Online customer reviews and their perceived trustworthiness by consumers in relation to various influencing factors

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ABSTRACT
Online customer reviews have become increasingly important to the business world nowadays as more and more users make use of social media platforms to look for product information. For the tourism industry this problem is especially prevalent due to the fact that its products and services are high risk and intangible. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how exactly online customer reviews influence customers and what aspects of an online customer review are influential when it comes to its perceived trustworthiness. The role of the reviewer's profile has not been researched extensively so far and may play a role in the perceived trustworthiness of a review. The present study, which has been conducted as an online survey, aims at finding out more about the problem by assessing personal opinions and presenting different reviews to the participants. The results show that the respondents' general attitude towards online customer reviews is positive and that they generally find them honest and credible. Gender and age do not seem to have an effect on the perception. However, the profile of the reviewer does seem to influence the perceived trustworthiness in a linear relationship. Implications of these results are that marketers may be able to identify which reviews are most likely to influence their business and why. They may prioritize which customer reviews to react to in order to reduce the negative effect of particular reviews.

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Keywords
Social Media Platforms, Web 2.0, Online Customer Reviews, TripAdvisor, perceived trustworthiness

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Relevance of topic

The business world has changed greatly over the past few years, mainly due to the rising importance and widespread use of social media, or web 2.0 (Forbes, 2013). The highly interactive web 2.0 world gives more power to the consumer which are now able to dictate the nature of the marketing content presented on the internet. Social networks and blogs 'enable individuals to create, share, and recommend information' (Hannah et al., 2011), 'evaluate products, make recommendations to contacts or friends, and link current purchases to future purchases through status updates and twitter feeds' (Forbes, 2013), and have been recognized for influencing the adoption and use of products and services (Lee, 2008). However, consumers do not only use the internet for researching the companies they want to buy from, but to engage with the companies as well as with other consumers who may have valuable insights into certain products and services (Hannah et al., 2011). A global study revealed that almost two-thirds of respondents read online customer reviews before making a purchase (Wei & Lu, 2013).

The so-called user-generated content generates a high amount of electronic word-of-mouth, or eWOM, that influences the reputation of a company and its products (DiMauro & Bulmer, 2014). EWOM refers to all positive and negative statements made by consumers about the products or services of a company or the company itself (Lee, 2008; Karakaya & Barnes, 2012). In addition, the phenomenon has been associated with the ripple effect, which basically means that a seemingly small and insignificant comment can have a far reaching and significant impact. Therefore, company websites are no longer the only source of information for consumers. The shared opinions and experiences of socially-connected consumers are taken into consideration when gathering information about a product or service (DiMauro & Bulmer, 2014) and, next to that, these online opinions are perceived as equally trustworthy as the brand websites themselves (Lee, 2008). Consumers more often rely on the recommendations and expert opinion of a friend or acquaintance found within their social media network (Forbes, 2013). Taking into consideration all these facts, it becomes obvious that companies nowadays have less control over the information available about them on the internet and that they are especially vulnerable to what consumers share online. They do not control the dissemination of product information due to the large extent to which consumers use the new interactive arenas, such as web 2.0 (Wei & Lu, 2013).

From a consumer perspective, these developments are mainly positive. The global reach of the internet gives them the possibility to gather information and opinions of peers from all over the world and, thus, define brands without the influence of companies (Pires et al., 2006), as they might present different or lacking information on their own websites in order to create a favorable image of their offering in the customers' minds. According to DiMauro & Bulmer (2014), 37% of buyers find quality an essential factor and 27% consider information found on social media networks as a weighing factor. For that reason, it is interesting to see how and to what extent these online customer reviews impact consumers looking for information online.

1.2 Background

In order to better understand social media and its various functionalities, the honeycomb framework (Figure 1), developed by Kietzmann et al. (2011), will be taken into consideration. The model can be used as a lens for understanding social media using seven functional building blocks. These are presence, sharing, relationships, identity, conversations, reputation and groups. When looking at the implications of each block, firms can decide how they should engage with social media. Kietzmann et al. (2012) describes three important ways in which firms should make use of the model. First, the social media user experience can be determined by determining the primary, secondary and tertiary building blocks of a platform. Second, managers can use the model as an analytical lens to figure out their community's needs and choose an appropriate social media platform accordingly. Third, the honeycomb model can be used as a lens for monitoring the community's needs and the social media tools the firm consequently needs to adapt. The seven building blocks are not mutually exclusive and do not all need to be included when it comes to a specific social media platform. Each block presents an important social media phenomenon that can be understood by applying various scientific theories. 'Identity' describes the extent to which users choose to reveal their identities on a social media platform in terms of personal information. 'Groups' stands for the opportunities users have to organize themselves into groups and distinct sub-communities within a social media platform. Users themselves can form and join these groups according to their personal interests. The 'relationship' building block deals with the extent to which users can be related to other users. Relate is defined as 'two or more consumers who have some form of relationship that leads them to converse, share objects, meet up or simply just list each other as a friend or fan' (Kietzmann et al., 2012). 'Reputation' is about the socially shaped opinion of firms or individuals that is based on prior experiences shared through word of mouth, coverage in the popular press and other sources. For that reason, it is important for firms to create positive links to their products and brands. The next building block is 'presence'. It is about the extent to which users know whether other users are accessible, or online, at a specific time. 'Conversations' is about the extent to which users communicate with each other using the social media platform. The last block, 'sharing', is about the extent to which users are able to exchange, distribute and receive contents.

