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Why should I believe this? Deciphering the qualities of a credible online customer review

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Why should I believe this? Deciphering the qualities of a credible online customer review

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Online customer reviews have been shown to have a powerful impact on the sales of a given product or service. However, the qualities of a ‘credible’ online customer review are still subject to debate. Existing research has highlighted the potential influence of a range of factors on the credibility of an online customer review, but relies heavily on quantitative methods and a ‘top down’ approach. In turn, this can reduce our understanding of the influence of these factors into merely discerning whether one pre-determined factor is more influential than another is. This paper adopted a ‘bottom up’ thematic analysis of individual qualitative interviews with a purposeful sample of consumers who regularly utilised online customer reviews. By undertaking a different approach to previous research, this study was able to complement existing quantitative findings with the additional depth and understanding that qualitative research can provide.

Keywords: online customer reviews, electronic word-of-mouth, consumer behaviour, qualitative research

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the term word-of-mouth (WOM), when used within a marketing context, referred to the direct communication from person to person regarding an opinion of a product and/or service. There have been many definitions of this concept quoted from within academic marketing literature. These definitions tend to focus on the mode of communication (often verbal), flow of information (from person to person), the independence of the sender and the offline context (Arndt 1967, Merton 1968, Stern 1994, Brown, Broderick et al. 2007, Jansen, Zhang et al. 2009). Definitions of electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) can be differentiated from their traditional counterparts by their emphasis on the online context that facilitates the exchange of information regarding the usage and characteristics of goods and services (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner et al. 2004, Litvin, Goldsmith et al. 2008).

One particular communication type which falls under the EWOM 'umbrella' is the online customer review. This is an area that has been researched heavily, and considered of the utmost importance to organisations that sell to consumers, with research clearly demonstrating the impact this source of information can have on the sales of the product or service they are associated with (see section 2.1). However, in an era when consumers have to contend with issues such as fake reviews (both good and bad) and a situation whereby a consumer can post a negative review of a product or service regardless of whether the fault came from them or the product/service provider, an important question that needs to be addressed by any organisation who allow users to post reviews is 'what are the key factors that influence consumers when it comes to evaluating whether or not the information and opinions conveyed in an individual online customer review are seen as credible, or 'believable?'

An important limitation to note regarding the extant EWOM literature, including the literature addressing the credibility of an online customer review, is its heavy reliance on quantitative research methods, a limitation which has already been noted within recently published literature reviews (Cheung and Thadani 2010, Chan and Ngai 2011). Research on the topic of review credibility often takes a 'top down' approach, by pre-selecting a range of potential influences from within the existing literature and testing the extent to which they affect the credibility of an online customer review. Relying

solely on such an approach can reduce our understanding of the issue to merely discerning whether one pre-determined factor is more influential than another when determining the credibility of an online customer review. As quoted in previous qualitative marketing studies, a lack of qualitative depth of understanding can lead to an insufficient understanding of a lived experience, with qualitative based studies allowing for a more refined understanding of behaviour (MacIver et al, 2012), which in this case is the experience of evaluating the credibility of an online customer review. The objective of this study intends to address this particular limitation of the extant literature base by adopting a qualitative approach, using consumer testimonies about their experiences with online customer reviews as the primary unit of analysis.

2.0 REVIEW OF KEY LITERATURE

The term ‘EWOM’ is frequently used as an umbrella term to encompass many different types of online communications, each with different characteristics, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of EWOM				
SCOPE OF COMMUNICATION				
		One-to-one	One-to-many	Many-to-many
LEVEL OF INTERACTIVITY	Asynchronous	○ Emails	○ Websites ○ Blogs ○ Online customer reviews ○ Hate sites	○ Virtual communities
	Synchronous	○ Video calling ○ Instant messaging	○ Chat rooms	○ Newsgroups
Source: Litvin et al (2008)				

The EWOM literature base has previously been categorised according to an input-process-output model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. EWOM IPO Model

INPUT: Posting or reading EWOM	PROCESS: Processing EWOM	OUTPUT: Outcome after processing EWOM
Writer's motivations Social tie Opinion leader Information giving Credibility Experience/expertise/ involvement	EWOM Platform EWOM System EWOM Interface/site design EWOM Message characteristics Valence Volume Content/quality Usefulness Credibility Accuracy	Purchase decision/product sales Customer behaviour/attitude Customer loyalty Product judgement acceptance/adoption Reduced Risk Marketing implications EWOM Metric
Reader's motivations Social tie Opinion seeker Information need Prior knowledge/experience/ involvement Cost/risk/uncertainty of buying	EWOM Information interpretation/processing	
Marketer's motivations		

Source: Chan and Ngai (2011)

This paper relates closely to the ‘process’ segment of this model, in particular the area of EWOM message characteristics, focusing specifically on online customer reviews.

A commonly accepted definition within the literature for the term electronic word-of-mouth is “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers which is made available to a multitude of people or institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner et al. 2004, p. 39). As illustrated in Table 1, the online customer review is just one form of EWOM, defined as “peer generated product evaluations posted on company or third party websites” (Mudambi and Schuff 2010, p. 186).

