

The social influence factor: Impact of online product review characteristics on consumer purchasing decisions

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Consumers no longer base their purchasing decisions only on advertisements or professional advices but instead primarily rely on online consumer opinions in the form of reviews as future consumers search for reviews across various online consumer review platforms. The various review platforms differ in their function characteristics; hence reviews are displayed differently across platforms. No literature until this point has further analyzed review function characteristics and viewed those as a moderating variable of reviews and consumer purchasing decisions. The impact of online consumer reviews on consumer purchasing decisions was validated and is of high importance for a company's profitability. Monitoring and quick responding to high numbers of reviews which one single product can attract in a short time on various platforms are challenging for companies but essential for reputation management and product sales. Therefore, to do so effectively, companies need to understand consumer reviews platforms and its review content. The research challenge therefore entails review function characteristics and its impact on consumer purchasing decisions. The research identifies four main categories of review online platforms which are retail websites, independent reviewing platforms, video-sharing platforms and personal blogs. All of them display reviews in different formats with various review function characteristics. An online survey, conducted by the author, with a population of 211 respondents, analyzed consumer opinions about the diverse platforms and review mechanisms and the impact of those on consumer buying behavior. The results show an impact of credibility and usability characteristics on consumer reliance in reviews. Finally, it can be concluded that consumers make use of various platforms and are thereby influenced in their purchasing decision through credibility and usability review function characteristics.

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Keywords

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

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last years, a new generation of online tools, applications and approaches, such as blogs, wikis, online communities and virtual worlds, commonly referred to as Web 2.0, has been developed (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Web 2.0 has changed the role of the internet from a medium for information transfer solely to a consolidation of platforms for technology-mediated social participation (Chua & Banerjee, 2015). The internet has become an interactive platform, promoting customer electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and hence serving as a major source of customer information and empowerment (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). A fundamental element of eWOM, featured by Web 2.0 (Huang & Benyoucef, 2012), which passes the power to the customer is Customer Generated Content (CGC): “besides extracting value, users also add value to Web 2.0 applications and processes by generating, reviewing, editing and disseminating content” (Constantinides, Romero, & Boria, 2009, p.2). Through CGC, individuals share opinions and experiences on companies, brands, products or services on large-scale, word of mouth networks. Thereby, consumers can make their personal opinions easily accessible to global communities of internet users while these can use the information to support their purchasing decisions (Dellarocas, 2003). Hence, customer’s perceptions, preferences and decisions are not only based on information generated by companies but can also be influenced by content generated by people on social networks (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Web 2.0 has built an easy and commonly used way to compare market offerings or to search for purchasing related advice given by other consumers in the format of a review (Floh, Koller, Zauner, 2013). Online consumer reviews can be defined as a subjective eWOM opinion and summary of experiences, attitudes, and opinions, expressed by past consumers (Floh et al., 2013; Lu, W. Chang, & H. Chang, 2014). Reviews are a voluntary type of product or service information based on personal usage experience with a dual role; firstly providing product information and secondly recommending or discouraging others from purchasing. Consequently, personal opinions and experiences for products and services in the form of reviews on the internet have become one of the most valuable sources of information to assist users when making purchasing decisions (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Dellarocas, 2003). To articulate opinions on all kind of goods or services, online consumer review platforms have recently emerged multiplicity. These Web 2.0 technologies support social interaction between online users and user generated content. The predominant audience on review platforms is consumers seeking product information about a prospective purchase and hence, reviews of other consumers about their purchasing experience. Therefore, consumer review platforms support the decision making process of future consumers (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). The high level of acceptance of the platforms by consumers, and its consequent wide dissemination, exert a large influence on consumer purchasing decisions and communication behavior (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Lu et al., 2014).

Only a few years ago, consumers primarily based their purchasing decisions on advertisements or professional advice while now the spread of online consumer opinions changes people’s behavior in a way that they rely on consumer reviews posted on Web 2.0 (Dellarocas, 2003; Guernsey, 2000). Consumers are substituting internet-based search for traditional search, whereby an interaction with strangers and not just with friends like in traditional WOM takes place (Klein & Ford, 2003). Hence, the modern form of WOM (eWOM) networks reaches a larger scale and makes use of the internet’s low costs

and multiple communication capabilities (Dellarocas, 2003). An immense audience is reached and CGC is spread rapidly; the control of marketers and companies slips away to consumers who are more selective about and involved in the creation of the information they obtain about products, brands and companies. The formation of value is more with the consumer and occurs between wider groups of stakeholders (Burton & Khamash, 2010). At the same time, the information in consumer reviews which does not originate by the company, is categorized as more credible than marketer-sponsored information. Hence reviews are seen as highly influential for consumers who are now bypassing marketer signals such as brands and rely on unfiltered eWOM from other consumers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Hung & Li, 2007; Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013). Moreover, the growing popularity of online reviews affects a wide range of management activities including brand building, customer acquisition and retention, product development and quality assurance. Information control has been taken from those in marketing and public relations and is now controlled by the customer (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Consequently, opportunities as well as risks are given through this change of consumer influence (Henning-Thurau, Walsh, 2003). In order to mitigate threats to a company or brand reputation, companies must add monitoring and quick responding to the highly interactive Web 2.0 environment of their management activities since a single product can often attract large numbers of reviews in diverse review platforms (Becker & Nobre, 2014; Chua & Banerjee, 2015). To do so effectively, companies need to understand the phenomenon of online consumer reviews and online consumer review platforms on which the reviews are posted.