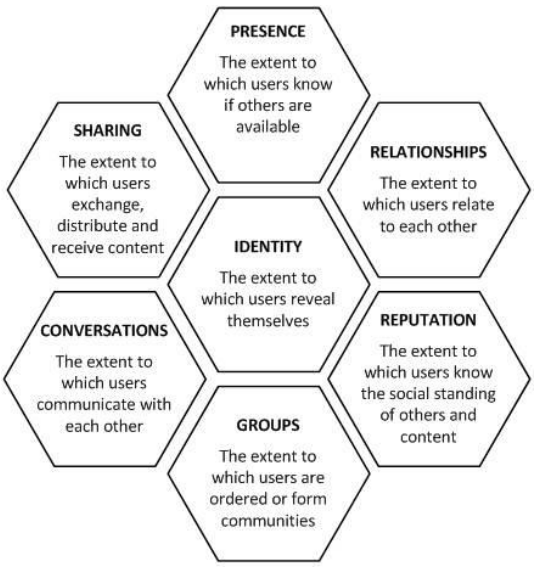

Figure 1. Social Media Functionality (Kietzmann et al., 2012)

1.3 Goal of the study

The study at hand aims at finding out to what extent online customer reviews influence brand perception and whether the profile of the reviewer is part of that influence. This topic in general has already been researched but not specifically in the

case of TripAdvisor, a well-known and popular travel review site. In order to get a better understanding of the topic in general, the literature review that follows in the next section focusses on the main concepts related to online customer reviews and hence discusses social media, eWOM and web 2.0 in general.

TripAdvisor is then the main focus of the survey. Its purpose is to find out more about the level of trustworthiness people have in online customer reviews, the TripAdvisor website in general and also particular reviews on that website. Next to that, different aspects of the reviews are being assessed, such as the length, the way in which it is written and the reviewer's profile.

Academic Relevance

There have been no studies so far that assess online customer reviews on TripAdvisor in particular and that in addition take the reviewer's profile into consideration. Thus, it is interesting to find out about the relationship of these reviews and their influence on the consumer's brand perception. The value that can be derived from this research can also be viewed as the basis for further research it can serve as.

Practical Relevance

With the emergence of the web 2.0, companies have become more vulnerable to eWOM and, as a part of that, online customer reviews. To be more specific, for companies this means that only a single customer review is able to hurt their business as these reviews spread quickly on the internet. For the travel industry, in which the service factor plays a crucial role, online customer reviews are key. With TripAdvisor being one of the most used travel review sites worldwide, it is interesting to see which aspects of an online customer review influence the consumer when reading a review.

The following main research question can be formulated after having defined the problem at hand:

To what extent do different factors influence the perceived trustworthiness of online customer reviews?

There are three sub questions that are aimed at supporting the focus of the research to answer the main research question appropriately:

What is the consumer's point of view on online customer reviews in general?

Which factors seem to have an impact on the perception of online customer reviews?

Does the reviewer's profile have any impact on the perceived trustworthiness of the online customer review?

The structure of this paper will be as follows. Section 2 explains the methodology part of the research so that the research methods are transparent and understandable. Next, the literature review is presented in section 3. All relevant information regarding the topic at hand that has been dealt with in scientific papers is discussed here. Topics such as online customer reviews, eWOM and the tourism sector are covered. Section 4 then briefly goes into detail about the website TripAdvisor and its workings. After that, the results of the survey are being displayed in section 5 and in section 6 the data analysis can be found. Finally, these findings are being discussed and concluded in section 7 and also put into perspective with regard to the research questions.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study systematically analyzes relevant scientific literature that is dealing with similar issues as the one presented in this paper. Issues such as social media, online customer reviews, the tourism sector and TripAdvisor are therefore being covered. These issues also serve as key words when searching for relevant literature. The search engines Google Scholar and Scopus have been used for gathering literature. After having found a variety of papers, they have been checked for relevance to this study. That way, unsuitable articles have been eliminated right way. Every abstract has been scanned according to the key words and the content in general as well as the year of publication as everything associated with web 2.0, which is characterized by technological development, is dynamic and changing quickly over time and needs to be up-to-date. With the information collected from the literature, a literature review has been compiled in order to get an overview of the latest and most important information regarding the topic at hand. This also helps the reader to become familiar with the topic in an easy and efficient manner.

Next to the literature review, an online survey has been conducted in order to be able to assess the issue with a relevant data set. This was especially important as this study is looking at TripAdvisor in particular and there is currently no data available specifically related to this topic. The online survey has been created and analyzed with the help of Google Tools. The distribution happened via several social media platforms, for example, Facebook and LinkedIn, and also via e-mail. The whole document can be found in the appendix (see Appendix Section 10.1). The questions posed in the online survey have been constructed according to Babbie's (2013) guidelines for asking questions in surveys. All items are either questions or statements that are closed-ended. That way, the answers have greater uniformity and are consequently easier to process and analyze. Also, special attention has been paid to the answer categories and that they are exhaustive. In many cases respondents have the chance to fill in an own response in case their answer has not been provided to make sure that all options are covered. The online survey has been made available for respondents for a period of 5 days and afterwards the analysis has been conducted with the help of Google Tools, Microsoft Excel and SPSS. SPSS has mostly been used to assess possible relationships between variables by coding the data and then compiling cross tabulations and looking for correlations.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Social Media, Online Customer Reviews & eWOM

An online customer review is defined as 'a type of product information and evaluation created by users on the basis of their own experiences. The review information is posted on either the websites of the online stores or on third party websites' (Wei & Lu, 2013). Many websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and Amazon, facilitate online customer reviews of products, services and firms. Users are able to write about and share their personal experiences on these platforms so that other consumers have the chance to read about first-hand experiences and get information that has not been published by the companies themselves. Also, online customer reviews, in comparison to traditional word-of-mouth, have several benefits. They are fast, savable and anonymous, and transcend time and space by being online (Wei & Lu, 2013; Litvin et al., 2005). That way, all online customer reviews have a global reach and are readily available to everyone that wishes to read them. Ultimately, online customer are the most accessible and prevalent form of eWOM (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008).

Park et al. (2007) point out three major differences between traditional word of mouth and online customer reviews. The first difference is the influence of traditional word-of-mouth which is normally limited to a smaller local network. On the contrary to

that, online customer reviews have a far wider reach due to the fact that they are accessible to consumers all over the world. Secondly, sellers do not have any influence on traditional word-of-mouth. They can decide whether they would like to provide consumers with the opportunity to review their products on their website. Nevertheless, a lot of reviews are posted on independent platforms nowadays, so that the degree to which sellers have influence over them is very limited. Thirdly, traditional word-of-mouth typically comes from people that are familiar to the consumer, such as family or friends, whereas with online customer reviews the information source is usually unknown.

