Window Dressing Effects of Online Information: A Content-Analysis of the Post-Purchase Reviews on Amazon.com

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Abstract: This study examined the surface characteristics of helpful customer reviews posted on Amazon.com to understand the nature of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM). To investigate the surface characteristics of the helpfulness of customer reviews and whether the helpfulness and attention-grabbing power of the customer reviews are associated with the surface characteristics, a content analysis of Amazon.com customer reviews was conducted. We found that consumers considered a review helpful if it offered visually prominent cues that made it more convenient to determine the usefulness and helpfulness of the review. The results of this study further demonstrate the mediational effect of attention-grabbing power on the review helpfulness. Our findings suggest that what is communicated and how the information is communicated is crucial to improve credibility and attention-grabbing power in the online environment. The current study fills in the gaps by including information about the visual characteristics of customer reviews, how the visual characteristics influence individuals' decision-making processes, and what visual attributes determine the "helpful" rating.

Keywords: eWOM, Amazon.com customer review, online credibility

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INTRODUCTION

Word of Mouth (WOM) has been conceptualized as characterizing an "interpersonal informational exchange between individuals familiar to each other" (Gupta & Harris, 2010). It has been studied to garner a better understanding of how consumers make decisions. For instance, researchers have found that customers perceive WOM as a more credible source of information than advertisements (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). That higher level of credibility stems from the fact that most WOM is received from trusted persons such as family, friends, or experts (Bone, 1995; Brown & Reingen, 1987).

With the advent of the Internet, WOM has become prevalent in online shopping contexts (Dellarocas, 2003). Customers are increasingly using information-sharing tools such as online shopping mall reviews, Social Networking Sites (SNSs), and blogs via the Internet. However, this so-called eWOM has features that distinguish it from traditional WOM. For instance, while traditional WOM involves one person or a small group of people in the communication process (e.g., information-sharing), with eWOM, information-sharing takes place between a message generator and a mass audience (Li & Hitt, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Unlike traditional WOM, information-sharing with eWOM can take place at any time and from any place with Internet accessibility. Moreover, it is not necessary for all communicators engaged in eWOM to be physically present at the same point in time during the information-sharing process (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010). The fundamental difference between the two forms of WOM, however, is that

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eWOM involves passing on information not only to individuals with whom they are familiar—such as friends and family—but also to complete strangers.

These differences in traditional and non-traditional WOM have triggered an investigation into the manner and extent of eWOM in terms of how consumers utilize online information-exchange platforms and why an increasing number of consumers are sharing their personal experiences with strangers through the use of web 2.0 tools (e.g., review sites, blogs, SNSs). Most online retailers, such as Amazon.com (hereafter, "Amazon"), provide various supplementary information other than product descriptions and retailer/manufacturer suggestions. Such supplementary information includes actual customer reviews and ratings. In addition, the quality of the customer reviews is appraised with "helpfulness" votes. Researchers have found that reviews that are voted as helpful can convince consumers, which leads to sales increases since actual consumer reviews are considered credible information sources (e.g., (Apriliani, 2018; Chen, Wu, & Yoon, 2004; Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006)). Most eWOM studies have focused on the content/argument quality of reviews, and thus little is known about the visual characteristics of these customer reviews. To fill this research gap, the current study will examine the visual characteristics of customer reviews, how the visual characteristics affect individuals' decision-making processes, and what visual attributes determine the "helpful" rating.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A trade-off between cognitive effort and accuracy is inherent in the decision-making process. Individuals tend to change their own decision-making strategies to reduce the amount of cognitive effort needed to make decisions (Shugan, 1980) and, simultaneously, to improve their decision-making accuracy and reduce uncertainty (Kleinmuntz & Schkade, 1993). The popularity of web 2.0 tools in online shopping environments has exposed consumers to an unparalleled number of opportunities to compare and analyze product offerings (Alba et al., 1997). Besides manufacturer, seller, and production information, online retailers like Amazon, Overstock, and Alibaba provide consumers with customer/user reviews, which can be conceptualized as "peer-generated product evaluations" (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). The massive availability of information on the web inclines people to select parsimonious strategies to process online information (Allport & Pendley, 2010; Hartono, 2019; Kang & Ogawa, 2017). These parsimonious strategies are cognitively efficient because they depend on simple heuristics cues for selecting and evaluating information instead of rigorous examination of information quality. However, as people want to minimize the amount of cognitive effort, they seek to maximize the satisfaction level with their decisions. To make better decisions quickly, consumers use rating websites (e.g., Consumer Reports and J.D. Power) and/or read customer reviews (Dabholkar, 2006).