2.1 Impact of online customer reviews on sales

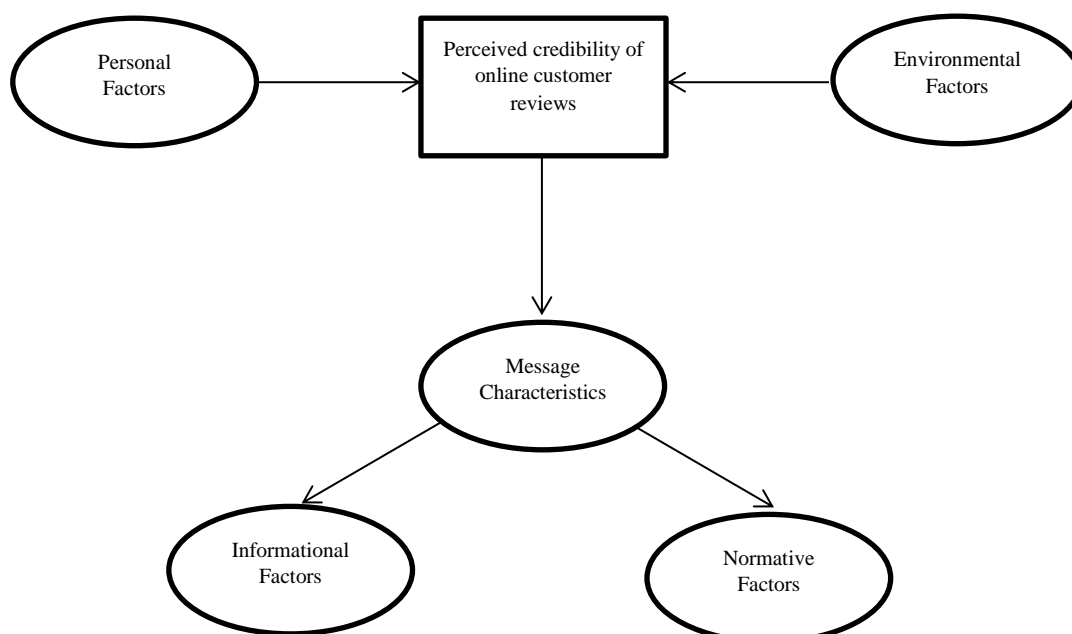
It has been consistently demonstrated that consumers tend to consult online customer reviews on a regular basis to assist with purchasing decisions (Pillier 1999, Bailey 2005, Walsh 2007, White 2007, McEleny 2008) and that consumers view word-of-mouth communications as a more credible source of information than information provided by marketing sources (Bickhart and Schindler 2001, Hogan, Lemon et al. 2004). Research has also consistently demonstrated the powerful influence of online customer reviews on a variety of outcomes. A range of studies have been conducted which found that positive online customer reviews can increase the sales of the product or service which they have been attributed with (Senecal and Nantel 2004, Sorensen and Rasmussen 2004, Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006, Clemons 2008, Davis and Khazanchi 2008, Gauri, Bhatnagar et al. 2008, Ye, Law et al. 2009) as well as the reputation of the brand of the product reviewed (Amblee and Bui 2008, Lee, Rodgers et al. 2009). Whilst some studies demonstrate the detrimental impact of negative online customer reviews on product sales (Clemons and Gao 2008, Lee, Park et al. 2008, Ye, Law et al. 2009), others have highlighted the benefits of having some negative reviews as having a positive impact upon the perceived credibility of

a message-set and on raising product awareness (Dargan 2008, Doh and Hwang 2009, Vermeulen and Seegers 2009). However, this does not detract from the consensus that all of these studies collectively demonstrate how online customer reviews, both positive and negative, can influence consumers’ perceptions of a brand and the sales of the product or service to which they correspond.

2.2 Categorising the factors influencing the effectiveness of online customer reviews

There are two key concepts that are important in the context of this study are defined within the literature, those of ‘review helpfulness’ and ‘review credibility.’ Review helpfulness is defined as a peer generated product review that facilitates the consumers purchase decision process (Mudambi and Schuff 2010, p.186), with ‘review credibility’ being defined as the extent to which one perceives a review to be believable, true or factual (Cheung, Chuan et al. 2009, p. 12). The existing EWOM literature highlights a wide range of factors that can potentially influence how consumers evaluate the credibility online customer reviews. Whilst a singular model categorising these influences does not currently exist within the literature, it is possible to extract several categories from a range of studies. Figure 2 demonstrates these categories.

