

Master Thesis

Exploring credibility in electronic word-of-mouth

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Summary

More than half of the Dutch population makes use of electronic user-reviews online by reading and evaluating these reviews as part of their decision-making process. However, an important practical issue is the rise of fake reviews on the Internet. Studies of Chevalier and Mayzlin (2003) and Zhu and Zhang (2010) showed evidence that reviews can have a direct influence on product sales, and marketers are well aware of this. As a result, the popularity of online reviews brings about growing concerns about the credibility of online reviews since there is substantial evidence of marketers cheating the public opinion with fake online reviews. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question: *which factors influence credibility assessments of eWOM of strangers?* Our sub questions were based on three pillars:

- What is the influence of receiver characteristics in credibility assessments of anonymous eWOM? (characteristics of the receiver)
- What is the influence of attributes of the review on credibility assessments? (characteristics of the message)
- What is the influence of characteristics of the reviewer on credibility assessments? (characteristics of the source)

Given the exploratory nature of the research objectives, a preliminary study was conducted. The goal of this preliminary study was to collect rich and detailed information concerning the attitudes, beliefs and trust of consumers towards anonymous eWOM via 15 interviews. This study made it possible to cover the predetermined areas of research, but it also allowed for unexpected new insights. The interviews not only helped answering some of the sub questions, but also served as a basis for the main study: an online experiment. The preliminary study showed that there is not one particular cue that influences credibility assessments, as it appears to be a combination of characteristics of the source, receiver and the message.

In the second part of the study we took an experimental approach. Our experimental material consisted of a (for the purpose constructed) website that contained product information about a camera and twelve (manipulated) user reviews. Reviews were manipulated on *name, expertise, message quality, negative product information, social presence, gender and consistency*. There were four versions of the website that all looked the same, except for the reviews on it because these were randomly divided over the four websites. This was done to account for other (unintended) effects, such as the influence of the order of certain reviews or the combination of certain reviews. The four versions of the websites were equally distributed to the participants. Participants were asked to comment on the credibility and trustworthiness of each review by giving plusses and minuses accompanied by explanation for elements that helped or hurt perceived credibility. This could be any element, from words to sentences to profile pictures or punctuation marks. Afterwards, all 126 participants were asked to fill out a survey that measured their levels of trust on a 7-point Likert scale.

When the main study was finalized, around 2000 comments on perceived credibility had to be analysed. This was done by coding each comment, based on a codebook that was both data-driven and theory-driven. The results of the main study confirmed what was said in the preliminary study: it appears that there is not one particular cue that influences credibility assessments, because it is a combination of cues. So, to answer the main research question: as expected, it appears that in this study perceived credibility assessments are influenced by a mixture of characteristics of the receiver, characteristics of the message and characteristics of the source. From the data of this

study, it appears that there is not one factor that will instantly make a review credible and trustworthy. It is the interaction between characteristics of the receiver (e.g. *experience with eWOM*, *attitude towards eWOM* and *trusting stance*), characteristics of the source (e.g. *expertise*, *experience* and *social presence*) and characteristics of the message itself (e.g. *message quality* and *balanced arguments*) that influences credibility assessments.

This study builds on the existing knowledge about eWOM and made a first step in adding more insight into what cues can increase or hurt perceived credibility in an online environment. Because of the nature of the study, the results cannot be seen as hard evidence, but must be seen as the first step in a journey towards full understanding of credibility in electronic word-of-mouth. Findings in this study should be used to gain a deeper understanding of what causes credibility in online reviews and even more important: how to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of these reviews. Future studies need to find out if results of our study can be generalized, for instance through a quantitative study that builds on our more explorative, qualitative study, in order to provide more definitive insights of what causes credibility in eWOM.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, consumers base their purchase decision less and less on the information that companies provide via the traditional channels. Brands and companies have to cope with a large amount of opinions and reviews (either positive or negative) from customers. This form of word-of-mouth, or user-generated content, creates an environment in which companies and brands have to compete with their own customers when it comes to the provision of information. Mangold and Faulds (2009) therefore state that marketers in this “social media era” are losing control over the content, timing and frequency of their product information.

Websites like Tripadvisor.com and Epinion.com enable consumers to share their experiences with goods and services through mini-reviews. This also happens in the Netherlands where, according to a study on the digital habits of the Dutch, 19% of consumers occasionally write about their experiences with a certain brand, for instance on websites like Tweakers.nl but also on social media like Facebook and Twitter (TNS Digital Life, 2011). An even bigger percentage of the consumer population, 53%, makes use of these reviews by reading and evaluating these reviews as part of their decision-making process. When making a decision, 25% of the Dutch consumers say that one single negative review can have a big impact on their decision. But the fact that stood out most is that nearly 60% of Dutch consumers claims to have more faith in the opinions of other consumers than in the information provided by companies themselves (TNS Digital Life, 2011).

However, an important practical issue is the rise of fake reviews on the Internet. Studies of Chevalier and Mayzlin (2003) and Zhu and Zhang (2010) showed evidence that reviews can have a direct influence on product sales, and marketers are well aware of this. As a result, the popularity of online reviews brings about growing concerns about the credibility of online reviews since there is substantial evidence of marketers cheating the public opinion with fake online reviews. Recently, Yelp had to respond to worrying findings of a study by Luca and Zervas (2013) on fraudulent online reviews. According to a spokesperson, Yelp is forced to act on businesses trying to mislead customers, by filtering out suspicious and less trustworthy reviews. Therefore, only 75% of submitted reviews are actually published; meaning about a quarter of the submitted reviews has characteristics of a fake review. The good news is that platforms such as Yelp are aware of the attempts of businesses trying to publish fake reviews, but the bad news is that they cannot filter everything and even more worrying: a lot of eWOM is published on platforms with less supervision, or no supervision at all. This shows the importance of credibility in online reviews.

Regarding credibility in online reviews, it is also intriguing to see that in real life, consumers are really careful in interacting with strangers, while online consumers solely interact with strangers and seem to trust them and their opinions. Since electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is getting more and more popular, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the factors and processes that are at play when making assessments about the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM messages online. It will be interesting to study why consumers trust and lend credibility to some reviews and reviewers online, while distrusting others. What is it that causes a consumer to trust a stranger online?

1.1 Research questions

A lot of research has been conducted in this area, but we are interested in an element that did not get that much attention: *how and why consumers believe in anonymous sources. What elements of the reviews, the reviewers or the (design of) websites that host the reviews, cause consumers to rate the opinion and advice of strangers as being credible?* Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question:

Main research question:

- Which factors influence credibility assessments of eWOM of strangers?

Sub questions:

- What is the influence of receiver characteristics in credibility assessments of anonymous eWOM? (characteristics of the receiver)
- What is the influence of attributes of the review on credibility assessments? (characteristics of the message)
- What is the influence of characteristics of the reviewer on credibility assessments? (characteristics of the source)

eWOM comes in many forms, but in this study the focus is on user reviews of electronics, for instance on websites like tweakers.nl, fok.nl, consumentenbond.nl and bol.com. There is a large number of electronics reviews available online which all discuss rather objective features and characteristics, which makes it interesting to study why some reviews are perceived to be more credible than others.

The outcomes of this study can help companies design websites with more reliable product information but it can also help websites like Tripadvisor in creating a more trustworthy and fraud-proof platform, in order to obtain and maintain a high level of trust and credibility. Unfortunately, the outcomes can also be misused by companies that want to mislead customers by writing fake reviews. Besides these practical implications, this study also aims to gain a deeper understanding of the factors and processes that are at play when making assessments about the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM messages online. How do both concepts compare and what makes electronic word-of-mouth such a powerful phenomenon?

2. Literature review

Marketers are losing control over the content, timing and frequency of product information. One of the main reasons for this is the rise of social media, which causes information to be provided not only by companies, but also by consumers themselves (Mangold & Fauld, 2009). Sing, Veron-Jackson and Cullinane stated that the growing popularity of social media not only brings opportunities for marketers, but also risks. On the one hand, it gives brands the opportunity to personalize their marketing, but on the other hand the consumers get more and more power because of social media services. The information that social media provides is changing the attitude of consumers which in turn results in changes in needs, values and buying behavior (Constantinides & Fountain, 2009). This is in line with Hearn, Foth and Gray (2009), who state that the participatory culture, due to the growing popularity of social media, brings about a change in the flow of communication. Where communication was at first mainly business-to-consumer, it nowadays is shifting towards consumer-to-consumer. This trend is amplified by new media services and applications that allow consumers to create their own content, for instance by recording video reviews or writing recommendations about restaurants (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). This type of informal advice that is shared among consumers, without commercial interest, is called word-of-mouth.

2.1 Word-of-mouth

There are several definitions for word-of-mouth (WOM). Richins (1983) for instance, states that WOM is a form of interpersonal communication among consumers, which covers their personal experiences and/or evaluations of a brand or product. Rosen (2002) defines WOM as *any oral communication about products with friends, family, and colleagues in the context of consumer behaviour* (Rosen 2002, p.266). There are many other definitions, but they all consist of three elements:

- The communication is interpersonal
- The conversation is non-commercial
- The content of the conversation is focused on the evaluation of a commercial product or service.
-

WOM in purchase decision-making process

Over the years, WOM has been the subject of many studies, mostly focusing on the effects and influence of positive and negative word-of-mouth (PWOM and NWOM) on the purchase decision-making process. This process consists of five phases (Kotler, Kelly, Brady, Goodman & Hansen, 2009):

1. Need recognition
In this phase a consumer acknowledges a gap between his current state and his desired state and develops a product need (Kotler et al., 2009)
2. Information search
Once a need is recognized by a consumer, he will actively try to find out in what ways he can fulfill his need. Reducing uncertainty is very important in this phase, but the amount of information needed to reduce uncertainty depends on his current information levels and the perceived value of the information found. Information of high quality that is relatively easy to find helps reduce uncertainty (Kotler et al., 2009). Sources of information could be product information, but also reviews and advice from friends. In this phase, WOM helps creating awareness and forming beliefs and attitudes.
3. Evaluation of alternatives
In this phase, consumers evaluate the alternatives (evoked set) based on their

considerations about the relative importance of the attributes of the products or services (Kotler et al., 2009). In this phase, WOM further supports forming of beliefs and attitudes.

4. Purchase

The phase in which a consumer decides to purchase the best alternative (or to not purchase anything at all). This decision is determined by psychological and economical factors, but also influenced by social values (Kotler et al., 2009).

5. Post-purchase evaluation

In this final stage of the decision-making process, consumers evaluate their purchase. The outcome of this evaluation can be satisfaction or dissatisfaction. When a consumer has conflicting ideas about his purchase, he experiences *cognitive dissonance*. He then will try to reduce this dissonance, e.g. by looking for information that contradicts his (negative) beliefs (Kotler et al., 2009). A dissatisfied customer could for instance search for positive reinforcement of his decision in reviews or other forms of word-of-mouth, while deliberately avoiding negative information. In the context of word-of-mouth, it is important to note that a consumer can also decide to publish or share his own evaluation.

Importance of WOM in purchase decision-making process

So, in the purchase decision-making process, consumers use WOM to reduce uncertainty and to reduce the amount of information that must be evaluated. This happens especially in phase 2 and 3, but also a little in phase 5, when a consumer starts looking for information that contradicts his negative feelings (Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979). Thus, the effects are mostly noticeable in the awareness, beliefs and attitudes. However, the effects are mediated by the feelings one has prior to being exposed to WOM information. If someone has very strong feelings and is very confident about his choice before being exposed to WOM (e.g. because of brand loyalty), these feelings will be very important when evaluating and using WOM information (East, Hammond & Lomax, 2008). Several scholars agree that negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) has more influence on the receiver of this information than positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) (Ahluwalia & Shiv, 1997; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987; Weinberger, Allen, & Dillon, 1981). This is called the negativity bias, which will be further discussed in paragraph 2.19

Influence of WOM on consumer behaviour

Previous research suggests that WOM is influencing consumer behaviour more than product information provided by companies (e.g. advertisements) because of the fact that it is perceived as more trustworthy, and thus making it more persuasive (Wilson and Sherrel, 1993; Lazarsfeld & Katz, 1955; Gilly, Graham, Wolfinbarger and Yale, 1998). Henricks (1998) even states that as an unpaid endorsement for products or services, WOM can be the most believable form of advertising for marketers. This perception of trustworthiness stems from the fact that people trust and agree with people they like. The relationship (e.g. biological or social) between the information seeker and WOM source is the underlying foundation of this trust (Gilly et al. 1998). However, in this Internet era, WOM developed into a less personal, more omnipresent phenomenon called eWOM.

2.2 Electronic word-of-mouth

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) define eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p.39). So, eWOM can basically be described as a positive or negative statement about a product, service or company, which is spread by consumers via the

Internet. Hennig-Thurau et al. also state that eWOM mostly takes place on online opinion websites (e.g. epinion.com), websites that are indexing reviews (e.g. imdb.com), shops that offer customers the possibility to review and rate products (e.g. amazon.com) and other consumer websites. Of course, eWOM also exists in less obvious forms, for example on social media like discussion boards, Facebook, Twitter and even Youtube (in the form of video reviews).

2.3 Differences between WOM and eWOM

There are several differences between WOM and eWOM (Lee, Park & Han, 2008; Chatterjee, 2001). First of all, the amount of WOM information online is overwhelming compared to an offline situation. Offline, one would have only a handful of WOM sources available, whereas in the online environment eWOM resources are practically limitless. When it comes to the purchase decision-making process, this can be seen as both a positive and a negative development, especially in phase 2 (information seeking). Consumers come across a multitude of opinions and evaluations, which can make uncertainty reduction a lot more difficult and time consuming. New media applications not only offer possibilities to consumers seeking for information, but also for consumers who want to distribute product information (last phase of the decision-making process). Amazon.com for instance makes it really easy for consumers to share their feelings, thoughts and opinions about a product.

Adding to this, positive and negative reviews are often presented together at the same time and location. Of course, this also happens in an offline environment, for instance during a party when you are discussing a certain product with other people. However, in an online environment a consumer is a lot more likely to come across positive and negative reviews at the same time and the range and amount of opinions is usually a lot broader and larger. The second difference between WOM and eWOM lies in the fact that eWOM remains practically forever available. This is also known as *temporal consistency*. If a brand made a big mistake in 2001, chances are that a consumer looking for information about this brand in 2012 will stumble upon this mistake. On the other hand, a company that made the news in a positive way could profit of it for years. This is in a way also true for regular WOM, but the big difference with eWOM is that a few bad experiences can hurt a company for a very long time, since these reviews are forever accessible and visible to everyone. So, the fact that eWOM is available for an unlimited period could both be harmful and positive to a brand, depending on the nature of the eWOM.

From the literature, it is not yet clear what impact the differences between WOM and eWOM have in terms of trustworthiness and credibility assessments and this is something that needs to be addressed in this study. We start by taking a closer look at the concepts of credibility and trust.

2.4 Credibility as a concept in general

Credibility has always played an important role in WOM, but came under more scrutiny due to the rise of Internet and social media. In the past, in the era of traditional media, content and information creation was limited to parties that had both the financial means and the authority to spread information on a large scale. Nowadays, digital developments basically eliminate these barriers: everyone can spread information to a large public, without being an authority and without too many financial costs and risks. All that is needed is a computer and an Internet connection. Of course this raises issues

of credibility since everyone can join in on information provision, often without any kind of gatekeeping or editorial involvement.

Credibility can be described in this context as the believability of the information and/or the source of this information (Metzger, 2007). When someone is perceived to be credible, this person is perceived to be believable. It is important to note that the credibility of someone or something is a perceived feature (Fogg, Marshall, Laraki, Osipovich, Varma and Swani, 2001). Therefore, one cannot say that a certain piece of information in fact is unanimously considered as being credible, as this perception lies in the eyes of the beholder (or better yet: receiver). What you may find credible can dramatically differ from what your neighbour may find credible, based on the different evaluations you and your neighbour make. The concept of credibility is closely linked to, and even builds on the concept of trust, which is up next for discussion.

2.5 Trust as a concept in general

Trust is a rather ambiguous concept, as shown by the fact that many different authors have defined it in many different ways. One thing that most researchers agree upon though is the fact that trust is only needed in uncertain and risky situations (Mayer et al., 1995; Luhmann, 2000). According to Grabner-Kräuter & Kaluscha (2003) people use trust to deal with and reduce complexity in uncertain situations. This is particularly true in online or electronic environments, where cognitive resources are limited. McKnight (2002) agrees with this and adds that trust helps consumers overcome perceptions of uncertainty and risk, perceptions that are even more prominent when interacting with “strangers”. Interacting with our social environment, including strangers, is something we do everyday. To make the best of this interaction, we try to understand, control and predict the behaviour of others around us, most importantly to try to figure out how the behaviour of others will affect us. However, this is very difficult, since people around us act independently and we have very little control over them. This forces us to consider a vast amount of possible behaviours that others exhibit, which is basically so overwhelming and complex that it becomes almost impossible. Of course, society has rules, laws and customs that somewhat help to reduce this social complexity by making the behaviour of others more predictable. Because this is not enough, we try to cope with social complexity by presuming that others will act and behave in a socially acceptable manner that fits the context of the interaction. This presumption that others will not suddenly behave in an unpredictable or antisocial manner is what is often meant by the concept trust (Gefen and Straub, 2004).