Next to that, online forums seem to have greater credibility and are easier to relate to from a consumer perspective (Wei & Lu, 2013; Park et al., 2007). Source credibility has often been mentioned as a crucial factor when it comes to the effectiveness of a message. Naturally, it depends on the reader's perception of the reviewer's trustworthiness and expertise (Karakaya & Barnes, 2012). The fact that the reviews have been written by fellow users evokes empathy and consequently leads consumers to trust the information more than information published on the sellers' websites. Lee (2008) agrees with these findings and further describes the online customer reviews as more relevant to the users and mentions that the fact that other users have contributed them as the main reason for that. In that regard, Cheung et al. (2008) point out that social media platforms are usually being considered trustworthy by users and that users also find online customer reviews to be unbiased. The more reviews there are, the more likely consumers are to believe the recommendations and perceive the product in a positive light (Park et al., 2007).

As a type of electronic word-of-mouth, online customer reviews have a dual role, as explained by Wei & Lu (2013), Park et al. (2007) and Lee et al. (2008). On the one hand, they include product information and, on the other hand, they provide personal recommendations made by the reviewer. Taking on the role of an informant, online customer reviews present user-oriented product information, including subjective and honest statements about the advantages and disadvantages of the product. These evaluations are usually not to be found on company websites and are especially helpful to the user when it comes to making the buying decision. As a recommender, the reviews, or the reviewers, share personal experiences and opinions to help other users make their purchasing decision. All in all, they make it easier for other users to judge the quality of a product.

Furthermore, Park et al. (2007) name three differences between the information provided by sellers and information provided by online customer reviews. These differences match with the explanation of the dual role and are necessary to know when it comes to understanding the consumer. The first difference is the trustworthiness of the source, which is often related to the level of credibility. As already mentioned above, previous studies (e.g. Lee, 2008) suggest that from a consumer perspective, online customer reviews are often perceived as more trustworthy as they believe other users not to hide, for example, inferior aspects of a product or service. In this case, honesty is a major concern and sellers are expected to highlight only the positive aspects of a product on their websites. The second difference mentioned by Park et al. (2007) is the fact that online customer reviews tend to be more consumer oriented in terms of comprehensibility. Reviews sometimes include, for example, usage situations, advantages and disadvantages from his or her perspective and experience, which are easier to relate to for the consumer than objective and technical product descriptions often to be found on seller websites. The last difference is about the way in which product information is displayed. On seller websites, there normally is a standard form in which each product is presented. Online customer review, however, are subjective and emotional and can consist of many or few words. Still, emotional reviews provide useful and important information when they are positive. Nevertheless, more objective and informative reviews are more persuasive than an emotional comment (Park et al., 2007).

3.2 Online customer reviews in the Tourism Sector

Many researchers have established that a high percentage of consumers look for information online by reading online customer reviews before making a purchase decision (Cheung et al., 2008; Forbes, 2013; Lee et al., 2008) and with the emergence of internet technologies more and more travelers seek information online (Litvin et al., 2005). Looking for travel-related information is in that sense one of the most popular online activities (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). In the tourism industry, which is characterized by high-risk purchases, it is common for consumers to consult online customer reviews. The product offerings are high risk because they are intangible and cannot be evaluated before the actual consumption (Litvin et al., 2005; Del Chiappa, 2011). Therefore, eWOM is especially influential as consumers constantly look for reference group evaluation on the internet to reduce uncertainty. The web 2.0, or travel 2.0, as it is referred to in the tourism sector, includes, among other things, tagging, web forums, customer ratings and evaluation systems, blogs, photo and video sharing (Del Chiappa, 2011). Del Chiappa (2011) further underlines that these information sources have a higher perceived credibility by consumers than traditional tourist information sources due to the fact that they have personally shared their experience.

Several researchers have found that online customer reviews have the most impact on accommodation products in the tourism industry in comparison to other travel products (Del Chiappa, 2011, Yoo & Gretzel 2008, Melian-Gonzalez et al., 2013). With regard to the lodging choice, online customer reviews have also been named as the most important variable when also looking at other variables such as location (Melian-Gonzalez et al., 2013).

Bronner & Hoog (2010) conducted a study and concluded a variety of main characteristics from their results regarding the profile of consumers reading online customer reviews in the tourism sector. They are as follows. First, these consumers are frequently younger than 55 years old. Second, they are from high and lower-middle income groups. And third, they are often couples with or without children.

3.3 Conceptual Model

After having analyzed relevant literature regarding the topic at hand and being able to see relationships between the key components more clearly, the following conceptual model can be developed (see Figure 2). This conceptual model will help give the research a clear focus and serve as the basis for the analysis.

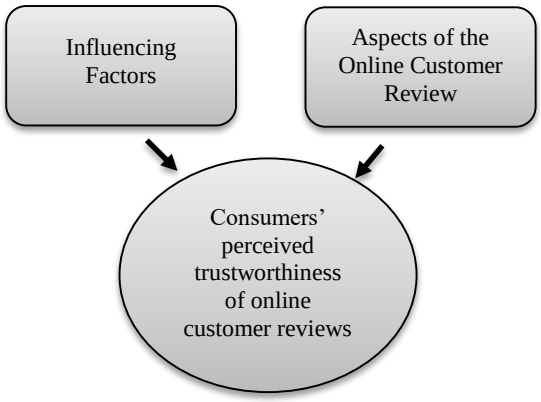

Figure 2. Conceptual Model: Influencing factors on consumers' perceived trustworthiness of online customer reviews