Figure 2. Factors influencing the perceived credibility of online customer reviews



Sources: Sweeney et al, 2008, Cheung et al, 2008

The personal and environmental factors are underpinned by the categories of attribution theory (Heider 1958, Eagly, Woods et al. 1978). In the context of evaluating the credibility of an online customer review, personal factors would constitute those directly related to the receiver. Studies which analyse the factors influencing consumers to consult online customer reviews demonstrates the impact of a range of personal factors, in particular risk reduction (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003, Bailey 2005, Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006). Research has also been conducted within an EWOM context on the influence of involvement. Defined as the perceived personal relevance of a product based on the individual's needs, interests and values (Park, Jumin et al. 2007), existing studies demonstrate how involvement works as a moderating factor which influences the impact of other factors on review credibility. Park et al's study (2007) demonstrated how low involvement consumers were more influenced by the number of reviews whereas high involvement consumers were more influenced by review quality. Park and Kim (2008) more specifically analysed the moderating influence of product knowledge, and found that attribute centric reviews were found more helpful by experts, with novices finding benefit centric reviews more helpful.

Environmental factors, otherwise referred to as situational factors by some studies, are those which do not relate to the sender, receiver or the message (Sweeney, Soutar et al. 2008). The role of situational factors on influencing the effectiveness of traditional WOM has long been acknowledged by both established studies and more recent studies within the field (Bloch, Sherell et al. 1986, Mazzarol, Sweeney et al. 2007, Sweeney, Soutar et al. 2008) with research demonstrating how a variety of situational factors could potentially influence the impact of an online customer review, such as product type and price (Huang, Lurie et al. 2009, Park and Lee 2009, Mudambi and Schuff 2010). However, research that tests the impact of situational factors within a EWOM environment is still limited.

2.3 Factors influencing review credibility

Research to date which specifically focuses on the factors influencing review credibility focuses heavily on measuring the impact of informational and normative factors. Rooted in dual process theory (Deutch and Gerrard 1955), informational factors are categorised as those based on the written content of reviews, with normative factors categorising those factors which can be subjected to social aggregation mechanisms (Cheung, Chuan et al. 2009, p. 13). With traditional WOM communications, interpersonal factors such as tie strength and homophily have been demonstrated to influence the credibility of such communications (Leonard-Barton 1985, Bansal and Voyer 2000, Ruef, Aldrich et al. 2003, Brown, Broderick et al. 2007). However, in the context of online customer reviews, a sender posts a review to a platform, such as an e-retailer or third party website. In almost all circumstances, there is no interpersonal relationship present between the sender and receivers that could therefor influence

credibility. Brown et al (2007) argue that on this basis, in an online context, tie strength must be characterised by a receiver's closeness to a specific website.

A range of studies utilising primarily quantitative methods have demonstrated the influence of a variety of informational and normative factors on the credibility of an online customer review. Cheung et al (2009) asked subjects to answer a variety of questions relating to their most recent online recommendation they had read and found that argument strength, source credibility and confirmation of prior belief all significantly influenced credibility. These results were consistent with previous research which illustrated the importance of the reputation of reviewers in determining their credibility (Hu, Ling et al. 2008). Doh and Hwang's study (2009) expanded upon this, focussing on the credibility of a message set and how the positive: negative ratio of messages influenced perceived credibility. The findings demonstrated that the message set with a positive: negative ratio of 8:2 received the highest credibility rating. Studies have also consistently demonstrated the impact of the aesthetics of a web page on the perceived credibility of website content, with higher levels of aesthetics resulting in an increase in credibility perceptions (Tractinsky, Cokhavi et al. 2006, Robins and Holmes 2008).

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Existing literature reviews have highlighted the dominance of quantitative studies in the field of EWOM research (Cheung and Thadani 2010, Chan and Ngai 2011). This study seeks to achieve new insights on the topic of how consumers evaluate the credibility of an online customer review based on the lived experiences of those who use them. Various qualitative studies in the field of electronic word-of-mouth marketing have demonstrated an ability to generate new insights on their given subject area and an ability to supplement existing quantitative studies on the same topic by providing an extra depth of understanding (Mazzarol, Sweeney et al. 2007, Sweeney, Soutar et al. 2008). It was on these grounds that a qualitative approach was adopted in order to obtain a more in depth understanding of the factors that can influence the credibility of an online customer review, based on the testimonies of consumers whom actually use them to assist with purchasing decisions. In depth semi structured interviews were chosen as the preferred data collection method as opposed to focus groups on the grounds that they would allow participants to express their views in their own terms without being influenced by other group members.

Each of the interviews had three main components, exploring (1) the factors that influenced the participants' to consult an online customer review, (2) the factors that influenced the participants' perceptions of a helpful online customer review, and (3) the factors that influenced the participants' perceptions of a credible online customer review. As the title of this study closely corresponds with the third components of the interviews conducted, most of the findings presented in this paper were taken

from this component, although some of the findings generated from the second component of the interviews also contributed to those presented in this paper.

Previous research has demonstrated the effectiveness of conducting pilot studies in order to refine the interview procedure (Sampson 2004, Kim 2011). The first six interviews were treated as pilot interviews in order to refine the interview process, utilising a range of behavioural and experience questions across all three components in order to encourage participants to discuss their experiences with online customer reviews. The questioning was influenced by the procedures outlined in critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). Whilst the interview process did not strictly adhere to the specialist processes outlined in this method, the questions were focused on asking about specific instances in which the participants had used online customer reviews to assist with a purchasing decision in order to elicit the causes, descriptions and outcomes of these events, the feelings and perceptions in the situation and how the participants felt this would change any future behaviour.

