



Examining the moderating effect of inconsistent reviews and its gender differences on consumers' online shopping decision



Kem Z.K. Zhang^{a,*}, Christy M.K. Cheung^b, Matthew K.O. Lee^c

^a School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei, China

^b Department of Finance and Decision Sciences, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, China

^c Department of Information Systems, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Keywords:

Online consumer review
Electronic word-of-mouth
Trust
Gender difference
Social media

ABSTRACT

The prevalence of social media has provided consumers with many opportunities to post online reviews on a wide range of products on the Internet. In this study, we attempt to investigate the moderating effect of inconsistent reviews (i.e., a mix of positive and negative reviews) on consumers' purchase decision. We further examine whether the effect will differ from female to male consumers.

We explain the moderating effect and its gender differences based on the theory of reasoned action, trust literature, and information processing literature. The research hypotheses are empirically tested in a laboratory experiment using structural equation modeling approach. Our findings show that consumers' cognitive trust to online retailers affects emotional trust, which further leads to purchase intention. When consumers are exposed to inconsistent reviews, the influence of emotional trust on purchase intention is significantly stronger. Moreover, the moderating effect of inconsistent reviews is stronger for female consumers than for male consumers. We expect that this study can enrich the understanding of how inconsistent reviews play a role in consumers' online shopping decision. Online retailers may apply our findings and leverage the influence of online consumer reviews in social media. Implications for both researchers and practitioners are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The prevalence of social media, including online discussion forums, blogs, social networking sites, microblogs, and online review sites has greatly facilitated consumers to publish and share their reviews on products, services, or retailers based on their prior purchase experience (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Online reviews, also known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), can be an important form of information that affects consumers' purchase decision. Recent industrial survey reports show that 90% of online shoppers read online reviews, while 83% believe that these reviews affect their purchase behavior (ChannelAdvisor, 2011). Ipsos Global pointed out that 78% of online users are influenced by online reviews in their purchase decision-making process (eMarketer, 2013).

The influence of online reviews has received empirical support from a growing number of studies in the information systems (IS) literature (e.g., Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009; Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Khammash & Griffiths, 2011; Qiu, Pang, & Lim,

2012). Among these studies, negative reviews are often viewed to posit a stronger effect on consumer behavior than positive ones (Park & Lee, 2009). The disproportional power of negative reviews may be attributed to the fact that they are more diagnostic and informative (Lee, Park, & Han, 2008). This is consistent with the impression formation literature, where people are found to place more emphasis on negative than positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Prior research has shown that the effect of negative reviews may be complicated. In Chatterjee's (2001) work, she pointed out that negative reviews have less effects if consumers patronize a familiar online retailer. Chiou and Cheng (2003) found that negative reviews are more likely to hurt brands with low image than high image. Sen and Lerman (2007) indicated that consumers tend to find negative reviews of hedonic products less useful than utilitarian products. A recent study from Berger, Sorensen, and Rasmussen (2010), however, pointed out negative reviews may produce positive effects. They found that these reviews may help companies improve product awareness and then increase consumers' purchase likelihood.

While a majority of prior studies tend to focus on the harmful effects of negative reviews (e.g., Park & Lee, 2009; Sen & Lerman, 2007; Verhagen, Nauta, & Feldberg, 2013), this study follows Berger et al.'s (2010) research and highlights the beneficial effect of negative reviews. In specific, we examine the influence of negative

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 551 63600195.

E-mail addresses: zzkkem@ustc.edu.cn (K.Z.K. Zhang), ccheung@hkbu.edu.hk (C.M.K. Cheung), ismatlee@cityu.edu.hk (M.K.O. Lee).

reviews along with the coexistence of positive ones. We refer to a mix of positive and negative reviews as inconsistent reviews. In reality, consumers are often exposed to inconsistent reviews in online environments (Tsang & Prendergast, 2009). For instance, a consumer may find one review stating that an online retailer is very helpful in answering consumers' questions (positive review), meanwhile s/he may also find another review pointing out that the retailer seems busy all the time and does not provide assistance in answering questions (negative review). To understand how consumers make decision in this circumstance, it will be important for online retailers to investigate the influence of inconsistent reviews. If online retailers simply think that negative reviews have opposite and stronger effects than positive ones, then they are likely to infer the effect of inconsistent reviews from an additive effects of both positive and negative ones. In this respect, negative information in inconsistent reviews may be overemphasized. The primary response strategy for online retailers may be to control such information and avoid any negative effects from it (Chiou & Cheng, 2003; Lee et al., 2008). However, it may not be easy or harmless to manipulate negative reviews in social media, even in retailer-hosted discussion forums. Consumers are savvy, and manipulating online reviews in aggressive roles may hamper the effect of reviews and the credibility of online retailers (Godes et al., 2005).