4. A CASE STUDY: TRIPADVISOR.COM

As the largest travel review site worldwide tripadvisor.com has made a name for itself since it has been founded in February 2000 by Stephen Kaufer, Langley Steinert and several others. TripAdvisor claims to have more than 60 million members and about 170 million reviews. The website reviews are all opinions of hotels, restaurants, attractions and other travel-related businesses (Melian-Gonzalez et al., 2013). Next to that, it also offers users booking tools to compare and find hotel prices, for example (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. The TripAdvisor Website. Retrieved from: www.tripadvisor.com

According to the website, TripAdvisor branded websites reach monthly visitor numbers of 375 million (www.tripadvisor.com). Munar & Jacobsen (2013) compare TripAdvisor to closed social networks and stress that their reach is far wider in a global sense. In addition, they have found that the website achieved the highest level of trust within their study from the consumer perspective. The reason for that is according to them successful corporate branding of websites such as TripAdvisor. They have also found similar results for other travel review sites. Among those are booking.com and expedia.com, which are well-known worldwide as well. As already mentioned, on TripAdvisor users are able to review hotels, restaurants and other travel-related businesses. When only reading reviews, users can do so anonymously, meaning that they do not have to have an own user account. However, when wanting to write reviews, users need to register and have a user account. That account saves all user activity and also lets other people know how active this specific user has been on TripAdvisor.

On TripAdvisor, the reviews include a rating as well as a personally written text. The texts are different in length and are solely displaying the opinion of the writer. While reading reviews, people can also see who wrote the review on the left hand side (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. A TripAdvisor Review. Retrieved from: www.tripadvisor.com

Reviewers have different levels according to how much they have contributed to the TripAdvisor community in terms of posting reviews. Additionally, the total number of reviews written by that person is visible as well as their number of reviews in the category displayed at that moment. For example, when looking at hotels, the number of hotel reviews written is shown. Last, the amount of helpful votes the reviewer has gotten is presented. A reviewer can receive a helpful vote by a user when he or she answers the question 'Was this review helpful?' with yes, as can be seen in Figure 2. Ultimately, this function of the website lets users get a short impression of who has written the review and whether they want to trust in their review.

In the introduction part of the paper, the honeycomb framework of social media has been introduced. In the interest of understanding more about this research and, hence, TripAdvisor will be explained according to the framework. As most social media platforms, TripAdvisor focusses on specific functional building blocks. These are, in this case, sharing, conversations and groups. Sharing on TripAdvisor is most likely the most important building block. The platform revolves around consumers writing reviews and therefore sharing their personal experiences. The user-generated content is available to anyone visiting the website and easily accessible when searched for. Moreover, conversations are encouraged by letting people react to reviews and giving them the possibility to discuss their topics of interest in forums. The third functional building block, groups, is important due to the strong presence of communities within the platform. Groups are formed in a sense that people with certain interests are able to look for specific information provided by users that have the same interest by using the search engine. Also, forums make it possible for users to find like-minded people that they can communicate with. All in all, the website encourages community and the sharing and exchange of personal experiences.

5. RESULTS

5.1 General Information about Respondents

The online survey has been available online for 7 days and after that period of time a total of 106 respondents have filled it out. Of these 106 respondents, 50 (47.2%) are female and 56 (52.8%) are male. The distribution is therefore relatively even and general results can be drawn from the sample for men and women. The average age of all respondents is 23, while the age ranges from 15 to 61. The majority, however, is in their early and mid-twenties. Apart from the different age groups, respondents are also from different countries. This will ensure the generalization of the results regardless of the nationality. With 42.5%, German nationals present the highest number of respondents. The Dutch follow with 33%, other EEA country nationals with 17% and, last, non-European country nationals with 7.5%.

Next, respondents were asked to name their main occupation. 79.2% are students, 16% are employed and the rest are either unemployed or ticked 'other' (see Table 1).

Table 1. Current occupation of respondents

#	Answer	%	# of Responses
1	Student	79.2	84
2	Employed	16	17
3	Self-Employed	0	0
4	Unemployed	1.9	2
5	Other	2.8	3
	Total	100	106

These numbers are not surprising as this study has been part of a bachelor thesis conducted at a university. Furthermore, as mentioned in the literature review, younger people are more likely to use social media and are therefore the main target of this study.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to provide their marital status. 63.2% are single, 32.1% are in a relationship and 3.8% are married. It will later be analyzed whether there is any relation between the marital status and Social Media Behavior.

5.2 Behavior on Social Media Platforms

All respondents indicated that they use at least one social media platform on a regular basis. As this survey was mainly distributed via Social Media platforms, it can be called a prerequisite for respondents to participate in the survey. The answers show that most respondents use two or more social media platforms (see Figure 5).

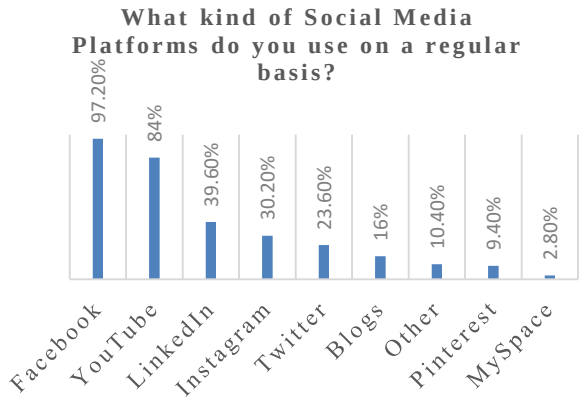

Figure 5. Social Media Platform Usage

With a significantly high percentage of users among the respondents, the two most popular platforms are Facebook and YouTube, with 97.2% and 84% respectively. Then follow LinkedIn with 39.6%, Instagram with 30.2%, Twitter with 23.6% and Blogs with 16%. Other, Pinterest and Myspace are rarely used by the respondents of this study.

In addition to which platforms are used the most, the respondents were asked to give an estimation of the amount of hours they spend on social media platforms in a week. The maximum number provided by one respondent is 70 hours, which means spending 10 hours a day on social media platforms. Mostly, this number lies between 10 and 30 hours with an average of 18.5 hours a week of all respondents. That means an average of approximately 2 to 3 hours spent on social media platforms daily.