The seventh interview onwards (not counting the interview that was omitted) represented the main phase of this study. One of the key limitations of the pilot phase was that the technique adopted relied heavily on events being remembered. For the main phase participants were given access to a computer and encouraged to find online customer reviews of products or services that they had recently purchased or was planning to purchase in the immediate future to discuss throughout the interview process. Implementing this change provided the participants with stimuli which facilitated a greater depth of discussion than the interviews conducted in the pilot phase. The provision of this extra stimuli also acted as a memory aid which helped participant recall other incidents in which they consulted online customer reviews in order to assist with a purchasing decision. In instances where participants were discussing a pending purchase decision, participants only consulted online customer reviews, discussed their opinions of these reviews with the interviewer and how these reviews would influence their intention to act. No actual purchases were made during the interview process.

As described at the outset, this research focused on exploring the credibility of single specific online customer reviews as a source of information, as opposed to online customer reviews as a general source of information as a whole. Previous research has highlighted the potentially detrimental influence of scepticism towards online customer reviews as a source of information (Sher and Lee, 2009), hence this needed to be recognised when recruiting participants from the study.

This study adopted a combination of sampling strategies, all of which fall under the umbrella of ‘purposeful sampling’ as outlined by Patton (2002). Table 2 outlines the approaches utilised within this study and the criteria for participation.

Table 2: Application of purposeful sampling strategies

APPROACH	DESCRIPTION	APPLICATION
Homogeneous sampling	Sampling with the intention of describing a particular subgroup in depth	The sample included consumers who proclaimed to regularly use online customer reviews. This was the sole criteria for the first round of interviews.
Criterion sampling	Ensuring that a sample meets a pre-determined criteria	Participants of this research confirmed prior to their interview that they had either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recently purchased a product or service and consulted online customer reviews - Was looking to make a purchase within the near future with the assistance of online customer reviews <p>This criteria was introduced for the second round of interviews.</p>

As Table 2 shows, the first criteria was that participants were required to frequently consult online customer reviews to assist with purchasing decisions by their own admission. By selecting participants who had used online customer reviews at some point in the past or intended to do so in order to assist with an upcoming purchase decision, it was assumed that scepticism amongst the participants towards online customer reviews as a source of information was low on the basis that the willingness to use them to assist with a purchasing decision was present. The additional criteria introduced for the main phase of the interviews asked that participants had either a purchasing decision that they were currently deliberating with the assistance of online customer reviews, or had recently made a purchase with the assistance of online customer reviews, in order to facilitate the interview process detailed on the previous page. Participants were initially recruited from a single Higher Education institute within the north-west of England. A snowball strategy was then employed in order to extend beyond this institute. The data from this study was collected from a sample of thirteen participants, generating seventeen individual interviews between them. One interview was omitted from the data analysis, as it did not yield any usable data, leaving sixteen interviews from a sample size of twelve. Some participants from the pilot were invited to a second interview based on their responsiveness in their first interview. The details of the sample base are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Sample base

CASE	SEX	AGE	OCCUPATION	PHASE	PURCHASE 1	PURCHASE 2	PURCHASE 3

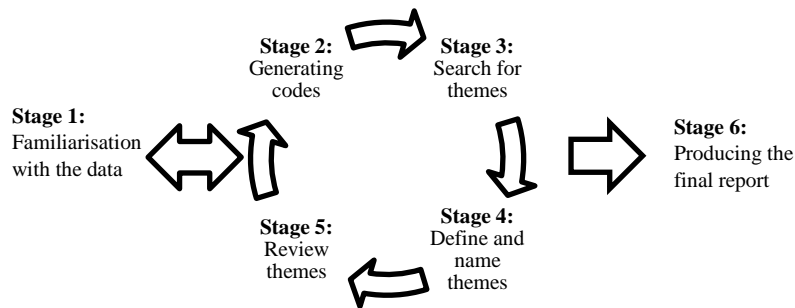
				P	I			
1	F	25-34	Student	P1	I3	Mobile Phone	Digital Camera	Holiday
2	M	18-24	Sales assistant	P2	I2	Headphones	Headphones	n/a
3	M	25-34	Careers advisor	P3	n/a	Computer game	n/a	n/a
4	M	35-44	Lecturer	P4	I4	Running trainers	Cycling Holiday	Energy drink
5	M	18-24	Auditor	P5	I10	Laptop	Desktop	n/a
6	F	35-44	Student	P6	n/a	Computer game	Tumble dryer	n/a
7	M	35-44	Lecturer	n/a	I1	iPod	Holiday	House
8	F	35-44	Lecturer	n/a	I5	Holiday	n/a	n/a
9	F	45-54	Student	n/a	I6	Holiday	n/a	n/a
10	F	45-54	Researcher	n/a	I7	Camera	n/a	n/a
11	M	45-54	Lecturer	n/a	I8	City break	Accommodation for business trip	n/a
12	M	25-34	Marketing Director	n/a	I9	TV	n/a	n/a
M = Male, F = Female, P=Pilot interview, I=Main interviews								

