WHO HAS WRITTEN IT?

HOW REVIEWER-READER SIMILARITY MODERATES THE FACTUALITY OF ONLINE REVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

It is increasingly common for consumers to consult online reviews before making their (online) purchase choice. This is especially true for holiday decision-making processes and hospitality services, as trip planners tend to rely on others' experiences for their decision making to reduce their perceived risk due to the experiential nature of tourism products. Previous research has demonstrated that a recipient's information evaluation is a crucial determinant of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) adoption. This paper contributes to the existing body of research by focusing on potential influence factors on information evaluation for which either ambiguous findings exist in the literature or which can be considered as an understudied aspect of eWOM: perceived similarity of the reviewer as a source characteristic and review style as a message characteristic.

Literature offers contradictory findings about the influence of review style, which may result from its context dependence. Based on this reasoning we expect that similarity moderates the effect of review style. Reviews that focus on simply describing the facts and do not refer to the feelings of the reviewer might be more influential over consumers' decisions when the information source is perceived similar, or, in other words, individuals may consider the advice of others who are "like-them" even more if it is factually written because they rely on hard facts. Hence we expect factual written reviews to be more influential when the reviewer is similar to the recipient. At the same time, more emotional and experiential reviews might be better evaluated if the reader sees himself as different from the reviewer and needs more information to understand and evaluate the review.

In two experimental studies we investigate how content and content structure influence the trustworthiness and perceived usefulness of the review and the attitude toward the reviewed business. Study 1 uses a 2 review style (factual vs. emotional) x 2 similarity (similar vs. dissimilar) x 2 valence (positive vs. negative) design with 174 undergraduate and graduate students. Negative valenced reviews were perceived as more trustworthy and more useful. The results also indicate that emotional reviews were seen as more trustworthy, but only in the dissimilar condition. A 3-way interaction was found for perceived usefulness of the review. In the positive condition emotional reviews were seen as more useful if the reader was similar to the reviewer. On the other hand, in the negative condition factual written reviews were evaluated better if the reader was similar to the reviewer whereas emotional written reviews were perceived as more useful if the reviewer was dissimilar to the reader.

Study 2 again investigates the moderating effect of similarity but this time only positively valenced reviews for restaurants were used. Furthermore another approach to manipulate factuality was used by showing a more experiential (so more subjective) and less experiential (so more objective/factual) review. The results with 130 undergraduate and graduate students tend to confirm the findings of study one. While factual reviews did not differ between the similar and dissimilar conditions, more experiential reviews again were superior if the reviewer is dissimilar to the reader.

Summarizing, our data suggest that less factual written (thus more experiential respectively emotional written reviews) are better evaluated if the reader is not similar to the reviewer. The same is true for the attitudes towards the reviewed business. Altogether, the more similar the writer is to the reader the more important are factual reviews.

References available upon request