

The Pennsylvania State University
The Graduate School
College of Health and Human Development

**CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE REVIEW ORDERING:
A FAIRNESS PERSPECTIVE**

A Thesis in
Hospitality Management

by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Science

December 2018

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ABSTRACT

Information overload forces online platforms to try to effectively display customer reviews. Yet, research on review order and its influence on customers is scant. This study examines how the review order (recommended by the website/company, helpful votes, and date of review) influences customer perceptions and behaviors. We found that listing reviews based on the “recommended” status (vs. date of review) leads to higher levels of negative motive inferences. Moreover, ordering by helpful votes is perceived differently by customers searching for hotel rooms vs. consumer goods due to the congruity effect. Furthermore, review order has an impact on customers’ purchase intentions through the mediation of inferred motive and perceived fairness. Our findings indicate that online travel agencies might want to carefully consider how they display online reviews on their websites. Adopting “recommended” or “helpful” ordering can harm customers’ trust.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Marriott Foundation for the funding of this research.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“With over 500 million candid traveler reviews, we can help you make the right choice when you shop for hotels, restaurants, and attractions.” – TripAdvisor (2018)

With the development of Internet technologies, a growing number of customers use electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to obtain information about a product, service, or a company. Online reviews, as an essential form of eWOM, are becoming one of the most influential information sources for customers when making purchase decisions (Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; L. Zhang, Wu, & Mattila, 2016). While customers of manufactured products read online reviews on product-selling websites such as Amazon.com, hotel guests and travelers mostly rely on reviews on travel websites such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com. Research shows that 69% of travelers are influenced by travel review websites when planning a trip (Collie, 2014) and 40% of US customers read online reviews before booking hotel rooms (BrightLocal, 2017). Customers of experience products are more affected by online reviews than those of search products since the quality of an experience product is difficult to evaluate until the actual consumption (Bae & Lee, 2011; C. Park & Lee, 2009) occurs. Online reviews are particularly important in the hospitality and tourism industry for selling intangible services. Online reviews document both positive and negative post-consumption evaluations made by previous customers and have a massive impact on prospective customers. Various studies have revealed the effect of hotel online reviews on customers' booking intention (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Tsao, Hsieh, Shih, & Lin, 2015), RevPAR (Phillips, Zigan, Silva, & Schegg, 2015), and room sales (Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009).

The importance of online reviews has gained growing recognition from both the industry and academic research (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014) and has motivated companies to manage online reviews in order to improve their business performance. Some companies have started to hire specialized personnel or offer incentives for customers to write fake reviews about their business or their competitors (Sungwoo Choi, Mattila, Van Hoof, & Quadri-Felitti, 2017; Dellarocas, 2006; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Fake reviews are unethical means to promote a business and may undermine the effectiveness of eWOM mechanism surmounting information asymmetry between sellers and buyers in e-commerce (Malbon, 2013). Previous studies have examined fake reviews in terms of reviewers' motivation to post fake reviews (Sungwoo Choi et al., 2017), benefits of fake reviews for companies (Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier, 2014) and customers (Dellarocas, 2006), differences between fake and truthful reviews (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009), and customers' skepticism toward online reviews (X. J. Zhang, Ko, & Carpenter, 2016). However, another type of manipulation of online reviews, the manipulation of the order in which online reviews are displayed to potential customers, has been neglected.

The shift of word-of-mouth (WOM) information from offline to online has created a high volume of online reviews, resulting in information overload for customers (Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2011; L. Huang, Tan, Ke, & Wei, 2014; D. H. Park & Lee, 2008). Previous research suggests that an effective display of reviews might ease customers' decision-making processes (Baek, Ahn, & Choi, 2012; L. Huang et al., 2014; D. H. Park, Lee, & Han, 2007), and online review websites have adopted different display sequences as a default option. For instance, TripAdvisor presents hotel reviews by the time of the review while Booking.com often lists "Featured Reviews" at the top. The review order can also influence customers' attitudes toward the product (Baek et al., 2012; Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2011; L. Huang et al., 2014; Pan & Zhang, 2011; Qiu & Wang, 2011), mainly due to the primacy effect (Pennington, 2012). However, there is scant research examining customers' perceptions of the review ranking mechanisms. If customers feel that they are being

intentionally manipulated by a certain marketing tactic, they might alter their responses to the persuasion message (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Isaac & Grayson, 2017). This research aims to examine customers' perceptions of different ordering displays of online reviews in terms of inferred motive and perceived fairness. The consequent purchase intention is also investigated to better understand the potential risk of manipulating the online review order.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

WOM and eWOM

As the oldest and one of the most important channels for information dissemination among people (Rui, Liu, & Whinston, 2010), WOM has received massive attention from academia. Traditionally, WOM was defined narrowly as oral and face-to-face communication about a product or service between non-commercial entities (Arndt, 1967). Contemporary literature often adopts a broader definition of WOM such as “the communication between customers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence” (Litvin et al., 2008, p. 459). Customers’ involvement with a product or service during consumption will engender their positive or negative affective responses, which in turn create inner tension that needs to be channeled by spreading WOM (Westbrook, 1987). Perceived as a non-commercial information source of products or services, WOM possesses high credibility and hence has a significant influence on customer decisions (Richins, 1983). Compared to marketing information released by the seller, WOM has the distinctive ability to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty (Lutz & Reilly, 1974; Murray, 1991).