In online shopping environments, consumers often encounter several thousand customer reviews, and the amount of information available to consumers prior to a choice can overwhelm them. Furthermore, as (Lang, 2000) limited cognitive capacity model argues, consumers do not have the unlimited cognitive capacity for information processing. For this reason, consumers are selective in reading customer reviews. A question that naturally arises is how consumers choose the customer reviews they will read and how the chosen reviews are characterized. To ease the decision-making process, consumers tend to seek and rely on credible information, as this tendency significantly reduces the amount of cognitive effort they expend (Warnick, 2004). The importance of credible information is well-documented in extant literature. For instance, credible information is considered useful and informative and, as a result, triggers stronger market responses, such as sales and brand attitudes (Hutton, Miller, & Skinner, 2003; Shen & Bissell, 2013).

The credibility of peer-generated product evaluations is a primary trigger that consumers decide whether to adopt the information, which thus affects their purchase decisions (Cheung, Sia, & Kuan, 2012). To help consumers assess the credibility of such reviews on their own, online retailers provide additional information, such as the helpfulness of customer reviews, which can be conceptualized as one individual's subjective judgment of the review's usefulness, credibility, and believability. For example, Amazon asks customers if a certain review is helpful to them ("Was this review helpful to you?") and shows how many other customers agree on the helpfulness of the review (e.g., "720 of 760 people found the following review helpful").

In the current study, we investigate the visual aspects of customer reviews (also referred to as surface characteristics) that were assessed as helpful. The overall assessment of online information based on surface characteristics is known as surface credibility (Tseng & Fogg, 1999). Surface characteristics are visually superficial elements used for evaluating surface credibility (i.e., judging a book by its cover). They include presentational elements such as color, font style and size, spacing, layout, and other graphic elements. First impressions of reviews are often based on surface characteristics, which help to ensure online shoppers either stay or move on to other customer reviews. Surface characteristics also

heavily influence web users' assessments of the credibility of the information (Robins & Holmes, 2008). According to the prominence-interpretation theory (Fogg, 2003), web users must be able to notice or recognize online content in order to evaluate its credibility. If a user does not notice a customer review because it lacks visual prominence, the review will have no effect on the user's decision-making process. The reverse is true if a certain customer review is highly prominent due to the way it is presented. Thus, evaluating visual prominence is the first step in assessing the credibility or believability of online content.

The Wathen and Burkell (2002) model also supports the importance of the first impression in the online environment. This model explains the relationship between surface characteristics and message credibility for the overall credibility assessment. According to the model, the surface characteristics of web content initially affect web users. If the visual aspects of web information do not meet web users' expectations, users lose the motivation to consider the actual content of the information. Moreover, the importance of surface features to the evaluation of online content credibility is expected to increase (Everard & Galletta, 2005).

Thus, the window-dressing features of online content have been the subject of a growing body of literature in recent decades. Most research on window dressing or first impressions has examined the effects of design features on how individuals evaluate the credibility of online content empirically. Design features include color schemes, fonts, layouts, and the hierarchical order of the content. Customer reviews can engage the user's attention by leveraging the limited visual cues available. For example, Amazon does not provide any design options for reviews; therefore, customers can only differentiate their reviews in terms of the simplistic presentational choices of their messages (e.g., spacing, numbering and bullet points, heading, labeling, and photo attachment). These visual cues are the only determinants of prominence and first impressions of customer reviews.

