), and the use and importance of OCRs at different stages of the trip planning process (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). Although these studies prove that consumer travel reviews have an impact on consumer behavior there is currently little research on how consumers assess trustworthiness and deception in OCRs (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014; Cox et al., 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009).

Trustworthiness is a component of the credibility construct and is defined as "a trustor's expectations about the motives and behavior of a trustee" (Doney & Cannon, 1997, p. 21). A trustworthy review can be defined as a review that is perceived by the reader as the honest, sincere, truthful,