Despite being extremely persuasive, traditional WOM is restricted within social network boundaries (Chan & Ngai, 2011). Today, the advancements of Internet technologies and the popularity of e-commerce have shifted traditional WOM to the online environment. Product or service evaluations can now be easily communicated online, enabling the information to reach a vast audience (Brown & Hayes, 2008).

A widely adopted definition of eWOM is “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company which is made available to

multitude of the people and institutes via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). eWOM can be spread through various channels such as review websites, social media, and blogs. Among them, online reviews may be the most essential form of eWOM. Studies often refer to eWOM and online reviews as two interchangeable terms and have drawn conclusions on the role of eWOM by analyzing online reviews’ impact (D. H. Park & Lee, 2008; Qiu & Wang, 2011; Tsao et al., 2015; Ye et al., 2009). It can thus be implied that the online review is widely recognized as a representative of eWOM. Although less personal, eWOM is considered as more powerful than traditional WOM due to its high availability and vast reach of audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In the hotel and tourism context, Ye et al. (2009) analyzed hotel reviews and online booking data retrieved from Ctrip.com and found that positive online reviews and high star ratings can boost the number of online hotel bookings. Phillips et al. (2015) also revealed the positive relationship between regional star ratings and RevPAR by examining the impact of online reviews at a regional level. The online review impacts hotel performance by influencing customers’ attitudes and choices. According to Tsao et al. (2015), review valence (positive vs. negative) can significantly influence customers’ booking intentions and this effect is enhanced when the review quantity is large.

The importance of eWOM requires managers to effectively use eWOM as a marketing communication tool. Some companies utilize fake reviews to promote their business or to attack competitors (Sungwoo Choi et al., 2017; Dellarocas, 2006; Litvin et al., 2008). Fake reviews, although being difficult to detect by reading them (Jindal & Liu, 2008; Mukherjee, Liu, & Glance, 2012), have been widely exposed as a bad phenomenon. For example, *The Times* newspaper in the UK disclosed that some hotel owners paid up to £10,000 to specialized agencies to improve travel review rankings and slander their competitors (McCracken, 2011). As a result, e-commerce customers may feel skepticism toward eWOM (X. J. Zhang et al., 2016), and such a

loss of confidence in eWOM can severely undermine the economic efficiency of e-commerce (Malbon, 2013).

eWOM manipulations are not restricted to the utilization of fake online reviews. Some customers cannot post their unfavorable reviews on a website because the company does not want to publish negative reviews on its products (Bhattacharya, 2017). Rank ordering of information provided to customers is another form of online information manipulation (Malbon, 2013). However, rare attention has been paid to the order of online reviews and its consequences.

Online Review Order

Review order is the sequence in which reviews are displayed. Ordering online reviews can be helpful for customers and beneficial for companies by influencing customer attitudes toward their products. D. H. Park et al. (2007) suggested that online reviews should be ordered by quality rather than by date as reviews of high quality can increase purchase intention. Qiu and Wang (2011) found that presenting reviews by valence expands customers' short-term memory so that they can recall more information, especially in case of positive reviews. The underlying reason is the order effect. A primacy effect may occur when people form product appraisal more consistent with the first review(s) they see (Kardes & Herr, 1990; Pennington, 2012). Listing favorable or high-quality reviews first can positively influence customers' attitudes towards the product.

While many review websites allow customers to change the review sorting method and display reviews in the way they prefer, most customers read reviews in the default mode (Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2012). There are three main types of review rankings: 1) recommended by the website/company, 2) most helpful and 3) date of review. The recommended ordering lists the website's featured reviews first (e.g., Booking.com). The helpful

ordering utilizes helpful votes generated by other customers and lists the most helpful reviews first (e.g., Amazon.com). The date of review ordering lists the most recent reviews first (e.g., TripAdvisor).

When reviews are ordered by “recommendation”, it is unclear why the top reviews are promoted. As shown in Figure 1, when customers read hotel reviews in Booking.com, the “Featured Review” is often listed first, although it is neither the newest nor the most helpful.

A New Zealand 9.2

Featured Review · Reviewed: June 20, 2017

Excellent Location!

😊 · Excellent location, close to Central Park and Broadway entertainment area. The hotel is clean and modern. It was convenient having laundry facilities on the 35th Floor. Our King room on the 31st floor had great city views. Comfortable bed.

Stayed in May 2017

Helpful

Hotel response:

Dear , thank you so much for confirming to others that what a great choice the is! We strive to provide an outs...

[Continue reading](#)

E United States of America 9.6

Reviewed: October 27, 2018

The is a great place to stay while on your adventure to The Big Apple.

😊 · The room was very quiet and clean. A little small but that is probably what most hotel rooms are like in NYC. The staff was so hospitable! Always had a smile! The location was great. Walk out the door and you are in Broadway.

