



# The role of emotions and conflicting online reviews on consumers' purchase intentions



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on dual-process theories, this paper explains how the systematic and heuristic information processing of online reviews with conflicting information can influence consumers' purchase decision making. The study adopts major assumptions of complexity and configuration theory in employing fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis on 680 TripAdvisor users to test the complex interrelationships between emotions and the systematic and heuristic cues used in processing reviews. The results show that the systematic and heuristic processing of online reviews can produce independent impacts on consumer decision making. Both processing routes can interact with each other to affect the domination of one route over the other. In the case of a positive-negative sequence, consumers mainly follow a heuristic processing route. In the reverse sequence, consumers' concerns about the credibility of the reviews leads them to think more deeply (systematic processing) and actively evaluate both the argumentation quality and the helpfulness of the online reviews.

## 1. Introduction

The development of travel review websites has radically changed the hospitality industry. Such platforms are a valuable source of information for consumers and, as a result, are a growing driver of decision making in booking hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. As a major form of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which refers to “any statement made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product, service, or company, which is available to a multitude of people and institutions via Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), online reviews are peer-generated evaluations posted on third-party websites (e.g., TripAdvisor). Thus, online reviews fall under the eWOM category of asynchronous, “one-to-many” communications (Bronner & De Hoog, 2011) and constitute one of the most important and influential forms of eWOM because they can directly and significantly explain consumers' online behavior (Banerjee & Chua, 2016). Given the increasing competition in the hospitality industry, the investigation of how consumer-generated reviews affect the consumption decision of tourism services is important.

Dual-process theories provide comprehensive information on how individuals process information, establish their validity assessments, and later form decision outcomes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). These theories posit that consumers process information using two routes: central/systematic processing (i.e., analysis of all relevant pieces of

information) and peripheral/heuristic processing (i.e., decision making by assessing whatever information is available). Dual-process theories recognize consumer information processing and persuasion as a complex combination of systematic and heuristic processing (Petty & Brinol, 2008). The co-occurrence of the two information-processing modes means that the two types of processing can occur simultaneously and affect each other (bias effect). Despite the bias effect having received considerable support in psychological literature, scant online review literature has examined it (Zhang, Zhao, Cheung, & Lee, 2014).

While practitioners recognize emotions as being critical to the success of the tourist experience, and researchers agree on the importance of relationships among emotion-related variables, consumer information processing, and behavioral intentions, findings are inconclusive about the interplay between emotions and cognition (Bigné, Andreu, & Gnoth, 2005; Pappas, Kourouthanassis, Giannakos, & Chrissikopoulos, 2016; Petty & Brinol, 2008). This is because, despite the undoubtedly complex and idiosyncratic nature of the phenomenon, researchers mostly investigate it using regression techniques, which fail to examine the combined effects of cognitive and affective perceptions on the intention to purchase (Pappas et al., 2016). This knowledge gap motivated the current research, whose conceptual contribution involves the identification and modeling of the interrelationships of emotions with cognitive information cues and behavioral intentions.

Drawing on dual-processing theories, this research adopts the major

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assumptions of complexity and configuration theories to shed new light on the roles of different systematic and heuristic informational cues of online reviews in consumers' decision making. The study employs the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to model the complex causal relationships and detect common patterns between emotions and systematic and heuristic information cues that can lead to high scores for customer purchase intentions. By successfully combining the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative research, the method has increasingly become a significant methodological tool for the analysis of various business topics (e.g., Chatzipanagiotou, Veloutsou, & Christodoulides, 2016; Fiss, 2011; Gounaris, Chatzipanagiotou, Boukis, & Perks, 2016; Ordanini, Parasuraman, & Rubera, 2014; Woodside, 2014).

The study contributes significantly to the knowledge on online reviews and eWOM in three ways. First, it aims to identify the key configurations of systematic and heuristic information cues for understanding the influence of online reviews in purchase decisions. Second, the study empirically examines whether additive or attenuation effects exist when consumers process online reviews by switching between the two processing routes. Third, to the best of our knowledge, this study is among the first to expand knowledge on how information cues interact with the sequence of the nature of online reviews (i.e., the order of positive and negative online reviews) to influence consumers' purchase intentions.

The study proceeds as follows: we first present the theoretical background, after which we develop the conceptual framework and research propositions to explain how consumers process online reviews. Then, we empirically test the model through an fsQCA of 680 TripAdvisor users. Finally, we discuss the findings, limitations, and opportunities for future research, summarizing the implications for both researchers and practitioners.

