

Impact of online product reviews on purchasing decisions

Nina Isabel Holleschovsky
University of Twente
P.O. Box 217, 7500AE Enschede
The Netherlands

Efthymios Constantinides
University of Twente
P.O. Box 217, 7500AE Enschede
The Netherlands

Email: e.constantinides@utwente.nl

Online consumer reviews, product and services recommendations and peer opinions play an increasingly growing role in the customer's decision making process. The various online product review and recommendation platforms differ in their objectives, function and characteristics. The literature has so far paid little attention on function characteristics of these platforms as an element of customer adoption and preference. Given the importance of this form of customer generated content on business sales and profitability the monitoring and often responding to customer reviews by business organizations has become a major managerial challenge and an important reputation management issue. In order to respond efficiently to customer reviews companies need to identify consumer reviews platforms, understand their characteristics and continuously assess their impact on consumer purchasing decisions. This study identifies four main types of online review platforms: retail websites, independent reviewing platforms, video-sharing platforms and personal blogs. These platforms present product reviews in different formats with accent on various review function characteristics. An online survey analyzed consumer opinions about the various platforms and review mechanisms and the impact of those on consumer buying behavior. The results underline the importance of platform credibility and usability on consumer trust and reliance in reviews as input in the decision-making process.

Keywords

Web 2.0, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Customer Generated Content (CGC); Reviews; Online Consumer Review Platforms

1. INTRODUCTION

A new generation of online tools, applications and approaches, such as blogs, social networking sites, online communities and customer review sites, commonly referred to as Web 2.0 (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008) have transformed the internet from a “broadcasting” medium to an interactive” one allowing the wide technology-mediated social participation (Chua & Banerjee, 2015). The internet has become a platform facilitating the “social” customer electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and a major source of customer information and empowerment (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). A fundamental element of the social eWOM is the Customer Generated Content or CGC (Huang & Benyoucef, 2012). Through CGC individuals share opinions and experiences on companies, brands, products or services and create large-scale word of mouth networks. This way consumers can make their personal opinions easily accessible to global communities or individual peers who use the information as an extra factor supporting their purchasing decisions (Dellarocas, 2003). Free and easy access to such information has weakened the power of marketing communication; Information provided by online peers influences customer perceptions, preferences and decisions much more than information provided by companies (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

The interactive Web has made possible to easily compare market offerings or to search for purchasing related advice given by other consumers in the form of a product review (Floh, Koller, Zauner, 2013). Online consumer reviews are subjective opinions and summarize experiences, attitudes, and opinions, expressed by consumers (Floh et al., 2013; Lu, W. Chang, & H. Chang, 2014). Personal opinions and experiences for products and services in the form of online reviews have become one of the most valuable sources of information assisting users when making purchasing decisions (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Dellarocas, 2003; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).

The predominant audience on review platforms is comprised of consumers seeking product information about a prospective purchase and those writing the reviews. The acceptance of these platforms is substantial, and their influence on purchasing decisions and communication behavior is increasing (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Lu et al., 2014).

Consumers are substituting internet-based search for traditional ways of information search, whereby interactions with strangers often takes place (Klein & Ford, 2003). The eWOM networks reach larger audiences and building on internet’s low costs and multiple communication capabilities (Dellarocas, 2003). Control of marketers and companies on communication channels and messages migrates to consumers who become critical, more assertive and powerful, taking over control of the information they obtain about products, brands and companies. Consumers become co-creators of value as direct stakeholders (Burtona & Khammash, 2010). The information in consumer reviews is widely considered as more reliable than marketer-sponsored information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Hung & Li, 2007; Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013). The changing nature of customer influence presents businesses with risks as well as opportunities (Henning-Thurau, Walsh, 2003). In order to mitigate threats on revenue or reputation, companies are forced to develop monitoring capabilities and quick responding in diverse review platforms (Becker & Nobre, 2014; Chua & Banerjee, 2015). To do this effectively, companies need to understand the dynamics of online consumer reviews and the impact of consumer review platforms where customer reviews and comments are posted.

These platforms can range from business retail websites to online communities, independent review sites and personal blogs with new platforms constantly emerging (Fan & Gordon, 2014; Lee & Youn, 2009). These platforms differ in several ways but have similar basic functions (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Dellarocas, 2003) giving consumer a wide choice (Lee, 2013).

Previous studies mostly focus on effects of online reviews like promises and challenges (Dellarocas, 2003) or on explanations for reading and adopting review platform content (Burtona & Khammash, 2010; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Lee J., 2013). Other studies have focused on mechanisms of average online ratings and the characteristics (number, depth or length) of online reviews (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Zhu & Zhang, 2010), on contextual factors like the content or variance of reviews and their impact on sales or purchasing behavior (Floh et al., 2013). Trust expressed in popularity of a blogger (Huang L.-S., 2015) or review helpfulness (Chua & Banerjee, 2015) have been also analyzed. Research also suggest the testing for moderating variables (Floh et al., 2013). Such moderating variables include brand strength and category maturity (Ho-Dac et al., 2013). Few studies have taken place in Europe (Floh et al., 2013; Burtona & Khammash, 2010). This study focuses on Western Europe and in particular The Netherlands and Germany with main items the identification of moderating variables of online reviewing platforms and their reviewing function characteristics are central.

The paper is organized as follows: First consumers’ motives for seeking reviews will be identified with the help of literature. Diverse review platforms and their various review functions will be also identified.

A consumer survey is conducted in order to analyze the influence of review function characteristics on consumer purchasing decisions. The research problem in this study is “What characteristics of review functions in online review platforms have the most influence on consumer purchasing decisions”. The following questions guide the operationalization process: (1) What are the motives of consumers to search online reviews? (2) How do various online review platforms differ? (3) Which are the various characteristics of review functions influencing consumer purchasing decisions? (4) Which review function characteristics can be found on what platforms? (5) What online consumer review platforms consumers choose to use as a basis for their purchasing decision? (6) Which review functions do consumers classify as most important with regard to their purchasing decision?

1.1 Methodology

The data for the literature review was gathered by online search through platforms like Scopus, Google Scholar and the online library of our university. Moreover, relevant literature was searched in offline libraries.

The empirical data necessary for the study was collected by means of an online survey. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics, a questionnaire building online tool. The questionnaire developed was part of an omnibus survey including four proprietary studies. Since all four studies were targeting the same target population this form of survey provided higher number of responders in a short time since each of the researchers recruited a part of the population. The first part of the survey was a part common for all four studies focused on demographics and descriptive data. The first as well as one of the four parts of this omnibus survey was the basis of this study. (see Appendix 8.1). Literature findings with respect

to the previous mentioned research questions served as the basis for developing the questionnaire.

The structure was based on five point Likert scale type questions, on frequency and closed questions including polar questions as well multiple response questions; the answers of the questionnaire were anonymous. The survey population was 422 respondents, with 50% of fully filled-in lists so the effective sample size was 211 responses. Convenience Sampling was applied for the selection of data, the survey was accessible to respondents through email and online. Personal messages were sent to social networks of the study participants and calls for the survey were posted on the participating researchers' social media profiles. The survey was open for respondents for eleven days at the end of May 2015. Incentives for participation were created in the form of a draw of an amazon or bol.com gift card. Participation in the draw was possible through voluntarily providing an E-Mail address in the end of the survey. The winner was drawn randomly by the four authors together, after the survey was closed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Former research has empirically validated the impact of eWOM on consumer purchasing decisions. More specifically, online consumer reviews on products or services significantly influence consumers' attitude or behavior toward a purchasing decision (Burtona & Khammash, 2010; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, 2003; Floh et al., 2013; Senecala & Nantel, 2004; Zhu & Zhang, 2010), business sales and profitability (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). The reputation of a product, brand or company which can be seen as a summary of companies past customer experiences, customer perceptions and business actions, is reflected on or shaped by reviews and forms usually a strong basis for purchasing decisions (Becker & Nobre, 2014; Dellarocas, 2010; Lee & Bradlow, 2011).