The main focus of this research is not on what is communicated but rather on how peer-generated information (e.g., customer reviews on Amazon) is evaluated and which surface characteristics (or design features) are embedded in customer reviews that receive high volumes or rates of helpfulness votes. Thus, we suggest the following two research questions:

RQ1: What surface characteristics are available to consumers for assessing the helpfulness of customer reviews on Amazon?

RQ2: What surface characteristics relate to the helpfulness of customer reviews on Amazon?

In addition to the relationship between surface characteristics and customer review helpfulness, this study further investigates whether the presence of surface characteristics helps web users notice and pay attention to particular customer reviews. Since attracting the consumers' attention to online content is a prerequisite for effective and efficient communication, it is important to understand how to attract and keep consumers' attention regardless of customer review users' judgments of review helpfulness (Bucy, Lang, Potter, & Grabe, 1999). Furthermore, as noted in the prominence-interpretation theory Fogg (2003) and the Wathen and Burkell (2002) model, drawing attention is a crucial first stage of the credibility assessment process. Consistent with this viewpoint, our expectations concerning the attention-grabbing power of surface characteristics are expressed in the following hypotheses:

H1: *A customer review featuring prominent cues will have more attention-grabbing power than a review lacking prominent cues.*

H2: *A customer review's attention-grabbing power will be positively related to the customer review's helpfulness.*

METHODS

Content Analysis

To investigate the surface characteristics of the helpfulness of customer reviews and whether the helpfulness and attention-grabbing power of the customer reviews are associated with the surface characteristics, we conducted a content analysis of Amazon.com customer reviews. Of Amazon's 36 departments (see Table 1), we excluded 10 for the following reasons. We dropped three departments due to their lack of exclusivity (i.e., the products within those departments, each related to more than one department). We dropped another seven departments because their products include mostly downloadable content that does not involve the shipping and handling process. We assessed products from 26 departments. To achieve a certain richness of reviews, we chose the top three bestselling products from each department and examined their customer reviews. After ranking those reviews in terms of their helpfulness, we selected the top five reviews for analysis (*n* = 390). However, after the coding was complete, we dropped two products (a total

of ten reviews) because they related to multiple products sold from one product page. Therefore, we analyzed a total of 380 reviews. Table 1 shows the Amazon product departments that were addressed in this study.

Table 1 *SAMPLE DEPARTMENTS*

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*Departments Included:

Appliances; Arts, Crafts & Sewing; Automotive; Baby; Beauty; Books; Camera & Photo; Cell Phones & Accessories; Clothing; Computers & Accessories; Electronics; Grocery & Gourmet Food; Health & Personal Care; Home & Kitchen; Home Improvement; Industrial & Scientific; Jewelry; Magazines; Musical Instruments; Office Products; Patio, Lawn & Garden; Pet Supplies; Sports & Outdoor; Toys & Game; Video Games; Watches.
** Departments Excluded:

Appstore for Android; Gift Cards; Kindle Store; Kitchen & Dining; MP3 Download; Movies & TV; Music; Prime Pantry; Shoes; Software.

A screen capture was taken of each product's review page in two timeframes: September 2015 and October 2018. Two coders—one male and one female—were trained for the coding. After undertaking several mock coding sessions, the first coder was asked to code entire units ($n = 380$; $n = 152$ in 2015, $n = 138$ in 2018). To check inter-coder reliability, the second coder was asked to code 20% of the units and resolve any discrepancies. Using Holsti's method, both coders reached 91–100% agreement, which is considered a strong level.

Coding focused on four main domains as well as on basic product information (e.g., product name, department, price, and average star ratings). These domains were author identity, information structure, style, and interactivity (see Table 2). For author identity, the coders looked at how the authors displayed their identities, including the use of a full name versus a partial name (last name, first name, or nickname), indications of their location, or even the use of an Amazon author verification badge, such as "real name," "top reviewer," or "verified purchase." The information structure was evaluated to determine how the content was visually presented to allow readers to navigate the information easily and identify information sources. This domain included the length of the review, the number of paragraphs and bullet points, and the use of photo and video content. The nature of the review style was also coded to identify the degree to which the information was properly and professionally presented. This domain included letter case (title, sentence, upper, lower, and toggle case) and sentence type (exclamation, command, question, and statement). The final domain, consumer responses to a review, was measured to ascertain popularity, approval, and author dedication; this was done by recording the number of reviews, comments, review updates, and stars given; the review helpfulness rating; and the number of voting participants (total votes).