The procedures for the analysis of the data collected adhered to those described in Braun and Clarke's version of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) as outlined below in Figure 3. NVivo 9 facilitated the coding of the data. It has been argued previously that CAQDAS packages have the potential to transform qualitative research into a rigid, automated analysis of data that requires human interpretation some researchers have misused NVivo in order to quantify qualitative data yet make claims of a qualitative analysis (Bringer, Johnston et al. 2004). However, the responsibility for such misuse ultimately lies with the researcher rather than the software package itself, as it is possible to attempt to quantify qualitative data without a CAQDAS package (Bringer, Johnston et al. 2004, Clare 2012). For this research, all coding and analysis was conducted manually within NVivo 9. None of the features available within the programme, which automatize the coding of qualitative data, were used as part of this study.

Unlike grounded theory, Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis outlines an element of flexibility in the sense that it can be applied to a 'top down' analysis of qualitative data with themes pre-determined from the literature, or a 'bottom up' analysis, with the coding and generation of themes dictated by the emergence of the findings. The bottom up approach was adopted for the purpose of this research as the as the themes and theme categories were named and labelled to reflect the content of the data as it emerged from the findings and analysis. However, as the literature review was conducted prior to the

data collection taking place the influence of pre-existing literature on the naming of themes and theme categories cannot be discounted.

Figure 3. Thematic analysis

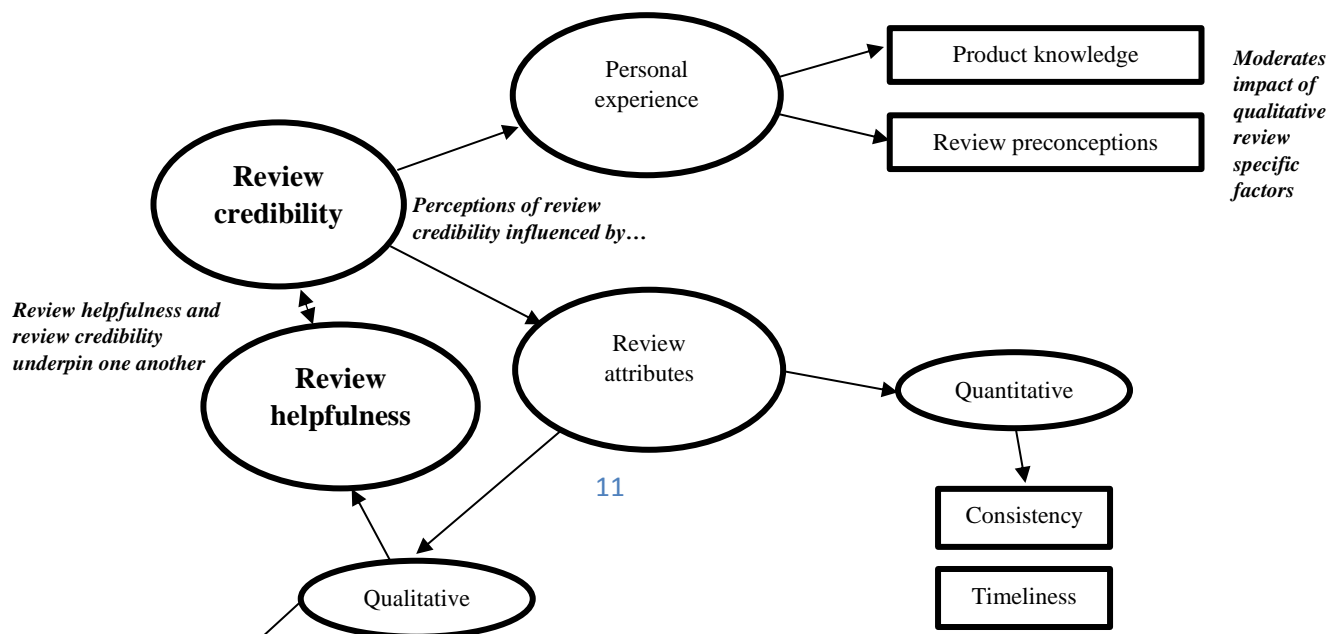


Source: Braun and Clarke (2006)

4.0 EXTRACTS FROM FINDINGS

In the literature review, Figure 2 demonstrated a range of categories extracted from existing literature that could be used to organise factors which influence the credibility of an inline customer review. As stated in the research design section, the themes and theme categories presented in this study were dictated by the content of the data collected. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of these themes in the form of a thematic map.

Figure 4: Thematic map of factors influencing review credibility



The first tier categories, signalled by the ovals with bold text, represented the focus of the interview components. As per the study title, the focus of this paper was the topic of review credibility, hence the key themes and second tier categories are organised within this. However, the findings also demonstrated that the concept of review helpfulness played a role in underpinning credibility (see section 4.1) hence its inclusion in the thematic map.