2.1 Consumer motives for reading online reviews

Personal purchasing motives include the physical activity or the information seeking while social motives include communications. These motivations are not the same as for a consumer's simple information search in an online environment but differ due to the consumer's intention of purchasing products while searching for reviews. Consumers see online communities as helpful and at the same time they are empowering for the consumers (Burtona & Khammash, 2010). Literature indicates different motives for consumers to seek reviews whereby four categories can be identified in the following, namely Informational behavior, Risk reduction, Quality seeking and Social belonging (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Burtona & Khammash, 2010; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Klein & T.Ford, 2003; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Firstly, online consumer reviews are increasingly being relied upon by consumers as a low cost means of making more informed purchasing decisions (Klein & Ford, 2003). Burtona and Khammash (2010) argue further that communications to achieve specific ends, such as information about products, can motivate consumers to search for opinions in the form of reviews. Hence, information search, which can be defined as the phase of the decision-making process wherein consumers actively collect and integrate information from numerous sources (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), can be identified as one of the motives. Additionally, Henning-Thurau & Walsh (2003) claim that reduction of search time and purchasing effort are self-involvement motivations for information seeking behavior. Information seeking for reviews includes product-involvement

motivations like learning of how a product is to be consumed and which products are new in the market (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

Further, consumers show uncertainty about their purchasing decision and the consequences those decisions can bring along. Besides relying on brand image or own purchase experiences, customers can seek information from former consumers in order to reduce the risk of unaimed consequences of their actions (Burtona & Khammash, 2010). Consumers perceive the source of consumer opinion reviews as trustworthy and less risky than marketer information. The author of the review is seen as similar to oneself by the reader (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Also, the process of seeking reviews can be used as a reassurance for the consumer that a right and risk-free choice was made. Especially when consumers plan to purchase high-priced products, the search for reviews is performed even more intensively in order to minimize uncertainty (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Hence, risk reduction can be categorized as a second motive for reading online opinions.

Moreover, Zhu & Zhang (2010) claim that consumers are seeking to discover product quality and hence take consumer reviews into consideration for their purchasing decision. Consumer review platforms can serve to maximize rationally the ratio of the perceived products' benefits and quality to its costs (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006).

Furthermore, belonging to a virtual community and bonding with this community is of interest and importance to certain consumers (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Within consumer review platforms, consumers can find this community and with the help of reviews can find users with similar interests and build communications with those. Personal blogs, for example, mostly focus on a specific product category and therefore attract users with similar product interests. Communication opportunities on online review platforms, like the possibility of contacting the author personally, commenting on reviews or following the blog is an example of bonding within a community. Social belonging hence attracts peer groups (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

Consequently, through the literature, four main motives for consumers seeking consumer opinions have been found which can be categorized as *Informational behavior*, *Risk reduction*, *Quality seeking* and *Social belonging*. In the following, knowing the four main motives to search for reviews, consumer review platforms on which the consumer looks for reviews, shall be analyzed with the help of existing literature. A special focus hereby concerns the differences between the platforms and their review function characteristics in order to later focus on the consumer's choice of platform and characteristics and the review function's influence on consumer purchasing decisions.

2.2 Online review platform categorization

As the motives for consumers to seek reviews have been identified, it will be analyzed which diverse online reviewing platforms are used by consumers. Further, it will be characterized which review design characteristics on platforms might influence consumers' product choice. The literature distinguishes between different kinds of online consumer opinion platforms. The classification of the platforms entails platforms consciously designed for reviews such as independent reviewing platforms and others like video-sharing platforms, originally designed for different purposes but likewise used for reviews. Retail websites, as well as independent consumer review platforms, personal blogs and video-sharing platforms are classified by the literature as platforms containing customer-generated content in the form of consumer reviews (Burtona &

Khammash, 2010; Dellarocas, 2003; Fan & Gordon, 2014; Lee & Youn, 2009; Preece & Shneiderman, 2009). These four different review platforms are taken into further analysis since these are containing reviews in a distinguished format. The reviews can clearly be differentiated from general customer eWOM. Either way, the platform is segmented in various sections of which one is a review section or expressive headings, catchwords or website names clearly emphasize the review content by using the words 'review', 'rating' or 'test' among similar ones. Online forums or social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram are not taken into further consideration as eWOM on these platforms is created in the form of CGC, also entailing consumer opinions, though without a clear boundary to non-review CGC. No overview of aggregated opinions can be found nor sections or headings leading to the review section. Moreover, on Facebook, only companies, no specific products or services, can be reviewed in an aggregated and over seeable way. Still, the CGC on these platforms can be categorized as crucial and highly influential, though is not seen as a clear review by the author and hence not further analyzed in the present paper. Nevertheless, it is advisable to further analyze these platforms and its CGC in future researches (see 5.1).

Retail websites

Retail platforms are websites of a retail store which focus on the sale of goods and services through the Internet (Investopedia). Hence, the main content on the platform comes from marketers of retail shops. Its ownership can therefore be classified as private. The main intention of the platform is therefore to sell the products offered in the retail shop. At the same time, reviews support platforms by increasing customer satisfaction and quality of service, in a way that future consumers can inform themselves beforehand by scanning through the reviews to determine whether the product fits their expectation (Fan & Gordon, 2014). Amazon.com is the largest Internet-based retailer in the United States and market leader in many European countries and hence will be taken as one of the example retail websites in the survey among others. Further retail platforms offering reviews are for example booking.com, specialized on the sale of accommodations or bestbuy.com selling electronics. Retail websites offer consumers the opportunity to post product reviews after their purchase. At the same time, future consumers are given the opportunity to orientate their purchases on post-consumer opinions (Dellarocas, 2010). The content of reviews on retail websites can be in the form of aggregated, numerical star ratings and open-ended customer-authored comments about the product in the format of a written text (Li, Hitt, & Zhang, 2011; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). A product review function includes a scoring system which allows to vote on review helpfulness and places the most voted conspicuously. The consumer can choose between a sorting option of helpfulness or date and hence most recent contributions or the sorting by the summary of aggregated ratings (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Dellarocas, 2010). Often, platforms incorporate features that show the reviews voted as most helpful on top of the chronology, the platform can thereby influence the reader on what is read (first) and hence plays a significant role in influencing users' purchase decisions (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Lee J., 2013). A profile of the review author can be visible, showing statistics like number of reviews written or an average score given on reviews (Dellarocas, 2010).

Independent consumer review platforms

Additionally to retail platforms, independent consumer review platforms display reviews on their website (Burtona &

Khammash, 2010). The platform is called independent since the websites is not connected to a retailer's store and hence does not offer products or services on the website. On that account, the intention of the website is solely the displaying of different products or services and its reviews to facilitate comparisons. The ownership can be seen as public due to its non-connection to stores. Epinion.com, yelp.com, ciao.co.uk or tripadvisor.com are examples of independent review platforms (Burtona & Khammash, 2010). People can write reviews about any kind of product or service which is offered on the platform (Floh et al., 2013). Like on retail websites, the content of reviews can be in the form of aggregated, numerical star ratings and open-ended customer-authored comments about the product in the format of a written text (Chua & Banerjee, 2015). Some platforms offer consumers an additional function to upload photos for supporting the consumer's review (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Wang, 2011). Further, features like a helpfulness mechanism and other sorting options are offered on independent reviewing platforms (Lee J., 2013). Mostly, the consumer who acts as the author of a review has a profile on the reviewing platform which shows characteristics like the number of reviews written, how long the author has been a member and sometimes some personal information like age, gender or even interests. Compared to the review author's profile on a retail website, the profile on independent platforms can be seen as of greater depth of information of the writer and may also entail personal information about the user (Burtona & Khammash, 2010).

Personal blogs

Blogging sites, especially those regularly writing about consumption experiences of products or services, have recently grown in popularity. Reviews by bloggers contain bloggers' experiences and product information; accordingly, ownership is classified as private. Bloggers often see themselves as experts of certain product categories and hence specialize on these in their reviewing blogs. The intention of private blogs is therefore to share purchasing experiences about certain product categories and give recommendations to others. Thus, consumers use this tool to inform themselves prior purchasing decisions (Huang, 2015). Due to its specialization on a product (category), blog entries are often found by consumers through search engines (Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, 2013). Since bloggers recommendation posts are seen as a useful marketing communication tool and a vital reference in consumer purchase decision making (Lu, et al., 2014), many bloggers have become opinion leaders. The profile of the blogger is mostly very detailed and communication exchanges with the blogger are often possible. The review content is mostly displayed through open-ended customer-authored texts, supported by media like photos or videos. The content is mostly considerably more detailed than on retail or independent reviewing websites and includes more personal thoughts and self-disclosure (Huang L.-S., 2015; Wang, 2011). Though, per product, only one review of one author is displayed and hence the consumer only relies on a single opinion.

