

Chapter XX

Reviewer Motivations, Bias, and Credibility in Online Reviews

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ABSTRACT

In the emerging CMC genre of online reviews, lay people, as opposed to professional writers, evaluate products and services, and they receive no pay for their time or effort. This chapter examines possible motivations for writing reviews, particularly efficacy and altruism. In addition, this chapter examines a sample of 640 online reviews to see whether a positive bias existed; indeed, over 48 percent of reviews bestowed the highest rating—5 stars. Finally, the chapter investigates how reviews manifest reviewers' concern for establishing credibility by examining four reviews' varying degrees of careful editing: use of low-frequency vocabulary, planned content, prescription-adhering grammar, correct punctuation, and correct spelling. Detailed analysis of the four online reviews—reviews of a recipe, a camcorder, a tour guide service, and a book—according to the extent to which they displayed careful editing, revealed that the reviews displayed spelling and punctuation errors. However, two of the four reviews showed careful

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a particular variety of computer-mediated communication (CMC): the “online review.” Such an analysis becomes more important as consumers more frequently write and post their evaluations of products and services on Web sites like Epinions.com and specialized sites like Allrecipes.com. Indeed, the ubiquity of online reviews written by laypeople, as opposed to professional review writers, generated this

headline in the satirical newspaper The Onion: “Majority of Human Discourse Now Occurring in Online Product Reviews” (2003). Certainly, online reviews constitute an emerging variety of CMC that is worth analysis.

One question that arises in relation to online reviews' increased availability and frequency is this: why do consumers look to online reviews for advice? After all, in most cases, consumers—the readers of the online reviews—do not know the reviewers of the products and services.

Yet, as Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) point out, online reviews “have become an important source of information to consumers, substituting and complementing other forms of business-to-consumer and offline word-of-mouth communication about product quality” (p. 345). That is, as is the case in word-of-mouth communication, online reviews help consumers reduce perceived risk, that is, their perceptions of uncertainty and adverse consequences of engaging in an activity,” such as making a purchase (Wang 2005, p. 111).

Previous research suggests that if a product or service is new, such as a new electronic gadget, or must be sensed or experienced to be appreciated, such as a tour guide service, consumers will look more often for the evaluations of others, particularly evaluations that seem credible (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 134). In fact, one study found that over a third of Americans ask friends for advice when making a decision about which movie to see (Walker, 1995). This finding clearly shows consumers value the opinions of other lay people, particularly as the perceived risk of selecting a product or service increases. Consumers even use reviews to reduce the effort of making choices about products that are essentially free, such as the recipes listed in recipe Web sites like Allrecipes.com, but they particularly try to minimize the effort of making a choice when making decisions about risky products and services, such as lawnmowers or veterinary services.

In online reviews, reviewers evaluate a broad spectrum of products and services like PlayStation 3 video game systems and TaylorMade golf clubs, as well as services like child care or dance lessons. Online reviewers also evaluate literary and artistic creations like books or movies. In the example below, taken from the site Epinions.com, nokia721032, one pseudonymed reviewer out of thousands, evaluates a Microtek film scanner:

I was looking for a dedicated slide scanner to replace a mid range model scanner that I was using before and was glad to find this one af-

fordably priced. It has calibration software that lets me calibrate my monitor, scanner and printer using the same color scheme which is very helpful when you need the color to be as close to perfect as possible. Some of my clients are very picky and since I have started using the 4000t I have not had any complaints with regards to the work. I would highly recommend this scanner to anyone out there looking for dedicated slide use.

Reviews like nokia721032’s raise interesting questions. First, knowing that reviewers are not compensated by the producers and providers whose goods and services they evaluate, what motivates reviewers to write online reviews?

Second, to what extent are online reviews positive, like nokia721032’s review of the film scanner? Research suggests that reviews manifest a positive bias, called the positivity effect. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) write that “a consumer chooses to read a book or watch a movie only if he or she believes that there is a high probability of enjoying the experience” (p. 345). This study examines a sample of 320 online reviews of recipes from the site Allrecipes.com to determine whether the online reviews of this popular site display positive bias. This analysis is interesting in that recipes are in general low risk products: consumers who use these online reviews do not need to trust in them as much as they do reviews of riskier products. This chapter also examines 320 online reviews of riskier products, such as laptop computers and DVD players, from the reviews site Epinions.com.

Third, to what extent do the reviewers use language that appears designed to build and maintain readers’ trust? In other words, to what extent do reviewers try to construct credibility, the “characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message” (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41)? After all, reviewers will have little effect on the world or little influence on readers if their evaluations are not perceived to be credible. Indeed, studies of third-party testimonials have shown that

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