Out of all the definitions of trust available, the definition of Mayer et al. (1995, p.172) fits best in this context. They define trust as *“the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.”* This definition fits best in the context of (e)WOM because it describes a certain personal relationship between two (or more) parties consisting of real people, whereas other definitions also describe the relationship as something between a person and for instance an abstract element like online banking (Gefen, 2002). So the most important element of trust in this context is the extent to which someone is willing to be vulnerable to the actions of other people.

2.6 Trust in an online environment

There is more to trust than just the trust between two individuals. When discussing trust in/on the Web, the work of McKnight, Cummings & Chervany (1998) is often cited. They developed a “Web Trust Model” that was actually based meant to measure trust in e-commerce, but it has a few elements that could also apply to eWOM:

Initial trust

McKnight et al. (1998) describe this as trust in an unfamiliar trustee, a trusting belief that is formed before parties have relevant, meaningful information about each other. Initial trust is based on social categorization, reputation, irrational thinking, institutional roles and structures or out of the need to immediately cooperate on a task (Meyerson et al. 1996).

Trusting beliefs

These beliefs are about the perception that the trustee (in this case someone that wrote a review) has attributes that are beneficial to the user. According to Geffen (2002) there are three prominent trusting beliefs. The first is *competence*, the ability of the trustee to do what the reviewer needs. So in the case of an online review this is about the ability of the reviewer to provide the information a reader needs. The second is *benevolence*: does the trustee (reviewer) have the inclination or tendency to help or to do good to others? The third trusting belief is integrity, or how honest and ethic is the reviewer? (McKnight et al., 2002). In this study we will measure trusting beliefs to see if they have any influence on credibility assessments.

Institution-based trust

Also called *system trust*, is the belief that favourable conditions are in place that will enhance the probability of a successful outcome, e.g. the trust someone has in the review system of Amazon.com. Is important to note that institution-based trust does not deal with personal attributes of another person. Institution-based trust has two dimensions: *structural assurance* and *situational normality*. The first is about beliefs one has that protective structures or procedures are in place that will promote success. An example could be the fact that someone believes that the feedback system of eBay is constructed and protected in a way that it is impossible to tamper with. *Situational normality* is the perception that the environment is in proper order and that the situation is normal and/or favourable (McKnight and Chervany, 2002). In the context of eWOM this would mean that a consumer believes that the Internet in general is an appropriate and favourable place to look for product information. Therefore we expect that:

Institution-based trust will have a positive influence on perceived credibility assessments.

Disposition to trust

This is a general tendency to display faith in humanity and to have a trusting stance towards others (McKnight et al, 1998). Grabner-Kräuter & Kaluscha (2003) also added that this is a personality trait that is the result of an on-going lifelong experience and socialization. Since disposition to trust is such an important construct in the model of McKnight in the context of e-commerce, this construct will also be tested in an eWOM context. We expect that:

A higher disposition to trust will have a positive influence on perceived credibility assessments.

Influence of strong ties vs. weak ties on perceived trustworthiness and credibility

As mentioned before, the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of WOM also stems from the fact that people trust and agree with people they like (Xia and Bechwati, 2008). This is often based on a social or biological relationship, so one would perceive a close friend as more credible than somebody one just met. In other words, strong ties are more important than weak ties when it comes to WOM. Strong ties are characterized by “(a) a sense that the relationship is intimate and special, with a voluntary investment in the tie and a desire for companionship with the partner; (b) an interest in frequent interactions in multiple contexts; and (c) a sense of mutuality of the relationship, with the partner’s needs known and supported” (Granovetter, 1973, p.57).

However, in eWOM almost all ties are weak because the information comes (most of the time) from absolute strangers. This causes problems for the receivers in terms of assessing factors such as expertise and credibility of the source of eWOM. How then, can we explain the persuasiveness of eWOM? Sen and Lerman (2007) contest that the weak ties online are still considered to be more credible than other weak ties like advertisements. Nielsen (2007) offers another possibility: eWOM offers opinions from professional experts and offers access to more diverse and broader sources of information. The diversity of information available online can also be seen as a major disadvantage, as it is getting harder and harder to evaluate things such as credibility and quality of the information. Although it is getting harder, it is not impossible, as the next paragraphs will show.

2.7 Social presence

The descriptions and definitions of trust and credibility mentioned above all suggest that trust and credibility are built through types of interpersonal interaction with another person or an organization. This is in line with Blau (1964), who stated that “human interaction” (e.g. face to face) is a precondition of trust. This implies that (the perception of) a high social presence, either via direct or indirect human contact will increase trust. When applying this logic to eWOM, the question arises whether, or how, social presence can increase the trustworthiness of for instance an online review. After all, one of the highest degrees of social presence is face-to-face communication, which is virtually impossible in eWOM.

According to Short, Williams and Christie (1967), who developed the social presence theory, media vary in the way a user experiences psychological proximity of other people. This psychological proximity is called social presence and is conveyed by elements of interpersonal communication. Examples of this are non-verbal signals, proximity (physical distance), orientation and physical appearance. A higher degree of these elements in any type of communication makes this experience more rich and less ambiguous and uncertain (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976). Based on this concept and the aforementioned elements of trust, it will be interesting to see if a higher degree of social presence in eWOM (e.g. an online review) will lead to an increase in trusting beliefs. Thus, it is expected that:

Higher levels of perceived social presence will positively influence eWOM credibility assessments.

2.8 Recurring dimensions of credibility

So far, we have seen that credibility is a personal perception that can differ from person to person. However, research over the years shows three prominent recurring dimensions that are being evaluated: *source bias / trustworthiness*, *source expertise* and *message credibility* (Greer, 2009). These dimensions of credibility are all linked to cognitive aspects that deal with either the source or the message itself. Source bias or source trustworthiness refers to the perceived goodness and morality of the source and deals with questions such as: is the source truthful and is the source unbiased? Source expertise refers to the perceived knowledge, experience and competences of the source. The last dimension, *message credibility*, is not so much about characteristics of the source, but more about the quality of the message and the information (e.g. use of supporting facts and valid arguments). So, a credible source is one that is seen as providing correct, plausible and unbiased information (Greer, 2009). Slater and Rouner (1996) also described three types of credibility assessment, which are very similar to those of Greer. The first is about the knowledge and attitudes one has about the source, which is similar to *source bias/trustworthiness*. The second assessment is of the attitudes about credentials or in other words: *reputed credibility*. The last type of assessment based on the *quality of the message*, including presentation, plausibility and the support of valid data and clear examples.

When looking at the literature concerning credibility it is clear that credibility is a rather complex concept. Several factors (source, receiver and message) are interacting and being evaluated at the same time in order to come up with an assessment of the credibility of the information. It seems that the message itself also plays an important role, just like several cognitive characteristics of the audience. What is most evident from the literature though, is that the source of the information has a significant influence on credibility assessment, by virtue of the perceived expertise, knowledge and trustworthiness of the source. These concepts are up next for discussion.

Types of source credibility

There are several types of source credibility, as described by Tseng and Fogg (2009). The first is *presumed credibility*, which is based on assumptions that the receiver of the information has. This type of credibility deals for instance with stereotypes such as “women can’t drive”, which can lead to someone judging the comments of a woman about a car as being not credible. *Reputed credibility* refers to the label that a source has. One will be more likely to perceive medical information as being credible when the source is labelled “Doctor”, for instance. The third type of credibility, *surface credibility*, is probably the simplest type, as it is based on superficial elements such as trusting someone that is well dressed. The most complex and reliable method of judging credibility is called *experienced credibility*, which is based on the personal experience of the receiver with a source over a longer period of time.

The aforementioned types of source credibility (presumed, reputed, surface and experienced credibility) are more difficult to evaluate in an online environment. Online, it is much harder to gain knowledge of the individuals we interact with, because most of the time we do not physically experience the presence of others, let alone know who they really are (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2009). For instance, how do we know if someone is an expert on the subject at hand? The source can state this explicitly (for instance on his profile) but how do we know it is true? Expertise online can also be derived from other information that is linked to a username, for instance the number of reviews that the source has written, or the number of likes of co-signs he gets from

other experts. Will these types of credibility also hold in eWOM settings? Based on the literature, we expect the following:

The perceived expertise of an eWOM source has a positive influence on perceived credibility assessments.

The personal experience of the receiver with an eWOM source over a longer period of time has a positive influence on credibility assessments.

Identity of the source

Related to the credibility of the source is the identity of the source. Online, we often have no idea about the identity of the source, because a) we simply do not know the person behind the review, even if he uses his real name and b) most reviews are posted under an alias or a nickname. This is interesting, because it does not match with the fact that in regular WOM, one trusts and agrees with people one likes. Since strong ties usually form the basis of trust in regular WOM, it is expected that participants in this study will mention this in their comments:

eWOM that is posted under a "real name" has a positive influence on perceived credibility, as opposed to eWOM that is posted under an obvious nickname.

2.9 Message credibility

Another recurring dimension of credibility is message credibility or message quality, especially online. The online environment causes us to rely on other cues, such as cues in the message or the platform. This does not have to be a problem, since other cues such as judgment of the message itself are available to assess credibility (Hong, 2006). This assessment of the message itself is concerned with elements such as presentation of the message and whether the message is supported by facts or good arguments. So, the better a message is presented, the more credibility this lends to the source, while the opposite is also true: a poorly presented message will hurt the credibility of the source. Slater and Rouner (1996) elaborated on this and found that when people assess information in contexts that offer little or no information about the source, the perceived message quality has even more influence on credibility assessments. In this study people that read (offline) articles naturally assumed that when an article was well written and presented, the author must be knowledgeable and competent. It should be noted that Wathen & Burkell (2002) found that message quality has less effect on credibility assessments when the source is perceived as being a credible expert beforehand.

The quality of the information plays an important role in evaluating the credibility of information. The most salient aspect of information quality is the argument strength (Sia, Tan and Wei, 1999). If a piece of information is perceived to contain valid and/or novel arguments, readers will be more likely to accept this information as being credible and believe it. This holds not only in traditional communication, but also in computer-mediated communication (Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen, 2007). Therefore, the following is expected for eWOM:

The quality of the eWOM-message has a positive impact on source credibility assessments of the reader.

The perceived expertise of a source mediates the impact of a lower quality eWOM-message on credibility assessments of the reader.

2.10 Other dimensions of credibility

Certainty

So far, we have discussed dimensions of credibility that are most recurring in the literature, but there is more to perceived credibility than just the characteristics of the source and the message quality. Slater and Rouner (1996) for instance have shown that when the information that someone receives is in line with his prior beliefs, he will have more confidence and certainty and thus is more likely to believe the information that is presented. This also works the other way around: when someone reads a review that goes against his prior beliefs, he perceives it as less credible. This is closely linked to the concept of *certainty*. Certainty is a concept with roots in philosophy. Of course, one cannot be really certain of anything (except death and taxes, according to Benjamin Franklin). An important aspect of certainty is that it is contextual: it is based on the current knowledge someone has. However, if one believes that all relevant information available is known, and if this information seems to be true, it is accepted as being certain (Stanley, 2008). Thus we expect that:

Information that is in line with prior beliefs and knowledge will have a positive influence on perceived credibility

Consistency, negativity bias and normative opinions

Also related to prior beliefs and certainty is the consistency of the reviews. Usually a consumer gathers several reviews from different users, which allows the consumer to compare the different reviews in terms of recommendation. If a user has read 9 reviews that all state that product X is of low quality and then reads a review that state that product X is of superior quality, this will most likely have a negative effect on the credibility assessment of that review (Zhang & Watts, 2004). This can be explained by the fact that people are used to following and believing in normative opinions (Cheung et al., 2007).

However, a relatively small amount of negativity might actually help in terms of credibility. Our social environment is filled with positive cues, so if we come across a negative cue, this will attract more attention (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972). Fiske (1980) called this the negativity bias: negative information stands out more because it is more rare than positive information. Manufacturers often put a lot of (financial) effort in marketing campaigns by spreading only positive information about their products. This could also explain why people are more hesitant to trust product information from companies: what company would spread negative information about their own products?

Another explanation why people perceive negative information to be more useful is that positive information is often taken for granted. If you were to buy an expensive television set and someone would describe this TV-set as “low quality”, this would be more salient because you would expect that an expensive piece of electronics is indeed of high quality. East, Hammond and Lomax (2008) explain the negativity bias even further. They state that information that confirms what the receiver already knew or assumed may increase their certainty but most likely will not change other aspects like their attitude or beliefs.

Continuing on normative opinions, Eysenbach, Yihune, Lampe, Cross & Brickley (2000) demonstrated that the overall rating (for instance 1 star or 5 stars) that other users gave a review could have a significant impact on the perceived credibility of the information. If a review has a high overall rating, this suggests that many other readers have

perceived the information as being credible, which should in turn make a reader more comfortable in doing the same. After all, apparently many other consumers agreed with the information provided (normative decision-making) (Eysenbach, Powell, Kuss & Sa, 2002).

Information that is counter-normative (deviating from the norms or standards) or goes against what the receiver knows or assumes however, may change one's evaluation. But, according to social judgment theory, this information should not differ too much from what the receiver knows or feels (e.g. be in his latitude of acceptance), because if not, he would find the information objectionable and will most likely reject it (latitude of rejection) (Doherty & Kurz, 1996). Based on the literature about normative opinions and consistency, it is expected that participants will mention this in their assessments:

Consistency of eWOM messages will have a positive influence on credibility assessments.

Negative product information will have a positive influence on the perceived credibility of the eWOM message.

Technical dimensions

The dimensions of credibility discussed above are all linked to cognitive aspects that deal with either the source or the message itself, but especially in an online environment, *technical* dimensions are also of importance (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Examples of technical dimensions are the usability and accessibility of a website, load time of a webpage and the top-level domain. A study of Rieh and Belkin (2000) showed for instance that a .gov or .edu domain is rated as more credible than for instance a .com domain. Hong (2006) also discussed such technical dimensions but in a somewhat broader sense. She labels it *structural features* and adds elements such as the presence of site ownership, third-party endorsements (e.g. a seal of approval from Thuiswinkel) and site contact information to the list of features that influence perceptions of credibility. According to Fogg (2001), the presence of these structural features increases credibility ratings, whereas the presence of banners and advertisements is negatively associated with credibility perceptions. It should be noted that this is true for websites, but it is not yet clear if this also holds for the reviews on these websites. However, since the platform that hosts the review (e.g. a website) is also a type of source, it is expected that:

The presence of structural features increases eWOM credibility perceptions

2.11 Influence of Internet experience on credibility assessment

It must be noted again that credibility is not a fixed characteristic of the source, but the assessment of the receiver. Adding to this, Metzger (2007) described credibility as a construct in which a credibility judgment is dependent on the relationship of the receiver with the medium, source, and the message. Most elements of this relationship have been described in this study so far, except for the experience that the receiver has with the medium (in this case an online medium like the Internet). Johnson and Kaye (2002) suggest that there is a strong positive relationship between how often someone uses a medium and the perceived credibility of that medium. They also suggest that Internet credibility is influenced by how much one relies on the Internet for his information gathering. Several studies suggest that if people spend more time online, this causes them to rate the information they find online more credible (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Greer (2003) for instance found that the amount of time someone spends with an online medium could predict whether someone would rate that medium as being credible. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) go even further and state that the more experience

someone has with the Internet, the more “savvy” they become in their assessment of which websites to trust and which not. Their explanation for this is that a more experienced Internet user is more inclined and able to actually verify information on the Internet and thus assess information as being credible compared to less experienced users. Again, most research focused on information on the Internet, not particularly on user reviews or other forms of eWOM. Therefore, it will be interesting to see if this is also true for eWOM. This leads to the following assumption:

The amount of experience someone has with eWOM has a positive influence on eWOM credibility assessments.

2.12 Conclusion

When considering the existing body of knowledge, anonymous eWOM seems to be a contradictory phenomenon. In real life situations, people are often very cautious in dealing with complete strangers. This hesitation comes from the fact that we don’t know the intentions and motives of a stranger, so we try to reduce the risk of getting in trouble by not interacting too much with strangers. For instance, a child is taught not to talk to strangers and consumers are usually hesitant to buy something from a door-to-door vendor. People are (unconsciously) aware of the fact that society unfortunately has room for people that are looking to exploit or harm others. So, in terms of WOM, a consumer would be hesitant to trust a complete stranger as an informant about product quality, as he tries to minimize risk.

Therefore, it is intriguing to see that consumers in an online environment let go of most of these constraints and boundaries. How else can we explain the fact that online consumer reviews appear to play an increasing role in consumer decision-making processes? More than 80% of web shoppers said they use other consumers' reviews when making purchasing decisions (Forrester, 2006b). On the one hand, these reviews offer a lot of advantages for consumers, but they also bring about risks and moral issues (Weinberg & Davis, 2004). Consumers can leave harmful, false feedback to (intentionally) hurt brands or companies. But there is also evidence of companies spreading manipulated reviews to either help their own brand or hurt other brands. How then does a consumer decide to trust or lend credibility to an online review, or reviewer? The cues that are present in offline WOM are missing online, but yet a consumer somehow decides to trust an anonymous source. Most research focuses on the effects of eWOM, but there has not been much research as to why someone would trust one complete stranger on the Internet, while distrusting another. Thus, it is interesting to try and understand which factors are important when deciding to trust a certain review or reviewers. Is it the review itself, for instance the length, tone or language? How important are visual cues like star ratings or avatars? What is the influence of website design and message presentation? Does the order of arguments or the type of information play a role? What is the influence of social presence?