Video-sharing platforms

Video-sharing platforms enable the posting of videos which can include personal videos, product advertisements, political messages or others (Preece & Shneiderman, 2009). But online video-sharing websites are also used by consumers to upload product reviews in the format of a video (Fan & Gordon, 2014). The intention of the platform is hence to offer users a platform to freely upload and share any kind of video with private content according to their interests, the general terms and conditions of the website. Participation and interaction among members in the form of exchanging videos and text comments

is encouraged (Chang & Lewis, 2013). Moreover, companies incorporate video-sharing platforms into the fabric of everyday business operations by using video-sharing platforms to share product experiences instantly and also by encouraging their customers to do so (Fan & Gordon, 2014). YouTube is the world's most successful video-sharing platform (Chang & Lewis, 2013). Blythe & Cairns (2009) analyzed product reviews on YouTube with the iPhone as an example product. They found that the main motivation for searching the iPhone on YouTube is to inform oneself about whether to buy the phone or not. Most frequent videos about the iPhone all consist of product reviews. Those videos about a product contain professional mass media reviews taped by news shows or featured experts, the majority of reviews were recorded by users though (Blythe & Cairns, 2009). The review content is shown in the form of a video, accompanied by a heading in the form of a written text, mainly stating that the video content is a review about a certain product. Moreover, a short written text underneath the video, composed by the author, describes the review, though not the content or author's opinion about the product. Video reviews on video-sharing platforms can be found through entering search terms on the platform, chronology can thereby be chosen by most popular/ most discussed/ most relevant, top rated or date of upload. Most popular, discussed and relevant sorting options are based on the number of views and user comments underneath the video. Top rated chronology options show the top rated videos first – the rating hereby has nothing to do with the rating of the product in the video but is more likely comparable with the most helpful function – hence people can rate how much they liked the video. Next to the chosen video, other videos with a similar content are displayed (Blythe & Cairns, 2009; Chang & Lewis, 2013). Low ranked videos are mostly hard to find while most viewed and commented videos are easier to find and hence watched more often. A profile of the video review's author is visible and shows links to other videos posted by the user, statistical information like number of subscribers and, if wanted by the user, a personal description (Chang & Lewis, 2013).

In general, literature about diverse online consumer platforms

reveals that online reviews in general affect consumer product choice. However, online reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions only when consumers' reliance on online reviews is sufficiently high when they make purchase decisions (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Therefore, in the following, the format characteristics of reviews, which become visible on the different review platforms, will be further analyzed.

2.3 Format characteristics

Consumers' reliance on reviews is dependent on and affected by the format characteristics of the review and the online review system's design (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). This phenomenon can be related to the psychological choice model of Hansen (1976) in which the effectiveness of an influencer (online reviews in this case) is moderated by environmental and contextual factors (platform, consumer, product characteristics). The interactions among these variables eventually determine the response (purchase decision) (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Hence, this paper is going to focus on the environmental and contextual factor of an online review system's design on platforms.

To increase consumers' reliance on reviews, the objectives of the different platforms should be to build trust for the consumer, promote website and service quality, facilitate member matching and offer consumers sufficient information as well as a user friendly design (Dellarocas, 2010; Huang & Benyoucef, 2012). Additionally, despite the relatively short history of the field, studies on review helpfulness are significantly increasing. Literature has analyzed specific design features and has come to different kind of conclusions. Dellarocas (2003) for example sees the overall number of positive and negative ratings, followed by the number of recently posted negative comments as most influential. Other authors, such as Lee (2013) analyzed a review helpfulness voting system which allows consumers to evaluate helpfulness and hence make the overall helpfulness of reviews visible to others. Though, Lee (2013) found that helpful reviews are influencing the consumer but can only be considered as impactful among early posted reviews due to time chronology and sorting options on platforms. The impact of reviews has also been studied by Floh et al. (2013) who have

Characteristics		Author examples	Retail platforms	Independent platforms	Blogs	Video platforms
Display of review	Qualitative	Floh et al. (2013) Li et al. (2011)	X	X	X	X
	Quantitative	Dellarocas (2010) Chua & Banerjee (2015) Li et al. (2011)	X	X		
Summary statistics	Total number of reviews	Dellarocas (2010) Huang & Benyoucef (2013)	X	X		
	Average rating	Dellarocas (2010) Dellarocas (2003)	X	X		
Sorting options	By date	Chang & Lewis (2013) Dellarocas (2003) Chua & Banerjee (2015)	X	X	X	X
	Review helpfulness	Chang & Lewis (2013) Chua & Banerjee (2015) Dellarocas (2010) Lee J. (2013)	X	X		X
	Overall aggregated rating	Chang & Lewis (2013) Dellarocas (2010) Chua & Banerjee (2015)	X	X		
	By views	Blythe & Cairns (2009) Chang & Lewis (2013)				X
Media support	Picture	Huang L.-S. (2015) Wang (2011)		(X)	X	
	Video	Blythe & Cairns (2009) Chang & Lewis (2013) Huang L.-S. (2015) Wang (2011)			X	X
Self-disclosure		Burtona & Khamash (2010) Chua & Banerjee (2015) Dellarocas (2010) Huang L.-S. (2015)		(X)	X	X

Table 1. Format characteristics of reviews on online reviewing platforms

researched that online review texts are considered to be more impactful compared to aggregated ratings. The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (2013) however claims that the overall average rating, aggregated in a rating system, is of most importance since users do not read the texts and hence rely on these summaries. On the opposite, Li et al. (2011) argue that summary measures, instead of context are more likely for a mismatch in preferences, introducing errors in consumer decisions. Impact and consumer reliance in reviews can also be determined by the amount of self-disclose information, hence personal information about the reviewer published at the authors' profile. Huang (2014) analyzed reviewing blogs and found that the reader's trust in reviews and in the reviewer's author and blog are of increasing importance and significantly influence blog reader's trust intentions and hence reliance and impact.

Consequently, as seen from the literature, a variety of review format characteristics are of importance. In the following, Table 1 illustrates the various format characteristics researched by several authors. Additionally, the table matches format characteristics to the identified platforms categories. The X implies that the mechanism characteristic is present, whereas a (X) implies that it is partly present and a bold X implies that the characteristic is very strong on the platform compared to the other platform categories. The identified format characteristics of a review make a basis for review platform engineering. Platforms displaying reviews determine the review function characteristics on their websites and consequently influence consumer purchasing decisions.

2.4 Company analytics and platform attraction

Customers and shareholders continuously pressure companies to increase customer satisfaction and quality of service in order to circumvent harm through reviews among others. Monitoring of reviews though, can examine customer opinions and hence contribute to company improvements. Review analytics engage in collecting, monitoring, analyzing and summarizing information to extract useful patterns and intelligence. The goal thereby is to analyze influential users, insights into changing consumer tastes and interests, ad-campaign effectiveness and competitive intelligence. Consequently, the data can be used for product-design-development, learning, tracking consumer concerns and the development of influencers themselves (Becker & Nobre, 2014; Fan & D.Gordon, 2014; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Even though, CGC and its emergence

are difficult to control, this powerful source can be measured and controlled accurately through proper engineering of a website including review format characteristics (Dellarocas, 2003). Therefore, for the application of analytics on online reviews, it is of importance to know what review format characteristics on review platforms, of those shown in Table 1, have the most influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

Additionally, the goal of a (reviewing) platform is to attract visitors, foster consumer interaction and support decision making. Also, the encouragement of consumers to return to the platform is of vital importance (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). Thus, review platform engineering needs to know and take into account the customer view and their desires for a helpful reviewing platform in order to be successful.

3. OPERATIONALIZATION

The format characteristics of reviews and its presence on various platforms were displayed in Table 1. In the author's opinion, these format characteristics of reviews can be divided into two categories. Whereas the first category of format characteristics demonstrates the simplicity of a system, its ease of use, navigation and clarity of overview, while the second concerns the social and reliability factors. The first can be circumscribed as usability; which can be seen as the quality of providing good service, so that it is convenient to use for the consumer (The Free Dictionary by Farlex). The second one can be summarized as credibility referring to whether an individual perceives a source of information as unbiased, believable, true or factual (Hass, 1981). The categorization is done on the basis of the different nature of the format characteristics of review platforms and its different influences. Table 2 displays the format characteristics of reviews, firstly categorized as usability characteristics, secondly those classified as credibility characteristics. Several format characteristics can be categorized in both categories since they affect the usability of the reviews on the platform as well as the credibility. Consequently, the two categories usability and credibility for format characteristics of reviews will be taken for measurement.

Literature has stated that consumer reliance on reviews and platforms is increased by a user friendly design and trust building measures (Dellarocas, 2010; Huang & Benyoucef, 2012). Hence, it is assumed that the diverse review format characteristics, as they are categorized in usability and credibility, influence the consumer's reliance on reviews and platforms and therefore their purchasing decision making (see Appendix, Figure 1).