Table 2 *CODING CATEGORIES*

Author Identity	Full name vs. Last/First/Nickname
	Author's Location Present vs. Absent
	Author Verification by Amazon.com (Real Name, Verified Purchase, Top Reviewer, etc.)
Information Structure	Review Length
	Number of Paragraphs Used
	Number of Bullet Points Used
	Number of Photo/Video Used
Style	Letter Case (Title, Sentence, UPPER, lower, tOGGLE)
	Sentence Type (Exclamation, Command, Question, Statement)
Interactivity	Number of Reviews
	Number of Comments
	Updates Present vs. Absent
	Stars Given

Variables

The helpfulness index and attention-grabbing power: In the current study, we explored the surface characteristics of customer reviews that are deemed "helpful." However, the helpfulness of customer reviews cannot be judged solely on the basis of a "helpful"–"not helpful" vote ratio (hereafter, "helpfulness ratio"). Since the helpfulness ratio is a percentage, this format could hide potentially important information. For instance, "90% of people found the review helpful" may have a different meaning and interpretation than "9 out of 10 people found the review helpful," or "900 out of 1,000 people found the review helpful." Even though the same percentage of people agreed with the helpfulness of the customer review, a review with 900 consents is more likely to be reliable and valid than a review with 9 consents. Thus, the helpfulness ratio was measured using the percentage of people who found the review helpful, but we gave extra weight to the helpfulness ratio based on the number of helpful-voting participants (hereafter, "total helpful votes"). In this way, we created a new helpfulness index to examine the surface characteristics of the helpful reviews and the relationship between the helpfulness and the attention-grabbing power of customer reviews. To preclude unintentional weighting due to differences in scale, we democratized two sets of numbers (helpfulness votes and total helpful votes) by converting them to percentages. For example, we calculated the participant ratio using the numbers for a customer review (i.e., the number of voters for the review) and the total number of reviewer voters in the analyses. We employed attention-grabbing power as a measure of the ability of visual attention capture of customer reviews. We were also able to operationalize attention-grabbing power by observing the total number of votes (total votes) for each review's helpfulness.

RESULTS

Surface Characteristics of Customer Reviews

The first research questions asked what surface features are available to consumers when assessing the helpfulness of Amazon customer reviews. The products that we analyzed were mostly awarded five stars (64.5%, $n = 123$) or four stars (22.4%, $n = 43$). The product reviews ranged in length from 474 to 23,094 words. An analysis of the top five most helpful reviews indicated that the helpfulness ratio (voted helpful divided by total votes), as a percentage, ranging from 82.5% to 100%. About 66% of the reviewers rated the product they were reviewing positively by giving it either five stars ($n = 250$) or four stars (14.5%, $n = 55$). The number of comments the other reviewers left ranged from 0 to 656.

Regarding author identification, 40.8% of the authors used their full names ($n = 155$); the others (59.2%, $n = 225$) used either their first names, their last names, or nicknames. When revealing their identities, the authors mostly used title case or sentence case (86.2%, $n = 328$), and just under two-thirds of them indicated their current locations (65.1%, $n = 248$). About 58% ($n = 220$) of the authors showed their identities along with "verified purchase" or "real name" badges (27.6%, $n = 105$). The titles of the reviews were mostly statements (52%, $n = 198$) or exclamations (35.5%, $n = 135$) expressed in either sentence case (67.1%, $n = 255$) or title case (24.3%, $n = 93$). About 79% of the authors did not provide follow-ups or updates ($n = 300$); only 3% and 6% of the reviews included a photo or a video, respectively.