3. Preliminary study

3.1 Introduction

Given the exploratory nature of the research objectives, a preliminary study was conducted. The goal of this preliminary study was to collect rich and detailed information concerning the attitudes, beliefs and trust of consumers towards anonymous eWOM via interviews. This study made it possible to cover the predetermined areas of research, but it also allowed for unexpected new insights. The interviews not only helped answering some of the sub questions, but also served as a basis for the main study: an online experiment which will be described later on.

3.2 Method

This preliminary study consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were based on the literature and were semi-structured, meaning they had a predetermined script with a set of questions, but it also allowed for some sidesteps and discussions with the participant (laddering). The questions were based on the literature and touched subjects such as *source bias/trustworthiness*, *source expertise*, *message credibility*, *types of source credibility*, *structural/design features*, *disposition to trust*, *institution based trust*, *social presence* and *Internet experience/expertise*. See Appendix A for the complete questionnaire.

15 students (8 male and 7 female) ranging from the ages of 21 to 25 years old participated in the preliminary study. They were recruited via the “Proefpersonenpool” of the University of Twente, which is a system that allows student to participate in studies in exchange for credits. The only requirement was that a participant had to be familiar with online shopping, which was tested simply by asking if they had bought something online in the past three months. The interviews were analysed with a codebook, consisting of theory-driven and data-driven codes. This codebook was also used for the experiment and will be discussed more deeply in paragraph 4.4.

3.3 Results preliminary study

In this explorative preliminary study we try to find initial answers to the main research question, starting with the first sub question:

What is the influence of receiver characteristics in credibility assessments of anonymous eWOM??

In order to answer this question, we try to get insights into the influence of characteristics of the receiver on perceived credibility of eWOM.

3.3.1 Characteristics of the receiver

Experience with e-commerce

All respondents said they bought products online, which was no surprise since it was one of the criteria to take part in the interview. There were also no surprises in the types of products they buy online. The one type of product that was by far mentioned the most was clothing. Both men and women in this study mostly bought clothing online, although one person said he specifically did not like to buy clothing online because of the fact that he could not try the clothing on. Some respondents (4 out of 15) solved this problem by reading about the fit of the product in the comments of other consumers. In doing so, they made an assessment of what size would be good for them and then they ordered the product. If the product did not fit well or if it did not meet up to their expectations, they would simply return the product. This also goes for shoes, which was the second most mentioned product. Other products that are bought online are books, cd's, DVD's and electronics. Surprisingly, only one person mentioned the online purchase of a service (a vacation). Although this was not intended, it does help the generalization of these results a bit, since the main study also deals with a good, rather than a service.

Respondents said they often use the same websites for their online shopping. They do this because of good past experiences with the website, for instance due to their quality of service, terms of delivery or price level. Another factor that plays a role is the name and image of the website. Respondents go to certain websites because they are well known and very popular: this leads them to believe that said websites must be good and trustworthy. This perhaps explains why bol.com, zalando.nl and amazon.com are very popular websites among respondents.

Experience with electronic word-of-mouth

All respondents said they preferred reading reviews before buying a product. They do this often on the same website as where they buy the product, because the reviews are on the same page so they are sure that the reviews are about the product in case. What is important to them is the number of reviews and if there is consensus among reviews. More consensus is considered to be a good thing regarding credibility assessments. People tend not to look at one review in particular when assessing credibility, but look at a bigger set of reviews as one. Therefore, one review should not differ too much from what is being said in other reviews. One very popular website for reading reviews is Tweakers.nl, which was mentioned 7 times. Reasons for this are the fact that Tweakers has been around for years, is well known, has a large and critical community and they come across as the most independent website. It is worth noting that respondents assume that having a lot of visitors means a website is reliable and trustworthy. This also goes for websites that have a lot of commercials and advertisements out: if they do this, then they "must be trustworthy". Finally, there were also some respondents (5)

that did not look specifically for a review, but they did look for user experiences from consumers on for instance a forum or message board. These are not the standard format reviews, but do touch aspects of using the product in everyday life. When reading all those experiences, respondents made some sort of review of the product in their mind. They considered statements about the product that were very specific about pro's and con's the most trustworthy and credible, but again only if there was consistency

It appears that the respondents have a lot of experience with eWOM, which made them very confident in their answers regarding their procedure when looking for online reviews. Their experience has taught them to look for consensus within a larger set of reviews, preferably on a large and well known website or platform. The most important finding is that these respondents tend to base their opinion on several different reviews, instead of just one particular review.

Attitude towards online product information

All respondents said they look for product information online, mostly to orientate on a product before buying it. They are looking for specific product information that comes from people they perceive as experts. This information could be for instance user experience with a product: things about the product that someone can only know if he has worked with the product for a period of time. Of course, this information has to be trustworthy and that is why respondents prefer to make use of well-known websites such as Kieskeurig.nl and Tweakers.nl. When using Google to find product information, they said to often come across websites that they do not know. In that case it is important that the website looks professional (e.g. proper design, good usability, no popups), not only visually but also when it comes to the language used.

Usage of reviews in online buying-process

Most of the respondents (14 out of 15) do read opinions or reviews about the product or online vendor before engaging in a purchase. For instance when buying clothes or shoes, respondents like to read about the fit of the products, because they can't fit it themselves. Therefore, they need the information and advice of other consumers that already have tried on the product. The information and experiences of other consumers are also particularly interesting for people that have no experience with or knowledge about the product and people that want to compare several products within a product group. All respondents said to prefer the information of other users over product information from the producer, because they give more extensive and detailed information and also because they not always trust the information a producer gives.

Respondents also don't want to take unnecessary risks, and like to double-check when shopping online. This not only goes for the product itself, but also the online vendor. Especially when the vendor is unknown to the respondent or when he does not have any prior experience with the vendor. Respondents then try to get more information about the vendor, for instance by reading reviews of other customers but also by looking at structural features like third party endorsements, for instance a quality seal from Thuiswinkel.nl.

Stance towards online reviews over time

Almost all respondents (13) said their opinion about online reviews and their attitude towards them has changed over the years. Half of them said that they have been using them more and more, because of some negative experiences with an online purchased product and because it is an indispensable feature when shopping online. After all, you cannot try on or hold the product yourself before purchasing. But what was also mentioned a lot is their more cynical and critical stance towards online reviews. Respondents have become more sceptical because they have learned by bitter

experience that you cannot simply trust anything that is said on the Internet. Respondents are well aware that marketing departments use reviews to influence public opinion about their products. In a way, respondents were more naïve in the past and became more streetwise, or rather “internetwise”. This is due to their negative experiences, their age and also due to their education. The most important lesson they learned is to not specifically trust one particular review, but form their opinion on the basis of the general image that is formed in a whole set of reviews that are deemed credible.

3.3.2 Characteristics of the message

Next up for discussion are the characteristics of the message. *What is the influence of attributes of the review on credibility assessments?*

Characteristics of a useful review

When reading online reviews, all respondents said they want to be convinced that the reviewer actually used the product himself and that he is an expert on the subject. A reviewer can achieve this by objectively describing the advantages and disadvantages of the product on the basis of good arguments and giving tips and advice based on experience and knowledge. It should be noted that an author is more likely to be perceived as an expert when the reader lacks knowledge about the product at hand. All participants said that wording and language should not be too extremely positive or negative, because overly positive wording triggers suspicion of commercial interests and overly negative wording comes across as just slashing or running down the product. It is also important that the reviewer describes the relative value or quality of the product: how does it compare to other products in this product group? All respondents said that if they feel that the author of the review has sufficient experience and expertise, they are willing to believe the author. Several respondents (10) evaluate if the author is capable or skilled enough to review a product, based on the quality of the message. Besides the use of valid arguments, message quality also covers the use of proper wording and language, fluent sentences, correct spelling and the use of punctuation marks. Incorrect spelling, wording and language are by far the biggest source of frustration and annoyance among respondents and bring up associations with low intelligence, thus making authors seem less capable. Nobody mentioned the importance of a real name vs. a nickname spontaneously, and when asked most said it might play a small role but only subconscious. One respondent said, “I really don’t care about what name is used, I only care about the message. I can imagine that older people are not too happy about using their real name online but still want to contribute with a good review. That’s fine by me”. This also goes for the use of a profile picture. Most respondents (10) said (when asked) they felt it would not do much for the review in terms of increasing credibility, but a profile picture that shows a child or a partying guy could possibly hurt credibility.

Cues of trustworthiness and credibility

In this case, respondents partly agreed and partly disagreed. They agreed on two things, the first being the quality of the message. Respondents would focus on the use of good arguments, meaning that more extensive reviews with better arguments are most credible. The second is the source of the review. In case of doubt, respondents said they would try to get to know as much as possible about the source of the review. Factors that were mentioned are perceived expertise of the source, name of the source and the number of reviews he has written (and how many likes these reviews have). And again: the more perceived expertise and experience, the more credible the source is perceived. The number of reviews and likes is a new insight and will be added to the main study.

Respondents also look for similarity: the more they feel a connection with a reviewer, the more they are willing to believe him.

However, respondents disagreed on another cue. Most respondents (9) said they were more prone to choose “negative” (more critical) reviews over positive reviews, because they feel those reviews are more realistic and honest. They associate positive reviews with prejudice of reviewers and perhaps foul play by producers that write reviews about their own products. However, one respondent had a very interesting take on this. She preferred the more positive reviews, because she learnt from experience that people on the Internet like to complain and nag about products. She also assumed that people who did like a product would not all write a review, whereas people that did not like a product all would write a review to complain. This would create a distorted image, where it would seem that everybody that bought the product has issues with it. Therefore, if the proportion of positive and negative reviews is 50/50 she would add another 20% to the positive reviews. However, this is hard to manipulate in our study, but it would be interesting to include this in another study. When do people actually believe the product is as bad as it seems from the reviews? Are people aware of the fact that the number of positive vs. negative reviews online might be disproportionate?

Respondents generally tend to believe the product specifications on the website of the manufacturer, but if someone in a review states that this information is not correct, respondents are inclined to believe the reviewer. Respondents know from their own experience that manufacturers will always try to make their product look more positive, because they have something to sell. If multiple reviewers agree that the product information is incorrect, all respondents said they believed the reviewers without hesitation. They are well aware that manufacturers have other interests, for instance making profit. Respondents agree that their fellow consumers are more honest and critical and they share the same interest: the best product possible.

Helpful reviews in buying-decision process

Reviews seem to help the most in the buying decision process when a consumer does not have a lot of knowledge about or experience with the product. In that case, respondents like to read critical reviews from fellow consumers, that discuss both pro's and cons. There was a bit of a discrepancy in some of the answers, as respondents said they like to read different opinions and point of views, but they also said they need consistency and consensus. They prefer when people actively discuss with each other in their reviews about their differing opinions with good, valid arguments. This allows readers to soak up different standpoints and make up their own mind about the product. Again, it is not one particular review that makes the difference, but it is the bigger picture that several reviews create and that allows them to form their own opinion. However, their opinion always seems to be influenced by the consensus in the reviews and also by the fact if what they read is consistent with what they already thought of the product. Several respondents (5) noted that (parts of) reviews that confirm what they thought had a bigger impact than (parts) of reviews that differed from what they already knew. However, when there was consensus among reviews about something that did not match the prior knowledge of the respondent, this also had a big impact.

Preference professional reviews vs. user reviews

The question if respondents prefer “professional” reviews over reviews written by other consumers yielded mixed answers. On the one hand, 7 respondents liked professional reviews because they are well written and very thorough. Also, respondents agreed that some products need a professional review by an expert, because you need a frame of reference if you are for instance reviewing an expensive hi-fi set. You need that frame of reference to judge the sound quality compared to other hi-fi sets, while you don't

particularly need a frame of reference when evaluating a pair of shoes. On the other hand, people seemed to have a slight preference for reviews written by other consumers. This has various reasons, the first being the fact that they feel more similarity with other consumers than with professionals, because they can relate to the situation and type of use of other consumers. The feeling was that professionals focus more on technical details and aspects that are not really important to regular users, while consumers focus on the use of the product in everyday life. Professionals also only use the product for a short period of time, while consumers have a lot more experience with the product. So ideally, respondents would like to read a professional review, mixed with the commentary of other consumers' experiences with the product in everyday life. Based on this information, one of the reviews in the main study will be a consumer review written by a (disclosed) professional photographer, to see if this indeed positively influences credibility assessments. This is in line with the literature on *source credibility*, especially with *reputed credibility*. This is based on the label that a reviewer has, for instance "professional photographer". However, the other half of the respondents preferred reviews from people that are more similar to them. Therefore, we will add the code *similarity* to the codebook, which covers references to perceived closeness or distance due to similarity or distance between reviewers and readers.

Writing a review

It is remarkable that the respondents were divided when it comes to writing a review themselves. Where they did not care about the name or a profile picture of the author when reading reviews, they would either add a profile picture or their own name when writing a review. Some respondents (6) made a case for writing under their own name (without a picture) because they were not afraid to stand for their opinion and it would make them look more professional. They said that a picture was not necessary when using a real name, because people would be able to Google their profiles themselves. The respondents that argued in favour of using a profile picture (4) said they would do this so that readers had an idea of who was writing the review. They felt that in that case, a nickname would not hurt credibility, as long as it is not too childish or extreme. They all agreed on how to write a credible trustworthy review: it should be an honest and thoughtful review, describing one's own experience with the product, highlighting both negative and positive points supported by examples, arguments, tips and advice. It should be clear to the reader that the author has experience with the product. Even if they are satisfied with the product, they would still try to imagine what could be a negative point to others and describe this. In doing so, readers can judge for themselves how important those points are. Because of the discrepancy between what respondents said they feel is important when reading reviews compared to writing reviews, there will be extra attention for manipulations regarding names and profile pictures in the main study.

3.3.3 Characteristics of the source

The final set of questions focused on characteristics of the source of the review. *What is the influence of characteristics of the reviewer on credibility assessments?*

Preference of source of product information

Whether respondents prefer receiving product information from their friends and relatives or from the Internet depends on several factors, of which experience and expertise are the most important. In principle, all respondents prefer information from their inner circle, because then they know where the information comes from. They know who the source is and what his backgrounds are, which makes it easier to appreciate the information and to estimate the value of it. Besides, respondents feel that family and friends wish them nothing but the best, so they will always be honest. Another advantage is that they can immediately answer your questions or give you real-life examples. However, product information from friends and family is useless when they lack experience and expertise regarding the product. This is why most (11) respondents tend to use Internet for their product information, because there is so much more information available online. This confirms the explanation of Nielsen (2007) why eWOM is persuasive, despite a lack of strong ties: eWOM offers opinions from professional experts and offers access to more diverse and broader sources of information. The wide array of opinions available online allows the respondents to form their own opinion, although they are not always sure they can trust those opinions. So again, consistency and consensus are very important in assessing credibility and trustworthiness.

WOM from friends and family

Respondents said that the information about products or services they receive from others around them is mostly negative, for instance about goods that were of low quality and had to be returned or about web shops that took forever to deliver an order. Two respondents said they believe that a good experience is something you expect and thus is more common, so therefore it will not be shared as much. Positive product information they receive from people around them is mostly about (web) shops with cheap offers and good products.

Respondents say they believe this information without hesitation. They received the information from people they have known for a very long time, like family and friends and they know that these people will never lie to them or betray them. Their trust in them is based on prior experiences and the fact that they know who they are dealing with and what their backgrounds are. Or, as one respondent put it: "I just know they want nothing but the best for me when they (my friends) give me advice" (Clara). Another reason to believe information received from friends is that they often have the same taste and interests as you.

Trustworthiness of friends and family vs. online

When asked whom respondents would trust when the product information from a friend contradicts the product information from online reviews, they did surprisingly not immediately pick their friends. Of course, when it was just a couple of reviews that contradicts their friend, or if the proportion was 50/50, then they would trust their friend. Again, they know they can trust their friends and they know how to put their evaluation in context. It also depends on the expertise of their friends: if a friend is a known expert, for instance a photographer, then his opinion would, relatively, outweigh several contradicting reviews on the Internet. This is dependent of the context though: a friend could also be too much of an expert, meaning he has very high standards. If the

friend then is very negative about a camera, but several reviews online are rather positive, respondents say they would probably guess the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

However, in all other cases the number of reviews that would contradict their friends' opinion is an important indicator. If there were 10 reviews that disagree with the review of a friend, then most respondents would either trust the online reviews, or look for more information elsewhere to make up their own opinion about the product. One respondent put it like this "Of course I want to trust the opinion of my friend, but that would get harder and harder as the number of reviews online that disagree with my friend grows. In that case, I would rather trust in a whole bunch of opinions from strangers, as long as they agree with each other".

3.4 Conclusion

This preliminary study confirms several things that were discussed in the literature overview, as it appears that the respondents really value experience, expertise, message quality, consistency and consensus. To most respondents, expertise and experience even outweighs the impact of advice of a strong tie. Therefore, the focus in the main study will be on these factors. This preliminary study also raises a few questions regarding the importance of elements of social presence, like the use of real names and profile pictures. These questions needed to be answered in the main study; so social presence became a more prominent factor in the main study. Finally, the interviews also gave us new insights about balanced, critical reviews and *similarity*. Both factors were added to the codebook. This preliminary study also shows that the respondents form a homogeneous group as far as experience with online shopping and eWOM goes. They all have a decent amount of experience and feel comfortable in using eWOM and other product information before buying a product.