5.3 Online Customer Reviews on Social Media Platforms

Of the 106 respondents, 95.3% indicated that they read online customer reviews before buying a product a service. For the purposes of this study, this number is of high importance as it shows that almost all respondents that participated in this study are familiar with online customer reviews on social media platforms, which is an advantage when it comes to answering the questions of this survey. The respondents were asked to choose between the most common forms of social media platforms when looking for online customer reviews (see Figure 6).

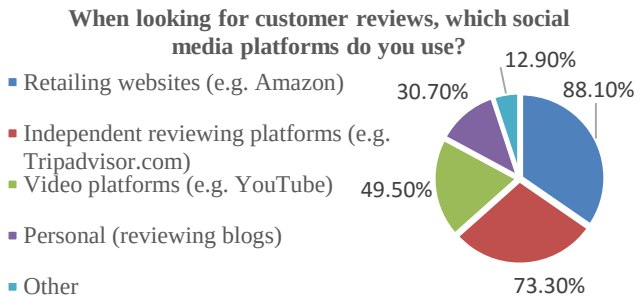

Figure 6. Type of Platform used for reading Online Customer Reviews

Most of them, namely 88.1%, mentioned that they use retailing websites such as Amazon for this purpose. Amazon, such as various other websites, sells products and gives consumers the possibility to review the product they purchased. 73.3% use independent reviewing platforms and 49.5% video platforms. A smaller number of respondents, 30.7%, read personal reviewing blogs and 12.9% use other platforms than provided in the answer section. For example, 6 respondents stated that they frequently look up products on tweakers.net, an independent reviewing platform for technologies such as smartphones and laptops. To be more specific with regard to the reviewing sites, almost 71.3% make use of amazon customer reviews. Others use TripAdvisor, Google my Business and other websites.

Additionally, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with different statements concerning online customer reviews. In relation to the statement 'I consider online customer reviews as very important when gathering information about a product', 24.8% indicated that they totally agree and 62.4% agree. Only 2% disagree with that statement and 10.9% neither agree nor disagree. Therefore, it can be concluded that for the majority of respondents online customer reviews play a major role when it comes to making a purchase. Very similar results were found for the statement 'I often use customer reviews as an information source when choosing product.' The next statement is 'Online customer reviews influence my product choice strongly'. 12.9% totally agreed with that statement and 63.4% agree with it.

5.4 Travel Review Sites and TripAdvisor in particular

5.4.1 General Information about the respondents' perception of Travel Review Sites

As described in the introduction part of this paper, TripAdvisor is used as a case study to find out more about the influence of online customer reviews on consumers. TripAdvisor is commonly used for gathering information on travel-related businesses. Out of the 106 respondents, 100 said that they have travelled within the past 12 months. When asked how often they read online customer reviews before booking a vacation, 32.1%

chose ‘very often’, 36.8% ‘often’, 25.5% ‘sometimes’ and only 3.8% ‘never’. In addition, on a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important), the majority of respondents, namely 68.9%, rated online customer reviews above 3 before booking a vacation. These reviews are looked up on a variety of websites. 61.3% visit tripadvisor.com, 54.7% booking.com, 44.3% other websites and a slightly smaller percentage expedia.com and hotels.com.

Several statements in the survey were about TripAdvisor and the respondents’ perception about the website in general. They were asked to rate them on a 5-point scale from ‘Totally disagree’ to ‘totally agree’. With the statement ‘Í find online customer reviews on TripAdvisor trustworthy as an information source’ 9.4% of the respondents ‘totally agree’, 49.1% ‘agree’, 21.7% ‘neither agree nor disagree’ and 6.6% either ‘disagree’ or ‘totally disagree’. Almost the same results were found with the statement ‘Online customer reviews on TripAdvisor seem credible to me in general’. Next, respondents were asked to give their opinion about the statement ‘I usually doubt the credibility of online customer reviews’. Only 2.8% said they ‘totally agree’ and 19.8% ‘agree’. 30.2% ‘neither agree nor disagree’, 34.9% ‘disagree’ and 2.8% ‘totally disagree’. These answers indicate that the general attitude toward TripAdvisor and its customer reviews is rather positive among the respondents. The majority perceives them as trustworthy and credible. In relation to that, a high number of respondents also indicated that they believe most online customer reviews to be honest and credible. More than 54.7% either ‘totally agree’ or ‘agree with the statement and 22.6% ‘neither agree nor disagree’. With regard to the next part of the survey, the last statement, which is ‘It is important to me to know who wrote the review’, is interesting to look at. 16% totally agree with that statement, 31.3% agree with it and 29.2% neither agree nor disagree, meaning that only 10.4% disagree and 3.8% totally disagree.

5.4.2 TripAdvisor Reviews and how they are perceived by users

In order to get a better picture of how customer reviews influence the consumers perception four exemplary TripAdvisor reviews have been presented to the respondents in the survey. The reviews are either positive or negative, long or short, and have a reviewer with either many helpful reviews or almost none to none. The different reviews can be found in the Appendix (see Section 10.1). All reviews have been chosen according to certain characteristics that are subjective to the researcher of this study. Review no.1 is medium-long and positive and its reviewer has an established profile in the TripAdvisor community. Review no.2 is long and negative and the reviewer has a non-established profile. Review no. 3 is short and negative and has a reviewer with an established profile. The last review, review no.4, is medium-long and positive and has a reviewer with a non-established profile. The length of the reviews has been labelled according to the number of words of the reviews. Below 50 words is short, between 50 and 100 words is medium-long and a review with above 100 words is long. The respondents were asked to rate the reviews with regard to how credible they find them, whether the length is appropriate, whether they would influence their decision of choosing a hotel, whether they have been written by someone trustworthy and whether they are written well and objectively. The results show that there are significant differences between the reviews in terms of the perceived credibility and other factors (see Appendix Tables 2-6).