Usability characteristics					
Characteristics		Retail platforms	Independent platforms	Blogs	Video platforms
Display of review	Qualitative	X	X	X	X
	Quantitative	X	X		
Summary statistics	Total number of reviews	X	X		
	Average rating	X	X		
Sorting options	By date	X	X	X	X
	Review helpfulness	X	X		X
	Overall aggregated rating	X	X		
	By views				X
Media support	Picture		(X)	X	
	Video			X	X
Credibility characteristics					
Display of review	Qualitative	X	X	X	X
	Quantitative	X	X		
Summary statistics	Total number of reviews	X	X		
	Average rating	X	X		
Self-disclosure			(X)	X	X
Media support	Picture		(X)	X	
	Video			X	X

Table 2. Review mechanisms classified in usability- and credibility characteristics

The conducted survey researches the impact of the format characteristics and whether usability and credibility characteristics influence consumer purchasing decisions. Further, it is to find out which credibility and usability factors have most influence on a consumer purchasing decision, hence, which design characteristics of an online consumer platform are preferred by the consumer.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Data Collection

An online survey in the format of a questionnaire was conducted in order to survey consumer purchasing behavior in relation to reviews. The author divided the questionnaire into three parts; the first part of the survey covers general population facts about the sample, whereby the second part asks about general social media and review behavior while the third part, created only for this research, surveys consumers about reviews and review format characteristics.

The survey received 422 responses of which 211 were fully completed.

Population statistics

From the 211 responses, the respondents' average age amounts to about 24 years (24.3). The total distribution lies in between 16 and 63. In category, the age group of students from 18 to 25 years amount to 82% (N=175). 56.4% of the sample size is female and 43.6% male which gives a variance of 0.25. The main nationality of the sample is German with 62% (N=131), Dutch respondents make up the second most representative group of respondents with 14% (N=30). Further nationalities are US-American with 6% (N=12) and other nationalities with 18% (N=38). Students make up the biggest occupation group of the respondents with 77% (N=163) and employees the second biggest with a percentage of 17% (N=35).

In the appendix (8.2) an overview of the geographical data of the respondents can be found.

4.2 Survey Results

Social Media behavior and use of reviews

Firstly, to get an overall overview of social media use, the questionnaire asks which Social media platforms the participant uses. It was assumed that respondents use at least one since the survey was distributed through social media channels. 98 % of all respondents use Facebook, which makes it to the most popular Social Media tool, followed by YouTube (70 %) and Instagram (46 %). The next question surveys whether the sample has ever checked online reviews prior a product purchase; 98 % (N=206) answered this question with a yes and hence have checked online reviews. Hence, this research is supported in its importance and relevance. Further, consumers indicate that most of them check reviews quite often (38 %, N=80), sometimes (29 %, N=62) or very often (22 %, N=47). Only 10 % (N=22) check reviews rarely or never. The choices of answers were not based on a certain time frame as in once a week or once a month, as it has been done in other studies (DiMauro & Bulmer, 2014). The reason lays in the fact that, in the author's opinion, the frequency of looking for reviews depends on consumer purchasing behavior and frequency and hence cannot be simply measured in time. The final question of this part concerns the various online review platforms. It was found that retail platforms are the most used, as 82 % of the sample population make use of those. Independent platforms are the second most indicated review platforms since 55 % make use of those, followed by video platforms (37 %) and blogs (31 %). Others were only chosen by less than 3 %. This question herewith supports the classification of reviewing platforms in section two of this paper. All categorized platforms were chosen by more than 30 % of the respondents and further platforms were barely chosen.

Review function characteristics

The main survey part concerning this research study starts off with three pictures of reviews for the sample purchase iPhone. The participant was not supposed to pay attention to the content

of the review but to the overall impression and general display of the review. The first shows a text review and an aggregated rating on a retail or independent platform, the second a screenshot of a video rating and the third a blog review composed of a text, photo and profile of the author. Through this question, the author wants to find the review format the user is most familiar with and would choose without thinking about it. The blog review was chosen by 55% of the respondents and hence seems most attractive to them. The first review which displays a review on a retail or independent platform and the video review were chosen by 23 and 25 % respectively. The following two questions analyze the reason for choosing one of the review options in question one. The former asks about the review the participant sees as most credible while the later asks about the most user-friendly one. 46 % see the blog as most credible, followed by the retail or independent website with 31 % and the video with 22 %. The results differ from those about the question of user-friendliness whereby the video review is seen as most user friendly (54 %) and the blog the least user friendly (21 %). Hence, at first sight, it seems as if the respondents have chosen the blog review as a basis for their purchase due to its credibility. In addition, the different perceptions of qualitative reviews, which are composed of texts or videos, and quantitative reviews, composed as aggregated star ratings as an example, were examined. Question four simply asks which of the two the respondents would choose as a basis for their purchasing decision, multiple answers possible. 86 % of all respondents chose qualitative and 45 % quantitative reviews. 78 % then justify their answer by saying qualitative reviews are more credible, while 22 % claim quantitative to be more credible. At the same time qualitative reviews are also considered as more user friendly by 55 % than quantitative ones. To further explore review characteristics, the sample population was asked on whether they classify media support in a review as credible or user-friendly. For this question, 42 % of the total respondents agree on credibility while 69 % agreed on user-friendliness. 13 % are of the opinion that media support like photos or videos does not make a review more credible or user-friendly. The eighth question on review mechanism characteristics introduces the sorting option for reviews on platforms. 46 % of the sample population makes use of it while 54 % does not. Those making use of it named sorting options for ranking, date of publication and helpfulness as the ones they use. Further, 87 % of the respondents consider a sorting option as user friendly, even though 46 % do not make use of it. The tenth question considers summary statistics as in quantitative reviews. 39 % of the whole sample considers them as credible, 74 % as user-friendly and 11 % as none. Statistics about the volume of reviews, hence the total number, are seen as credible by 60 % and user friendly by 39 %. 20 % do not consider them as one of those. Finally, the last two questions concern self-disclosure of the review author. 73 % of the sample population, rate a visible and detailed profile of the author as credible. Member activity statistics like the number of reviews created by the author or the duration of membership are preferred by 71 %. 50 % (also) consider personal characteristics like the author's interests as important.

All questions of the survey and statistical results can be found in the Appendix (Appendix 8.1-8.5).

4.3 Survey Analysis

The results have shown the importance of reviews, its influence and different views on review mechanism characteristics. A further analysis should allow deeper insights into the findings of the questionnaire and consequently into review mechanism characteristics on review platforms.

Choice of platform (Q1.7 & Q1.8)

In Q1.7 60 % of the sample population indicates to check online reviews quite often or very often prior a product purchase. Due to their frequent use of reviews, the following analysis investigates whether regular users check reviews on the same platforms than the complete sample population. Therefore, the distribution of results for platform choice (Q1.8) is analyzed with those respondents checking reviews quite often or very often only. As a result, for retail websites the users increase by four % (86 % in total), for independent reviewing platforms, the respondents decrease by two % (53 % in total), for video platforms increase by two and for blogs increase by 2 % (39 % in total) (see Appendix 8.5, cross table 1). Hence, the distribution shows that frequent users of reviews choose the same platforms as those using reviews only sometimes or rarely. It can be therefore concluded that review platform choice does not depend on the frequency of checking reviews prior a purchase.

Display of reviews (Q1.8 & Q2.1)

Q1.8 and Q2.1 both asked the consumer about their choice of product review platforms. Though, Q1.8 named the platforms directly as answering options while Q2.1 showed pictures of different review displaying options without directly mentioning which platforms are shown. The questions shall now be compared. Firstly, the overall percentage distribution for the platform choices does not concur. Image one from Q2.1 can be categorized as a retail or independent reviewing platform which received 82 (retail) / 55 (independent) % of the votes. Though, in the image question (Q2.1), only 23 % of the participants would choose this kind of review format as their reviewing basis. The second image which displays a video review was voted by 25 % while in Q1.8 37 % voted for the video review. The last picture showed a blog which most people voted for, though only 32 % voted for the personal blog as a review platform in Q1.8. Thus, when directly asking consumers which review platform they are using as a basis for their purchase decision, retail and independent platforms are the most popular. Though, when showing images of reviews, the blog review convinces consumers. The distinction in distribution choice can be explained in not identifying the images as the correct platforms. Further, blogs have just recently grown in popularity as a reviewing platform and hence are rather new for consumers. Not all survey participants might have been aware when answering the first question that a personal blog can be used as a review platform. Therefore, due to lack of knowledge or simply no use of blogs, the participants have not chosen the blog in the first question. Though, it seems as if in the second question, the display characteristics of the review blog have convinced consumers. This example might explain that users mostly use the platforms they know and used to use, though actually prefer additional or other review mechanism features.

Display of reviews (Q2.4 & Q1.8)

To further examine the displaying of reviews, Q2.4 will be analyzed. The results have shown that more respondents use qualitative reviews as a basis for their purchasing decision. Though, multiple answers were possible. 71 out of 211 respondents chose both answers which makes 34 % of the respondents. Consequently, around every third person prefers a review platform where both kinds of reviews are displayed. This confirms with the multiple choices of platforms in Q1.8.