4. Main study: method

4.1 Research design and participants.

In the second part of the study we took an experimental approach in order to answer the main research question: *Which factors influence credibility assessments of eWOM of strangers?*

The experimental material consisted of a (for the purpose constructed) website that contained product information about a camera and twelve (manipulated) user reviews as can be seen in Figure 1. We specifically opted for reviews about electronics, because there is a large number of electronics reviews available online which all discuss rather objective features and characteristics. This is not the case in reviews about for instance hotels or restaurants, because those reviews deal with subjective experiences. These subjective experiences would make it harder to control our manipulations, because of a greater influence of personal characteristics. There were four versions of the website that all looked the same, except for the reviews on it because these were randomly divided over the four websites. This was done to account for other (unintended) effects, such as the influence of the order of certain reviews or the combination of certain reviews. The visual layout of the reviews showed strong resemblance to the usual review-formats as seen on websites like bol.com and kieskeurig.nl. The product image used was of a rendered image of a non-existing camera so that nobody would have any prior knowledge about this specific camera. The four versions of the websites were equally distributed to the participants.



Figure 1. Example of a version of the website.

Participants were gathered via the “Proefpersonenpool”. At first, they were meant to partake in the experiment in a controlled setting, in the presence of a researcher. This way, the researcher could immediately ask questions about the comments that participants made. However, it proved very difficult to get students to come to the university on a predetermined timeslot. After some modifications to the method, it was possible for students to partake in the experiment in their own time and on their own computer. This change had several advantages: it made the experiment more realistic as it was more similar to a real life situation in which they read reviews. Another big advantage was that it made the study immediately more popular among students, which resulted in more students signing up. A disadvantage was the lack of control by a researcher, but this was solved by immediately contacting participants when comments were unclear.

Given the purpose of this study it was required that the participants had dealt with anonymous eWOM in the past 6 months. It was also important that they had purchased one or more products online, because then they would have some experience in evaluating anonymous eWOM when purchasing products online. The goal was to get a total sample of at least 25 people for each version of the website, making a total of 150 participants.

4.2 Procedure

After they signed up, participants received instructions and a link to the experiment, in which they could participate at home on their own computer. They were asked to imagine they wanted to buy a digital camera and were looking for product information. The URL they received led to a (for the purpose constructed) website that looks like a regular website with some product information and images on it. The most important element of the website were of course the reviews.

Once on the website, participants were asked to comment on the credibility and trustworthiness of each review by giving plusses and minuses accompanied by explanation for elements that helped or hurt perceived credibility. This could be any element, from words to sentences to profile pictures or punctuation marks (see Figure 2).

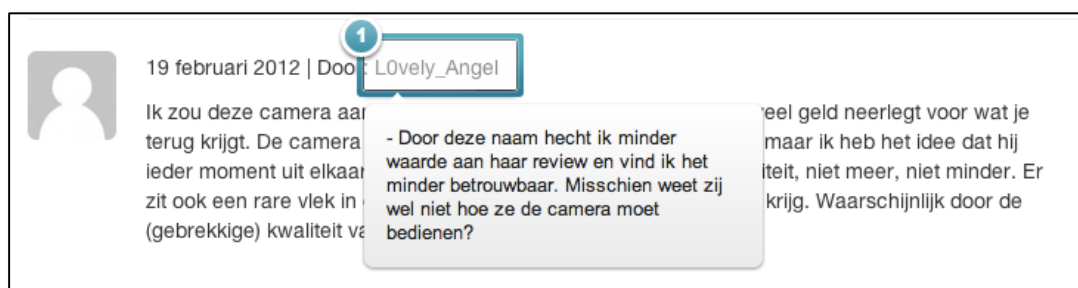


Figure 2. Example of an annotation on the website.

Participants were able to directly annotate on the website through a plugin named *Bounceapp*. This made it easier for participants to immediately write up their evaluations while reading the reviews. To conclude their task, they had to fill out a survey (see Appendix A) that measured demographics and several statements regarding trust in others, trust in the Internet and trust in online reviews.

4.3 Instrument

As mentioned before, all twelve reviews were based on common templates as seen on bol.com and kieskeurig.nl. This included the name of the reviewer, a profile picture (either a standard anonymous avatar or a real picture) and the date on which the review was submitted. However, the reviews were manipulated on several different aspects based on the constructs that have been discussed in the literature overview and on insights gained from the preliminary study:

Name

The first manipulation was based on the (nick)name of the author. One author was presented either as “HappySnekkie45” or as Michael de Leeuw. Both messages were exactly the same. To double-check, we also included an author presented as either “LOvely_Angel” or as Stephanie Schreuder. In doing so, we also manipulated on gender.

Three types of expertise

The second manipulation dealt with perceived expertise. To test this, we included two identical reviews, except for an additional sentence that state “which I use daily as I am photographer” which suggests the reviewer is a professional. The other two manipulations were based on the use of technical jargon (e.g. “ISO” and “tripod”) and on the addition of a reviewer stating that he “had been using the camera for the past few months”, suggesting expertise based on experience.

Normative opinion

Normative opinion is a variable that in this study refers to the influence of the opinion of others. Therefore, one review was manipulated with additional profile information regarding the contributions of the reviewer to the website. The sentence: “P. Jordens, has written 69 reviews and 57 people liked this review” was added.

Gender

The preliminary study made clear that some people (including women) prefer technical information from a man over technical information from a woman. Therefore, two identical reviews were included, one under the name of Maikel van Lent and one by Mieke van Lent.

Message quality

Message quality was manipulated in 6 reviews by adding references to respectable sources like *de Consumentengids*, by adding spelling errors and poor grammar and finally by adding valid, sound arguments vs. reviews without those arguments.

Negative product information

Some reviews were manipulated with negative product information, for instance by adding a sentence that suggests that the camera was not the best option on the market.

Consistency

Consistency in this study refers to the general consistency between reviews. We made sure that some reviews contradicted each other, while some reviews just reaffirmed what was said in other reviews, to see how important consistency in reviews is.

Social presence

Social presence in this study refers to a perceived psychological proximity of the author. Social presence was manipulated in four reviews by adding more extensive profile

information, such as profile pictures and location, but also more personal information in the message itself.

For a complete overview of all reviews and manipulations, see Appendix B.

4.4 Analysis

When the main study was finalized, around 2000 comments on perceived credibility had to be analysed. This was done by coding each comment, based on a codebook that was both data-driven and theory-driven. The first draft of the codebook was based on the theories in the literature overview and the preliminary study and contained codes such as *message quality*, *normative opinion* and *trusting stance*. During the gathering of data from the main study, we added codes based on that data to the codebook. This led to an initial codebook with 22 codes. With this codebook, two coders independently started coding 2 interviews and 5 experiments in order to obtain a high inter-rater reliability. The discussion of differing codes led to a new version of the codebook, which was tested again with 5 (other) interviews and experiments. This showed that the study would benefit from a more specific set of codes. For example, we added *lack of expertise* and *lack of experience* as counterparts of *expertise* and *experience*. As can be seen in Appendix C, the final codebook has 27 codes. In the final round, both coders tested 5 interviews and 15 experiments independent of each other. This resulted in a kappa of .86, which is very high considering the size of the codebook and the fact that the codes did not have categories. This means that not every piece of data has the same type of code: it could be that one piece of data has three codes assigned to it, while another piece only has one. Therefore, it is very unlikely that two coders randomly assign the same code to the same piece of data

5. Main study: Results

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will describe our sample as well as reveal the findings of the main study.

In total 141 people participated in this study, of which 15 were interviewed and 136 participated in the experiment. Unfortunately, 10 people forgot several parts of the experiment or skipped half of the questionnaire, meaning that their results were not useful for this study. After deletion of incomplete and invalid cases, 126 cases were used for analysis. 37,3% of the participants were male and 62,7% were female and ranged in age from 18 to 31 years old, with an average age of 21,77 years old ($SD = 2,69$). The majority of them were still studying at a university (77,8%) or at HBO (11,9%). As can be seen in Table 1, almost half of them read at least once a month product information on the Internet (48,4%), while 21,4% said they do this at least once a week. Another 21,4% said they read product information online in the past 3 months (table 1)

Table 1
Reading of Product Information Online

	Frequency	%
Weekly	27	21,4%
Monthly	61	48,4%
Once in past 3 months	27	21,4%
Once in past 6 months	9	7,1%
Once past 12 months	1	.8%

Note. $N = 126$.

When it comes to buying products online, Table 2 shows almost half of the participants said they do this at least once a month (48,4%). 27.7% said they bought something online in the past 3 months and 11,1% did this in the past 6 months. There were also participants that buy products online on a weekly basis (7,9%). The preliminary study made clear that participants mostly buy clothing, shoes, books and electronics online.

Table 2
Engaging in Online Purchase

	Frequency	%
Weekly	10	7,9%
Monthly	61	48,4%
Once in past 3 months	34	27%
Once in past 6 months	14	11,1%
Once past 12 months	7	5,6%

Note. $N = 126$.

Levels of trust

The questionnaire also contained 18 items that measured several levels of trust of the participants on a 7-point Likert scale, distributed over five categories: Disposition to trust: benevolence, disposition to trust: trusting stance, institution-based trust: situational normality, Institution-Based Trust: situational normality – benevolence and trusting intentions: willingness to depend. These statements are based on the work of McKnight et al. (1998). The results in Figure 1 show that the participants form a very homogenous group, as there are no real outliers they appear to agree with each other in general. We did check if there was any significant difference in levels of trust between participants that answered *weekly* or *monthly* vs. *once in past 3/6/12 months* on both

questions, but this was not the case. As can be seen in Figure 1, participants' answers to the statements are in general in between "undecided" and "slightly agree". This means they are moderately comfortable in trusting other people in general, even if they are strangers. It also means they believe the Internet is a safe enough place for shopping and gathering product information, therefore they are willing to trust in the honesty and integrity of online reviewers. See Appendix D for more information about the reliability and factor analysis.

Disposition to trust: benevolence ($\alpha = .808$)	Mean	SD
<i>Over het algemeen zijn mensen begaan met het welzijn van anderen</i>	4.48 (N=126)	1.164
<i>Meestal geven mensen genoeg om anderen om ze daadwerkelijk te helpen, in plaats van alleen maar aan zichzelf te denken</i>	4.29 (N=123)	1.220
<i>De meeste mensen zijn eerlijk in de omgang met anderen</i>	4.29 (N=124)	1.215
<i>Mensen zijn oprecht bezorgd over de problemen van anderen</i>	3.94 (N=124)	1.215
Disposition to trust: trusting stance ($\alpha = .845$)		
<i>Over het algemeen vertrouw ik in mensen totdat ze me een reden geven om ze te wantrouwen</i>	5.10 (N=124)	1.366
<i>Wanneer ik iemand voor het eerst ontmoet geef ik hem/haar meestal het voordeel van de twijfel</i>	4.95 (N=124)	1.229
<i>Normaal gesproken vertrouw ik nieuwe kennissen totdat ze aantonen dat ik ze niet kan vertrouwen</i>	5.11 (N=122)	1.268
<i>Ik ben goed van vertrouwen</i>	4.97 (N=124)	1.337
Institution-Based Trust: Situational normality ($\alpha = .915$)		
<i>Ik heb een goed gevoel over de gang van zaken wanneer ik iets koop op Internet of andere activiteiten op het Internet uitvoer</i>	5.02 (N=122)	1.320
<i>Ik voel me op mijn gemak wanneer ik aankopen doe via Internet</i>	5.06 (N=123)	1.332
Trusting Intentions: Willingness to depend ($\alpha = .866$)		
<i>Wanneer ik productinformatie zoek vertrouw ik gerust op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i>	4.70 (N=123)	1.274
<i>Ik durf mijn aankoopbeslissing gerust te baseren op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i>	4.41 (N=123)	1.367
<i>Wanneer ik niet zeker ben van mijn zaak ben kan ik altijd vertrouwen op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i>	4.37 (N=123)	1.277
<i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen op goede en effectieve wijze productinformatie kunnen geven</i>	4.27 (N=123)	1.242
Institution-Based Trust: Situational Normality - Benevolence ($\alpha = .870$)		
<i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen het beste met anderen voor hebben</i>	4.85 (N=122)	1.096
<i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen waarheidsgetrouwe informatie verstrekken</i>	4.81 (N=123)	1.097
<i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk en oprecht zijn</i>	4.82 (N=123)	1.102
<i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk zijn in hun reviews</i>	4.93 (N=123)	1.139

Figure 1. Items measuring levels of trust.

5.2 Results

To get insights into what influence the different manipulations had on perceived credibility assessments, we take a closer look at the comments that participants made on all 24 reviews. In doing so, we can compare both versions of the manipulated review and see if there are differences in the comments that participants made on both reviews. In this chapter, we will first discuss the effects of each manipulation, followed by a description of the comments that participants made on that manipulation.

5.3 Manipulation on name

A1 vs. B1

Both reviews were manipulated on the name of the author. Review A1 was written by *HappySnekkie45* and review B1 by *Michael de Leeuw*. Both messages were, content wise, the same (see Figure 2). The most striking difference in results was indeed caused by the manipulation. Almost 43% of the participants that saw review A1 commented on the name of the author in a negative way, while 9,5% commented on the name in review B1. Note: all comments on the name of B1 were positive, because he used his full name.

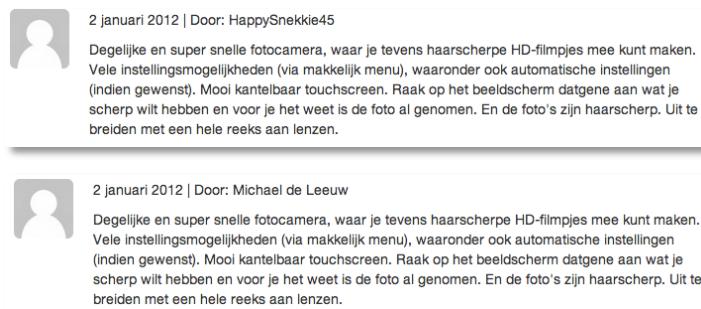


Figure 2. Review A1 and B1.

A2 vs. B2

Again, both reviews were manipulated on the name of the author and both had the exact same message, as can be seen in Figure 3. Almost 43% of the participants that read review A2 (by *L0vely_Angel*) commented on the name of the author in a negative way. Only 6% commented on the name of the reviewer (*Stephanie Schreuder*) in review B2 (in a positive way).



Figure 3. Review A2 and B2.

Comments on name of author

As opposed to what participants said in the preliminary study, the name of the author of a review does influence credibility assessments. Especially the use of a nickname influences credibility and trustworthiness in a negative way. Participants feel that the use of a pseudonym raises some questions regarding the intentions of the author. What does the author have to hide, why is he anonymous? Participants associate this with somebody that can say anything he wants on the Internet without taking responsibility for it. It is not only a matter of trust, but also a matter of expertise. A strange nickname does not sound professional, according to participants. Such nicknames are associated with people that are not very serious, less intelligent people or children. Those types of people are deemed not capable of writing a credible and trustworthy review.

"It seems trustworthy because the author uses his full name. He doesn't hide behind a nickname so he's not afraid to voice his opinion and take responsibility for it." - Participant about the name of an author.

Participants prefer a review written by someone with a real name (first name and surname), because it feels more personal and trustworthy. A real name allows you to Google that person to see who you are dealing with, which gives participants a sense of control and safety. Besides, they reason that a person who uses his real name is honest and not afraid to take responsibility and stand by his words.

Mediation through message quality

However, the message itself can mediate a strange nickname. Several respondents (10) said they did worry about a nickname, but in the end they felt that the message (if high quality) outweighs a strange nickname. It would then only bother them if there were a pattern in reviews that are very similar message wise or name wise.

"This name doesn't sound very trustworthy, but the message itself seems like it is written by someone that has a lot of knowledge about cameras. So I'm not too bothered about the nickname." - Participant about a review that he perceives as trustworthy and credible, despite the nickname of the author.

For example, when several reviews more or less look the same and if they are written by nicknames that are very similar (e.g. Happysnekkie 45 and SnekkieHappie45) this would hurt trustworthiness because participants associate this with bots that automatically submit reviews or efforts of a marketing department that tries to influence public opinion about their product.

It should be noted that some participants (8) mentioned the name of a female reviewer. These participants assumed that a man has more knowledge about technology than a woman.

5.4 Manipulation on expertise

A3 vs. B3

The manipulation in reviews A3 and B3 focused on *labelled expertise* (see Figure 4). Both messages were the same, but in review B3 the author made clear he that he is a professional photographer. 63 people saw this review and 41 of them (73%) commented on the label of the reviewer. Overall, 89% of the comments on this type of expertise were related to this review. Participants said they trusted this review because a professional photographer wrote it. The general thought is best summarized by this quote:

“I trust this review because he’s a photographer. I’m assuming he knows what he’s talking about, because he has a lot of experience and a broad frame of reference. If a professional uses this camera then it must be very good.” – Participant about the disclosed profession of the author.



Figure 4. Review A3 and B3.

A4 vs. B4

The goal of reviews A4 and B4 (Figure 5) was to manipulate perceived expertise through additional profile information. Review A4 had some extra information about the reviewer, such as the amount of reviews he has written and the amount of likes this particular review received. This normative opinion obviously was very important to participants, because almost 80% of the readers of A4 commented on this. Over the whole study, 97% of the comments on normative opinion were related to this review. The importance of the normative opinion comes from three factors:

- Participants feel more secure in trusting a review when others before them have already done so. They reason that if so many people already “liked” the review, it must be good. So many people cannot be wrong.
- Participants associate someone that writes a lot of reviews with expertise and experience.
- The amount of reviews and likes shows that the author must be a “real” person and not a fake account that was set up to write a positive review.