5.4.2.1 Credibility of Reviews

With regard to the statement ‘The review above seems credible.’ review no.1 has a significantly higher number of respondents, namely 80.2%, agreeing and totally agreeing than review no.2 and review no.3, with 34.1% and 50.9% respectively. Review no.4 scored 63.2%.

5.4.2.2 Lengths of Reviews

The reviews labelled as ‘short’ in this study both have a high number of respondents agreeing and totally agreeing with the stamen ‘The review above has the appropriate length’. These are review no.1 and review no.4 with 78.3% and 69.8%. Review no.2, which has a long text, has 42.5% disagreeing with the statement and 30.2% agreeing. For review no.3, which is very short, the same values are 34% and 19.8%.

5.4.2.3 Extent to which Review would influence Hotel Choice

The next statement, ‘The review above would influence my decision of choosing a hotel’, also shows higher percentages of ‘agree’ and ‘totally agree’ in review no.1 (73.6%) and review no.4 (46.2%) than in the other two. This numbers correlate with the percentages seen in the first statement. Both Review no.1 and no.4 score high numbers when it comes to credibility and whether the review would influence the respondents’ decision.

5.4.2.4 Trustworthiness of Reviewer

The fourth statement, ‘The review above is written by someone I find trustworthy’, shows a variety of responses. Review no. 1 seems to be perceived as having a trustworthy reviewer by the respondents of the study with 68.9% either agreeing or totally agreeing with the statement. However, review no.2 has a high number of respondents not finding the reviewer trustworthy. 57.5% either disagree or totally disagree with the statement. Then, review no.3 has more split responses. 38.7% neither agree nor disagree and 41.5% agree. Approximately the same goes for review no.4.

5.4.2.5 The way the review is written

Last, the statement ‘The review is written well and objectively’ has gotten different results for the four reviews. 63.2% of the respondents agree or totally agree with review no.1 having been written well and objectively. Review no.2 has gotten more negative results with 26.4% totally disagreeing and 46.2% disagreeing. A more diversified set of answers can be seen with review no.3. 36.8% disagree with the review being written well and objectively, while 23.6% neither agree nor disagree and 24.5% agree. Review no.4 has 40.6% of respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the stamen and 36.8% agreeing. 14.2% disagree. The possible explanations for these differences and relationships between variables will be further explored in the next section.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Relationships between the different variables

6.1.1 Age and Social Media Behavior

The first variable to be analyzed is age. This will be done in relation to a variety of results found in the online survey. In order to get a better understanding of the behavior of respondents and the relation to age, four different age groups have been formed in the analysis process. These are 15-20, 21-25, 26-30 and 31 and older. There are 16%, 67.9%, 10.4% and 5.7% of respondents in these groups respectively.

First, we will take a look at age in connection to the amount of hours spend on social media platforms every week (see Appendix Table 7). This variable has also been divided into four groups, namely 1-10 hours, 11-20, 21-30 and 30 or more. Age Group 1 has most people spending between 11-20 hours a week with

47.1%.A n average person in that group spends 15 hours online. Most people in age group 2, which is 34.7%, spend between 21-30 hours on social media platforms. The average person here spends about 20 hours online which is already 5 hours more than someone in age group 1. Age group 3 has 36.4% of respondents spending between 11 and 20 hours online, which is the highest number in the age group. On average a respondent in this group spends 18 hours on social media platforms. The last age group has most respondents, 50%, spending between 0 and 10 hours online with an average of 11 hours. From these results, it can be said that social media usage amongst respondents rises after the age of 20, then slowly declines after the age of 26 and then drops more drastically at the age of 31. Young adults are therefore the group of respondents using the social media platforms most frequently.

6.1.2 Gender and Online Customer Reviews

When looking at the frequency of how often males and females check online customer reviews there are no striking differences to be found (see Appendix Table 8). 36% of females and 28.6% of males check reviews 'very often' and the same data for 'often' are 40% and 33.9%. The only difference is that there is no female that indicated she 'never' checks online customer reviews and that there are 4 men that did indicate so.

Similar results can be found when looking at the importance the respondents give to online customer reviews (see Appendix Table 9). The rating goes from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) and 26% of females checked 5 while 16.1% of males did so. 46% of females checked 4 and 50% of the males. 1 was only chosen by 2% of the females and 5.4% of the males.

Another interesting relationship to look at is the extent to which the different genders think that reviews are credible and honest in general. Again, there are no apparent differences between males and females of the present group of respondents (see Appendix Table 10). 4% of females and 3.6% of males totally agree with the statement and 56% of women and 46.4% of men agree with the statement. Only 8% of women and 14.3% of men disagree and for both gender less than 4% totally disagree.

When asked about whether it is important to know who wrote the review the genders % of the females and again do not show major differences (see Appendix Table 11). 18% of the females and 14.3% of the males totally agree with that stamen in addition to 32% of the females and 30.4% of the males agreeing with it. In disagreement with the statement are only 14% of the females and 7.1% of the males. The same data for totally disagreeing are 4% and 3.6%.

6.2 TripAdvisor

6.2.1 Influencing factors on perceived credibility

To see whether there are any factors influencing the perceived trustworthiness of a review, different relationships will be looked at. Using the Pearson correlation (2-tailed), which goes from -1 to +1, it will be examined whether the length of a review, short, medium-long or long, has any effect on the perceived credibility of the entire review. For the purposes of this study, credibility will here be regarded as closely related to trustworthiness. As mentioned in the literature review, trustworthiness is often related to the level of credibility (Park et al., 2007). Review 1 has a correlation efficient of 0.41, review no. 2 of 0.162, review no3. Of 0.355 and review no. 4 of 0.334. According to the rules, all correlations are significant except for review 2. It is therefore questionable whether length actually has a significant impact on perceived credibility.