Consumers use different Web 2.0 tools to share their purchase experience and information across different consumer review platforms. These platforms can rank from retail websites to online communities, independent websites and personal blogs, with new platforms constantly emerging (Fan & Gordon, 2014; Lee & Youn, 2009). They differ in several ways but have similar basic functions (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). A variety of review mechanisms and diverse display options of reviews is applied on different review platforms (Dellarocas, 2003). Hence, review functions appear in a great variety of settings; platform design can control the operations through diverse engineering of the information systems that mediate online review platforms. It can be specified which design options are to support the review mechanism. Thereby, the applied characteristics of a review function on an online reviewing platform tend to have an impact on the consumer (Dellarocas, 2003). Thus, when a consumer is searching a review for one product, a big variety of reviews on diverse platforms are available. Accordingly, one has to decide which reviews from which platforms to regard and rely on (Lee J., 2013). Consequently it can be said that an engineering design problem for consumer review platforms is existing; the full space of design possibilities and the impacts of specific characteristic choices on the resulting purchasing decisions of consumers have to be understood by companies and platform operators and hence make an important research challenge (Dellarocas, 2003).

Until this point, previous research mostly concerned average effects of online reviews like promises and challenges (e.g. Dellarocas, 2003) or general explanations for reading review platform content (e.g. Burton & Khamash, 2010; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Lee J., 2013). More specific researches focused on the average online rating or the number, depth or length of online reviews (e.g. Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Zhu & Zhang, 2010) or contextual factors like the content or variance

of reviews and its impact on sales or purchasing behavior (e.g. Floh et al., 2013). Recently trust as in, for example, the popularity of the blogger (e.g. Huang L.-S., 2015) or understanding review helpfulness (Chua & Banerjee, 2015) were analyzed. Hence, scholars suggest testing for moderating variables (Floh et al., 2013). Moderating variables that have already been researched concern brand strength and category maturity among others (Ho-Dac et al., 2013). In the present research, the moderating variables of online reviewing platforms and its reviewing function characteristics are of interest. Moreover, few studies were conducted in Europe (Floh et al., 2013) and if so often limited on the UK (Burtona & Khammash, 2010) which is why this research will mostly focus on Western Europe with a main basis on the Netherlands and Germany.

Consequently, the present research will focus on several review function characteristics, hence different review mechanisms and displays of reviews that vary between online consumer review platforms. Further the characteristic's impact on consumer purchasing decisions will be examined. Accordingly, the paper is organized as follows: Firstly, consumers' motives for seeking reviews will be examined with the help of existing literature in order to come up with diverse review platforms and their various review functions. The current research is emphasized by the influence that reviews and its characteristics have on company activities and on the other side by the importance of review function characteristics for platform operators. An operationalization addresses the variables of review function characteristics in more detail and classifies them into two categories, namely credibility review function characteristics and usability review function characteristics. On the basis of those, a consumer survey is conducted in order to analyze the influence of review function characteristics on consumer purchasing decisions. The following questions guide throughout the paper: (1) What are the motives of consumers to search online reviews? (2) How do various online review platforms differ? (3) Which are the various characteristics of review functions influencing consumer purchasing decisions? (4) Which review function characteristics can be found on which platforms? (5) Which are the online consumer review platforms consumers choose to use as a basis for their purchasing decision? (6) Which review functions do consumers classify as most important with regard to their purchasing decision?

Hence the overall research question guiding throughout the paper examines which characteristics of review functions on online review platforms have the most influence on consumer purchasing decisions.

1.1 Methodology

In order to identify the most important review function characteristics and their influence on consumer purchasing decisions; the present paper firstly collects and analyzes numerous relevant scientific literatures concerning the topic of reviews and online consumer review platforms. A literature review serves as a basis for further research steps and combines identified findings, whereby previous literature of various high-value journals, books and internet sources is chosen. Partly, the literature is contradicting and hence will be assessed on a critical basis through an in-depth content analysis and researched further in a later stage. The data for the literature review was gathered by online search through platforms like Scopus or the online library of the University of Twente. Moreover, relevant literature was searched in offline libraries. The key words build a basis for the search of literature. The research literature by Becker & Nobre, 2014; Dellarocas, 2010; Dellarocas, 2003; DiMauro & Bulmer, 2014 and Henning-

Thurau & Walsh, 2003 play a guiding and relevant role throughout the paper.