“I like the fact that there is more information available about the author. He has written a lot of reviews and a lot of people appreciate his reviews, so this means he has experience and he knows what he is talking about. It’s a testament to his trustworthiness if 57 people think it’s a useful review.” – Participant about normative opinions.

It should be noted that participants value the amount of likes more than the amount of reviews someone has written.



Figure 5. Review A4 and B4.

A5 vs. B5

To see if there was any difference in perceived expertise caused by gender, we manipulated review A5 (written by a woman) and B5 (written by a man) on gender of the reviewer (see Figure 6). There were no differences worth mentioning. Comments on both reviews focused on expertise derived from experience and language/wording, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.



Figure 6. Review A5 and B5.

Comments on expertise

Comments on expertise in this study can be divided into two categories: expertise derived from experience and expertise derived from language and wording. These concepts are up next for discussion.

5.4.1 Expertise derived from experience

Expertise derived from experience is really self-explanatory, but it was coded as *“references to experience of the user with the product, for instance due to a description of the circumstances in which the camera was tested or due to knowledge of how long the author the camera has been testing”*.

This form of expertise is related to some elements of message quality. The comments in the preliminary study regarding message quality showed that people appreciate examples and detailed information about the product. This type of information can only be provided by people that actually have worked with a product for a longer period of time. There is also a connection with writing a balanced and critical review. Someone that has more experience with a product is not hindered by his initial enthusiasm (love is blind) and thus is better able to write an unbiased review

"You can't write a review if you bought the camera just three days ago. That's too short of a period to do some proper testing, besides that you are still blinded by your enthusiasm" - Participant about a lack of experience from the reviewer.

Cues for perceived experience

As was discussed in the preliminary study, respondents preferred to hear the experiences of actual users with the product and this also showed in the comments during the experiment. Participants referred to statements in the reviews that, according to them, one was only able to make if one truly had experience with the product. If someone discusses the fact that the camera has some issues when shooting several pictures at once, this is both criticism and it also shows the actual experience of the author with the product. It is information that a manufacturer obviously will not provide and this makes it very credible to participants. Adding to this, participants assume that someone with experience with a product group in general (e.g. camera's) also has a better frame of reference and thus is very capable of judging a product. Experience also gives authors some form of authority: they have used the product over a longer period of time, meaning they are well aware of all functionalities, possibilities and pros and cons of the product.

"This shows that it's not just a spontaneous review, but that the author has really put some thought and time in it. She wrote the review after a couple of months, so he as enough experience with the camera. At least his initial enthusiasm has faded which allows him to write a balanced review." -Participant about expertise derived from experience.



12 mei 2012 | Door: Ellen Meerdijk
Woonplaats: Leiden
Product gekocht op: 26-02-2012

Gezien mijn goede ervaringen met 'point & shoot' camera's is mijn oog op deze camera gevallen. Ik heb hier na een paar maanden toch spijt van gekregen. De kwaliteit van de foto's valt me helaas tegen. De foto's zijn namelijk minder scherp dan ik had verwacht. Een pluspunt is wel dat de camera gemakkelijk te bedienen is, vandaar dat ik hem toch maar gehouden heb. Kortom: voor de minder kritische gebruiker is dit wellicht een aanrader.

Figure 7. Cue that suggests expertise derived from experience.

Expertise based on experience can be inferred from a number of cues, for instance when an author discusses the circumstances in which he used the camera, or from the advice and tips he gives or from a cue that shows how long the author has been using the camera (for instance in a sentence that shows when he bought the camera, or in his profile information). An example can be seen in Figure 7.

Lack of experience

As these results show, experience with the product in case is very important to participants. It comes as no surprise then that a clear lack of experience will harm the perceived credibility. A lack of experience was inferred from two types of cues.

For instance, it appears from either the review or the profile information that the reviewer only got the camera recently. Participants feel that one can only write a balanced review when having sufficient experience with a camera. Experience is gained over time, so a person that bought the camera only two weeks ago has not enough experience to properly judge the camera.

"Her experience sounds honest and sincere, but is less trustworthy because she only bought the camera a couple of days ago. That's too short to form a proper opinion." – Participant about a lack of experience from the author.

"Not a useful review since it is not written by the actual user. This makes it less trustworthy because he doesn't have any experience with the camera himself." – Participant about a lack of social presence.

It is also possible that the person that wrote the review does not own the camera himself. This was mentioned a lot because one of the reviews was written by someone that gave the camera as a present to his brother. Although this person did not own the camera himself and thus does not have a first-hand experience, he still wrote a review about the camera. This was, according to most participants that read the review, not very credible and trustworthy. Not only because he did not describe a first-hand experience, but also because participants doubted if the person that used the camera would be critical of it, since he got it as a present. There was some doubt about the honesty of his brother.

5.4.2 Expertise derived from language and wording

The other category of expertise in this study is expertise derived from language and wording. In the codebook, we describe this as *"references to use of language and wording, for instance technical jargon, technical terminology or the discussion of advanced camera functions"*.

We learned from the preliminary study that perceived expertise is very important when assessing credibility. But how do participants gain knowledge of the perceived expertise online where it is harder to gain knowledge of the individuals we interact with, because most of the time we do not physically experience the presence of others, let alone know who they really are (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2009)? According to participants, the wording and language used by authors is a good indicator of expertise.

There are three cues in the language and wording that participants associate with expertise. The first cue is the use of technical jargon and terminology, which leads to a more positive assessment of perceived expertise. Participants assume that someone that uses technical jargon has more technical knowledge than the average consumer. An example of this is the sentence *"I love to experiment with the shutter speed, and adjusting the ISO values is very easy"*

"This review is reliable and trustworthy, because this person clearly knows what he is talking about. He discusses things like "ISO values", "tripod" and "stabilization." – Participant about technical jargon.

The second cue is when an author explicitly identifies and discusses technical features and functions of the camera: if an author discusses anything more than just the basic features, this leads participants to think that the author really knows what he is talking about.

"Peter describes several functions in detail, for instance the optical zoom and panorama function. This suggests that he not only tested everything, but that he also has a lot of technical knowledge about the functions. This makes it trustworthy." – Participant about expertise derived from language and wording.

The final cue for expertise is when an author gives technical advice or technical tips about camera functions or solutions to technical problems. According to participants, this shows that the author really understands what certain functions are for and how they work. They are able to think on a higher level about the product and see the bigger picture, which gives them authority and credibility.

"I can tell that this woman knows what she's talking about from her language use and the technical advice she gives potential buyers. Very credible and trustworthy." – Participant about perceived expertise derived from the technical advice of the author.

Risk of too much expertise

It goes without saying that too much technical jargon and technical details will alienate readers that do not have sufficient technical knowledge. Those readers will probably not have a clue what is being said in the review, which causes uncertainty, which in turn negatively influences credibility assessments.

"This description is very technical, which makes it difficult for me to understand. If I don't understand what is being said, I won't be able to tell if it makes any sense. This makes me hesitant to trust the review. He seems like an expert, but unfortunately I can't check if that's really true because of the use of jargon that sounds like abracadabra to me."
-Participant about a review that sounds too technical.

5.4.3 Lack of expertise

On the other side, there is also a risk of a lack of expertise. A lack of expertise was assigned to comments that dealt with *"references to a (presumed) lack of expertise, for instance based on language/wording (e.g. "I think he just doesn't know to handle a camera" or "it seems like he doesn't know that much about camera's")"*

The preliminary study and literature already showed that perceived expertise is very important when assessing credibility, so it is not very surprising that a lack of expertise was the third most common category of comments. There are four cues that signal a presumed lack of expertise.

1. When a reader assumes he has more expertise than the author. The reader feels some sort of superiority over the author regarding product knowledge. One participant said *"This makes no sense at all, I'm pretty sure it's the other way around, so his statements are not very trustworthy to me."*
2. Language and wording are also important cues for a presumed lack of expertise. Simple language or sentences that project doubt make an author look like a layman. In one review there was a possible solution to a malfunctioning camera that was phrased *"maybe it's an issue with the lens?"* This is an example of what participants would infer as a statement of someone lacking expertise.
3. If an author says something that contradicts what the majority says, participants assume it is because of a lack of expertise. This is comparable to the concept of consistency that was already discussed in the preliminary study. If ten reviews complain about the image quality of the camera and one review is very positive about the image quality, participants think that is because that reviewer has insufficient knowledge about cameras.
4. The name of the author can also influence the presumed lack of expertise. One participant said for instance: *"The name LOvely_Angel immediately hurts the credibility of the review. That's a name that I associate with a 12-year old girl and I don't think a 12-year old is capable enough to properly evaluate a camera. I also think the stain on her lens is her own fault because she doesn't know how to handle a camera."* – Participant about names that hurt perceived credibility.

Although it was a small proportion (8 out of 126 participants), some people commented on the gender of the author in relation to a lack of expertise. Five respondents (including two women) preferred reading reviews about electronics from a man over a woman, because they assume that men have greater expertise on this subject.

Lack of expertise and prior knowledge

15% of the comments on lack of expertise are linked to *prior knowledge* and 51% of prior knowledge comments are linked to *lack of expertise*. This is very simple to explain, because a lot of participants base their judgement of a lack of expertise on what they know themselves. If they feel that a reviewer is wrong in what he or she says, this feeling is caused by their own knowledge on the subject.

"In my view, a strange spot on the lens is not caused by the quality of the lens. If that was the case then the whole picture should look bad. This spot is caused by a faulty unit or some smearing on the lens in my opinion." – Participant linking his prior knowledge to a lack of knowledge of the author.

5.5 Manipulation on message quality

A6 vs. B6

Message quality was manipulated in B6 (see Figure 8) by adding a reference to a reliable authority (Consumentengids). The message itself was in both reviews the same and meant to be of poor quality. Nonetheless, almost 43% of the readers of B6 gave a positive comment on message quality, mostly due to the reference to *de Consumentengids*, which is generally seen as a reliable source.

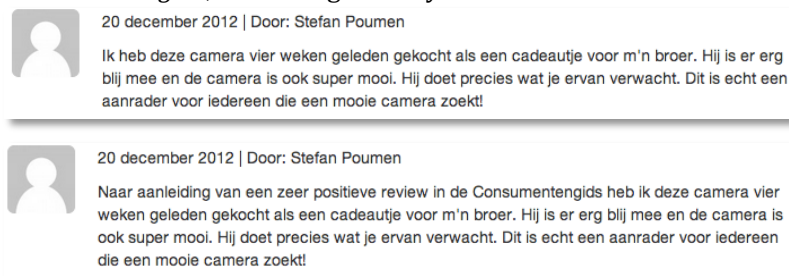


Figure 8. Review A6 and B6.

A7 vs. B7

The difference between A7 and B7 was in the argumentation. Review A7 elaborated more, which should result in a higher quality message, while B7 was very short and of very poor quality (see Figure 9). Although 30% of the readers of B7 commented on the low quality of the message, there was no reversed effect in A7. On the contrary, the elaboration was probably a little overdone, since 17% of the readers had a suspicion of commercial interest of the author.

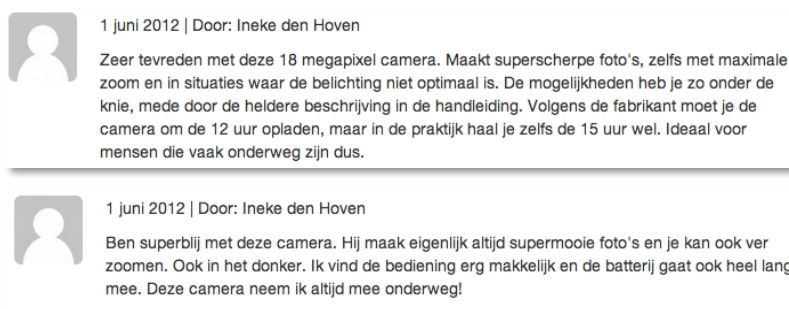


Figure 9. Review A7 and B7.

A8 vs. B8

Reviews A8 and B8 in Figure 10 were intended to have a poor message quality, but B8 had a sentence that referred to other reviews on the Internet. This was supposed to increase message quality, but it backfired. Half of the readers of this review commented on poor message quality and this review received twice the amount of comments on message quality compared to A8 and twice the amount of comments regarding lack of expertise.

"She wrote the review in a way that immediately annoys me to the extent that I cannot take this review seriously. I don't like those spelling errors, it looks like she's a girl that is texting her friend or chatting on Facebook." –Participant about a low quality message.

"She basically says that her decision was solely based on other reviews, which tells me she has no experience with cameras at all. Unreliable!"
-Participant about an apparent lack of expertise.

The fact that she refers to other reviews on the Internet is not as strong as the referral to a review in *de Consumentengids* from review B6. As a matter of fact, this referral hurts credibility and trustworthiness, because participants see this as a lack of expertise.



Figure 10. Review A8 and B8.

Comments on message quality

Message quality was one of the most mentioned topics. In a way, it could be expected that this would be commented on that much, as it is the most encompassing category. Most respondents only commented on the message itself, instead of other factors such as the name of the author or a profile picture. Since it is such a broad concept, it is important to highlight a few important elements of message quality in this study.

5.5.1 Incorrect language use

The most important aspect that was mentioned of message quality was the use of correct language. Respondents were really annoyed by grammar errors and spelling mistakes, some of them even stated that they would skip the review as soon as they came across any of those errors. Some said they "just don't like it" and others assumed that someone that made such mistakes was either:

- Too young to judge a product properly.
- Not capable of judging a product properly due to lack of intelligence.
- Writing the review in a hurry, thus not capable of writing a well thought-out review.

"I immediately notice some horrible spelling errors, which really annoys me. I'm assuming this person wrote the review in a hurry so this makes it not very trustworthy. Did he really think it through?" –Participant about incorrect language use

5.5.2 (Lack of) arguments

However, besides using correct, clear language and wording, respondent also appreciate a specific type of information. The information in a review should be rich, detailed and very specific when it comes to discussing pros and cons. One cannot simply state that a camera is not worth the money: a statement like that has to be supported by valid, explicit arguments and examples. When this is the case, respondents will feel less strongly about spelling and grammar errors, as illustrated by this respondent

"This review is full of spelling mistakes and ugly sentences, that's the first thing I noticed. However, this does not make the review less credible or trustworthy, because the argumentation is very clear and very good, also due to vivid examples. That's what matters most to me" –Participant about proper argumentation.

This also means that a superficial review, or a review of two sentences without much information about the performance of the camera is often considered as not being credible or trustworthy.

"This review is way too superficial and short, there is practically nothing in this review that supports his enthusiastic statement." –Participant about a lack of argumentation.

5.5.3 Overall presentation of the message

Regarding the overall presentation of the message, the majority of respondents mentioned the overview of pros and cons that was implemented in the review of Ilse Willems. According to respondents, this showed that the author really gave it a good thought and it also "forced" the author of the review to think of both advantages as well as disadvantages. This overview should be the final conclusion of a thoughtfully built up review. Respondents also said this gives them the opportunity to quickly scan a review and that it serves as some sort of double check for consistency with the message above. See Figure 11 for an example of this.



Figure 11. Review with highly valued overall presentation.

5.5.4 References to credible sources

Finally, respondents often mentioned the reference to a positive review in *de Consumentengids* (a magazine of the Consumers Union) that was in review B6 (Figure 9). They perceived this as being very credible, because they see *de Consumentengids* as a respectable authority. They assumed that if *de Consumentengids* was positive about a product, it really must be a good product. There was no doubt among respondents about the actual existence of said positive review, because they feel comfortable knowing that they could easily verify for themselves whether the review really exists.

5.5.5 Use of subjective language and/or wording

Closely related to message quality is the use of subjective language and wording. Comments that contained references to “vague, nondescript, subjective language or wording (e.g. “I just felt I had to buy this” or “fairly ok”) were coded as “use of subjective language and/or wording”. The main study made clear that participants did not like reviews that are subjective or reviews that are unclear so that they leave room for doubt. Most comments were about subjective language that could be interpreted in many different ways, depending on your frame of reference. For instance, the sentence “this camera works just like it’s supposed to do” got a lot of critique of participants. Because “like it’s supposed to do” is not a statement that is measurable, as it depends on one’s expectations and frame of reference. This also holds true for sentences such as “The camera looks beautiful” (comments: “what is beautiful to you can be ugly to me”) or “the camera works just like you would expect”. These are very subjective statements and will differ from person to person which makes them useless in review that is supposed to be neutral. Participants prefer facts and statements that are measurable, so that they can judge for themselves. Terms that express positive or negative feelings about a technical product should be formulated in an objective manner, preferably by using hard facts. How sharp is a “razor-sharp” image? This should be supported by a valid measuring unit, for instance megapixels. Subjective language and wording is not only unclear, it can also come across as commercial:

“The images are “crystal clear” according to her. This not only sounds like a commercial, it is also highly debatable how clear “crystal clear” is. I would like to see that statement supported by objective facts so that I can verify it myself.” – Participant about the use of subjective wording.

Finally, a lot of respondents found statements that dealt with “expectations” or “feelings” of the author not very credible or trustworthy. In one review there was a sentence “I just had a good feeling about this product” which according to participants is a useless statement since it is unclear as to what that feeling was and why she had that feeling. Participants reasoned that if you make statements like that, your review is not based on specific features or experiences you had with the camera. Therefore, the argumentation is weak and highly debatable. This also goes for the sentence “it’s just not what I expected of it”. Without an explanation what the expectations were and why they were not met, this statement is again useless to participants.