Now, it will be assessed whether there is a correlation between the statements 'The review above is written by someone I find trustworthy' and 'The review above seems credible'. Again, using the Pearson correlation (2-tailed), all reviews show a significant correlation between the two variables. Review no.1 has a correlation coefficient of 0.631, review no.2 a 0.566, review no. 3 a 0.521 and review no. 4 a 0.596. Since the correlation coefficient is positive, it can be concluded that the more trustworthy the reviewer is perceived, the more credible the review in general is perceived by the reader.

Earlier in the survey respondents were also asked to state whether they usually doubt the credibility of online customer results. However, this particular mindset does not seem to have any effect on how the respondents judged the four reviews shown to them. All four correlation coefficients are close to 0, namely between -0.1 and 0.1. Consequently, there is no correlation. Other variables such as age or nationality also have no apparent significant influence on perceived credibility.

6.2.2 Influencing factors on perceived trustworthiness of reviewer

With every review the respondents were asked to indicate whether they find that the review has been written well and objectively. When looking at that statement in relation to the perceived trustworthiness of the person who has written the review, there are positive and significant relations to be found in all four reviews. The correlation coefficients are, in order, 0.701, 0.506, 0.661 and 0.419. These results show that when a user finds that a review is written well and objectively, he or she is more likely to find the reviewer trustworthy.

7. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

7.1 Influencing factors on the perceived Trustworthiness of Online Customer Reviews

In the introduction part of the paper, a research question along with three sub questions have been formulated. The main research question 'To what extent do different factors influence the perceived trustworthiness of online reviews?' will be answered in accordance with the results found in the study and with the help of the three sub questions.

The first sub question was 'What is the consumers' perception of online customer reviews in general?'. As becomes obvious in the results, almost all respondents of the present study make extensive use of customer reviews before making a purchase. Furthermore, the respondents give high importance to customer reviews in general and indicate that when looking for product information, they are especially important. That can be explained by the high number of respondents that state that reviews influence their product choice strongly. Thus, it can be concluded that when looking for product information, respondents value the information and experiences shared in online customer reviews greatly. In addition, only a small percentage of the respondents said that they doubt the credibility of online customer reviews. With regard to TripAdvisor, the general attitude towards its reviews is also positive. The respondents believe the reviews to be honest and credible.

Second, the question 'Which factors seem to have an impact on the perception of online customer reviews?' is being examined. Two general variables, namely age and gender, have been looked at. Age does seem to affect the hours spend on social media with the 21-25 year olds spending most time on the internet. However, there have been no differences found when it comes to perceiving customer reviews. The same goes for gender. The males and females among this study group do not show any significant differences in terms of perceiving customer reviews. For

example, it was found that they give equal importance to review, they both find reviews equally credible and honest and give equal importance to who wrote the review. When taking a closer look at the analysis of the four different reviews, it can be assumed that the respondents prefer medium-long reviews. The correlations show that the right length also increases the overall perceived trustworthiness of the review.

The last sub question to be answered is 'Does the reviewer's profile have any impact on the perceived trustworthiness of the online customer review?'. The reviews written by someone with an established profile has gotten the most positive responses for trustworthiness. In this case the correlations have also shown that the more trustworthy the reviewer seems, the more trustworthy the entire review appears to the reader. This linear relationship means that whenever the reviewer profile does not seem trustworthy, the level of trustworthiness in the entire review decreases.

7.2 Limitations of present study

The study at hand is subject to several limitations. The first limitation was the time frame. Due to the fact that this study has been conducted as part of a bachelor thesis, there were only about 2 months of time available for the entire process of writing the research paper including conducting the online survey. More time would have made it possible to conduct a more in-depth study and analyze more variables in relation to online customer reviews and in particular TripAdvisor. Also, more available time might have increased the number of respondents and thereby make the results more valid and significant for scientific purposes.

Another limitation is the fact that most respondents of the study are students of the University of Twente. That is because both researchers distributing the survey are students at the university themselves and therefore have their main network of social contacts there. The results can therefore not be generalized as the study would have required to have a more diverse set of respondents in terms of occupation and age.

A third limitation is researcher bias. Many aspects of the study are subjective to the researcher such as the constructing of the survey questions and the analysis of the results. For example, during the analysis of the results of the survey, some reviews that have been shown to the respondents have been labelled as short, medium-long and long.

7.3 Possible directions for future research

As social media is progressing fast and has become increasingly important to marketers and the tourism industry, many different aspects about online customer reviews may be assessed in the future. In relation to the tourism business, one interesting approach may be to look at the linguistics of reviews and analyze how they influence the perceived trustworthiness of a review. Word choice, use of slang words, whether the text I formulated more formal or informal and other aspects may be worth taking a look at. Next to that, this kind of study should be conducted with a higher number of respondents and a more diverse group of people. Age, gender, occupation, socio-economic background and other variables may be of important when it comes to perceiving trustworthiness.

Furthermore, different social media platforms related to travel may be compared to see whether there are any differences of how consumers perceive the reviews and why. In addition, it may also be interesting to research whether there are any significant differences between industries. For example, whether different factors influence the trustworthiness of a review written about a travel-related product or a technical product.

Apart from that, the results found in this study may change over time as recent developments with regard to customer reviews may influence consumers' perception of online customer reviews in general. Many reviewing sites have had problems with companies offering to write fake reviews. These may lead to a decrease in credibility of the reviewing sites and the general mistrust of users. Finally, they harm the reviewing sites as well as the companies receiving these fake reviews.

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10. APPENDIX

10.1 Online Survey

What is your gender? *
Please choose one option.

- Female
- Male

How old are you? *
Please fill in the number.

What is your nationality? *
Please choose one option.

- Dutch
- German
- Other EEA Country
- Non-European Country

What is your marital status? *
Please choose one option.

- Single
- In a relationship
- Married
- Other

What is your current occupation? *
Please choose one option.

- ○ Student
- ○ Employed
- ○ Self-employed
- ○ Unemployed
- ○ Other

What kind of Social Media Platforms do you use on a regular basis? *
On a regular basis means at least once a week. You can check more than one box.