Each of the themes identified represent a factor identified from the responses of the participants that influenced how they evaluated the credibility of an online customer review. These were organised into two broad categories. The first of which is *personal experience*. The themes placed in this category represented elements of the participant’s life experience which influenced how they evaluated the credibility of an online customer review. The second category is *review attributes*. The themes placed in this category represent attributes attached to an individual review which influenced how participants evaluated its credibility. This was divided down further into quantitative attributes (those which were measurable, often presented numerically) and qualitative attributes (those which derived from the written content of a review).

4.1 Impact of review helpfulness

The first theme to be presented is that of *review helpfulness*. The topic of review helpfulness was discussed in its own context in the second component of the interviews. However, this theme was also discussed within the context of review credibility, and how it underpinned the significance of review credibility. As demonstrated in the thematic map

Throughout the interview process, participants found reviews from a variety of sources such as Trip Advisor and Amazon that they deemed to be credible or ‘believable’, but would dismiss the significance

of this credibility if the content of the review was unhelpful or not relevant. This point is typified in the following extracts from the interviews.

“[Quoting the review] ‘Friendly and welcoming’ that’s not something I am fussed about in London as I am not going to spend time with the staff. If I was going to a leisure hotel in the Scottish Highlands and I wanted to have my meals there then maybe, but I would be more interested in getting in and out without having to queue up. So these aren’t particularly helpful to me at this stage.” [Case 11, Interview 8]

Conversely, participants also described how reviews that initially seemed helpful could be hampered if factors supporting credibility were missing, such as number of supporting reviews or the date the review was posted. This was typified in the following example:

“I’m looking at 2005 when really I should be looking at a bit closer to the...that particular one, you’re saying is that helpful. Yes, I mean it would be helpful to know but I mean this one here, 2005 don’t want that, I’m really not interested in reviews from five years ago. I want the more recent ones.” [Case 7, Interview 1]

“It’s hard to trust a singular consumer review. You tend to trust them as a group that correlate to similar responses. For example, if 10 people out of 12 commented on a similar positive feature, you would believe it.” [Case 5, Pilot 5]

Whilst no definitive conclusions can be drawn from this due to the qualitative nature of the work, the findings here would suggest that the significance of the credibility or believability of an online customer review is dependent on how helpful a review is perceived. As the examples above imply, whilst a review may be ‘believable’, this quality was not significant if the content of a review was not relevant to the participant’s needs.

4.2 *Qualitative review attributes influencing credibility*

Alongside review helpfulness, three additional themes emerged from the data in this category. The first theme to be presented is that of *rationality*. This theme emerged as a result of several participants describing how they would be more likely to consider the information contained in an online customer review as credible or believable, if the opinion conveyed in any such review was done so in a rational and considered manner, as opposed to a review which came across as a ‘gripe’, or that the author of such reviews had some kind of agenda.

“My idea of a trustworthy review is something that sounds rational, rather than some gripe, some flipping kind of comment. Stuff like that I probably would not take much notice of at all if any.” [Case 4, Pilot 4]

This theme was often discussed in a negative context and reinforced with examples such as the following, where participants would point out the irrationality of a review and as a result, dismiss its credibility.

"For example, we saw a review where the person complained there were too many kids there. That was last year when we went, and I'm thinking you actually booked for a holiday village that's designed for kids." [Case 7, Interview 1]

However, this was also discussed in a positive context. Typified by the following example, some participants described how a balanced review which contained both positive and negative comments came across as more rational and as if they were not writing to an agenda (as described in the example above from case 4).

"A good review is one that takes both the good and the bad into account and is balanced. I think that's more trustworthy as they have showed they're not exactly writing to an agenda and they're prepared to show their interpretation in the most neutral way that they possibly can." [Case 3, Pilot 3]

The second theme that emerged from the data was the theme of *competence*. This theme emerged from the views of several participants whom found reason to doubt the competence of the author of an online customer review based on the participants own interpretation of the review's content.

"Something that I do know about a digital camera is you don't just point and press. You press it, hold it, and it does the adjustment for you. That's just some numpty who doesn't know how to do it and is using it wrong." [Case 10, Interview 7]

"Without meaning to sound patronising that just doesn't look particularly well informed anyway. There's typo's in it, 'had hi hopes', the punctuation, the way it's written, just sounds like somebody who didn't really know what they were doing in the first place. I could be completely wide of the mark but that just doesn't look credible and I wouldn't really take any notice of that." [Case 4, Interview 4]

As typified by the above examples, the theme of competence (or incompetence) often emerged from a negative context where the content of a review, such as poor use of grammar, or if the review described something which the participant perceived as being wrong (such as incorrect use of a product as described in interview 7), then the credibility of the review would be dismissed as a result of the participant dismissing the competence of the author with the said product.

The final theme to be presented in this subsection is that of *honesty*, which was encapsulated by the following example..