😞 · I really enjoyed the cleanliness and comfort but the room was so small with only one chair. After walking so much, I would have appreciated a chair for each of us.

Stayed in October 2018

Helpful

Figure 1: An example of the recommended ordering in Booking.com.

The website explains the review ordering in an additional “read more” page. “By default, reviews are sorted based on the date of the review and on additional criteria to display the most relevant reviews, including but not limited to: your language, reviews with text, and non-anonymous reviews” (Booking.com, 2018b). The explanation, although indicating the use of additional criteria, fails to clarify how the featured reviews are selected. This ambiguous ordering mechanism can cause skepticism. Since the recommended ordering involves reviews featured by the company, customers may make inferences about the company’s motive (Campbell, 1999b, 2007; Friestad & Wright, 1994). The date of review ordering, on the other hand, does not involve a manipulative intent. We hence suggest that the recommended ordering triggers higher levels of inferred motive compared to those sorted by the date of review.

H1: Ordering “by recommendation” (vs. by date of review) will trigger higher levels of inferred negative motives.

Online reviews are influential in the hospitality and tourism context due to the intangible nature of services (Bae & Lee, 2011). While prior research indicates that product type influences how customers process online review information (C. Park & Lee, 2009), the relationship between product type and online review ordering mechanisms remains unknown.

Product Type

According to Nelson (1974), a product can be classified as either a search type or an experience type. Search products are defined as those whose quality can be judged prior to purchase or consumption. Experience products are characterized by attributes that are hard to evaluate until the product is consumed and experienced despite that some of the attribute information is available. For example, a customer can evaluate a flash drive, a search product, based on attribute information such as storage capacity and interface before actually using the

flash drive. On the other hand, a customer trying to book a hotel room, a typical experience product, will find it difficult to judge different hotels prior to the experience. Due to the experiential nature of hospitality products, the post-purchase evaluation is a matter of taste rather than objective quality (Dai, Chan, & Mogilner, 2017). For example, a microwave oven with higher cooking power is objectively better than others having lower power. However, whether a hotel room with a traditional interior design is better than another with a more modern design largely depends on personal taste. Although some hotel room attributes (e.g., room size) can be objectively evaluated, hotels are often differentiated by taste (Spiller & Belogolova, 2016). While hotel customers actively seek eWOM information to reduce perceived risk (Bansal & Voyer, 2000), the subjective evaluation in eWOM may not be useful to the customer due to different personal tastes.

Recommendations from other customers are considered more trustworthy than information from commercial sources (Crotts, 1999). When ordered by helpful votes (vs. recommended ranking), the listing is based on other customers' feedback, and, as such, it should lead to lower levels of inferred motive. However, when the customer does not agree that the "helpful reviews" are indeed helpful, there is a divergence between the customer's opinion and platform consensus (Wu, Mattila, Wang, & Hanks, 2016). Such incongruity may lead to greater perceptions of negative motives. Prior research shows that extremely positive reviews are more likely to be voted as helpful (A. H. Huang, Chen, Yen, & Tran, 2015). Yet, this effect is moderated by product type. Attribute claims of experience products are more difficult to substantiate, leading to stronger resistance to extreme reviews (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). For customers of experience products, extremely positive reviews are less helpful than reviews with moderated ratings (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010) or negative ratings (Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, & De Ridder, 2011). In sum, customers searching for experience products may disagree that the top-rated reviews are helpful. Hence, when the customer sees an unhelpful review listed at the top

because it is “the most helpful,” the perceived incongruity with the helpful ordering may lead to inferred motive. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Ordering by helpful votes will trigger higher levels of inferred negative motives among customers of experience (vs. search) products.

Inferences of negative motives can lead customers to perceive unfairness with the marketing action. For example, when the price increases without explanations, customers may infer the firm’s motive for the price change and hence perceive the price as unfair (Campbell, 1999b).

Perceived Fairness

Fairness has been broadly studied in the marketing literature (Bolton, Warlop, & Alba, 2003; Campbell, 1999a; Sunmee Choi & Mattila, 2004; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986). Generally, fairness can be defined as a judgment of the extent to which an outcome or the process to reach an outcome are deemed reasonable, acceptable, and just (Bolton et al., 2003; Xia, Monroe, & Cox, 2004). There is some evidence to suggest that revenue management practices with demand-based pricing might be perceived as unfair (Sunmee Choi & Mattila, 2004; Heo, Lee, Mattila, & Hu, 2013). Other pricing mechanisms, such as opaque pricing (i.e. non-disclosure of key attributes of the hotel by online travel agencies), can also be perceived as unfair and may result in customers’ avoidance of the deal (Lee & Jang, 2013). Customers’ willingness to enforce fairness and resist unfairness is common. Kahneman et al. (1986) demonstrated that some people would decline a positive offer and bear the loss because the allocation of the offer was considered unfair. In sum, practitioners should pay attention to perceived fairness because it can influence customer satisfaction (Wu, Mattila, & Han, 2014), negative word-of-mouth (Lii & Sy, 2009; Xia et al., 2004) and (re)purchase intention (Beldona & Namasivayam, 2006).