About 36% of the reviews were written in a single paragraph ($n = 138$). Some reviews were more than 11 paragraphs in length (14.5%, $n = 55$). When writing the review, only 17% ($n = 65$) of the authors used bullet points, especially when presenting the pros and cons of the product. When stating the pros and cons, 36.2% of the authors included only pros ($n = 138$), and 25.7% included both pros and cons ($n = 98$). In most cases, the pros and cons were expressed without any labeling (94.7%, $n = 360$) or distinctive format (71.1%, $n = 270$). About 3% of the reviews had a summary ($n = 13$), and 8% had a conclusion ($n = 30$) with an indicating label. Twenty-five reviews used at least one all-caps word, mostly for emphasis (11.8%, $n = 45$).

Surface Characteristics of a Helpful Customer Review

The second research question asked what surface characteristics influence the helpfulness evaluation of customer reviews. We examined a number of aspects regarding the surface characteristics of helpful customer reviews: (1) whether an identifiable review summary or conclusion was presented in the reviews, (2) whether visual aids such as photos or videos were embedded in the reviews, (3) whether key messages in a review (such as the pros and cons of a product) were labeled, and (4) whether a review was organized through the use of bullet points.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to investigate the effects of the use of a summary/conclusion, visual aids, labeling, and bullet-point styles on the helpfulness index. A customer review was considered more helpful when it

(1) featured an identifiable review summary sentence or paragraph ($F = 53.72$, $p < .001$) or conclusion ($F = 105.86$, $p < .001$), (2) had visual aids (e.g., photos and videos taken by actual consumers) embedded within it ($F = 4.80$, $p < .05$), (3) labeled the pros and cons of a product ($F = 12.42$, $p < .001$), or (4) featured bullet points or other similar styles (e.g., numbering) ($F = 25.16$, $p < .001$) (see Table 3).

Table 3 *EFFECTS OF SURFACE CHARACTERISTICS OF CUSTOMER REVIEWS ON HELPFULNESS*

Presentational Cues	Types of Cues	N	Mean	SD	df	F
Identifiable Summary	Present	12	65.23	19.70	378	53.72***
	Absent	368	50.14	6.25		
Identifiable Conclusion	Present	33	61.96	18.42	378	105.86***
	Absent	347	49.54	4.08		
Visual Aids	Present	25	55.10	6.31	378	4.80*
	Absent	355	50.49	7.49		
Labeled Pros and Cons	Present	21	56.13	17.51	378	12.42***
	Absent	359	50.29	6.36		
Bullet Point Style	Present	67	54.66	11.33	378	25.16***
	Absent	313	49.74	6.06		

*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

Effects of Surface Characteristics on Attention-Grabbing Power and Review Helpfulness

The current study hypothesized that visually prominent customer reviews would be more likely to grab attention regardless of the quality of the information and that attention-grabbing power would be the main determinant of the helpfulness of a customer review. We used ANOVA to examine the effects of the surface characteristics on attention-grabbing power (H1). Our analyses found that a customer review is more likely to capture attention when it features an identifiable review summary sentence or paragraph ($F = 53.36$, $p < .001$) or conclusion ($F = 130.58$, $p < .001$), embeds visual aids (e.g., photos and videos taken by actual consumers) ($F = 3.58$, $p < .05$), labels the pros and cons of a product ($F = 14.12$, $p < .05$), or features bullet points or other similar styles (e.g., numbering) ($F = 24.24$, $p < .001$).

The second hypothesis predicted that there would be a positive relationship between the attention-grabbing power and the helpfulness of an Amazon customer review. Regression analysis shows that the attention-grabbing power of a review predicts consumers' helpfulness evaluation of a customer review ($b = .45$, $t (378) = 9.70$, $p < .001$). The current study further investigates whether the timing of data sampling affects the attention-helpfulness relationship since the current data were collected in two timeframes. Correlation coefficient values for 2015 and 2018 data are .96 and .97, respectively. Thus, in both timeframes, attending-grabbing power functions as a key determinant of review helpfulness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the surface characteristics of helpful customer reviews posted on Amazon to understand the nature of eWOM because Amazon customer reviews are one of the most common forms of eWOM for sharing actual user experiences with peers. In online shopping environments, consumers tend to minimize their efforts when making purchasing decisions; however, there is a trade-off between effort and accuracy in their decision-making (Shugan, 1980). To reduce effort and enhance accuracy concurrently, consumers often look for organized information that can help them save time or otherwise minimize the effort inherent in processing a considerable body of information while increasing the accuracy of their decision-making (Kleinmuntz & Schkade, 1993). Individuals' intentions to minimize their cognitive effort would explain why, generally speaking, we found that customer reviews that users considered helpful tended to have visually prominent attributes. This tendency will become increasingly important in the digital era because consumers are being exposed to "information overload," wherein there is too much information to process within a limited time.