Credibility characteristics vs. usability characteristics (Q2.1, Q2.2 & Q2.3)

Q2.2 and Q2.3 identified the reason for consumers to choose one of the reviews displayed in images in Q2.1 as a basis for

their purchasing decision. It was asked which review they considered as more user friendly and which as most credible. In what follows, it will be analyzed whether usability or credibility is more important to the consumer when choosing a review and its platform. Hence, the results of Q2.1 will be matched with those in Q2.2 and later with Q2.3 through a what-if analysis, to see whether more users chose the image they claim to be more credible or user-friendly. Firstly, 74 % of the respondents determined the review which they chose in Q2.1 also as the most credible one. 42 % defined the review they have chosen as the most user-friendly one. In total, 32 % designated their chosen review as both most credible and user-friendly (see Appendix 8.5, cross table 2. and 3.). It can thus be concluded that both characteristics play an influence when deciding for reviews on a review platform; though credibility seems to be more important when a consumer comes to choose a review as a basis for a purchasing decision.

Credibility characteristics vs. usability characteristics (Q2.3 & Q2.4)

The following will look closer to the results of Q2.4 concerning the choice of qualitative or quantitative reviews. Again, it will be analyzed whether consumers choose one of those reviews on the basis of credibility or usability. Firstly, from those consumers, who choose qualitative reviews for their purchasing decisions, 80 % did so due to the credibility of the review, while 55 % of the ones who prefer the qualitative review, consider it as more user-friendly. 44 % therefore consider the qualitative review as more credible and at the same time more user-friendly. For the participants who choose quantitative reviews as a basis, 34 % of them also consider those as more credible. 46 % of the ones who chose qualitative reviews classify these reviews as more user-friendly. In total, 18 % of the ones who choose qualitative reviews consider them as both, more credible and user-friendly. It can therefore be concluded that the sample population which chooses qualitative reviews, does so mostly due to the credibility of those reviews but for many, qualitative reviews (also) convince with their usability. For respondents who choose quantitative reviews for a purchasing decision, usability seems to persuade them. Very few though, consider quantitative reviews as both, user-friendly and credible at the same time.

Conclusively, the analysis shows that people who base their purchasing decision on qualitative reviews more likely do so due to credibility. Hence they perceive credibility as the most important characteristic, while consumers who base their purchase on quantitative reviews, distinguish usability as the most important characteristic.

Review volume statistics (Q2.11 & Appendix 8.5)

Q2.11 found that 80 % of the sample population consider a statistic about the total number of reviews as either way credible or user-friendly or both. 60 % thereby perceive it as credible. To further investigate the importance and influence of the review volume, a question and its response will be taken from another part of the conducted survey from another author (see Appendix 8.5, Image 1.). Firstly, different pictures of reviews for pizza delivery services are shown and the participant was requested to choose the one he would choose as a basis for their purchasing decision. Next, it was asked why the consumer chose this review. 59 % claim to have chosen a restaurant due to the high volume of reviews it has obtained. Therefore, it can be confirmed that statistics about the review volume influence a consumer's reliance in reviews since the visibility of the total number of reviews is valued as more credible. Further, due to the consumer's high interest in the statistic and hence its high influence, user-friendliness for

statistics of review volumes on platforms can also be confirmed.

Media impact on review platform choice (Q2.1 & Q2.7)

Q2.7 examined that 87 % of the respondents consider media support in a review as either more credible or user-friendly or both. To further explore whether media support influences consumer's choice of review, it will again be looked at Q2.1 which shows three images of reviews. Two of those three images contain media. The video review uses a video as the main media of the review, whereas the blog review entails a photo of the product reviewed as well as a photo of the review's author. 77 % of the respondents chose one of the reviews with media support. The blog review that mainly contains a text but has media as a support was chosen most. Consequently, media support can be categorized as credible and user-friendly and seems to have an impact on review choice and hence the consumer's purchasing decision.

Sorting options for reviews (Q2.8 & Q2.9)

An interesting finding can be encountered when comparing Q2.8 and Q2.9 which both concern sorting options for reviews. The first question asked whether the participants make use of sorting options on online reviewing platforms, and more than half (54 %) responded with a 'No'. In the following question though, 87 % claimed sorting options to be user-friendly. Hence, one wonders why the consumers do not make as much use of the sorting option even though they perceive it as user-friendly. There is the possibility of a bias in this question and answer due to the phrasing of the question. The answer possibilities were yes and no, though the field yes asked participants to fill in which sorting options they use. Out of convenience it might be that respondents preferred to choose 'No' in order to have less work and time expense. Though, if this does not or only partly leads to a biased response, on the one hand, usability might not be persuading enough to use the sorting option and hence consumers have other reasons to not make use of those. On the other hand, the disuse of sorting options can be in coherence with respondents who take the video-review or blog as a basis for the purchasing decision (Q1.8/ Q2.1) since those review platforms do not offer sorting options. This will be examined next.

Sorting options for reviews (Q1.8, Q2.1 & Q2.8)

The results to the choice of reviewing platforms (Q1.8) will be matched with the respondents that do not make use of sorting options (see Appendix, cross table 5). However, no coherence can be found between those participants who do not use sorting options and at the same time prefer platforms, like blogs and video-sharing sites, where sorting options are not available. Also a matching with Q2.1 does not find any coherence. Hence, no explanation can be found for the high number of respondents not using sorting options.

Self-disclosure (Q1.8, Q2.1 & Q2.12)

The following analyzes whether there is a consistency between the users who have voted a detailed profile or identity of the review author as credible (Q2.12) and those who have chosen platforms where a profile is shown in detail (mainly blog, as well as video-sharing platform). Hence, Q1.8 and Q2.12 will be matched (see Appendix, cross table 6). From the whole population 73 % regard self-disclosure as credible. When comparing with the choice of platforms in Q1.8 no big differences can be noticed between the platform choices. Retail websites which do not show detailed profiles of the review authors lay even a little above 73 % (76 %) by the ones who consider self-disclosure as credible and the choice of blogs who show high self-disclosure, a little below with 71 %. Only video

sharing platforms confirm the assumption slightly, since these show a detailed profile and the choice is made by 80 % of those respondents perceiving a detailed profile as credible. Though, when matching with Q2.1 which actually shows images of the reviews, the coherence can be confirmed. The first image of a retail website, not showing a profile is voted by 65 % while the video review and blog review are voted by 85 and 80 respectively of the ones perceiving a profile as credible. Therefore, it can be concluded that those participants who were more attracted by the reviews showing a profile, confirmed their choice by classifying self-disclosure in a review as credible.

The matching of results gave further insights in review function characteristics on platforms and their impact on consumer decisions. Hereafter the results will be discussed.

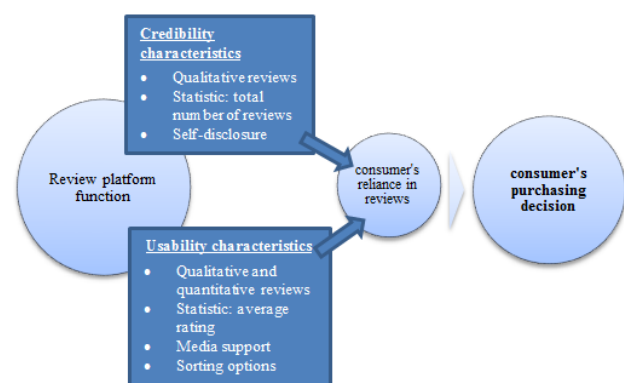
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study confirms that reviews are highly popular among consumers considering a purchase: 98 % of the sample population check reviews and 60% do this often or quite often. However, online reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions only when consumers' reliance on online reviews is sufficiently high when they make purchase decisions. Consumers' reliance on reviews is dependent on and influenced by the format characteristics of the review and the online review system design (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). To increase consumers' reliance on reviews, the objectives of the different platforms should be to build trust for the consumer, promote website and service quality, facilitate member matching and offer consumers sufficient information as well as a user friendly design (Dellarocas, 2010; Huang & Benyoucef, 2012). Hence, online review platform design moderates reviews and the consumer's reliance and purchasing decisions. Two categories of review format characteristics could be established: usability and credibility characteristics. These characteristics were further surveyed in the questionnaire in order to solve the engineering design problem for consumer review platforms and the impact of the function characteristic on consumer purchasing decisions.