"[When asked the third lead question regarding why he would trust this particular review] If I was to have met that person, it's almost like I asked this person what would you say about that family cycling holiday...and it's given me an honest, or what looks like, an honest account, it's not over the top, it's not glorifying it in any way, and it sounds like a natural, conversational response." [Case 4, Interview 4]

In addition to the tone of a review, this idea of honesty also emerged from the content of a review, such as the review amending the review as a result of their admission of making a mistake with the initial

review (with this admission being communicated in the updated review). The underlying implication with both examples however was that a review which were perceived to sound like a ‘natural’ response was perceived by the participants to be more honest, believable and less likely to be someone writing to an agenda.

4.3 *Quantitative review attributes*

The first theme to be presented in this category the theme of *consistency*. In the context of evaluating an individual review, the theme of consistency reflected the influence of reoccurring aspects of information across either a single message-set or multiple message-sets. Various participants indicated that they would more likely to trust the contents of a review if they saw similar points raised in other reviews (sometimes spread across a range of platforms) as typified in the following example.

“It’s hard to trust a singular consumer review. You tend to trust them as a group that correlate to similar responses. For example, if 10 people out of 12 commented on a similar positive feature, you would believe it.” [Case 5, Pilot 5]

The second theme presented is that of *timeliness*. Throughout the interview process, several participants dismissed the credibility of any review they perceived to be ‘out of date’,

“Sometimes we got this idea that the more recent reviews are the more useful as from my experience, things change quickly in the hotel business.” [Case 11, Interview 8]

As typified in the above example, the assumption amongst participants was the more recent reviews contained information that was more up to date, especially in industries where things change fast.

The final theme presented in this subsection is *verification*. Despite only being discussed by a single participant, this theme touched on an important issue.

“I know that in order to provide a review you need to have actually stayed at the hotel, and booked through booking.com because they send you this link right after your stay has ended and they send you this in which you need to review your overall experience with the hotel. I have already used it myself, I know it’s credible, so why not trust other people who have used the site and stayed in this hotel.” [Case 1, Interview 3]

Like the themes of rationality and honesty, this theme also emerged as a response to reviews perceived to be ‘writing to an agenda’. In the context of this theme, participants explained how they would be more likely to believe a review where there was a process in place which ensured reviewers had actually bought the product in question, making more likely that they bought a product or service and had genuine reasons for the opinion they conveyed and less likely that they would be writing to an agenda.

4.3 *Factors related to personal experience*

The first theme to be presented related to the personal experience is that of *product knowledge*. Previous quantitative studies on EWOM credibility (Cheung et al., 2009) demonstrated that consumers are more

likely to deem information from EWOM as credible if it confirms what they already know. This theme reaffirms this point, as it emerged from discussions which implied how a participant’s own product knowledge was often a strong influence on the perceived credibility of an online customer review.

“When I booked a holiday this year to go to Lanzarote, there were negative reviews about the pool being a salt water pool. I’ve been to Lanzarote before and there are no fresh water pools in Lanzarote.” [Case 7, Interview 1]

“I mean I have had headphones before, you can’t sleep or anything like that because of the way headphones are, so I could just discard that straight away because I know that’s wrong, well it’s not expected from headphones.” [Case 2, Interview 2]

Some of the above examples also supporter the themes of rationality and competency detailed in section 4.2, illustrating how product knowledge could influence participant’s perception of the rationality of a review or competence of a reviewer. For example, one would have to ask whether the participants of seven and eight would have responded to the respective reviews as they did if they were not aware that or that there were no freshwater pools in Lanzarote?

The second theme to be presented in this category is *review preconception*. This theme demonstrates how a variety of preconceptions related to online customer reviews as a source of information influenced credibility evaluations. As stated in section 3.0, procedures were put in place to ensure that the participants of this research had enough trust in online customer reviews as a source of information to warrant using them to assist with purchasing decisions, so the preconceptions discussed only served to strengthen credibility ratings.

Participants discussed a range of preconceptions which served to increase their perception of online customer reviews in general as a credible source of information, such as conceptions that online customer reviews contained up to date information, and that they were often based on peoples experience with a product or service in day to day life, as opposed to being based on lab tests.

“But with reviews you get usability over a longer period of time. So you get someone, not someone who is sitting in an office, for example you have got the mobile phone, you buy a mobile phone and for example their going to test it in a lab. But they are not testing it as in someone walking about with it in their back pocket all day, dropping it on the table...” [Case 7, Interview 1]

“One thing you wouldn’t get as that (review) is up to date is the fact you have to book it in advance. That’s because as it says, I wasn’t aware it was because of the terrorist aspect, I thought it was so busy, but that suggest to me as that is up to date, you might not get that in a book.” [Case 9, Interview 6]

There was evidence to suggest that positive past experiences contributed to these positive preconceptions. Various participants described how consulting online customer reviews for previous purchases had served them well, which in turn increased their general credibility perceptions of online customer reviews as a reliable source of information.