5.6 Manipulation on negative product information

A9 vs. B9

Review B9 had some minor critical complaints about the product in order to give some negative product information, as opposed to review A9 that was only positive (see Figure 12). This showed in the results with 29% of the readers commenting (in a positive way) on the negative product information in B9, while 3% of the readers of A9 commented in a negative way on the lack of negative information.



Figure 12. Review A9 and B9.

A10 vs. B10

The manipulation reviews A10 and B10, as seen in Figure 13, was more or less the same as in A9 and B9, but with the addition of a summary of pros and cons at the end. A10 was the positive review and A9 the more negative review. To also manipulate consistency we left the negative points mentioned in review B10 itself out of the summary at the end. 52% of the participants that read A10 commented on negative product information, versus 39,5% in review B10. At first this seems strange, because A10 is lacking negative product information while B10 obviously has some negative information.

However, this can be explained by the fact that A10 is lacking negative product information in both the message as well as the overview of pros and cons, while B10 is only lacking negative product information in the overview. This also explains why 24% of the readers of B10 commented on a lack of consistency.

“Why doesn’t she mention the negative point in the overview? I find this very suspicious, does she want to hide something?” – Participant about the lack of consistency within the review.

Participants commented on the fact that the reviewer mentioned a negative aspect in her review, but did not mention the negative aspect in her summary of pro’s and cons. This contradiction confused participants, which lead to doubt, which in turn led to lower perceived credibility and trustworthiness. It was also associated with disarray of the reviewer and in a few cases even with a lack of integrity of the reviewer, by describing this contradiction as “suspicious”.



Figure 13. Review A10 and B10.

5.6.1 Unintended side effect of reviews A10 and B10

Although review A10 and B10 were meant to manipulate on negative product information, they unintentionally provided other insights. It appeared that several participants (28) are also very critical of the *type of use of the product*. In this case, the reviewer said she used the camera to make pictures of her drawings by using a tripod as can be seen in Figure 14. The comments on her type of use can be divided in two categories. The first category consists of people that appreciate the fact that she describes her type of use. This allows readers to evaluate her judgement and put her review in context. A reader can relate (or not) to her type of use and then critically think about whether her gripes would apply to their own intended use.

"I think this is very reliable and trustworthy because she explains what she uses the camera for. Therefore I can relate it to my own intended use and compare my needs to hers. In doing so I am able to judge for myself if her pros and cons would be important to me."
-Participant about the type of use described in the review.

The second category of comments came from people who said that her type of use is too specific and therefore not very reliable and credible to people who want to use the camera in a more common fashion.

"I think she only uses the camera for making pictures of his drawings, which makes his experience with the camera very one-sided. This makes his review less trustworthy."
-Participant about the niche usage of the author.



Figure 14. Review A10, manipulated on negative product information but also linked to type of usage.

Comments on negative product information

Participants' comments on negative product information resemble their comments on message quality. The bottom line is that participants want to read an honest review and one important cue for honesty is criticism. It is deemed very important to not only write about the positives of a product, but also about the negative aspects. Several participants noted that manufacturers in their advertisements are already highlighting the positive points of a product, so a review should reflect on those points and give criticism where criticism is due. Most participants feel that every product has some cons, or things that could have been done better. Therefore, they must be discussed in a review, even if an author feels those points are not that important to him. There are several reasons for this. First of all, criticism shows that the author has experience and some level of expertise. It also shows that the author really thought deep about the product and its features. Second, participants expect a neutral, objective review. This means that a review should carefully depict what is good about a product, and what is "bad" about a product. Because different consumers have different standards and demands, participants feel that authors should be aware of this and also try to mention aspects of a product that would bother other consumers, even though they themselves are not bothered by it. That is why the majority participants state that it is "unacceptable" if a review is only positive. This will only be accepted if an author

carefully explains why the product has no disadvantages, this allows readers to judge for themselves if they agree or not.

“A product can’t be perfect, every product has disadvantages. If you don’t mention these, you are either on the marketing team, still over the moon with your purchase or simply just not an expert. Either way, you have lost all credibility in my opinion”. –Participant about balanced arguments.

It is important to note that the criticism should not carry on too far: the goal should always be to write an unbiased review. A review full of negative points comes across as just running down the product, which leads to suspicion among readers:

“Review is formulated way too negative. I prefer to consider all the pros and cons. I get the feeling this review was written by a competitor or something” –Participant about balanced arguments.

5.6.2 *Seemingly commercial interests*

Closely related to the comments on negative product information is the category of comments that deals with unbalanced reviews that give the appearance of *seemingly commercial interests*. This is the category of comments that refers to *“the possibility of commercial interests of the author”*. As was already clear from the preliminary study, participants are well aware that manufacturers or other stakeholders can manipulate reviews on the Internet. Participants were sometimes very suspicious when reading reviews. This suspicion was caused by several factors.

Euphoric and very positive reviews make it sound like a salesman is pitching the product. Most of the time, the cause for this is exaggerated language that comes across as “fake”. The excessive use of adjectives like “*super sharp*”, “*razor-sharp*”, “*top quality*” and “*fantastic*” sounds too commercial, according to participants. This also goes for the combination of double positive words to describe a feature, for instance “*easy and efficient*” or “*smooth and snappy*”. Participants associate this kind of language with the language used in commercials and advertisements. This association gets even stronger when the review in case is solely positive about the product. The combination of an enumeration of positive points and the use of overdone language seriously hurts credibility assessments.

“This review seems really fake and commercial due to the superlatives and the fact she only mentions positive aspects of the camera. The language is overdone and reminds me of the language used in advertisement leaflets.” - Participant about a review that sounds like an advertisement.

Two of the reviews that were most associated with commercial interests were review A1 (Figure 15) and B1, not in the least because of the last sentence in which the author seems to recommend another product. Because the rest of the review is so positive and filled with overdone language, several participants felt that this last sentence was not a genuine advice, but an attempt at upselling.



Figure 15. Review A1, manipulated on name but also linked to seemingly commercial interests.

Finally, a passive style of writing (as can be seen in the review above) was often associated with manufacturer-manipulated reviews. These are reviews in which the word “I” is never used, therefore the review seems very impersonal and fake. Participants expect a review to contain one’s own experiences with the camera instead of a passive summing-up of the features of the camera.

5.7 Manipulation on social presence

A11 vs. B11

As can be seen in Figure 16, review A11 was manipulated by adding social presence through a profile picture and the use of a full name, while B11 had an anonymous profile picture and just a surname. This showed in the results, as 39,5% of the readers of A11 positively commented on social presence, while social presence comments on B11 were obviously non-existent. It is remarkable that the review with higher levels of social presence received more positive comments on *critical review* than the review without social presence (36,5% vs. 25%). This also goes for message quality. Readers of B11 (no social presence) had more critical comments on message quality than readers of A11 (24% vs. 8%).



Figure 16. Review A11 and B11.

A12 vs. B12

Review A12 was manipulated by adding social presence through a profile picture, the use of a full name and additional information about her location and date of purchase. B12 had just initials followed by a last name (see Figure 17). Not surprisingly, 45% of the readers of A12 commented positively on social presence compared to zero comments on social presence in B12. What does surprise though is the fact that 45% of the readers of B12 commented on negative product information versus 30% of readers of A12. However, this must be coincidental because the tone of the comments is the same for both reviews: they appreciate her critical stance towards the product.



Figure 17. Review A12 and B12.

Comments on social presence

It appears that participants really value the fact that a review is written by a real person, as this positively influences trustworthiness. Of course, it is hard to know if someone is a real person but there are several cues that can help in that regard. In general, participants want to know as much as possible about the author, as this helps them to get an impression about the author and to evaluate his expertise and credibility. One very important cue is extensive profile information that gives the reader more background information about the author, besides his name. Examples are age, location and date of purchase.

But a full name including a serious profile picture will increase social presence most. A picture can both hurt and improve credibility though, depending on the picture and context. A serious photo can help to improve credibility, but a profile picture of a dog or someone partying will not help. Some respondents also noted that the profile picture could help put the review in perspective.

"I always look at profile pictures, so that I know who I'm dealing with. This helps me put things in perspective. Suppose the profile picture with this review was of an old lady, then I wouldn't take her issues regarding usability very serious." – Participant about social presence.

"The profile picture makes it extra credible, because now I see it's written by a man. To be honest, when it comes to electronics I find men more reliable. I just feel they are more knowledgeable about the subject." – Participant about social presence.

Just as with the comments about the name of the author, some participants also reasoned that people like to be anonymous on the Internet so that they can speak ill of others or just to spread nonsense. Although not as heavily as with a name, several participants did say they prefer a review with a profile picture or an anonymous profile, because it shows that the author is honest and upright and takes responsibility for his words. Overall, the general thought on social presence in reviews was that people want to have as much information about the author as possible. This means they can form a good impression about the author and it also gives them a feeling of control and security, because the author is very open, honest and vulnerable. Therefore, the author must be integer and telling the truth.

6. Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this research was to get an insight into the factors that influence credibility assessments of eWOM of strangers. To help answer this question we formulated several expectations regarding eWOM and credibility, based on the available literature. In this section we will discuss these expectations, summarize the findings of the preliminary- and main study and draw conclusions based on those findings. The Results chapter was very large and extensive and therefore we will summarize the results in this chapter. We will also discuss recommendations for future research and the limitations of this study.

6.2 Summary of findings and conclusions

To answer the main research question “*which factors influence credibility assessments of eWOM of strangers?*” we formulated several expectations. We now need to draw conclusions: to what extent are these expectations supported by this study?

Since the literature on WOM states that people are more likely to agree with and trust in strong ties, we expected that this would also be the case in eWOM, although strong ties online are not as strong as offline. Our expectation was that:

eWOM that is posted under a “real name” has a positive influence on perceived credibility, as opposed to eWOM that is posted under an obvious nickname.

This expectation is partly supported by this study. Boldly stated, the use of a real name in principle never hurts perceived credibility, whereas the use of a nickname *could* hurt perceived credibility. Participants liked it when an author used his real name, because this gives them a sense of security and control: they know they are dealing with a real person, they know who is talking about the product and they know that this person dares to stand for his opinion.

In the literature review we saw that trust and credibility are built through types of interpersonal interaction with another person or an organization. Blau (1964) for instance, stated that “human interaction” (e.g. face to face) is a precondition of trust. This implies that (the perception of) a high social presence, either via direct or indirect human contact will increase trust. Therefore we expected that:

Higher levels of perceived social presence will positively influence eWOM credibility assessments.

This is supported, as it appears that in this study, higher levels of perceived social presence indeed positively influence eWOM credibility assessments. It appears that participants really value the fact that a review appears to be written by a real person, as this positively influences trustworthiness. In general, participants want to know as much as possible about the author, as this helps them to get an impression about the author and to evaluate his expertise and credibility. To get this impression, readers need as much information about the author as possible.

The next expectation dealt with the quality of the eWOM message:

The quality of the eWOM-message has a positive impact on source credibility assessments of the reader.

This expectation is supported in this study: the higher the quality of the message, the more credibility this lends to the source. Message quality is about the use of correct language and spelling, rich, detailed and specific product information and the use of valid arguments and credible sources. The results of this study are very much in line with the existing literature on credibility. Hong, (2006) showed that the assessment of the message itself is concerned with elements such as presentation of the message and whether the message is supported by facts or good arguments.

Closely related to message quality are *use of subjective language and wording*, which hurts perceived credibility and trustworthiness and *seemingly commercial interests*. A review should be neutral and at all times avoid being associated with a disguised marketing effort.

The fourth expectation was about the perceived expertise of an author:

The perceived expertise of an eWOM source has a positive influence on credibility assessments.

This expectation is also supported by the data in this study. Together with *message quality* and *negative product information*, this seems to be the most important factor when assessing credibility and trustworthiness. Perceived expertise can be inferred from a number of factors and can be split up in three types of expertise:

- Expertise derived from experience
- Expertise derived from language and wording
- Expertise based on a label (e.g. a professional photographer)

If participants assigned one (or more) of these types of expertise to an author, this had a very positive influence on perceived credibility and trustworthiness. This is in line with the work of Tseng and Fogg (2009) on source expertise. Source expertise also works the other way around, because a perceived *lack of expertise* will damage credibility assessments. A lack of expertise can also be inferred from a number of factors, for instance based on one's own prior knowledge, the language and wording of the author, the name of the author or if an author says something that contradicts with what the majority says.

Based on the work of Wathen & Burkell (2002), who found that message quality has less effect on credibility assessments when the source is perceived as being a credible expert beforehand, we made a link between perceived expertise and message quality:

The perceived expertise of a source mediates the impact of a lower quality eWOM-message on credibility assessments of the reader.

The data in this study supports this expectation, in the sense that both elements on their own are important enough to "carry" a review. This means that a professional photographer can get away with a lower quality message, based on his perceived expertise. However, if a review is of very high quality it can also be seen as credible and trustworthy, even if a reader does not signal any obvious cues of expertise.

The next expectation was about the consistency of reviews:

Consistency of eWOM messages will have a positive influence on credibility assessments.

Initially, this expectation was aimed at consistency *among* reviews. The preliminary and main study showed that this does indeed positively influence credibility assessments. Participants tend to believe what the majority says and they don't like it when a review differs too much from the general thoughts about the product. However, the main study also made clear that consistency *within* a review is very important. If a reviewer contradicts himself or his argumentation is not consistent, this will hurt his credibility and trustworthiness.

Regarding negative product information, we expected that:

Negative product information will have a positive influence on the perceived credibility of the eWOM message.

The data in this study supports this expectation. As mentioned before, it seems that negative product information is, together with message quality and perceived expertise the most important factor in assessing credibility. Participants want to read an honest, critical review and this is only possible if not only positives, but also negatives of a product are discussed.

It proved to be a lot harder to find evidence for our expectation about the personal experience with an eWOM source over a longer period of time:

The personal experience of the receiver with an eWOM source over a longer period of time has a positive influence on credibility assessments.

Support for this expectation had to come from the preliminary study, because this could not be manipulated in an experiment. However, there were still some interesting answers but it is rather difficult to find evidence that supports our expectation. It is true in the sense that the participants in this study in general tend to prefer the same source every time they look for eWOM. In this case, a "source" must be seen as a platform such as Tweakers.net or Kieskeurig.nl. Participants often use the same platforms, if possible. They do this because they know what to expect and because they have good experiences with the platform in case. They trust the platform because they are familiar with it. However, this is not the case for the people that deliver the eWOM on those platforms. If we look at the reviewer as a source, then it is nearly impossible to have experience with one source over a longer period of time, because if you look for eWOM, you will not often come across the same reviewer. So, to conclude: If a platform is seen as the eWOM source, there is support for this expectation. But if we look at the author as a source of eWOM, it is unlikely to have experience with a source over a longer period of time. There are exceptions, for instance a regular contributor to Tweakers.nl. However, none of the participants mentioned this.

In connection to experience with eWOM, we formulated an expectation that deals with experience with eWOM in general:

The amount of experience someone has with eWOM has a positive influence on eWOM credibility assessments.

This is supported. The amount of experience does indeed have an influence on eWOM credibility assessment, but if that influence is positive or negative depends on how you

look at it. The participants in the preliminary study all have several years experience in dealing with eWOM. The preliminary study showed that those participants felt more secure in assessing credibility, meaning they were more aware of the risks of eWOM. Their experience has learned them, sometimes the hard way, what to look out for and what cues are important when assessing trustworthiness. In that sense, their experience has a positive influence on eWOM credibility assessments: over the years they have become more “internet smart”. However, just because they have a lot of experience with eWOM this does not mean they are more prone to trust eWOM in general. In fact: it seems to be the other way around. Their experience has made them more careful and cynical and it would be interesting to compare their stance against people that have less experience with eWOM.

The last expectation was related to structural features in relation to eWOM credibility perceptions:

The presence of structural features increases eWOM credibility perceptions, while the presence of banners and advertisements is negatively associated with credibility perceptions

The data only partially supports this, because nobody mentioned anything about banners and advertisements in the preliminary study. Therefore it was not incorporated in the main study. However, the results did show that the presence of certain structural features increase eWOM credibility perceptions. Especially structural features such as profile information can increase perceived credibility and trustworthiness. This does not just contain elements of social presence, but also (quality) measurements of the contributions of an author. Examples are the amount of reviews someone has contributed, but also the measured helpfulness of a review by other readers. Participants feel secure in following normative opinions and get a sense of security and control when an author has created an extensive profile.

Conclusion

Before we answer the main research question, we would like to summarize our findings and arrange the categories of comments in order of frequency. Table 3 gives a basic overview of the categories of comments discussed by participants when making credibility assessments of the reviews they read.