Firstly, consumer's motives to search for reviews were identified in the literature as personal and social motives, more precisely as Informational behavior, Risk reduction, Quality seeking and Social belonging. The platform choices thereby differ, as well as the platform's review function characteristics. The survey results confirm the presence of various review function characteristics and their influence on consumers. The platform categories found in the literature could be confirmed through the respondents in the survey as the online consumer review platforms that consumers use in practice; retail websites are the most used review platforms for checking online reviews. The combination of shopping and checking reviews for the product, seems to be appealing due to its convenience. Nevertheless, when consumers choose for a review function, they often look for additional characteristics than only those offered on retail (or independent) websites. Further, it can be said that no one of the platforms identified in the study entails all the review function characteristics which consumers regard as usable or credible. The findings indicate that a mixture of qualitative and quantitative reviews seems attracting to consumers, qualitative reviews can be accounted as most credible and user-friendly. Additionally, the review function characteristic of media support, especially in addition to a written text is increasing the usability of a website as well as for some consumers the credibility. Furthermore, self-disclosure in the form of a visible identity of the review's author is an

important characteristic of a review function due to its credibility. Also, statistics which give an overview for the consumer on the reviews, like the total number of reviews given for a certain product, increase the credibility of reviews and its platform. A statistic about the average rating of all reviews for the product enhances usability. Moreover, sorting options seem to make review platforms more credible; however, users do not seem to make use of them as much. The reason for this could not be solved in this research. Due to the perception as usefulness though, it is advisable to include this option on a review platform.

The study indicates that credibility and usability are important characteristics for online platforms and the consumer's reliance in reviews displayed on these. Qualitative reviews are more likely preferred by consumers than quantitative ones. The former are chosen due to its credibility while the later are chosen due to its usability. Conclusively, credibility is the determining characteristic for reliability in reviews, while usability should not be ignored since it can also be regarded as important for platform and review choice. A platform with all influencing function characteristics combined would entail usability and credibility characteristics whereby special attention should be paid to the presence of credibility ones. Model 1 shows the influence of review function characteristics on consumers purchasing decisions. The characteristics of highest influence on consumer purchasing decisions are shown and demonstrate the function characteristics which would have to present on an ideal review platform for a consumer's reliance in its reviews.



Model 1. Impact of review characteristics on consumer purchasing decisions

From a company's perspective, the growing popularity of online reviews affects a wide range of management activities and takes information control from companies and gives it away to the consumer. Though, the Web 2.0 makes it possible to follow and protocol CGC and herewith identifies points for improvement as in improving the quality of goods or services. Monitoring and analytics nonetheless have to be planned and focused systematically and precisely. To do so effectively, companies need to understand the phenomenon of online consumer reviews and online consumer review platforms. Knowing the online review platforms of importance and the review function characteristics influencing consumers can be hereby regarded as of utmost priority. Negative information about a company's service or product can be spread rapidly and to an unlimited number of people on several platforms. Investing in customer satisfaction is hence the one side of preventing the company from risks (Dellarocas, 2003). On the other side, learning about review function characteristics and their influence can lead companies to invest in new marketing concepts. Cooperation with online review platforms can be made, since platforms can, for example, influence the

readability of reviews through their design of the review function as in sorting options automatically applied. This is for example the case with the 'most helpful' reviews appearing first on certain platforms leading the reader to specific reviews. Further consumer promotions animating to review the product in certain ways can influence the presence on review platforms of companies and with the review function characteristics applied correctly influence other consumers.

From a platform's perspective, knowing the preferred review function characteristics of consumers, can lead to increased platform use when applied. Further, as it became clear throughout this research, none of the online review platforms has all the review function characteristics that influence consumers or are desired by those. Accordingly, it is advisable to create a new online consumer review platform combining the different characteristics as shown in Model 1. Additionally, constant monitoring of new market trends by companies as well as platforms is advisable, as the web is constantly developing further and new platforms are rapidly emerging.

From a consumer's perspective, review platforms increase market transparency and make purchasing less risky. Firstly, understanding the consumer's wants and impacts of reviews, makes platforms adapt to them and offer an even better use of reviews. Secondly however, as companies understand consumers better, they gain more power to manipulate.

Conclusively, not one review function characteristic has the most influence in consumer purchasing decisions but some credibility as well as usability characteristics are of influence (Model 1). An ideal review platform would have all these characteristics present.

5.1 Future research and implications

Practical

The display of online consumer reviews is of interest to practitioners because consumer perception and behavior are significantly influenced by review mechanisms. First, companies need to identify their existing e-commerce and presence of reviews on online review platforms. With the knowledge of the review function characteristics and influence factors, companies are given the opportunity to broaden and deepen their perspective on reviews. Development of managerial strategies that allow companies to effectively benefit from consumer reviews, such as efficient monitoring, can and should be fabricated. Review platform design is advised to further research possibilities to combine review functions and platforms to create one where consumer's desires and main influence factors are included. Continues monitoring of trends is of importance and can be done through following future literature concerning these topics.

A further investment in the future can be conducted in the field of applying reviews more intensively in offline purchases. Many consumers currently look for reviews online prior an offline purchase. Though, some, when shopping offline and finding a product they would like to purchase do not purchase it because they would like to check reviews in advance. Hence, offline stores, especially those selling electronics, currently loose many consumers to online stores – the need of consumers to check other consumer's opinions prior might be one of the reasons. Offline stores can therefore invest in displaying reviews in stores and work on developing ideas and prototypes to give the consumer the secureness to purchase at their store.

Theoretical

The present research could be further improved with a bigger sample and another population to make the results more reliable. Additionally, new platforms are constantly emerging,

which is why this research can be further investigated in the future. An interesting finding in this research was the review function characteristic of sorting options which had contradicting findings. Therefore, future research in this field is highly advised to further research this phenomenon. Moreover, recently, it was found that many reviews are biased. Not only would this fact manipulate and change the current results, since according to Chua and Banerjee (2015) consumers can not distinguish helpful reviews from frivolous or biased ones, but also does this fact offer room for future research. Also, reviews on social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram, which were not investigated in this paper, are increasing and open a new field of future research due to its high impact on consumer decisions. An additional research in the field of reviews and review function and platform design can focus on customer retention measures. Retaining customer costs less than acquiring a new one (DiMauro & Bulmer, 2014). Hence it might be interesting to see what role reviews play in retaining key customers. The power of brand loyalty is an important factor for retaining consumers, though normally consumers look for reviews when there is uncertainty and need of information for the product. For further researches or experiments, consumers who make use of reviews often or quite often, would give a good example. These consumers have a higher influence due to their frequent use but at the same time represent users who use reviews less frequently in a way that they use the same categories of platforms.

5.2 Limitations

Several limitations in this research can be resolved in future research. The Bachelor thesis was carried out with limited time and capabilities. No entire research could hence be conducted due to a lack of time and resources. A time scope of ten weeks was given to conduct the complete research. Due to this lack, not all online opinion platforms where reviews take place could be considered. A specific definition of reviews and review platforms was done in order to decrease the number of possible platforms. Though, the chosen platforms were confirmed by the survey and seem to be the most used ones. However, for example Facebook was named as the most used social media tool and was not considered even though numerous CGC and opinions take place since reviews are not clearly distinguished there. The same goes for consumer opinion forums. Furthermore, factors affecting consumer readership and influence aside from review functions and platforms could be explored more thoroughly and were ignored in this paper. It is advised to expand on this model and research further, since the generalizability is limited due to the sample population being mostly students and rather young and solely of certain countries. The sample should therefore be extended by random sampling. Also reliability and validity is limited and can therefore be seen as a weakness of this research. Further engaging in cross-cultural comparisons to improve the understanding of the research implications is advised. In the future, the topic of the research and its results might have changed due to the steadily growing and changing Web 2.0.

For the survey, no professional tools or more attractive and additional incentives for the collection of results were available. The questionnaire was self-created and hence the author's formulations could have been misunderstood. Additionally, not all respondents were native English speakers. The sample size was rather small and respondents were mostly from Western Europe. Though, due to convenience sampling no equal amount of consumers in terms of geographical facts was reached. Moreover, due to the different nationalities, especially those respondents from non-European countries might have different perceptions since the internet and social media, as well as

online shopping might play a different role in their countries. Results might hence be biased. Due the fact that the survey was conducted online, there was a limited control of situational effects and participants had no chance to ask questions when obscurities existed. Though, an online survey can be regarded as appropriate for this study since it is the best way to gain many insights in a short time with few resources.