In this study, we provide an alternative perspective for online retailers. Drawing upon the theoretical insights from the information processing literature, we argue for the *positive moderating effect* of inconsistent reviews on consumers' online purchase behavior. We examine whether this moderating effect exists on the attitude–intention link in the online shopping context. We also consider whether the moderating effect may differ for female and male consumers. Gender differences have been shown to occur in the electronic commerce (e-commerce) context (e.g., Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004; Rodgers & Harris, 2003; Yeh, Hsiao, & Yang, 2012). However, how gender may interact with the influence of online reviews is little investigated in the extant literature. An exception from Awad and Ragowsky (2008) suggested that the effect of review quality on trust is stronger for males than females, whereas the influence of trust on intention to shop online is stronger for females than males. Thus, it will be theoretically interesting and useful to advance research on inconsistent reviews by considering the role of gender. In summary, we ask two research questions in this study:

- (1) How do inconsistent reviews moderate consumers' online shopping decision?
- (2) Whether the moderating effect of inconsistent reviews will differ for female and male consumers?

To approach the two research questions, we investigate the moderating effect of inconsistent reviews and its gender differences in the trust-based acceptance model developed by Komiak and Benbasat (2006). This model is employed to delineate the belief–attitude–intention process of consumers' online shopping decision. The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we present the theoretical background of this research. We then develop and empirically test our research model using a laboratory experiment. Finally, we discuss the findings and conclude this study with discussions of theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future studies.

2. Theoretical background

In this section, we introduce the trust-based acceptance model to demonstrate consumers' behavioral decision. We further derive two theoretical perspectives from the information processing literature, including the heuristic–systematic model and selectivity

hypothesis, for explicating the moderating effect of inconsistent reviews and its gender differences.

2.1. Trust-based acceptance model

Komiak and Benbasat's (2006) trust-based acceptance model is built upon the theory of reasoned action. This theory has been widely used in e-commerce studies (e.g., Hansen, Jensen, & Solgaard, 2004; Hoehle, Scornavacca, & Huff, 2012; Komiak & Benbasat, 2006). It suggests that individuals' behavior is predicted by their behavioral intention (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The theory further delineates the causal relationships among individuals' behavioral intention, attitude, beliefs, and subjective norms. Behavioral intention captures an individual's likelihood of performing a behavior. Attitude pertains to the affective evaluation of whether performing this behavior is favorable or not. Beliefs are defined as the cognitive assessments or perceived consequences of this behavior. Subjective norms refer to the pressure from "important" others who believe the individual should perform this behavior. According to the theory of reasoned action, individuals' behavioral intention is primarily determined by attitude and subjective norms; while attitude is further a function of beliefs about the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

Extant research shows that online trust is a key driver for the success of e-commerce (e.g., Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2011; Cheung & Lee, 2006; Hong & Cho, 2011). It is critical for online retailers to build consumer trust (Kim & Park, 2013). Given the importance of trust, Komiak and Benbasat (2006) proposed the trust-based acceptance model to understand the adoption of online recommendation agents. They examined two types of trust in the model: cognitive trust and emotional trust. *Cognitive trust* is conceptualized as trusting *beliefs*. It highlights trustors' beliefs from rational expectations of trustees' attributes that can be relied on. Meanwhile, *emotional trust*, also viewed as *affective trust*, is a form of trusting *attitude*. It refers to trustors' attitude and emotional feelings, such as feeling secure or comfortable, about relying on trustees. Emotional trust is different from cognitive trust (Komiak & Benbasat, 2004). It captures consumers' affective evaluation of performing trusting behavior (Sun, 2010). In online environments, consumers often affectively evaluate trusting behavior. A high level of emotional trust suggests that consumers have favorable feelings toward performing the behavior. Ignoring the emotional dimension may hamper the understanding of consumers' behavioral decision (Komiak & Benbasat, 2006).

The trust-based acceptance model highlights that cognitive trust affects emotional trust, which further leads to individuals' adoption intention. Although the theory of reasoned action indicates that subjective norms affect individuals' behavioral intention, the influence of this factor is not considered in the trust-based acceptance model. This is because that consumers' adoption behavior is often voluntary in the context of recommendation agent and online shopping (Komiak & Benbasat, 2006), and subjective norms may be more important for a behavior in mandatory rather than voluntary settings (Miller & Hartwick, 2002). In summary, this trust-based acceptance model depicts a process of belief–attitude–intention (i.e., cognitive trust → emotional trust → behavioral intention) for understanding consumers' adoption behavior.

2.2. Heuristic–systematic model and selectivity hypothesis

In the information processing literature, the *heuristic–systematic model* suggests that two strategies are available for individuals when they need to process information (Chaiken, 1980). The first strategy is heuristic processing. It refers that "people consider a few informational cues—or even a single informational cue—and

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