Based on the fairness literature and attribution theory, Campbell (1999a) demonstrated that perceived fairness mediates the effect of inferred motive on shopping intentions, such that people who inferred that the firm has a negative (vs. positive) motive perceive less fairness in the pricing, and hence report lower shopping intentions. More recently, Campbell (2007) further showed that price changes induce perceived unfairness through inferred motives. We thus put forth the following prediction:

H3: The effect of review ordering (recommended vs. helpful votes vs. date) on customers' purchase intention will be sequentially mediated by inferred motive and perceived fairness.

The conceptual model of this paper is shown in Figure 2.

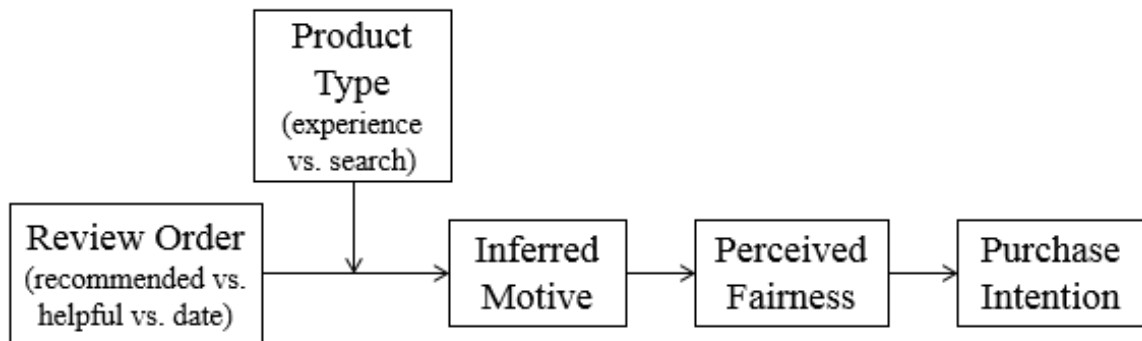


Figure 2: Conceptual model.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Design and Sampling

This study employed a 3 (review order: recommended vs. helpful votes vs. date) \times 2 (product type: experience vs. search) between-subjects design. We targeted adults living in the United States (US) who had experience in both purchasing material products and booking hotels online. Two filtering questions were presented at the beginning of the survey after the informed consent page: “I have purchased products online” and “I have booked a hotel room online.” Only those who answered both questions positively were allowed to proceed.

Two hundred and three US adult participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk for a small monetary compensation and randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. Fifty-six participants who did not pass the attention checks were excluded from further analyses. Three participants were removed due to extremely long completion time (i.e., more than three standard deviations over the mean). Although the sample size was largely reduced in the data cleaning process, the results between the reduced data and full data were similar, except that the interaction between product type and review order on inferred motive became marginally significant. Table 1 shows the *p*-values of the significance tests for the two data sets.

Table 1: Significance tests (*p*-values) of the main ANOVA results.

	Purchase Intention		Perceived Fairness		Inferred Motive		Manipulation Check	
	N=144	N=203	N=144	N=203	N=144	N=203	N=144	N=203
Product	.707	.404	.300	.471	.642	.975	.000	.002
Order	.376	.592	.000	.000	.000	.000	.139	.685
Product*Order	.946	.965	.793	.417	.040	.057	.217	.411

The final sample size used in the analysis was 144. Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents.

	Participants	
	(Total N=144)	%
Gender		
Male	87	60%
Female	57	40%
Age		
18-25	26	18%
26-35	68	47%
36-45	25	17%
46-55	15	10%
56-65	7	5%
66 or above	3	2%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	9	6%
Asian American	9	6%
African American	9	6%
Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)	109	76%
American Indian	2	1%
Alaskan, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander	0	0%
Other	6	4%
Education		
Grade 8 or less	1	1%
Grades 9–11	0	0%
High School or equivalent	23	16%
1 to 3 years of college or technical school	52	36%
College graduation (4 years)	56	39%
Attended or completed graduate school	12	8%

Procedure and Stimuli

Participants were asked to imagine that they needed to buy a new microwave oven (in the search product condition) or book a hotel room (in the experience product condition) (see Appendix A). They were presented with a product page containing some basic product

information (e.g. “LED lighting” for the microwave oven or “Breakfast included” for the hotel room), a picture of the microwave oven or the hotel room, an average review score (4.1 out of 5 (4.1/5) across all conditions to represent a normal rating), and three reviews. For each product, the three reviews were identical across the three ordering conditions in terms of the review score and content. The first review rated the product as 5/5, the second 3/5, and the last one 1/5. The review posting date and the number of helpful votes were manipulated so that they were ranked by recommended (platform featured review first, with a “Featured Review” stamp on the first review), helpful (most helpful reviews first), or date (from the most recent to the oldest). On top of the review section, there was a bar indicating that the reviews were sorted by one of the three ordering types (see Appendix B for the sample product pages as the stimuli). Table 3 presents the number of participants in each condition.