"It's worked for us, and it's worked for us for some holidays that we decided not to go on. We have avoided locations purely because of reviews from other people." [Case 7, Interview 1]

"I do look at reviews before I book a hotel; I have not found any to be misleading. **They have usually lived up to what they have said.** It's just to get a general picture." [Case 9, Interview 6]

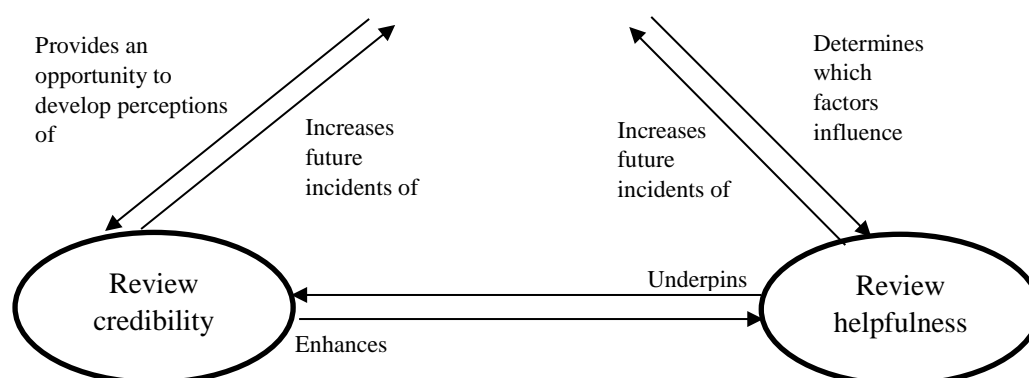
5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The research objective of this paper was to contribute to the understanding of factors that influence perceptions of review credibility, using receivers' testimonies as the primary unit of analysis. The interview findings uncovered many different relationships. A range of frameworks have been utilised in previous EWOM research in order to categorise the factors that influence the credibility of online customer reviews, such as informational and normative factors underpinned by dual process theory (Deutch and Gerrard, 1955). Whilst the categories that emerged from this research resembled these categories in some way, they did not adequately reflect the key factors influencing credibility in the context of this research. Arguably, the key influencing factors in this research bore greater resemblance to attribution theory (Heider, 1958, Sen and Lerman, 2007) which suggests that readers will attribute the recommendation of online customer reviews to reviewer related reasons or product related reasons, and base their decision on whether to use this review on the casual inferences made about a reviewer's motivations for writing a review. This research offered some evidence of this not only in a negative light, when they dismissed the credibility of an online customer review based on negative inferences made about the reviewer, but also in a positive light in instances when reviewers changed their reviews at a later date, thus reflecting a sense of honesty.

Whilst the concept of 'review helpfulness' and the factors that influence this has been addressed as a separate concept in previous research (Mudambi and Schuff 2010) one contribution of this research is that it highlights the moderating role of helpfulness, as highlighted in figure 5.

Figure 5. Relating review consultation, review helpfulness and review credibility





The extracts from the findings demonstrated that the helpfulness of a review could influence the significance of review credibility in the sense that a participant may encounter a review that meets all their criteria of a credible review, yet if the content of the review was not relevant to them and did not provide any content which facilitated their purchase decision then its credibility would be meaningless. However, due to the qualitative nature of this research, this relationship was only identified and needs to be tested further using methods that generate measurable data.

Two particular limitations of this study need to be noted. One of which is the limited sample size compared to other quantitative studies. Whilst it is fully acknowledged that a larger sample may have resulted in the generation of further themes, it was judged that theoretical saturation had been reached at this point. This decision was also partially justified by evidence from existing research that illustrated how in a large-scale research project consisting of sixty interviews, 92% of the themes were identified after twelve interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

The second limitation of this study is regarding the personal factors that moderate how various informational and normative factors can influence the effectiveness of an online customer review. Existing research provided strong evidence to show that the moderating influences of product type and involvement could moderate how the participants of this study perceived concepts such as the helpfulness and credibility of an online customer review (Park, Jumin et al. 2007, Mudambi and Schuff 2010). It was assumed based on this evidence that it was highly probable a participant's level of involvement and product choice in the purchasing decision they discussed in the interviews influenced their interpretations of the online customer reviews used as the stimulus for a discussion. Whilst using individual interviews offered many advantages over using quantitative methods, one of the limitations of using this method was that it was not always possible to accurately and objectively measure, or even to make accurate and informed subjective judgements on a participant's involvement in the purchase they discussed in the interviews.

Research clearly demonstrates that online customer reviews are a powerful influence over purchasing decisions (see section 2.1), hence it is in the interest of any practitioner wishing to utilise them for marketing purposes to understand how to maximise their potential impact. The factors of influence in this study were in the context of evaluating the credibility of singular online customer reviews, as opposed to a message-set or online customer reviews as a source of information. In the context of marketing communications, it is possible for marketers to encourage the presence of these factors within a single review through the format which they impose on the writer. Existing review platforms demonstrate a wide range of formats that are imposed on review writers. This research could be used by practitioners as a basis for designing any such structure they wish to impose on customers who write online customer reviews in order to maximise their impact when used as a marketing communication tool. For future studies on the topic of review credibility, it is important that clear distinction is made regarding the level at which credibility judgements are being studied, whether it be in the context of singular reviews, a group of reviews or online customer reviews as a general source of information.

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