Table 3
Top 10 of Credibility Cues

Topic of comment	Frequency
Message quality	303 (16%)
Balanced arguments	290 (15,3%)
Expertise derived from experience	173 (9%)
Lack of expertise	131 (6,9%)
Use of subjective language/wording	122 (6,4%)
Expertise derived from language/wording	122 (6,4%)
Seemingly commercial interests	92 (4,9%)
Name of author	90 (4,75%)
Social presence	75 (4%)
Lack of experience	73 (3,9%)

What immediately stands out is the variety of topics that are mentioned: there is, for instance, not one particular topic that is mentioned by nearly everybody. This confirms what was said in the preliminary study: it appears that there is not one particular cue that influences credibility assessments, because it is a combination of cues. So, to answer the main research question: as expected, it appears that in this study perceived

credibility assessments are influenced by a mixture of characteristics of the receiver, characteristics of the message and characteristics of the source. From the data of this study, it appears that there is not one factor that will instantly make a review credible and trustworthy. It is the interaction between characteristics of the receiver (e.g. *experience with eWOM*, *attitude towards eWOM* and *trusting stance*), characteristics of the source (e.g. *expertise*, *experience* and *social presence*) and characteristics of the message itself (e.g. *message quality* and *balanced arguments*) that influences credibility assessments. For instance, a review written by someone with a strange username (*source characteristic*) could still be perceived as credible when the message is of high quality (*message characteristic*). It also means that someone that is perceived as an expert (e.g. a photographer) can write a lower quality message and still be perceived as credible. However, a receiver's prior knowledge or experience (*receiver characteristics*) can interact in such a way with for instance a *source characteristic*, that a source that is perceived as an expert by one person is perceived as a layman by another person. Based on the results of this study, for experienced Internet users with an average disposition to trust, a "perfect" review in terms of credibility and trustworthiness would look like this:

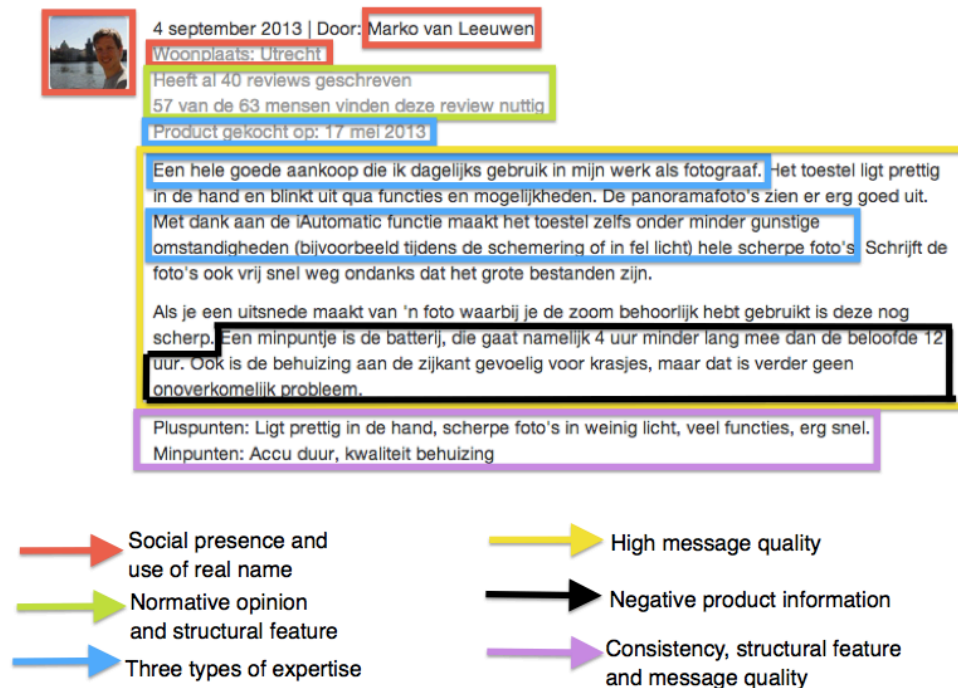


Figure 18. A "perfect" review in terms of perceived credibility assessments.

6.3 Limitations

As in any study, the results of this study are subject to several limitations, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results and conclusions. The first limitation is the sample that was used in this study. After deletion of incomplete and invalid cases, 126 people took part in this study, which is less than we initially aimed for. We aimed for two groups of 75 participants as a minimum, in order to have a more solid ground to base our study on. Unfortunately, we were not able to gather the desired 150 participants, because of time constraints since the recruitment of participants proved to be a slow and difficult process. Another possible issue with the sample is the fact that 37,3% of the participants was male and 62,7% was female. This means that there is an imbalance in terms of gender, and although there is no reason to think that this has influenced our results, it should still be noted. This also goes for the average age, which was 21,77 years old ($SD=2,69$). Perhaps older people look for different cues when assessing credibility. The level of education of the participants in this study can also be seen as a limitation. The majority of them were still studying at a university (77,8%) or at HBO (11,9%), which means they are highly educated and at this point it is unclear whether level of education will have influence on perceived credibility assessments.

However, based on the literature we do have reason to believe that the characteristics of the participants regarding expertise and disposition to trust could have influenced our results. Participants in this study have significant experience with eWOM and the Internet in general and also have an above average disposition to trust. This means they do not have too much trouble trusting other people in general, even if they are strangers. It also means they believe the Internet is a safe enough place for shopping and gathering product information, therefore they are willing to trust in the honesty and integrity of online reviewers.

The other limitations are related to the method used in this study. As should be clear by now: credibility is in the eye of the beholder. Fogg, Marshall, Laraki, Osipovich, Varma and Swani (2001) stated that the credibility of someone or something is a perceived feature. Therefore, one cannot say that a certain piece of information in fact is unanimously considered as being credible. Thus, we can only map recurring cues that people mention when assessing credibility. This however raises two issues that need attention. First of all, the sample we used was small so the results are not particularly generalizable. However, in terms of the type of product that was used in the manipulation, we do feel that our results extend beyond reviews about cameras. We believe our results also apply to other electronics, as long as the product has rather objective features and characteristics.

Second: the method we used is a form of self-report: participants only reported on what they consciously assessed. As credibility is "in our head", we do not know if what participants say influences their credibility assessment is the same as what actually *does* influence their assessment. Still, we believe that our method allowed respondents to answer freely, without any constraints. The downside however was that analysing 2000 comments was very time-consuming, but it yielded very rich data.

6.3 Future research

This study aimed at exploring the cues that people use when assessing credibility in eWOM. In doing so, it builds on the existing knowledge about eWOM and made a first step in adding more insight into what cues can increase or hurt perceived credibility in an online environment. Because of the nature of the study, the results cannot be seen as hard evidence, but must be seen as the first step in a journey towards full understanding

of credibility in electronic word-of-mouth. Findings in this study should be used to gain a deeper understanding of what causes credibility in online reviews and even more important: how to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of these reviews. Future studies need to find out if results of our study can be generalized to provide more definitive insights of what causes credibility in eWOM. A possible suggestion for future research would be a quantitative study that builds on our more explorative, qualitative study. This future study could take the cues we identified in this study and implement them in a quantitative study, for instance by letting participants rate the credibility of several manipulated reviews on a scale from 1 to 10. This way our work can be tested on a much larger scale, to see if for instance negative product information is indeed as important as our study suggests. It would be also be interesting to conduct this study again with different groups of participants, for instance a group of people that has little experience with eWOM and the Internet in general or a group that has a very low disposition to trust. In doing so, we can compare different groups to see what influence experience and disposition to trust really have.

Finally, future studies could also investigate the differences between credibility assessments of goods vs. services. Do people use the same cues to assess credibility of a review about a restaurant or hotel, compared to a review about a camera?

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Appendix A

Questions semi-structured interview

Koop je weleens iets op Internet? Zo ja, wat koop je dan? Doe je dat op verschillende sites of kom je vaker op dezelfde site?

Bekijk je dan meningen / reviews van anderen over het product in of de verkoper in kwestie? Waarom wel/niet?

Heb je recent weleens iets gehoord van anderen over een aankoop van een product of dienst? Zo ja, van wie en waar ging dat over? Was dit positief of negatief?

Vond je die informatie geloofwaardig? Waarom (niet?)

Ga je zelf weleens op zoek naar informatie over producten en diensten? Zo ja, waar zoek je die informatie dan? (Waarom daar?) Welke informatie hoop je te vinden?

Ga je zelf weleens op zoek naar reviews? Waar zoek je deze reviews dan, en waarom daar? Indien vaste plek voor vinden reviews: waarom dan specifiek daar? Wat zijn de sterke punten van die bron? Wat maakt deze bron geloofwaardig?

Lees je dan liever "professionele" reviews (bijvoorbeeld van een vaste recensent van een krant of website) of reviews door medeconsumenten? Waarom?

Krijg je liever productinformatie uit je directe omgeving (familie, vrienden) of haal je het liever van Internet? Of heb je geen voorkeur? Waarom (niet?)

Kom je weleens reviews tegen die je echt helpen in je aankoopbeslissing? Hoe komt dat?

Kom je weleens reviews tegen die je echt niet gelooft/vertrouwt? Waar komt dat door?

Waar let je op als je een review leest? Wat vind je belangrijk in een review? Wat stoort je in een review? Waarom?

Heb je zelf weleens een review geschreven? Waarom? Was je toen positief of negatief? Heb je geprobeerd om geloofwaardig over te komen? Hoe? Wat zou je er aan doen om geloofwaardig over te komen?

Stel dat je tegenstrijdige informatie krijgt over een product, bijvoorbeeld van een vriend vs. reviews op Internet, welke informatie weegt dan zwaarder voor jou?

Stel dat er tegenstrijdige informatie in reviews op Internet staat, hoe beslis je dan welke informatie je gelooft en welke je niet gelooft?

Stel dat de productinformatie op een website niet overeenkomt met wat er in een review staat, wat geloof je dan? En waarom?

Ben je in de loop van de tijd anders tegen reviews aangekeken? Hoe? En waarom?

Questionnaire

Hoe vaak voert u onderstaande activiteiten uit op Internet? (antwoorden: wekelijks, maandelijks, 1x in de afgelopen 3 maanden, 1x in de afgelopen 6 maanden, 1x in het afgelopen jaar)

1. Lezen van productinformatie (incl. reviews) op Internet
 - A) Wekelijks
 - B) Maandelijks
 - C) 1x in de afgelopen 3 maanden
 - D) 1x in de afgelopen 6 maanden
 - E) 1x in het afgelopen jaar
2. Doen van aankopen op Internet
 - A) Wekelijks
 - B) Maandelijks
 - C) 1x in de afgelopen 3 maanden
 - D) 1x in de afgelopen 6 maanden
 - E) 1x in het afgelopen jaar

De volgende uitspraken gaan over vertrouwen. Geef uw mening over deze uitspraken op een schaal van “zeer mee oneens” tot “zeer mee eens”, waarbij een 1 staat voor “zeer mee oneens” en een 7 voor “zeer mee eens”. De 4 is voor “neutraal”.

1. Over het algemeen zijn mensen begaan met het welzijn van anderen:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

2. Meestal geven mensen genoeg om anderen om ze daadwerkelijk te helpen, in plaats van alleen maar aan zichzelf te denken:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

3. De meeste mensen zijn eerlijk in de omgang met anderen:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

4. Mensen zijn oprecht bezorgd over de problemen van anderen:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

5. Over het algemeen vertrouw ik in mensen totdat ze me een reden geven om ze te wantrouwen:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

6. Wanneer ik iemand voor het eerst ontmoet geef ik hem/haar meestal het voordeel van de twijfel:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

7. Normaal gesproken vertrouw ik nieuwe kennissen totdat ze aantonen dat ik ze niet kan vertrouwen:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

8. Ik ben goed van vertrouwen:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

Beantwoord de volgende stellingen op een schaal van “zeer mee oneens” tot “zeer mee eens”, waarbij een 1 staat voor “zeer mee oneens” en een 7 voor “zeer mee eens”. De 4 is voor “neutraal”.

9. Ik heb een goed gevoel over de gang van zaken wanneer ik iets koop op Internet of andere activiteiten op het Internet uitvoer:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

10. Ik voel me op mijn gemak wanneer ik aankopen doe via Internet:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

11. Wanneer ik productinformatie zoek vertrouw ik gerust op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

12. Ik durf mijn aankoopbeslissing gerust te baseren op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

13. Wanneer ik niet zeker ben van mijn zaak ben kan ik altijd vertrouwen op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

Tot slot graag uw mening over de volgende stellingen.

14. Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen het beste met anderen voor hebben:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

15. Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen waarheidsgetrouwe informatie verstrekken:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

16. Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk zijn in hun reviews:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

17. Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk en oprecht zijn:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

18. Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen op goede en effectieve wijze productinformatie kunnen geven:

Zeer mee oneens 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Zeer mee eens

Appendix B

Manipulations

Manipulatie op naam:

A1 Door: HappySnekkie45

Degelijke en super snelle fotocamera, waar je tevens haarscherpe HD-filmpjes mee kunt maken. Vele instellingsmogelijkheden (via makkelijk menu), waaronder ook automatische instellingen (indien gewenst). Mooi kantelbaar touchscreen. Raak op het beeldscherm datgene aan wat je scherp wilt hebben en voor je het weet is de foto al genomen. En de foto's zijn haarscherp. Uit te breiden met een hele reeks aan lenzen.

B1 Door: Michael de Leeuw

Degelijke en super snelle fotocamera, waar je tevens haarscherpe HD-filmpjes mee kunt maken. Vele instellingsmogelijkheden (via makkelijk menu), waaronder ook automatische instellingen (indien gewenst). Mooi kantelbaar touchscreen. Raak op het beeldscherm datgene aan wat je scherp wilt hebben en voor je het weet is de foto al genomen. En de foto's zijn haarscherp. Uit te breiden met een hele reeks aan lenzen.

A2 Door: L0vely_Angel

Ik zou deze camera aan niemand aanraden, omdat je gewoon teveel geld neerlegt voor wat je terug krijgt. De camera voelt erg plastic aan (dus wel lekker licht), maar ik heb het idee dat hij ieder moment uit elkaar kan vallen. De foto's zijn redelijk van kwaliteit, niet meer, niet minder. Er zit ook een rare vlek in elke foto die ik met geen mogelijkheid weg krijg. Waarschijnlijk door de (gebrekkige) kwaliteit van de lens?

B2 Door: Stephanie Schreuder

Ik zou deze camera aan niemand aanraden, omdat je gewoon teveel geld neerlegt voor wat je terug krijgt. De camera voelt erg plastic aan (dus wel lekker licht), maar ik heb het idee dat hij ieder moment uit elkaar kan vallen. De foto's zijn redelijk van kwaliteit, niet meer, niet minder. Er zit ook een rare vlek in elke foto die ik met geen mogelijkheid weg krijg. Waarschijnlijk door de (gebrekkige) kwaliteit van de lens?

Manipulatie op expertise:

A3 Door: PeterWillems

Het toestel ligt prettig in de hand en blinkt uit qua functies en mogelijkheden. De panoramafoto's zien er erg goed uit. Met dank aan de iAutomatic functie maakt het toestel zelfs onder minder gunstige omstandigheden (bijvoorbeeld tijdens de schemering of in fel licht) hele scherpe foto's. Schrijft de foto's ook vrij snel weg ondanks dat het grote bestanden zijn. Als je een uitsnede maakt van 'n foto waarbij je de zoom behoorlijk hebt gebruikt is deze nog scherp.

B3 Door: PeterWillems

Een hele goede aankoop die ik dagelijks gebruik in mijn werk als fotograaf.

Het toestel ligt prettig in de hand en blinkt uit qua functies en mogelijkheden. De panoramafoto's zien er erg goed uit. Met dank aan de iAutomatic functie maakt het toestel zelfs onder minder gunstige omstandigheden (bijvoorbeeld tijdens de schemering of in fel licht) hele scherpe foto's. Schrijft de foto's ook vrij snel weg ondanks dat het grote bestanden zijn. Als je een uitsnede maakt van 'n foto waarbij je de zoom behoorlijk hebt gebruikt is deze nog scherp.

A4 Door: P. Jordens

69 reviews geschreven

57 mensen vinden deze review nuttig

Dit is een leuk klein cameraatje om bij je te hebben zodat je even snel een paar foto's van bijvoorbeeld je kinderen kunt maken. Het is geen "powerhouse", dus verwacht geen uitgebreide functies en mogelijkheden, maar gewoon klikken en schieten zoals men dat noemt. De zoomfunctie werkt naar behoren en de lens is kwalitatief gewoon goed,

waardoor je scherpe 18 megapixel foto's krijgt. Er is wel wat vertraging als je de flitser gebruikt, maar als je een iets sneller SD kaartje erbij koopt valt het op zich wel mee.

B4 Door: P. Jordens

Dit is een leuk klein cameraatje om bij je te hebben zodat je even snel een paar foto's van bijvoorbeeld je kinderen kunt maken. Het is geen "powerhouse", dus verwacht geen uitgebreide functies en mogelijkheden, maar gewoon klikken en schieten zoals men dat noemt. De zoomfunctie werkt naar behoren en de lens is kwalitatief gewoon goed, waardoor je scherpe 18 megapixel foto's krijgt. Er is wel wat vertraging als je de flitser gebruikt, maar als je een iets sneller SD kaartje erbij koopt valt het op zich wel mee.

A5 Door: **Mieke** van Lent

Toen ik deze camera binnen kreeg heb ik hem direct onder verschillende omstandigheden getest. Mijn conclusie: het apparaat kan goed overweg met de klassieke "lastige" shots voor een camera, bijvoorbeeld als de belichting niet goed is. Je kunt zelf heerlijk experimenten met de sluitertijd en de ISO waardes zijn ook makkelijk aan te passen. Ik raad wel aan om een tripod te gebruiken, want qua stabilisatie valt ie me toch een beetje tegen.