Table 3: Number of participants per condition.

Experimental Condition		Cell size (n)
Product Type	Review Order	
Hotel room	Recommended by the website	18
	Helpful votes	22
	Date of review	31
Microwave oven	Recommended by the website	29
	Helpful votes	20
	Date of review	24

As the dependent variable, participants reported their purchase intention on a 7-point scale (“I am likely to book the hotel room/purchase the microwave oven on this site,” “I am likely to recommend this site to my friends,” and “I am likely to make another booking/purchase from this site if I need it”; $\alpha = 0.83$) adapted from H. Zhang, Lu, Shi, Tang, and Zhao (2012).

Participants then rated the perceived fairness of the review order (unfair/fair, wrong/right, and unreasonable/reasonable; $\alpha = 0.95$) and inferred motive (“The intent of the website platform was

to take advantage of consumers,” “The goal of the website platform was to make profit regardless of the impact on consumers,” and “What is your perception of the review order (sorted by recommended/top rated/date)?” bad/good (this item was reverse coded in the analysis); $\alpha = 0.74$) on a 7-point scale adapted from Campbell (2007). To assess perceived incongruity with reviews with helpful votes, participants reported their perceived helpfulness of each review on a 7-point scale (not helpful/helpful). To check the manipulation of product type, participants read a brief definition of experience and search products and then evaluated either a hotel room or a microwave oven on a 7-point, bipolar scale (search product/experience product). Realism of scenario (“How realistic is this scenario to you?” not at all realistic/very realistic) and demographic information were also measured (see Appendix C for the full list of measurements).

Chapter 4

Results

Supporting the manipulation of product type, the results of a two-way ANOVA on the perceived product type (experience vs. search) showed only the main effect of product type ($M_{\text{hotel}} = 5.17$, $M_{\text{oven}} = 3.86$, $F(1, 138) = 19.02$, $p < 0.001$), such that the hotel room was perceived as an experience product and the microwave oven was considered as a search product. The main effect of review order ($F(2, 138) = 2.00$, $p = 0.14$) and the interaction effect of product type and review order ($F(2, 138) = 1.55$, $p = 0.22$) were not significant. Furthermore, the participants thought the stimuli were realistic ($M = 5.92$) and the perceived realism did not vary across conditions. In conclusion, our manipulations were effective.

Inferred Motive

A two-way ANOVA on inferred motive revealed a significant interaction effect of product type and review order ($F(2, 138) = 3.30$, $p < 0.05$). The main effect of review order was significant ($F(2, 138) = 11.86$, $p < 0.001$) while product type had no significant effect ($p = 0.642$). Planned comparisons showed that the “recommended” ordering triggered higher levels of inferred motive than the date of review ordering in both the hotel room ($M_{\text{recommended}} = 3.83$, $M_{\text{date}} = 2.34$, $p < 0.001$) and the microwave oven ($M_{\text{recommended}} = 3.81$, $M_{\text{date}} = 2.88$, $p < 0.01$) conditions, supporting H1.

When reviews were ranked by helpful votes, participants in the hotel condition inferred higher levels of inferred motives than their counterparts in the microwave oven condition ($M_{\text{hotel}} = 3.82$, $M_{\text{oven}} = 3.02$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, ordering by helpful votes induced higher levels of

inferred motive than ordering by date ($p < 0.001$) and similar to the “recommended” ordering ($p = 0.970$) for participants in the hotel condition. Among participants in the microwave oven condition, the helpful ordering resulted in lower levels of inferred motive than the recommend ordering ($p < 0.05$). This pattern of results, shown in Figure 3, supports H2.

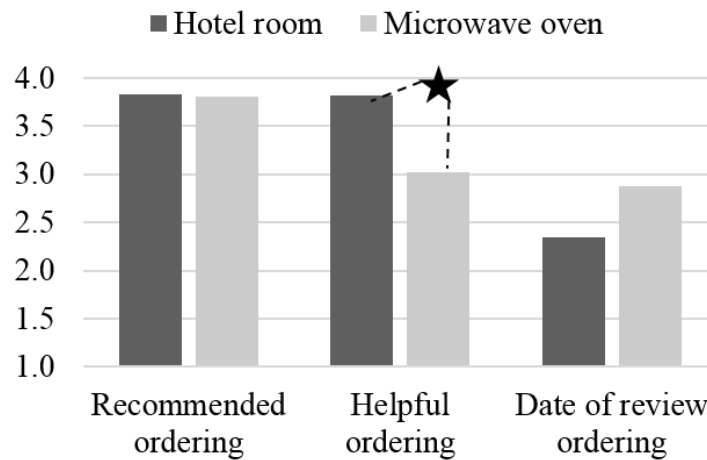


Figure 3: The interaction effect of product types and review orders on inferred motive.