The further methodology applied to support the research comprises a survey. The survey was conducted in the form of an online questionnaire, created through Qualtrics, a leading enterprise survey technology provider, enabling students to create a survey for their research projects. In total, the survey was created by four authors working on a bachelor project about online consumer reviews and purchasing behavior, which explains why the survey consists of five parts. The first part is a general, collective part about geographic data from the respondents and the relevance of reviews. The other parts were created each by one author, concerning one's own bachelor thesis' focus. Hence, the first as well as one of the four parts, which the author of this paper created, will mainly be taken for the present research (see Appendix 8.1). The questionnaire is based on the former literature review and its outcomes. Existing findings of other researches serve as a basis and is further examined in the questionnaire. The structure of answers consists of a common five point Likert scale on frequency and closed questions including polar questions as well as answer possibilities where multiple responses are possible. The results of the questionnaire are kept anonymously. The population size covers 422 respondents, with a dropout rate of 50 per cent throughout the survey. Hence an effective sample size of the whole survey is 211. Convenience Sampling was applied for the selection of data, since the whole population is too large, the survey was sent online via E-Mail and Social Media. Personal messages were sent to social media connections and friends, additionally the survey was posted on the author's social media profiles to reach all their online connections and in Facebook groups of the University of Twente. The survey was open for respondents for eleven days, from the 23.05.2015 until the 01.06.2015. Incentives for participation were created in the form of a raffle of an amazon or bol.com gift card. Participation was possible through voluntarily providing an E-Mail address in the end of the survey. The winner was drawn randomly by the four authors together, after the survey was closed

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Former research has empirically validated the impact of eWOM on consumer purchasing decisions. More specifically, online consumer reviews on products or services significantly influence consumers' attitude or behavior toward a purchasing decision (Burton & Khammash, 2010; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, 2003; Floh et al., 2013; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). The reputation of a product, brand or company which can be seen as a summary of companies past actions and products, is reflected or shaped by reviews and applies as a basis for purchasing decisions (Becker & Nobre, 2014; Dellarocas, 2010; Lee & Bradlow, 2011). Additionally, consumer purchasing behavior is important in terms of a company's profitability and sales, and influenced by the reading of online consumer reviews (Burtona & Khammash, 2010; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Hence, brand and company reputation and its establishment and factors of influence, like online reviews, should be regarded as increasingly important for company managers (Becker & Nobre, 2014). Therefore consumer motives for seeking reviews on products online are analyzed in the following.

2.1 Consumer motives for seeking reviews

Purchasing motivations draw on physiological and psychological themes whereby personal and social motives for seeking reviews accrue. Personal motives include the physical activity or the information seeking while social motives include communications. These motivations are not the same as for a

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2 Online review platform categorization

As the motives for consumers to seek reviews have been identified, it will be analyzed which diverse online reviewing platforms are used by consumers. Further, it will be characterized which review design characteristics on platforms might influence consumers' product choice. The literature distinguishes between different kinds of online consumer opinion platforms. The classification of the platforms entails platforms consciously designed for reviews such as independent reviewing platforms and others like video-sharing platforms, originally designed for different purposes but likewise used for reviews. Retail websites, as well as independent consumer review platforms, personal blogs and video-sharing platforms are classified by the literature as platforms containing customer-generated content in the form of consumer reviews (Burtona & Khammash, 2010; Dellarocas, 2003; Fan & Gordon, 2014; Lee & Youn, 2009; Preece & Shneiderman, 2009). These four different review platforms are taken into further analysis since these are containing reviews in a distinguished format. The reviews can clearly be differentiated from general customer eWOM. Either way, the platform is segmented in various sections of which one is a review section or expressive headings, catchwords or website names clearly emphasize the review content by using the words 'review', 'rating' or 'test' among similar ones. Online forums or social media sites such as Facebook or Instagram are not taken into further consideration as eWOM on these platforms is created in the form of CGC, also entailing consumer opinions, though without a clear boundary to non-review CGC. No overview of aggregated opinions can be found nor sections or headings leading to the review section. Moreover, on Facebook, only companies, no specific products or services, can be reviewed in an aggregated and over seeable way. Still, the CGC on these platforms can be categorized as crucial and highly influential, though is not seen as a clear review by the author and hence not further analyzed in the present paper. Nevertheless, it is advisable to further analyze these platforms and its CGC in future researches (see 5.1).

Retail websites

Retail platforms are websites of a retail store which focus on the sale of goods and services through the Internet (Investopedia). Hence, the main content on the platform comes from marketers of retail shops. Its ownership can therefore be classified as private. The main intention of the platform is therefore to sell the products offered in the retail shop. At the same time, reviews support platforms by increasing customer satisfaction and quality of service, in a way that future consumers can inform themselves beforehand by scanning through the reviews to determine whether the product fits their expectation (Fan & Gordon, 2014). Amazon.com is the largest Internet-based retailer in the United States and market leader in many European countries and hence will be taken as one of the example retail websites in the survey among others. Further retail platforms offering reviews are for example booking.com,

specialized on the sale of accommodations or bestbuy.com selling electronics. Retail websites offer consumers the opportunity to post product reviews after their purchase. At the same time, future consumers are given the opportunity to orientate their purchases on post-consumer opinions (Dellarocas, 2010). The content of reviews on retail websites can be in the form of aggregated, numerical star ratings and open-ended customer-authored comments about the product in the format of a written text (Li, Hitt, & Zhang, 2011; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). A product review function includes a scoring system which allows to vote on review helpfulness and places the most voted conspicuously. The consumer can choose between a sorting option of helpfulness or date and hence most recent contributions or the sorting by the summary of aggregated ratings (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Dellarocas, 2010). Often, platforms incorporate features that show the reviews voted as most helpful on top of the chronology, the platform can thereby influence the reader on what is read (first) and hence plays a significant role in influencing users' purchase decisions (Chua & Banerjee, 2015; Lee J., 2013). A profile of the review author can be visible, showing statistics like number of reviews written or an average score given on reviews (Dellarocas, 2010).