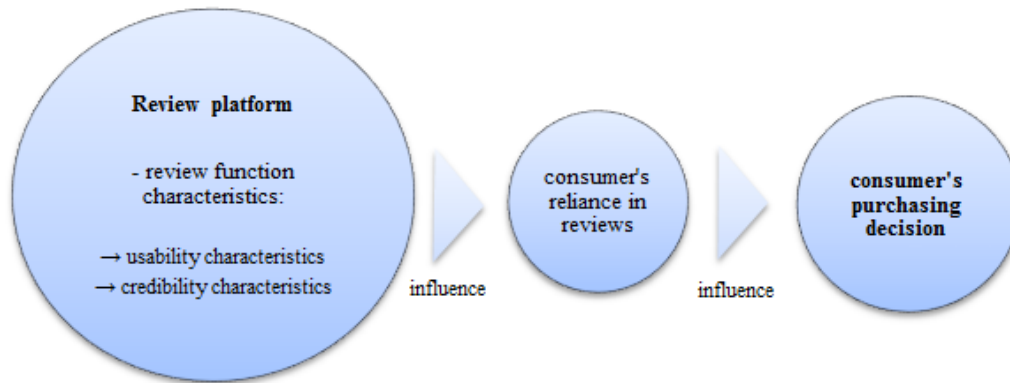
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7. APPENDIX

Figure 1.: Operationalization: Review function characteristics' influence on consumer purchasing decisions



7.1 Questionnaire

Bachelor Thesis 2015

WIN A 15 € AMAZON OR BOL.COM GIFT CARD (Your choice) The four of us are currently writing our thesis and need your help! It would be amazing if you could fill in our questionnaire and thereby become part of our research. Every single response makes a big difference for us. We would be so grateful! All responses are handled anonymously and confidentially! The entry of your e-mail address in the end is voluntary and will only be used to contact you in case of winning. Julia Diekmann, Gina Gräfinholt, Jennifer Schönau & Nina I. Holleschovsky

Age

Gender

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

Nationality:

- Dutch (1)
- German (2)
- US-American (3)
- Other: (4) _____

Current main occupation:

- Student (1)
- Self-employed (2)
- Employed (3)
- Unemployed (4)
- Other: (5) _____

Which social media platforms do you use?(Multiple answers are possible)

- Facebook (1)
- Twitter (2)
- LinkedIn / Xing (3)
- Instagram (4)
- Pinterest (5)
- YouTube (6)
- Blogs (7)
- Other: (8) _____

Have you ever checked online customer reviews/ opinions before purchasing a product?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

How often are you checking online customer reviews before a product purchase?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Quite Often (4)
- Very Often (5)

When looking for product reviews what platforms do you mostly choose? (Multiple answers are possible)

- Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon) (1)
- Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com; revoo.com) (2)
- Video platforms (e.g. YouTube) (3)
- Personal (reviewing) blogs (4)
- Other: (5) _____

IGNORING THE CONTENT OF THE TEXTS/ VIDEO: Please choose the review below which you would choose as a basis for your product buying decision (Example purchase: iPhone)

- Image:Amazon (1)
- Image:Youtube (2)
- Image:Blog (3)

Which review of the ones above seems most credible to you?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)

Which review of the ones above seems most user-friendly to you?

- 1 (1)
- 2 (2)
- 3 (3)

What kind of online reviews do you use as a basis for your buying decision? (Multiple answers possible)

- Qualitative (written description or video) (1)
- Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5) (2)

Which kind of review do you consider as more credible?

- Qualitative (written description or video) (1)
- Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5) (2)

What kind of review do you consider as more user-friendly?

- Qualitative (written description or video) (1)
- Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5) (2)

Media support (photo / video / sound) make a review more .. ? (Multiple answers possible)

- credible (1)
- user-friendly (2)
- none of the two above (3)

Reviewing platforms mostly offer sorting or filtering options (helpfulness / relevance, date, rating, view count). Do you choose to use those options? If yes, which?

- Yes (1) _____
- No (2)

Does a sorting option for reviews make the review platform more user-friendly?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

I consider an overview of all reviews in the form of a summary statistic (e.g. average star rating) as... ? (Multiple answers possible)

- Credible (1)
- User-friendly (2)
- none of the two above (3)

I consider statistics about the total number of reviews existing for a product as ...? (Multiple answers possible)

- Credible (1)
- User-friendly (2)
- none of two above (3)

Does a review appear more credible to you when a detailed profile / identity of the user, who has created the review is visible?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

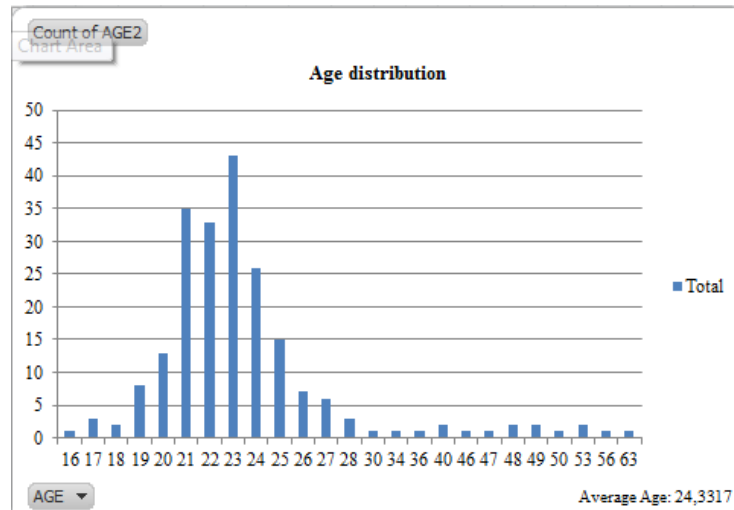
If yes, which profile characteristics of the reviewer are important to you? (Multiple answers possible)

- Member activity statistics like the number of reviews the user has created in total or his/her duration of membership (1)
- Personal characteristics like the user's interests, education or friendships (2)

7.2 Questionnaire: Population Statistics

Statistic	Value
Respondents	211

Q1.1. Age:



Q1.2. Gender:

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Male	<div style="width: 43.60%;"></div>	92	43.60%
2	Female	<div style="width: 56.40%;"></div>	119	56.40%
	Total		211	100.00%

Q1.3. Nationality:








#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Dutch	<div style="width: 14.22%;"></div>	30	14.22%
2	German	<div style="width: 62.09%;"></div>	131	62.09%
3	US-American	<div style="width: 5.69%;"></div>	12	5.69%
4	Other:	<div style="width: 18.01%;"></div>	38	18.01%
	Total		211	100.00%

Q1.4. Occupation:



#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Student	<div style="width: 77.25%;"></div>	163	77.25%
2	Self-employed	<div style="width: 2.84%;"></div>	6	2.84%
3	Employed	<div style="width: 16.59%;"></div>	35	16.59%
4	Unemployed	<div style="width: 2.37%;"></div>	5	2.37%
5	Other:	<div style="width: 0.95%;"></div>	2	0.95%
	Total		211	100.00%

7.3 Questionnaire: Social Media behavior and use of reviews

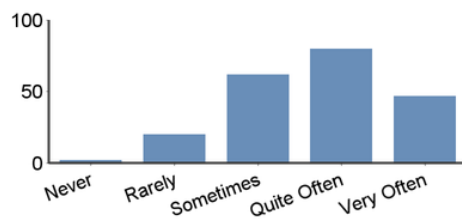
Q1.5. Use of social media platforms

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Facebook		207	98.10%
2	Twitter		46	21.80%
3	LinkedIn / Xing		95	45.02%
4	Instagram		98	46.45%
5	Pinterest		42	19.91%
6	YouTube		148	70.14%
7	Blogs		28	13.27%
8	Other:		12	5.69%
	Total		676	100.00%

Q1.6. Have the surveyed persons ever checked online reviews

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Yes		206	97.63%
2	No		5	2.37%
	Total		211	100.00%

Q1.7. How often check the surveyed persons reviews

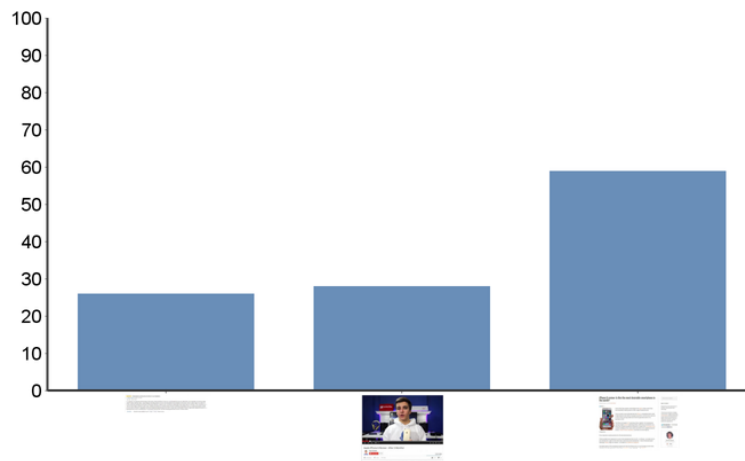


Q1.8. Platforms chosen by the sample when looking at product reviews

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon)		172	81.52%
2	Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com; revoo.com)		117	55.45%
3	Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)		79	37.44%
4	Personal (reviewing) blogs		66	31.28%
5	Other:		6	2.84%
	Total		440	100.00%