The differential inference ratings for ordering by helpful votes across the two product types can be explained by the congruity effect. We computed the helpful index as the reported score of the first review minus that of the last review. A higher (vs. lower) helpful index score indicates that the participant perceived the top review to be more helpful than the last review. In the ordering by helpful votes condition, the helpful index score implies the participant’s level of congruity with the helpful order. The results of a two-way ANOVA on the helpful index score showed only the main effect of product type ($M_{\text{hotel}} = -0.12$, $M_{\text{oven}} = 1.40$, $F(1, 138) = 17.24$, $p < 0.001$), such that participants in the hotel condition had higher helpful index scores than their counterparts in the microwave oven condition. The main effect of review order ($F(2, 138) = 2.48$, $p = 0.09$) and the interaction effect of product type and review order ($F(2, 138) = 1.00$, $p = 0.37$) were not significant. These results are consistent with previous research (Willemssen et al., 2011) suggesting that extremely positive review are less helpful than negative reviews for customers of

experience products, since the first review was extremely positive (5/5 stars) in our stimuli for all conditions. The pattern of the results is shown in Figure 4.

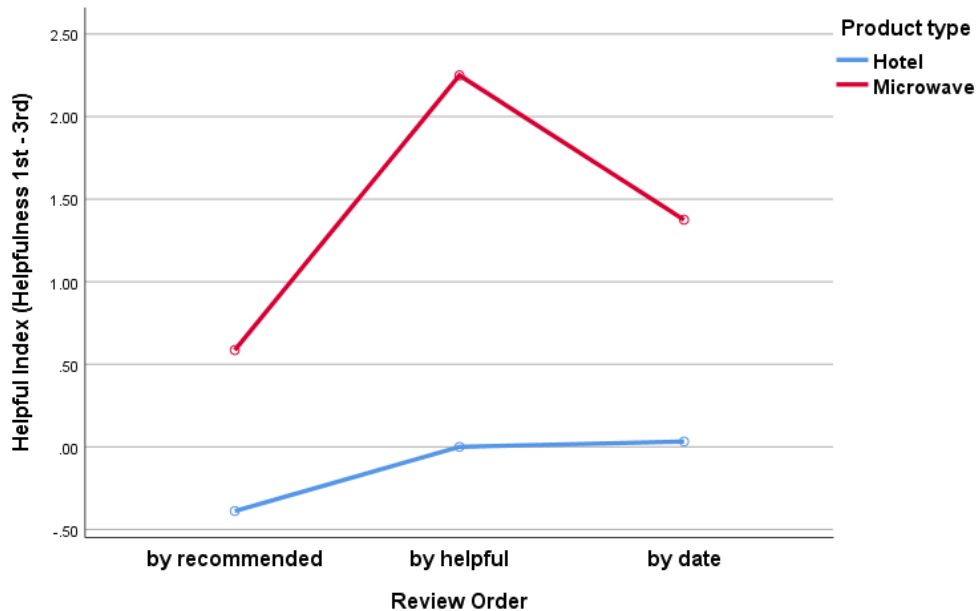


Figure 4: Effects of product type and review order on the helpful index score.

The planned comparison revealed that when reviews were ranked by helpful votes, participants in the hotel condition reported a lower helpful index score ($M_{\text{hotel}} = 0.00$) than their counterparts in the microwave oven condition ($M_{\text{oven}} = 2.25$, $F(1, 138) = 11.37$, $p = 0.001$). In other words, customers searching for a hotel room perceived higher levels of incongruity when presented with ordering by helpful votes. Such incongruity may lead to inferred motive.

The Mediation Effect of Perceived Fairness

Perceived Fairness

The results of a two-way ANOVA on perceived fairness showed only the main effect of review order ($F(2, 138) = 9.59$, $p < 0.001$). The main effect of manipulated product type ($F(1,$

138) = 1.08, $p = 0.30$) and the interaction effect of product type and review order ($F(2, 138) = 0.23, p = 0.79$) were not significant. Post Hoc comparisons revealed that the recommended ordering ($M_{\text{recommended}} = 4.99$) was perceived as less fair than the helpful ordering ($M_{\text{helpful}} = 5.68, p < 0.01$) and the date of review ordering ($M_{\text{date}} = 6.04, p < 0.001$). There was no significant difference between orderings by helpful votes and by date ($p = 0.12$).

Purchase Intention

The results of a two-way ANOVA on purchase intention showed no main effect of review order ($F(2, 138) = 0.99, p = 0.38$) or product type ($F(1, 138) = 0.14, p = 0.71$). There was no interaction effect of product type and review order ($F(2, 138) = 0.06, p = 0.95$).