Independent consumer review platforms

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

Personal blogs

Blogging sites, especially those regularly writing about consumption experiences of products or services, have recently grown in popularity. Reviews by bloggers contain bloggers' experiences and product information; accordingly, ownership is classified as private. Bloggers often see themselves as experts of certain product categories and hence specialize on these in their reviewing blogs. The intention of private blogs is therefore to share purchasing experiences about certain product categories and give recommendations to others. Thus, consumers use this tool to inform themselves prior purchasing decisions (Huang, 2015). Due to its specialization on a product

(category), blog entries are often found by consumers through search engines (Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, 2013). Since bloggers recommendation posts are seen as a useful marketing communication tool and a vital reference in consumer purchase decision making (Lu, et al., 2014), many bloggers have become opinion leaders. The profile of the blogger is mostly very detailed and communication exchanges with the blogger are often possible. The review content is mostly displayed through open-ended customer-authored texts, supported by media like photos or videos. The content is mostly considerably more detailed than on retail or independent reviewing websites and includes more personal thoughts and self-disclosure (Huang L.-S., 2015; Wang, 2011). Though, per product, only one review of one author is displayed and hence the consumer only relies on a single opinion.

Video-sharing platforms

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

In general, literature about diverse online consumer platforms reveals that online reviews in general affect consumer product

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

2.3 Format characteristics

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1. Format characteristics of reviews on online reviewing platforms

2.4 Company analytics and platform attraction

Customers and shareholders continuously pressure companies to increase customer satisfaction and quality of service in order to circumvent harm through reviews among others. Monitoring of reviews though, can examine customer opinions and hence contribute to company improvements. Review analytics engage in collecting, monitoring, analyzing and summarizing information to extract useful patterns and intelligence. The goal thereby is to analyze influential users, insights into changing consumer tastes and interests, ad-campaign effectiveness and competitive intelligence. Consequently, the data can be used for product-design-development, learning, tracking consumer concerns and the development of influencers themselves (Becker & Nobre, 2014; Fan & D.Gordon, 2014; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Even though, CGC and its emergence are difficult to control, this powerful source can be measured and controlled accurately through proper engineering of a website including review format characteristics (Dellarocas, 2003). Therefore, for the application of analytics on online reviews, it is of importance to know what review format characteristics on review platforms, of those shown in Table 1, have the most influence on consumer purchasing decisions (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003).

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

3. OPERATIONALIZATION

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

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

The conducted survey researches the impact of the format characteristics and whether usability and credibility

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

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

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

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Data Collection

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

The survey received 422 responses of which 211 were completed. The uncompleted questionnaires are filtered and results are based on responses completed for each question.

Population statistics

From the 211 complete surveys, the sample's average age amounts to about 24 years (24.3317). The total distribution lies in between 16 and 63. In category, the age group of students from 18 to 25 years amounts to 82 per cent (N=175). 56.4 per cent of the sample size is female and 43.6 per cent male respondents which gives a variance of 0.25. The main nationality of the sample is German with 62 per cent (N=131), Dutch respondents make up the second most representative group of respondents with 14 per cent (N=30). Further nationalities are US-American with 6 per cent (N=12) and other nationalities with 18 per cent (N=38). The respondents category other nationalities covers mainly western and southern European nationalities like Belgium, Austrian, British, Italian or Spanish nationalities. Students make up the biggest occupation of the respondents with a percentage of 77 per cent (N=163) and employees the second biggest with a percentage of 17 per cent (N=35).

Hence, it can be said that the average respondent is a Western European student within the normal student age group of 18 to 25. This can be explained by the way of distributing the survey. Since all four authors of the survey are German students, living in the Netherlands, most connections on their social networks, through which the survey was distributed, have similar attributes as the authors themselves.

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

4.2 Survey Results

Social Media behavior and use of reviews

Firstly, to get an overall overview of social media use, the questionnaire asks which Social media platforms the population uses. It was assumed that respondents use at least one since the survey was distributed through social media channels. 98 per cent of all respondents use Facebook, which makes it to the most popular Social Media tool, followed by YouTube (70 per cent) and Instagram (46 per cent). The next question surveys whether the sample has ever checked online reviews prior a product purchase; 98 per cent (N=206) answered this question with a yes and hence have checked online reviews. Hence, this research is supported in its importance and relevance. Further, consumers indicate that most of them check reviews quite often (38 per cent, N=80), sometimes (29 per cent, N=62) or very often (22 per cent, N=47). Only 10 per cent (N=22) check reviews rarely or never. The choices of answers were not based

on a certain time frame as in once a week or once a month, as it has been done in other studies (DiMauro & Bulmer, 2014). The reason lays in the fact that, in the author's opinion, the frequency of looking for reviews depends on consumer purchasing behavior and frequency and hence cannot be simply measured in time. The final question of this part concerns the various online review platforms. It was found that retail platforms are the most used, as 82 per cent of the sample population make use of those. Independent platforms are the second most indicated review platforms since 55 per cent make use of those, followed by video platforms (37 per cent) and blogs (31 per cent). Others were only chosen by less than 3 per cent. This question herewith supports the classification of reviewing platforms in section two of this paper. All categorized platforms were chosen by more than 30 per cent of the respondents and further platforms were barely chosen.