B5 Door: **Maikel** van Lent

Toen ik deze camera binnen kreeg heb ik hem direct onder verschillende omstandigheden getest. Mijn conclusie: het apparaat kan goed overweg met de klassieke "lastige" shots voor een camera, bijvoorbeeld als de belichting niet goed is. Je kunt zelf heerlijk experimenten met de sluitertijd en de ISO waardes zijn ook makkelijk aan te passen. Ik raad wel aan om een tripod te gebruiken, want qua stabilisatie valt ie me toch een beetje tegen.

Manipulatie op message quality:

A6 Door: Stefan Poumen

Ik heb deze camera vier weken geleden gekocht als een cadeautje voor m'n broer. Hij is er erg blij mee en de camera is ook super mooi. Hij doet precies wat je ervan verwacht. Dit is echt een aanrader voor iedereen die een mooie camera zoekt!

B6 Door: Stefan Poumen

Naar aanleiding van een zeer positieve review in de Consumentengids heb ik deze camera vier weken geleden gekocht als een cadeautje voor m'n broer. Hij is er erg blij mee en de camera is ook super mooi. Hij doet precies wat je ervan verwacht. Dit is echt een aanrader voor iedereen die een mooie camera zoekt!

A7 Door: Ineke Den Hoven

Zeer tevreden met deze 18 megapixel camera. Maakt superscherpe foto's, zelfs met maximale zoom en in situaties waar de belichting niet optimaal is. **De mogelijkheden heb je zo onder de knie, mede door de heldere beschrijving in de handleiding. Volgens de fabrikant moet je de camera om de 12 uur opladen, maar in de praktijk haal je zelfs de 15 uur wel.** Ideaal voor mensen die vaak onderweg zijn dus.

B7 Door: Ineke den Hoven

Ben superblij met deze camera. Hij maakt eigenlijk altijd supermooie foto's en je kan ook ver zoomen. Ook in het donker. Ik vind de bediening erg makkelijk en de batterij gaat ook heel lang mee. Deze camera neem ik altijd mee onderweg!

A8 Door: Lydia

Sinds een paar dagen heb ik deze camera. De snelheid van camera is echt super! Verder is die lekker compact waardoor deze makkelijk in een klein schoudertasje past. Egt handig!. Ik twijfelde tussen een spiegelreflexcamera en een systeemcamera. M'n gevoel zei dat ik deze moest kopen en ik heb geen spijt!

B8 Door: Lydia

Sinds een paar dagen heb ik deze camera. De snelheid van camera is echt super! Verder is die lekker compact waardoor deze makkelijk in een klein schoudertasje past. Egt handig!. Ik twijfelde tussen een spiegelreflexcamera en een systeemcamera. Volgens de recensies op Internet moest ik deze kopen en ik heb geen spijt!

Manipulatie op negative product information:

A9 Door: Maarten de Keizer

Prettige camera die goed in de hand ligt. Zowel in de extreme kou van de Oostenrijkse piste als de tropische omstandigheden in Brazilië schiet deze camera mooie plaatjes. Verder is de camera erg gebruiksvriendelijk en hij maakt minstens 300 foto's per laadperiode. De foto's zijn daarna makkelijk en efficiënt op je pc over te zetten via een usb kabel.

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Prettige camera die goed in de hand ligt. Zowel in de extreme kou van de Oostenrijkse piste als de tropische omstandigheden in Brazilië schiet deze camera mooie plaatjes. Het valt wel op dat de verf op de hoeken vrij snel los laat. Verder is de camera erg gebruiksvriendelijk en hij maakt minstens 300 foto's per laadperiode. De foto's zijn daarna makkelijk en efficiënt op je pc over te zetten via een usb kabel. Een minpunt is de flitser, die omhoog klapt precies op de plek waar je de camera vasthoudt.

A10 Door: Ilse Willems

Alles wat ik als gemakzuchtige gebruiker nodig heb zit erop en aan. Het zoomobjectief is echt uitstekend, voor zo weinig geld zulke prestaties: daar kan menig duurder merk nog een punt aan zuigen! Zelf gebruik ik de camera hoofdzakelijk voor het fotograferen van mijn tekeningen, en dat vanaf statief. Dat levert kwalitatief zeer hoogstaande foto's op.

Pluspunten: Vele gebruiksmogelijkheden, Gebruiksvriendelijk, Haarscherpe foto's, Goede prijs/kwaliteit, Degelijke behuizing

Minpunten: -

B10 Door: Ilse Willems

Alles wat ik als gemakzuchtige gebruiker nodig heb zit erop en aan. Het zoomobjectief is echt uitstekend, voor zo weinig geld zulke prestaties: daar kan menig duurder merk nog een punt aan zuigen! Natuurlijk merk je wel dat de lens iets minder is dan bij duurdere merken. Zelf gebruik ik de camera hoofdzakelijk voor het fotograferen van mijn tekeningen, en dat vanaf statief. Dat levert kwalitatief zeer hoogstaande foto's op. Een nadeel is het overzetten van de foto's, dat kan wat sneller.

Pluspunten: Vele gebruiksmogelijkheden, Gebruiksvriendelijk, Haarscherpe foto's, Goede prijs/kwaliteit, Degelijke behuizing

Minpunten: Lens is niet van topkwaliteit, trage bestandsoverdracht, soms wat traag.

Manipulatie op social presence

A11



Door: Barend van Leeuwen

Woonplaats: Utrecht

In normaal daglicht maakt het toestel prima foto's, gewoon helder en scherp zoals je mag verwachten van een moderne camera. Helaas heeft de camera wel wat moeite om te focussen bij 15x zoom. Wellicht door de lens, maar je krijgt dan ook waar je voor betaald hebt. Al met al ben ik redelijk tevreden met mijn aankoop.

B11 Door: Barend

In normaal daglicht maakt het toestel prima foto's, gewoon helder en scherp zoals je mag verwachten van een moderne camera. Helaas heeft de camera wel wat moeite om te focussen bij 15x zoom. Wellicht door de lens, maar je krijgt dan ook waar je voor betaald hebt. Al met al ben ik redelijk tevreden met mijn aankoop.

A12



Door: Ellen Meerdijk
Woonplaats: Leiden
Product gekocht op: 26-05-2012

Gezien mijn goede ervaringen met "point & shoot" camera's is mijn oog op deze camera gevallen. Ik heb hier na een paar maanden toch spijt van gekregen. De kwaliteit van de foto's valt me helaas tegen. De foto's zijn namelijk minder scherp dan ik had verwacht. Een pluspunt is wel dat de camera gemakkelijk te bedienen is, vandaar dat ik hem toch maar gehouden heb. Kortom: voor de minder kritische gebruiker is dit wellicht een aanrader.

B12



Door: E. Meerdijk

Gezien mijn goede ervaringen met "point & shoot" camera's is mijn oog op deze camera gevallen. Ik heb hier na een paar maanden toch spijt van gekregen. De kwaliteit van de foto's valt me helaas tegen. De foto's zijn namelijk minder scherp dan ik had verwacht. Een pluspunt is wel dat de camera gemakkelijk te bedienen is, vandaar dat ik hem toch maar gehouden heb. Kortom: voor de minder kritische gebruiker is dit wellicht een aanrader.

Appendix C

Codebook

Code	Naam Code	Omschrijving	Definitie
1	Nummer	1, 2, 3 etc.	Identificatienummer interview
2	Ervaring productinformatie zoeken	1 = Wekelijks 2 = Maandelijks 3 = Afgelopen 3 maanden 4 = Afgelopen 6 maanden 5 = Afgelopen jaar	Hoe vaak zoekt respondent naar productinformatie op Internet
3	Ervaring online aankopen	1 = Wekelijks 2 = Maandelijks 3 = Afgelopen 3 maanden 4 = Afgelopen 6 maanden 5 = Afgelopen jaar	Hoe vaak doet respondent een aankoop op Internet?
4	Naam	Echte naam of nickname	Verwijzing naar de naam van reviewer
5	Expertise 1	Expertise op basis van label	Verwijzing naar label van reviewer, bijv. "professionele fotograaf"
6	Expertise 2	Expertise op basis van taalgebruik	Verwijzing naar het taalgebruik in de review, bijv jargon, vaktermen of het bespreken van camerafuncties
7	Expertise 3	Expertise op basis van ervaring	Verwijzing naar duidelijke ervaring gebruiker met product, bijv. door omschrijving van testomstandigheden of hoe lang product al in bezit is.
8	Gebrek aan expertise	Gebrek aan expertise	Verwijzing naar vermoeden van gebrek aan expertise, bijvoorbeeld op basis van taalgebruik (bijv. "volgens mij doet ie zelf gewoon iets verkeerd" of "het klinkt alsof hij niet veel weet over camera's")
9	Gebrek aan ervaring	Gebrek aan ervaring	Verwijzing naar gebrek aan ervaring auteur met product, bijvoorbeeld als product pas kort in bezit is. Bijv. "Je kunt geen goed oordeel vellen na 2 dagen"
10	Consistentie	Consistentie van reviews	Verwijzing naar inhoudelijke overeenkomsten/verschillen tussen reviews. Bijv. "dit heb ik vaker gelezen dus het zal wel kloppen". Ook als iemand zichzelf tegenspreekt in een review
11	Structural features	"Technische" dimensies	Verwijzingen naar structural features zoals banners, thuiswinkel keurmerken, banners en advertenties
12	Ervaring algemeen	Ervaring met medium Internet	Verwijzingen naar ervaring met Internet in het algemeen (kennis, houding, gedrag).
13	Ervaring eWOM	Ervaring met eWOM	Verwijzingen naar ervaring met eWOM. Door schade en schande wijs geworden? Naief geweest? Erg

15	Message quality	Kwaliteit van de review	Verwijzingen naar (in)correct taalgebruik, verwijzingen naar (kwaliteit van) argumentatie/voorbeelden, verwijzingen naar lengte review, verwijzingen naar brongebruik en algemene presentatie
16	Design features	Ontwerp van website/reviewtemplate	Verwijzingen naar design elementen in websites of vormgeving van de review. Bijvoorbeeld lettertype, kleurgebruik en visuele waardeoordelen (sterren)
17	Integriteit	Integriteit van de bron	Verwijzingen naar de integriteit van de bron of de integriteit van zijn/haar uitspraken. Bijv. "volgens mij is wil deze persoon het product alleen maar afkraken" of "deze persoon komt heel erg eerlijk en oprecht over"
18	Prior knowledge	Geloofwaardigheid op basis van eigen kennis	Verwijzingen naar elementen uit de review die men zelf al wist en dus kan verifiëren / als feit beschouwd en dus geloofwaardig (of juist niet: in dat geval "weet men het beter dan auteur")
19	Vertrouwenshouding	Vertrouwenshouding t.o.v. anderen	Verwijzingen naar het vertrouwen/wantrouwen in anderen
20	Welwillendheid	Goede bedoelingen van anderen	Verwijzingen naar de behulpzaamheid en goede bedoelingen van anderen, bijvoorbeeld door extra tips of adviezen. Bijv. voor wie is de camera bedoeld en hoe los je een minpunt op? Of "deze persoon wil anderen behoeden voor een miskoop"
21	Commerciële schijn	Schijn van commerciële belangen	Verwijzingen naar eventuele schijn van commerciële belangen, bijv. bij te positieve reviews die klinken als verkooppraatjes.
22	Normative opinion	Hoeveelheid likes en endorsements	Verwijzingen naar hoeveelheid geschreven reviews en likes/waarderingen van review(s)
23	Kritische beoordeling	Objectiviteit reviewer	Verwijzingen naar (gebrek aan) objectiviteit van de bron, bijv. het eerlijk benoemen van positieve en negatieve punten, verwijzingen naar gedegen totaalbeoordeling van product op basis van feiten. Of als iemand helemaal geen minpunten heeft genoemd.
24	Similarity	Overeenkomsten/verschillen	Verwijzingen naar overeenkomsten of verschillen tussen lezer en reviewer. Bijv. leefsituatie, beroep, gebruikssituatie, geslacht en leeftijd. Bijv. "ik ben ook gemakzuchtig dus ik voel een band met hem en verwacht dat hij op dezelfde dingen let als ik"
25	Gebruiksdoeleinde(n)	Gebruiksdoeleinde(n) van de camera	Verwijzingen naar gebruiksdoeleinde(n) die de auteur noemt. Bijv. "hij gebruikt de camera alleen maar voor zijn tekeningen, is zijn review dan wel betrouwbaar?"
26	Subjectief taalgebruik	Onduidelijk taalgebruik	Vaag, nietszeggend en subjectief taalgebruik. Bijv. "redelijk" of "mijn gevoel zegt dat"
27	Onbetrouwbaar	Gewoon onbetrouwbaar / ongeloofwaardig	Als het niet helemaal duidelijk is waarom iets onbetrouwbaar/ongeloofwaardig is. Bijv. "ik geloof deze persoon gewoon niet"

Appendix D

Reliability analysis

Constructs with items

Cronbach's alpha if item deleted

Disposition to trust: Benevolence ($\alpha = .808$)

- | | |
|--|------|
| • <i>Over het algemeen zijn mensen begaan met het welzijn van anderen</i> | .803 |
| • <i>Meestal geven mensen genoeg om anderen om ze daadwerkelijk te helpen in plaats van alleen maar aan zichzelf te denken</i> | .720 |
| • <i>De meeste mensen zijn eerlijk in de omgang met anderen</i> | .760 |
| • <i>Mensen zijn oprecht bezorgd over de problemen van anderen</i> | .747 |

Disposition to trust: Trusting Stance ($\alpha = .845$)

- | | |
|--|------|
| • <i>Over het algemeen vertrouw ik in mensen totdat ze me een reden geven om ze te wantrouwen</i> | .780 |
| • <i>Wanneer ik iemand voor het eerst ontmoet geef ik hem/haar meestal het voordeel van de twijfel</i> | .880 |
| • <i>Normaal gesproken vertrouw ik nieuwe kennissen totdat ze aantonen dat ik ze niet kan vertrouwen</i> | .765 |
| • <i>Ik ben goed van vertrouwen</i> | .768 |

Institution-Based Trust: Situational normality ($\alpha = .915$)

- | | |
|--|---|
| • <i>Ik heb een goed gevoel over de gang van zaken wanneer ik iets koop op Internet of andere activiteiten op het Internet uitvoer</i> | - |
| • <i>Ik voel me op mijn gemak wanneer ik aankopen doe via Internet</i> | - |

Constructs with items

Cronbach's alpha if item deleted

Trusting Intentions: Willingness to depend ($\alpha = .866$)

- | | |
|---|------|
| • <i>Wanneer ik productinformatie zoek vertrouw ik gerust op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i> | .803 |
| • <i>Ik durf mijn aankoopbeslissing gerust te baseren op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i> | .806 |
| • <i>Wanneer ik niet zeker ben van mijn zaak ben kan ik altijd vertrouwen op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i> | .800 |
| • <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen op goede en effectieve wijze productinformatie kunnen geven</i> | .895 |

Institution-Based Trust: Situational Normality – Benevolence ($\alpha = .870$)

- | | |
|---|------|
| • <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen het beste met anderen voor hebben</i> | .878 |
| • <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen waarheidsgetrouwe informatie verstrekken</i> | .828 |
| • <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk zijn in hun reviews</i> | .799 |
| • <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk en oprecht zijn</i> | .829 |

Factor Analysis over 5 components

	COMPONENT				
	1	2	3	4	5
Disposition to trust: Benevolence					
• <i>Over het algemeen zijn mensen begaan met het welzijn van anderen</i>					.803
• <i>Meestal geven mensen genoeg om anderen om ze daadwerkelijk te helpen in plaats van alleen maar aan zichzelf te denken</i>					.720
• <i>De meeste mensen zijn eerlijk in de omgang met anderen</i>					.760
• <i>Mensen zijn oprecht bezorgd over de problemen van anderen</i>					.747
Disposition to trust: Trusting Stance					
• <i>Over het algemeen vertrouw ik in mensen totdat ze me een reden geven om ze te wantrouwen</i>					.780
• <i>Wanneer ik iemand voor het eerst ontmoet geef ik hem/haar meestal het voordeel van de twijfel</i>					.880
• <i>Normaal gesproken vertrouw ik nieuwe kennissen totdat ze aantonen dat ik ze niet kan vertrouwen</i>					.765
• <i>Ik ben goed van vertrouwen</i>					.768
Institution-Based Trust: Situational normality					
• <i>Ik heb een goed gevoel over de gang van zaken wanneer ik iets koop op Internet of andere activiteiten op het Internet uitvoer</i>					.923
• <i>Ik voel me op mijn gemak wanneer ik aankopen doe via Internet</i>					.927

Continued on next page

	COMPONENT				
	1	2	3	4	5
Trusting Intentions: Willingness to depend ($\alpha = .866$)					
• <i>Wanneer ik productinformatie zoek vertrouw ik gerust op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i>					.803
• <i>Ik durf mijn aankoopbeslissing gerust te baseren op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i>					.806
• <i>Wanneer ik niet zeker ben van mijn zaak ben kan ik altijd vertrouwen op de informatie in reviews van andere gebruikers</i>					.800
• <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen op goede en effectieve wijze productinformatie kunnen geven</i>					.895
Institution-Based Trust: Situational Normality – Benevolence ($\alpha = .870$)					
• <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen het beste met anderen voor hebben</i>					.878
• <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen waarheidsgetrouwe informatie verstrekken</i>					.828
• <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk zijn in hun reviews</i>					.799
• <i>Ik geloof dat reviewers over het algemeen eerlijk en oprecht zijn</i>					.829