To test H3, we conducted a serial mediation analysis using the bootstrapping approach (Hayes, 2013; Model 6). Review order was entered as the independent variable, inferred motive and perceived fairness as the serial mediators, and purchase intention as the dependent variable. The analysis created two dummy codes for the contrasts between ordering by helpful votes versus ordering by “recommendation” and ordering by date versus ordering by “recommendation”. Specifically, comparing ordering by helpful votes and ordering by “recommendation” conditions, the indirect effect of review order on purchase intention through inferred motive and perceived fairness was not significant ($\beta = 0.04, SE = 0.04, 95\% CI = [-0.02, 0.13]$). However, comparing ordering by date and ordering by “recommendation” conditions, the indirect effect of review order on purchase intention through inferred motive and perceived fairness was significant ($\beta = 0.14, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI = [0.04, 0.27]$ excluding zero). In sum, the results provide partial support for H3. Specifically, the recommended ordering (vs. the date of review ordering) led to lower purchase intention of the product through higher levels of inferred motives and lower levels of perceived fairness.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Online reviews have attracted an enormous amount of attention in both the industry and academia. Information and recommendations from other customers are particularly important in the hospitality context since it is difficult to evaluate an experience prior to purchase (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Yet, research on the review order and its influence on customers is scant. The main purpose of this research is to identify the effect of different review ordering displays (i.e. recommended vs. helpful votes vs. date) on customers' perceptions of the review order and their purchase intention and to determine whether product type plays a moderating role. The findings suggest that review order and product type interactively influence customers' inferred motive. Our mediation analyses indicate that review ordering mechanisms influence customers' purchase intention through inferred motive and perceived fairness. Specifically, ordering reviews by "company recommendations" (vs. date of review) is likely to trigger inferred motive, thus leading to perceptions of unfairness and lower levels of purchase intention. Furthermore, customers searching for an experience product (e.g., a hotel room) tend to have higher inferred motive perceptions when the reviews are ordered by helpful votes.

Theoretical Implications

The current research contributes to the hospitality literature in several ways. First, it adds to the online review literature by shedding light into customers' responses to different review ordering mechanisms. Prior studies have enhanced our understanding of why customers seek online reviews (Kim, Mattila, & Baloglu, 2011), how customers process online review information (Xie, Miao, Kuo, & Lee, 2011), and the effect of online reviews on customers'

behaviors (Tsao et al., 2015). However, the impact of review orderings on customers' perceptions and behaviors remains unclear. The current work addresses this gap by showing that the ordering mechanism can influence customers' perceptions and purchase intentions. Specifically, listing reviews based on the "recommended" status, compared to ordering by date of review, leads customers to infer negative motives, perceived unfairness of the ordering, and lower purchase intentions toward the product.

Second, this work complements prior research distinguishing between experience products and search products. The importance of online reviews in the hospitality industry is heightened as customers often rely on eWOM to assist their decisions on experiential purchases. Recent research documents the effect of product type on customer evaluations of online reviews (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). The current research shows that product type also influences customers' perceptions of online review ordering mechanisms. Specifically, customers of experience products, such as hotel rooms, infer higher levels of negative motive when reviews are ordered by helpful votes.

Third, fairness is broadly examined with pricing strategies in the hospitality literature (Sunmee Choi & Mattila, 2004; Heo et al., 2013; Lee & Jang, 2013). The discussion of whether other marketing tactics are fair remains scarce. This research addresses this gap by demonstrating that different methods of presenting online information can influence perceived fairness through inferred motive.

Managerial Implications

This research also has several managerial implications. First, travel websites adopt different review ordering as their default display. For example, Booking.com is listing the website "recommended" review at the top, while TripAdvisor is ordering reviews by date of review. The

current research explains customer perceptions and consequential behaviors regarding review ordering mechanisms widely adopted in the hospitality industry. The findings of this study indicate that experiential products such as hotels might benefit from different review ordering mechanisms compared to search products. We suggest that online travel agencies, such as Booking.com, might want to pay careful attention to review ordering. To diminish skepticism and to promote purchase intention, the default option should be the date of the review instead of “recommended” or “featured” by the company/website. Ordering by helpful votes can also harm customers’ trust in the platform if extremely positive reviews are listed first.

Second, many travel websites now display the selected reviews as customer testimonials when listing highly popular hotels (e.g. Booking.com, 2018a). Our findings indicate that hotel customers might not find extremely positive reviews helpful, although such reviews can be helpful when searching for material goods. When selecting the review to showcase, we suggest that review platforms avoid extremely positive reviews and display reviews with moderately positive ratings.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the current work open up several avenues for future research. First, the experiment was conducted in an online platform using simulated scenarios. In reality, customers usually have access to more than three reviews for each product. Although we showed that there were twenty pages of reviews in total, the product page was a stationary picture with no interactive function. Therefore, participants could not view the rest of the reviews. When customers have access to a large number of reviews, information overload may lead them to infer positive motives, such as “they are trying to help me.” Future research should examine

customers' perceptions of review order fairness with interactive product pages in order to gain accurate understanding of the real reactions of customers.

Second, company reputation has an important impact on inferred motive (Campbell, 1999a). The current study did not reveal the name of the website to eliminate potential confounding effects. In reality, customers often base their judgements on existing knowledge, such as the reputation of the website and their familiarity with it. Future investigation on perceived fairness of online review orders across branded platforms may yield important findings.

Third, this study did not examine the impact of ordering reviews by valence (e.g. from highest to lowest). Although such an ordering mechanism is not a common default option, many websites offer it as an alternative (e.g. Booking.com). Perceived risk associated with intangible services often drives customers to be risk-averse, thereby paying attention to negative reviews in order to avoid poor choices (Ahluwalia, 2002; Willemsen et al., 2011). Future research should examine the moderating role of product type on online reviews ordered by valence.