Review function characteristics

The main survey part concerning this research study starts off with three pictures of reviews for the sample purchase iPhone. The participant was not supposed to pay attention to the content of the review but to the overall impression and general display of the review. The first shows a text review and an aggregated rating on a retail or independent platform, the second a screenshot of a video rating and the third a blog review composed of a text, photo and profile of the author. Through this question, the author wants to find the review format the user is most familiar with and would choose without thinking about it. The blog review was chosen by 55 per cent of the respondents and hence seems most attractive to them. The first review which displays a review on a retail or independent platform and the video review were chosen by 23 and 25 per cent respectively. The following two questions analyze the reason for choosing one of the review options in question one. The former asks about the review the participant sees as most credible while the later asks about the most user-friendly one. 46 per cent see the blog as most credible, followed by the retail or independent website with 31 per cent and the video with 22 per cent. The results differ from those about the question of user-friendliness whereby the video review is seen as most user friendly (54 per cent) and the blog the least user friendly (21 per cent). Hence, at first sight, it seems as if the respondents have chosen the blog review as a basis for their purchase due to its credibility. In addition, the different perceptions of qualitative reviews, which are composed of texts or videos, and quantitative reviews, composed as aggregated star ratings as an example, were examined. Question four simply asks which of the two the respondents would choose as a basis for their purchasing decision, multiple answers possible. 86 per cent of all respondents chose qualitative and 45 per cent quantitative reviews. 78 per cent then justify their answer by saying qualitative reviews are more credible, while 22 per cent claim quantitative to be more credible. At the same time qualitative reviews are also considered as more user friendly by 55 per cent than quantitative ones. To further explore review characteristics, the sample population was asked on whether they classify media support in a review as credible or user-friendly. For this question, 42 per cent of the total respondents agree on credibility while 69 per cent agreed on user-friendliness. 13 per cent are of the opinion that media support like photos or videos does not make a review more credible or user-friendly. The eighth question on review mechanism characteristics introduces the sorting option for reviews on platforms. 46 per cent of the sample population makes use of it while 54 per cent does not. Those making use of it named sorting options for ranking, date of publication and helpfulness as the ones they use. Further, 87 per cent of the respondents

consider a sorting option as user friendly, even though 46 per cent do not make use of it. The tenth question considers summary statistics as in quantitative reviews. 39 per cent of the whole sample considers them as credible, 74 per cent as user-friendly and 11 per cent as none. Statistics about the volume of reviews, hence the total number, are seen as credible by 60 per cent and user friendly by 39 per cent. 20 per cent do not consider them as one of those. Finally, the last two questions concern self-disclosure of the review author. 73 per cent of the sample population, rate a visible and detailed profile of the author as credible. Member activity statistics like the number of reviews created by the author or the duration of membership are preferred by 71 per cent. 50 per cent (also) consider personal characteristics like the author's interests as important.

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

4.3 Survey Analysis

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

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

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

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

Q1.8 and Q2.1 both asked the consumer about their choice of product review platforms. Though, Q1.8 named the platforms directly as answering options while Q2.1 showed pictures of different review displaying options without directly mentioning which platforms are shown. The questions shall now be compared. Firstly, the overall percentage distribution for the platform choices does not concur. Image one from Q2.1 can be categorized as a retail or independent reviewing platform which received 82 (retail) / 55 (independent) per cent of the votes. Though, in the image question (Q2.1), only 23 per cent of the participants would choose this kind of review format as their reviewing basis. The second image which displays a video review was voted by 25 per cent while in Q1.8 37 per cent voted for the video review. The last picture showed a blog which most people voted for, though only 32 per cent voted for the personal blog as a review platform in Q1.8. Thus, when directly asking consumers which review platform they are using as a basis for their purchase decision, retail and independent platforms are the most popular. Though, when showing images of reviews, the blog review convinces consumers. The distinction in distribution choice can be explained in not identifying the images as the correct platforms. Further, blogs have just recently grown in popularity as a reviewing platform