The current study found that consumers considered a review helpful if it offered visually prominent cues that

made it more convenient to determine the usefulness and helpfulness of the review. These prominent cues included identifiable sentences or paragraphs clearly labeled as "summary," "conclusion," and/or "pros and cons," as well as bullet points or similar styles (e.g., numbering) of information presentation. These cues help consumers determine, at a glance, what kinds of information are available in a review; they also allow consumers to direct their attention to specific parts of the review pertinent to them, saving time and effort in locating product-related information. Overall, our results suggest that the organization of information and the way in which the information is presented play a significant role in consumers' judgments of a review's helpfulness or credibility in online environments.

Our results are also consistent with the hypotheses of this study, which state that surface characteristics are important factors in increasing the attention-grabbing power of a customer review and thereby predict the perceived helpfulness of a customer review. Similar to our finding on the surface characteristics of helpful reviews, a customer review featuring visually prominent cues is more likely to attract web users' attention. Furthermore, having one's eye caught is a prerequisite for assessing the credibility of online information because one cannot assess the credibility or quality of information if one does not notice or recognize it due to a lack of visual prominence. Our findings suggest that not only what is communicated but also how the information is presented is crucial to improving credibility and attention-grabbing power in an online environment.

The findings herein align with and reaffirm what previous studies of website credibility have found. Although consumers are known to use vigorous criteria (e.g., argument quality, author expertise, and trustworthiness) to determine credibility, they rely more on superficial cues—such as visual cues—than on the content itself (Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2002). Moreover, Fogg (2003) and Wathen and Burkell (2002) concluded that visual factors (e.g., layout, use of white spaces, use of images) and information structure—both of which allow readers to easily navigate content and find what they are looking for—are heavily used as cues to determine website credibility. These findings with regard to website credibility align with those within this study related to review credibility in that customers consider reviews with certain visual cues and information structures to be helpful.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study helps differentiate the role of eWOM from that of traditional WOM. One of the prominent differences between traditional and nontraditional WOM is that in the latter, people are sharing information with strangers; in information assessments within an online context, the information source is not as important as other aspects of credibility. As shown in Table 4, our results affirm that the information source—whether it is a real customer, whether the reviewer has the expertise, or whether the reviewer uses a real name—has little impact on the helpfulness of a given customer review.

Table 4 *EFFECTS OF CUSTOMER REVIEWER IDENTIFICATION ON HELPFULNESS*

Reviewer Identification	Present	*N*	Mean	*SD*	df	F	*p*
Real Customer	Yes	88	111.93	18.5	150	.02	.90
	No	64	112.36	21.96			
Real Name	Yes	42	113.17	22.62	150	.16	.69
	No	110	111.71	18.94			
Expert	Yes	18	114.13	23.62	150	.21	.65
	No	134	111.84	19.50			

In spite of its contributions to the literature, however, the study does have some limitations. First, since each online shopping website provides different formats and requirements for customer reviews, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to customer reviews on other websites. Second, given that the two most helpful reviews of bestselling products from each department comprised our unit of analysis, the findings of this study could represent the prominent characteristics of those reviews solely. Finally, this study equated "helpful" with "credible" in the context of review. Even though helpfulness and credibility are closely related concepts, they are not interchangeable terms because of the multi-dimensional nature of credibility and the unique environments of eWOM (e.g., information sharing with strangers). Therefore, future research should clarify the concept of credibility in eWOM to better understand how individuals share and utilize information in online environments.

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