Appendix A

Scenarios

Experience product: hotel room

Please imagine that you need to book a hotel room online for your trip to London. Below is a hotel that fits your budget. Read the information and online reviews and indicate your booking intention.

There are different ways to order online reviews on review platforms, such as ranking by the time of posting or recommended. The **reviews shown below are ranked by recommended/top rating/date of posting.**

(Insert picture here, see Appendix B)

Search product: microwave oven

Please imagine that you need to purchase a new microwave oven online. Below is a microwave oven that fits your budget. Read the information and online reviews and indicate your likelihood of purchasing this product.

There are different ways to order online reviews on review platforms, such as ranking by the time of posting or recommended. The **reviews shown below are ranked by recommended/top rating/date of posting.**

(Insert picture here, see Appendix B)

Appendix B

Manipulation Samples

Hotel reviews in date of review ordering



Deluxe Queen Room

- ✓ Room size 226 ft²
- ✓ Air-conditioning
- ✓ Private bathroom
- ✓ Breakfast included
- ✓ 500 feet from subway station

★★★★☆ 4.1 out of 5 stars

153 reviews

Sort by: **Date (most recent to oldest)** ▼

★★★★★ **Absolutely wonderful**

December 16, 2017, by Mike

Such a great hotel. Wonderful location so convenient for everything. Great bars and restaurants just outside the hotel.

👍 1 person found this review helpful.

★★★★☆ **Ok**

April 23, 2017, by Amy

I stayed for a week, service was good from front desk to room cleaning. The facility is also very nice. The mattress in the room was not comfortable.

👍 2 people found this review helpful.

★★★☆☆ **Clearly not a five star hotel**

October 11, 2016, by David

This is a 3 star type of place. Personnel not rude but not very professional. WIFI not working. Food ok but not great. Location very convenient though.

👍 19 people found this review helpful.

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Microwave reviews in recommended ordering



Microwave Oven

- ✓ 1.2 Cu.ft/1100W
- ✓ Stainless Steel
- ✓ Smart sensor
- ✓ LED lighting
- ✓ Easy clean interior

★★★★☆ 4.1 out of 5 stars

153 reviews

Sort by: **Recommended** ▼

★★★★★ **Exactly what we needed** ★ Featured Review

October 11, 2016, by Mike

Great microwave for an apartment. It looks great. Not too big, but good on strength/heating, and it's easy to use!

👍 1 person found this review helpful.

★★★★☆ **Decent microwave**

April 23, 2017, by Amy

Working ok so far. Good quality. But for an older person like my dad, it is a little confusing trying to set the time.

👍 2 people found this review helpful.

★★★☆☆ **Not user friendly**

December 16, 2017, by David

The microwave is not worth the price. It is not very user friendly due to the very poorly written instruction.

👍 19 people found this review helpful.

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Appendix C

Scales

Purchase Intention (Zhang, Lu, Shi, Tang, & Zhao, 2012; $\alpha=.832$)

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements (1 – strongly disagree; 7 – strongly agree)

I am likely to book the hotel room on this site / I am likely to purchase the microwave oven on this site.

I am likely to recommend this site to my friends.

I am likely to make another booking/purchase from this site if I need it.

Perceived Fairness (Campbell, 2007; $\alpha=.950$)

How would you rate the order of the reviews (sorted by recommended/top rated/date)?

1 – Unfair/Fair – 7

1 – Wrong/Right – 7

1 – Unreasonable/Reasonable – 7

Inferred Motive (Campbell, 2007; $\alpha=.740$)

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements (1 – strongly disagree; 7 – strongly agree).

The intent of the website platform was to take advantage of consumers.

The goal of the website platform was to make profit regardless of the impact on consumers.

What is your perception of the review order (sorted by recommended/top rated/date)?

1 – Bad/Good – 7 (*reverse coded*)

Individual Review Helpfulness

How are the reviews helpful to you? (each group will see the reviews in their own stimuli)

★★★★★ **Absolutely wonderful**

★ Featured Review

October 11, 2016, by Mike

Such a great hotel. Wonderful location so convenient for everything. Great bars and restaurants just outside the hotel.

👍 1 person found this review helpful.

1=not helpful, 7=helpful

★★★★☆ **Ok**

April 23, 2017, by Amy

I stayed for a week, service was good from front desk to room cleaning. The facility is also very nice. The mattress in the room was not comfortable.

👍 2 people found this review helpful.

1=not helpful, 7=helpful

★☆☆☆☆ **Clearly not a five star hotel**

December 16, 2017, by David

This is a 3 star type of place. Personnel not rude but not very professional. WIFI not working. Food ok but not great. Location very convenient though.

👍 19 people found this review helpful.

1=not helpful, 7=helpful

Manipulation Check – Product Type

Search products are defined as those whose quality can be judged prior to purchase or consumption. Experience products are characterized by attributes that are hard to evaluate until the product is consumed and experienced despite that some of the attribute information is available.

According to the above definitions, the hotel room/microwave oven is a type of _____ products. (1 = Search, 7 = Experience)

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