7.4 Questionnaire: review characteristics

Q2.1. First impression review choice prior a product purchase (example purchase: iPhone)



Q2.2. Most credible review of the ones above (1: Retail/ Independent review, 2= video review, 3= blog review)

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	1	<div style="width: 31.28%;"></div>	66	31.28%
2	2	<div style="width: 22.27%;"></div>	47	22.27%
3	3	<div style="width: 46.45%;"></div>	98	46.45%
	Total		211	100.00%



Q2.3. Most user-friendly review of the ones above

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	1	<div style="width: 23.22%;"></div>	49	23.22%
2	2	<div style="width: 54.98%;"></div>	116	54.98%
3	3	<div style="width: 21.80%;"></div>	46	21.80%
	Total		211	100.00%



Q2.4. Qualitative or quantitative review as a basis for purchasing decision

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Qualitative (written description or video)	<div style="width: 86.26%;"></div>	182	86.26%
2	Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)	<div style="width: 45.02%;"></div>	95	45.02%
	Total		277	100.00%

Q2.5. More credible review (qualitative or quantitative)

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Qualitative (written description or video)		165	78.20%
2	Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)		46	21.80%
	Total		211	100.00%

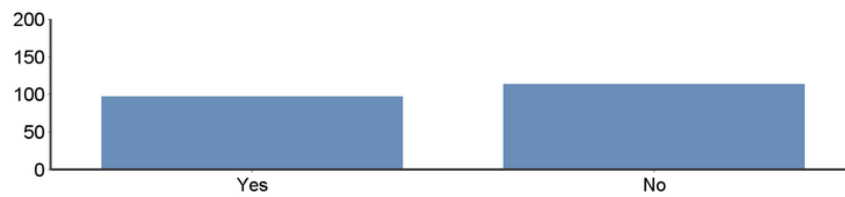
Q2.6. More user-friendly review (qualitative or quantitative)

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Qualitative (written description or video)		115	54.50%
2	Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)		96	45.50%
	Total		211	100.00%

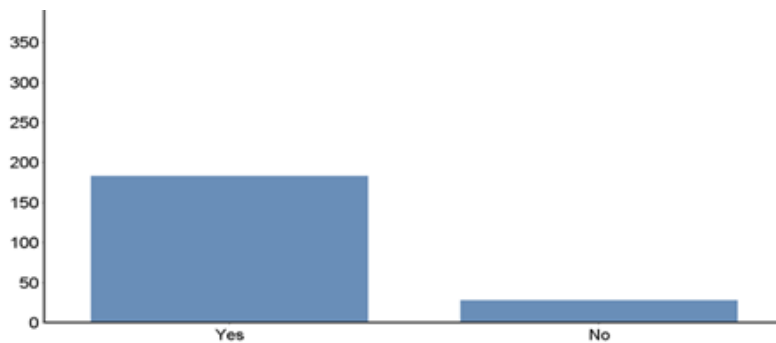
Q2.7. Media support (photo/ sound/ video)

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	credible		89	42.18%
2	user-friendly		146	69.19%
3	none of the two above		27	12.80%
	Total		262	100.00%

Q2.8. Use of sorting options for reviews on review platforms



Q2.9. Does a sorting option for review make a review platform more user-friendly?



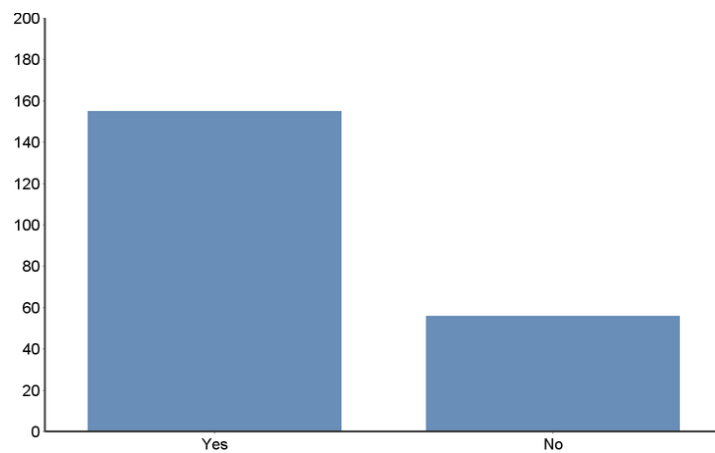
Q.2.10. Summary statistics

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Credible		82	38.86%
2	User-friendly		156	73.93%
3	none of the two above		24	11.37%
	Total		262	100.00%

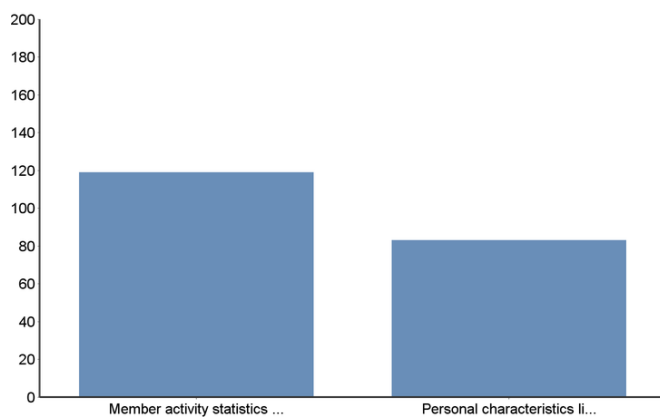
Q2.11. Statistics about review volume (total number of reviews)

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Credible		127	60.19%
2	User-friendly		83	39.34%
3	none of two above		42	19.91%
	Total		252	100.00%

Q2.12. Does a detailed profile/ self-disclosure of the review author make the review more credible?



Q2.13. Important profile characteristics of the review author



7.5 Survey Analysis

Cross table 1. : Q1.7. + Q1.8.

	How often are you checking online customer reviews before a product purchase?					Total
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Quite Often	Very Often	
Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon)	4	15	70	119	66	274
Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com; revoo.com)	1	14	47	69	44	175
Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)	0	3	34	43	40	120
Personal (reviewing) blogs	0	3	32	36	37	108
Other:	2	2	4	5	2	15
Total	7	27	91	137	77	339

Cross table 2. : Q2.1 + Q2.2

		IGNORING THE CONTENT OF THE TEXTS/ VIDEO: Please choose the review below which you would choose...			Total
		Image:Amazon	Image:Youtube	Image:Blog2	
most credible to you?	1	24	9	7	40
	2	4	21	7	32
	3	4	5	48	57
	Total	32	35	62	129

Cross table 3: Q2.1 + Q 2.2

		IGNORING THE CONTENT OF THE TEXTS/ VIDEO: Please choose the review below which you would choose...			Total
		Image:Amazon	Image:Youtube	Image:Blog2	
most user-friendly to you?	1	12	10	15	37
	2	13	23	28	64
	3	7	2	19	28
	Total	32	35	62	129

Cross table 4: Q2.4 + Q2.5 / Q2.6

		What kind of online reviews do you use as a basis for your buying decision? (multiple answers p...		Total
		Qualitative (written description or video)	Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)	
r as more credible?	Qualitative (written description or video)	165	67	182
	Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)	39	35	52
	Total	204	102	234
s more user-friendly?	Qualitative (written description or video)	114	45	126
	Quantitative (a scale/ star rating from e.g. 1 to 5)	90	57	108
	Total	204	102	234

Image 1: Importance of review volume, addition to Q2.11

Below you can see an overview of restaurants available you can order Pizza from. Which restaurant would you choose?

- Image:El Patrino Pizza (1)
- Image:Pizza Empire (2)
- Image:Zonzon (3)
- Image:Pizza Max (4)

Why did you chose this restaurant?Multiple answers are possible.

- Logo (1)
- Minimum order amount (2)
- Volume of reviews (3)
- Special offer (4)
- Top Restaurant (5)
- Other (6) _____

Cross table 5: Q1.8 + Q2.8

		When looking for product reviews what platforms do you mostly choose?(Multiple answers are possible)					Total
		Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon)	Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com; revoo.com)	Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)	Personal (reviewing) blogs	Other:	
sorting or filtering options price, date,...	Yes	88	63	44	39	8	106
	No	102	64	46	38	2	128
	Total	190	127	90	77	10	234

Cross table 6: Q.18 / Q2.1 + Q2.12

	Does a review appear more credible to you when a detailed profile / identity of the user, who h...		Total
	Yes	No	
Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon)	145	45	190
Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com; revoo.com)	93	34	127
Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)	72	18	90
Personal (reviewing) blogs	55	22	77
Other:	5	5	10
Total	170	64	234
Image:Amazon	21	11	32
Image:Youtube	30	5	35
Image:Blog2	50	12	62
Total	101	28	129