and hence are rather new for consumers. Not all survey participants might have been aware when answering the first question that a personal blog can be used as a review platform. Therefore, due to lack of knowledge or simply no use of blogs, the participants have not chosen the blog in the first question. Though, it seems as if in the second question, the display characteristics of the review blog have convinced consumers. This example might explain that users mostly use the platforms they know and used to use, though actually prefer additional or other review mechanism features.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Review volume statistics (Q2.11 & Appendix 8.5)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The following analyzes whether there is a consistency between the users who have voted a detailed profile or identity of the review author as credible (Q2.12) and those who have chosen platforms where a profile is shown in detail (mainly blog, as well as video-sharing platform). Hence, Q1.8 and Q2.12 will be matched (see Appendix, cross table 6). From the whole population 73 per cent regard self-disclosure as credible. When comparing with the choice of platforms in Q1.8 no big differences can be noticed between the platform choices. Retail websites which do not show detailed profiles of the review authors lay even a little above 73 per cent (76 per cent) by the ones who consider self-disclosure as credible and the choice of blogs who show high self-disclosure, a little below with 71 per cent. Only video sharing platforms confirm the assumption slightly, since these show a detailed profile and the choice is made by 80 per cent of those respondents perceiving a detailed profile as credible. Though, when matching with Q2.1 which actually shows images of the reviews, the coherence can be confirmed. The first image of a retail website, not showing a profile is voted by 65 per cent while the video review and blog review are voted by 85 and 80 respectively of the ones perceiving a profile as credible. Therefore, it can be concluded that those participants who were more attracted by the reviews showing a profile, confirmed their choice by classifying self-disclosure in a review as credible.

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

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

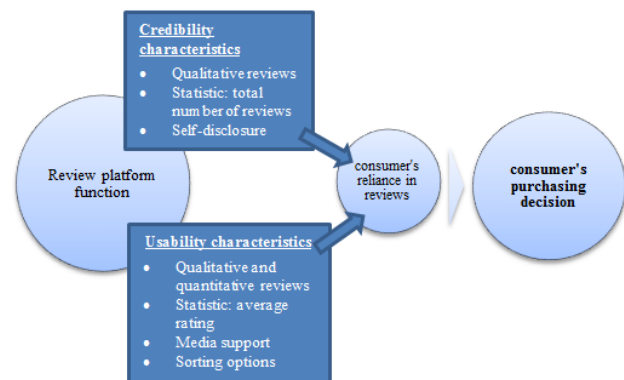
Customer opinions in the form of reviews offer opportunities as well as risks. Reviews are seen as highly influential for consumers due to their reliance on unfiltered eWOM from other consumers instead of relying on marketer signals such as brands (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Hung & Li, 2007; Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013). Former research has empirically validated the impact of online consumer reviews on consumer purchasing decisions whereby consumer purchasing behavior is important in terms of a company's profitability and sales, and influenced by the reading of online consumer reviews (e.g. Burtona & Khamash, 2010; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Therefore it is of importance to understand the impact of reviews on purchasing decisions and choice of review platforms. The conducted survey of this research confirms that reviews are highly used by the population through the fact that 98 per cent of the sample population check reviews and 60 per cent even check them often or quite often. However, online reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions only when consumers' reliance on online reviews is sufficiently high when they make purchase decisions. Consumers' reliance on reviews is dependent on and affected by the format characteristics of the review and the online review system's design (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). To increase consumers' reliance on reviews, the objectives of the different platforms should be to build trust for the consumer, promote website and service quality, facilitate

member matching and offer consumers sufficient information as well as a user friendly design (Dellarocas, 2010; Huang & Benyoucef, 2012). Hence, online review platform design moderates reviews and the consumer's reliance and purchasing decisions. Two categories of review format characteristics could be established: usability and credibility characteristics. These characteristics were further surveyed in the questionnaire in order to solve the engineering design problem for consumer review platforms and the impact of the function characteristic on consumer purchasing decisions.

Firstly, consumer's motives to search for reviews were identified through literature as personal and social motives, more precisely as Informational behavior, Risk reduction, Quality seeking and Social belonging. The platform choices thereby differ, as well as the platform's review function characteristics. The by the survey analyzed results confirm the presence of various review function characteristics and its influence on consumers. The in the literature review categorized platform categories can be affirmed through the respondents in the survey as the online consumer review platforms consumers use. However, it should be noticed that new platforms are constantly emerging. Hence, within short time the affirmation of those currently relevant platforms may not be proper anymore. For the time being, retail websites are the most used review platforms for checking online reviews. The combination of shopping and checking reviews for the product one is about to shop, seems to be appealing due to its convenience. Nevertheless, when consumers choose for a review function, they prefer additional characteristics of the mechanism than just those offered on retail (or independent) websites. Further, it can be said that no categorized platform entails all the review function characteristics which consumers regard as usable or credible and hence influence consumers purchasing decisions. Rather, according to the survey, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative reviews seems attracting to consumers, qualitative reviews thereby can be accounted as most credible and user-friendly. Additionally, the review function characteristic of media support, especially in addition to a written text is increasing the usability of a website as well as for some consumers the credibility. Furthermore, self-disclosure in the form of a visible identity of the review's author is an important characteristic of a review function due to its credibility. Also, statistics which give an overview for the consumer on the reviews, like the total number of reviews given for a certain product, increase the credibility of reviews and its platform. A statistic about the average rating of all reviews for the product enhances usability. Moreover, sorting options seem to make review platforms more credible; however, users do not seem to make use of them as much. The reason for this could not be solved in this research. Due to the perception as usefulness though, it is advisable to include this option on a review platform.

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

on consumer purchasing decisions are shown and demonstrate the function characteristics which would have to present on an ideal review platform for a consumer's reliance in its reviews.