## 2. Literature review

In the dual-process literature, the two prevalent models are the elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model (HSM; Chaiken, 1980). The two models provide similar mechanisms to explain individuals' information-processing strategies. For example, the *central route* in the ELM and the *systematic processing* in the HSM indicate that individuals exert high cognitive effort to elaborate information. By contrast, the *peripheral route* in the ELM and the *heuristic processing* in the HSM suggest that individuals adopt heuristic and simple decision rules to quickly form judgments. Both models can be applied to online reviews, though the HSM is still under-researched.

The HSM (Chaiken, 1980) is a widely recognized communication model that attempts to explain how people receive and process persuasive messages. Under the HSM are two models of information processing: systematic processing and heuristic processing. During systematic processing, a message recipient examines all the pieces of information carefully for their relevance and importance to the task before making a final decision. In heuristic processing, the message recipient uses a few informational cues, such as simple decision rules, to reach a conclusion by assessing available information. For example, the “source credibility” cue may trigger the “credibility implies correctness” rule, leading the recipient to favorably assess the validity of a message received from a more credible source.

The HSM does not treat dual processes as a case of a straightforward tradeoff (as the ELM does) but suggests that they can occur concurrently and affect each other in complex ways (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Their interaction can be explained through the following three effects: (1) the additivity effect, which produces independent effects on consumers' decision making; (2) the attenuation effect, which explains how the systematic mode of persuasion can attenuate the heuristic mode; and (3) the bias effect, which means that heuristic processing can bias systematic processing by affecting individuals' expectations of or

inferences about the validity of arguments (Zhang et al., 2014). Drawing on the HSM, this study investigates how different systematic and heuristic informational cues of online reviews interact with and influence consumers' purchase decision making.

### 2.1. Systematic processing route: Cognitive processing

Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 35) define argument quality as “the strength or plausibility of persuasive argumentation.” Argument quality refers to the perception of strong and convincing arguments rather than weak and implausible ones. When applying the dual-process theory of human information processing in the online review context, researchers tend to consider the quality of reviews (argument quality) to explain central processing (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Previous research on online reviews analyzes argument quality as a composite construct, thus failing to discern the importance of different argument quality dimensions on consumers' information processing (Zhang et al., 2014). We focus on the behavioral outcomes of argument quality using two dimensions—*informativeness* and *persuasiveness*.

*Informativeness* refers to consumers' overall perception of whether the online review provides complete, consistent, accurate, or adequate information (Sussman & Siegal, 2003), while *persuasiveness* represents consumers' perceptions of the degree of relevance embedded in online reviews (Zhang, 1996). High-quality online consumer reviews are persuasive because the information is relevant for evaluating the product and contains understandable, reliable, and sufficient reasoning. High-quality, informative arguments contribute to favorable decision outcomes (Cheung, Sia, & Kuan, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, in the context of online review websites, a consumer is more likely to visit a particular restaurant, for example, if he or she finds the reviews about it highly informative and relevant.

In addition, the perceived helpfulness of a review captures the extent to which potential consumers perceive a peer-generated evaluation as useful and valuable in their decision process to choose a product/service (Yin, Bond, & Zhang, 2014). Therefore, helpfulness can be understood as a measure of information diagnosticity. We argue that the perceived helpfulness interacts with argument quality. As messages with high argument quality provide more complete information, a message with stronger arguments should positively influence the way people perceive the usefulness of information (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Perceived helpfulness can be a cognitive cue because consumers need to read a review carefully to assess whether it is useful for their decision making. According to the technology acceptance model, perceived usefulness is a fundamental predictor of user adoption (Davis, 1989). In line with that model, we posit that consumers who find information in an online review helpful will have higher purchase intentions.

### 2.2. Heuristic processing route: Affective processing

Online review credibility involves consumers perceiving the online recommendation as believable, true, or factual as a whole (Nabi & Hendriks, 2003). In this research, the subject of the credibility assessment refers to the online recommendation or review, and not trusting beliefs about a person or an organization. Findings from the literature on the impact of credibility of online information on sales are inconclusive. Some researchers claim that the fact that online information is posted by experienced travelers makes it more credible than information from traditional media (e.g., Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016). Conversely, other studies posit that the online information can be posted by any individual without any editing or fact-checking processes and, therefore, is less credible than other types of information sources (e.g., Magnini, 2011). The current work supports previous research on online reviews regarding the influence of review credibility on consumer purchase intentions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

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