Model 1. Impact of review characteristics on consumer purchasing decisions

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

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

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

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

5.1 Future research and implications

Practical

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

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

Theoretical

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

represent users who use reviews less frequently in a way that they use the same categories of platforms.

5.2 Limitations

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

For the survey, no professional tools or more attractive and additional incentives for the collection of results were available. The questionnaire was self-created and hence the author's formulations could have been misunderstood. Additionally, not all respondents were native English speakers. The sample size was rather small and respondents were mostly from Western Europe. Though, due to convenience sampling no equal amount of consumers in terms of geographical facts was reached. Moreover, due to the different nationalities, especially those respondents from non-European countries might have different perceptions since the internet and social media, as well as online shopping might play a different role in their countries. Results might hence be biased. Due the fact that the survey was conducted online, there was a limited control of situational effects and participants had no chance to ask questions when obscurities existed. Though, an online survey can be regarded as appropriate for this study since it is the best way to gain many insights in a short time with few resources.

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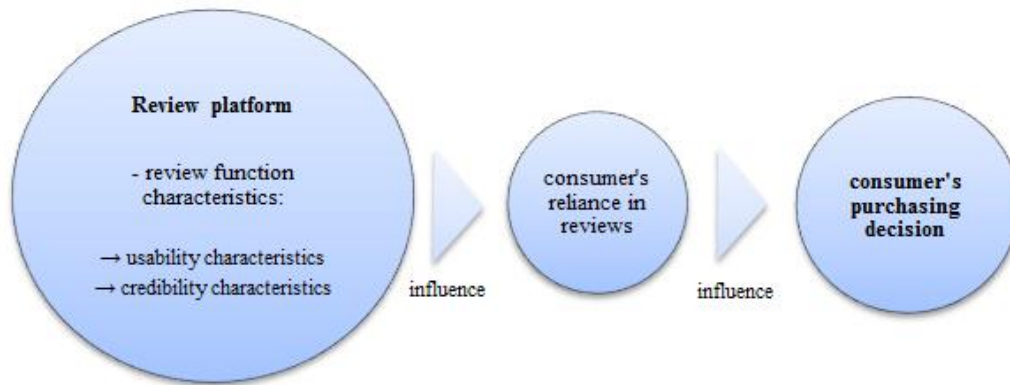
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8. APPENDIX

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



8.1 Questionnaire

Bachelor Thesis 2015

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

Age

Gender

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)

Nationality:

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

Current main occupation:

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

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

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

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

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- ☐ 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)

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

- ☐ 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)

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

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

Which kind of review do you consider as more credible?

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

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

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

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

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

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

- ☐ Yes (1) _____
- ☐ No (2)

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

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

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

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

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

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

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

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

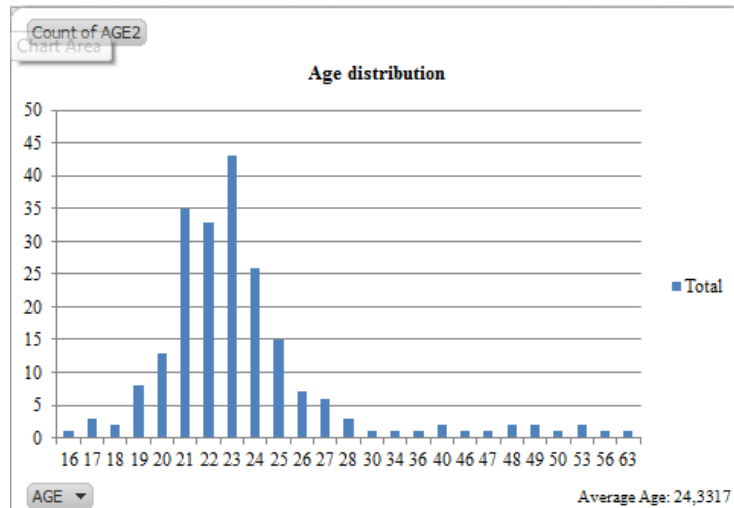
If yes, which profile characteristics of the reviewer are important to you? (Multiple answers possible)

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

8.2 Questionnaire: Population Statistics

Statistic	Value
Respondents	211

Q1.1. Age:



Q1.2. Gender:

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	Male	<div></div>	92	43.60%
2	Female	<div></div>	119	56.40%
	Total		211	100.00%

Q1.3. Nationality:









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

Q1.4. Occupation:

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

8.3 Questionnaire: Social Media behavior and use of reviews

Q1.5. Use of social media platforms

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






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

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

Q1.7. How often check the surveyed persons reviews

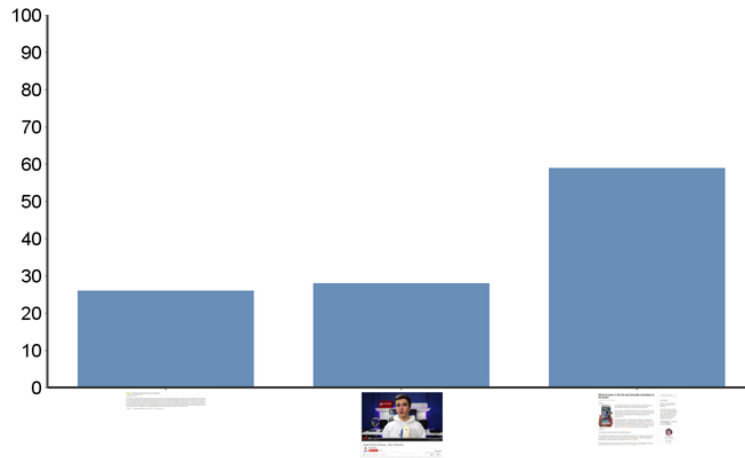


Q1.8. Platforms chosen by the sample when looking at product reviews

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

8.4 Questionnaire: review characteristics

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



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

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	1	<div></div>	66	31.28%
2	2	<div></div>	47	22.27%
3	3	<div></div>	98	46.45%
	Total		211	100.00%



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

#	Answer	Bar	Response	%
1	1	<div></div>	49	23.22%
2	2	<div></div>	116	54.98%
3	3	<div></div>	46	21.80%
	Total		211	100.00%



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

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




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

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

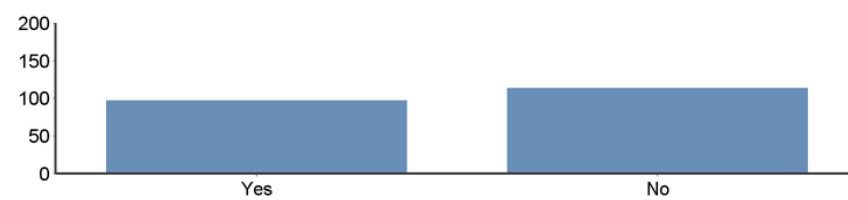
Q2.6. More user-friendly review (qualitative or quantitative)

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

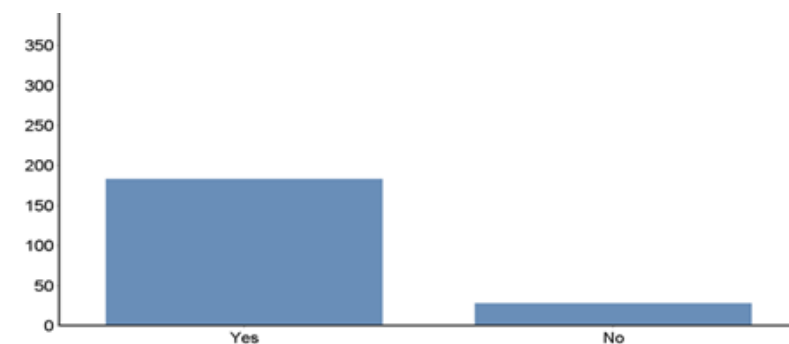
Q2.7. Media support (photo/ sound/ video)

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

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



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



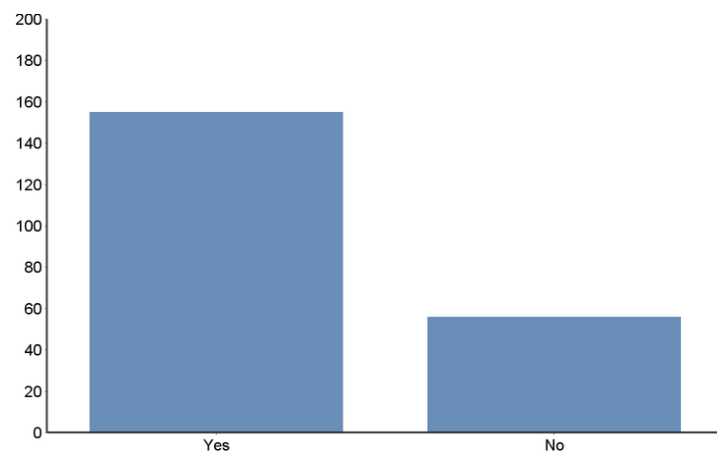
Q2.10. Summary statistics

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

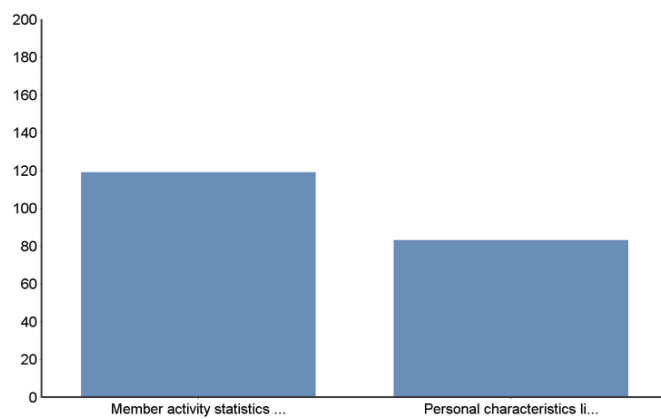
Q2.11. Statistics about review volume (total number of reviews)

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

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



Q2.13. Important profile characteristics of the review author



8.5 Survey Analysis

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

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

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

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

Cross table 3: Q2.1 + Q 2.2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cross table 5: Q1.8 + Q2.8

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

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

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