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ Myspace
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ Blogs
- ☐ Other

How many hours per week do you spend on Social Media Platforms? *
Please only fill in numbers. Tip: Think about your daily usage and multiply by 7.

Before buying a product or service, do you read online customer reviews? *
Please choose one option.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

When looking for customer reviews, which social media platforms do you use? *
You can check more than one box.

- ☐ Retailing websites (e.g. Amazon)
- ☐ Independent reviewing platforms (e.g. Tripadvisor.com)
- ☐ Video platforms (e.g. YouTube)
- ☐ Personal (reviewing blogs)
- ☐ Other

Which review sites do you usually visit when looking for online customer reviews? *
You can check more than one box.

- ☐ Amazon customer reviews
- ☐ Yelp
- ☐ Google my business
- ☐ Yahoo!
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ TripAdvisor
- ☐ Other: _____

Please read the following statements and rate them according to your personal opinion. *

I consider online customer reviews as very important when gathering information about a product.

I consider professional online critics as very important when gathering information about a product.

I consider the company website as very important when gathering information about a product.

I often use customer reviews as an information source when choosing a product.

Online customer reviews influence my product choice strongly.

Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Totally Agree

Have you travelled within the past 12 months? *
Please choose one option.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Before booking a vacation, how often do you read online customer reviews? *
Please choose one option.

- ○ Very often
- ○ Often
- ○ Sometimes
- ○ Never

○ Not sure

How important are online customer reviews to you when it comes to booking a vacation? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important at all	○	○	○	○	○	Very Important

What sort of trips do you usually do? *

You can check more than one box.

- ☐ Business
- ☐ Couples
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Solo
- ☐ Other

Which travel review sites do you make use of when looking for online customer reviews? *

You can check more than one box.

- ☐ booking.com
- ☐ tripadvisor.com
- ☐ expedia.com
- ☐ hotels.com
- ☐ Other

Please indicate your opinion about the following statements. *

Please choose one option. In case you are not familiar with TripAdvisor, please choose 'N/A'.

I frequently make use of TripAdvisor as an information source for my travel plans.

I find online customer reviews on TripAdvisor trustworthy as an information source

TripAdvisor is a trustworthy platform in general.

I carefully consider the opinions expressed in online customer reviews.

I think that the TripAdvisor website is user-friendly.

Online Customer Reviews on TripAdvisor seem credible to me in general.

I usually doubt the credibility of online customer reviews.

I believe that most online customer reviews are honest and credible.

It is important to me to know who wrote the review.

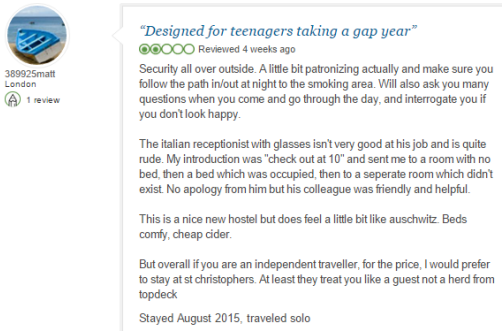
Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Totally Agree	N/A

Scenario: The Generator Hostel London

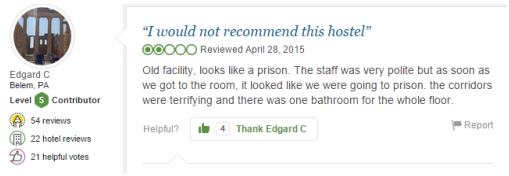
Please imagine yourself looking for accommodation in Central London. While browsing the different hotels on TripAdvisor, you discover the Generator Hostel London and start looking at its customer reviews. Below you can see a picture of its profile including a summary of its ratings. On the next pages there are four different customer reviews. Please read them carefully so that you can answer some questions concerning your personal impression of these reviews.

Review no.1

Review no.2



Review no.3



Review no.4

The review above ... *

...seems credible.

...has the appropriate length.

...would influence my decision of choosing a hotel.

...is written by someone I find trustworthy.

...is written well and objectively.

Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Totally Agree

10.2 Tables and Figures

Table 2. Survey results: 'The Review above seems credible.'

	Review no.1	Review no.2	Review no. 3	Review no.4
Totally Disagree	3,80%	5,70%	4,70%	2,80%
Disagree	3,80%	28,30 %	17%	10,40 %
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12,30 %	32,10 %	27,40 %	22,60 %
Agree	70,80 %	28,30 %	46,20 %	61,30 %
Totally Agree	9,40%	5,70%	4,70%	1,90%

Table 3. Survey results: 'The Review above has the appropriate length.'

	Review no.1	Review no.2	Review no. 3	Review no.4
Totally Disagree	1,90 %	4,70 %	6,60 %	2,80 %
Disagree	7,50 %	42,50 %	34%	6,60 %
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12,30 %	19,80 %	31,10 %	19,80 %
Agree	62,30 %	30,20 %	19,80 %	63,20 %
Totally Agree	16%	2,80 %	8,50 %	6,60 %

Table 4. Survey results: 'The Review above would influence my decision of choosing a hotel.'

	Review no.1	Review no.2	Review no. 3	Review no.4
Totally Disagree	3,80 %	11,30 %	7,50 %	5,70 %
Disagree	4,70 %	34%	31,10 %	11,30 %
Neither Agree nor Disagree	17,90 %	24,50 %	21,70 %	35,80 %
Agree	67%	28,30 %	29,20 %	43,40 %
Totally Agree	6,60 %	1,90 %	10,40 %	2,80 %

Table 5. Survey results: 'The review above is written by someone I find trustworthy.'

	Review no.1	Review no.2	Review no. 3	Review no.4
Totally Disagree	3,80 %	13,20 %	5,70 %	2,80 %
Disagree	4,70 %	44,30 %	8,50 %	22,60 %
Neither Agree nor Disagree	24,50 %	26,40 %	38,70 %	34,90 %
Agree	57,50 %	15,10 %	41,50 %	37,70 %
Totally Agree	9,40 %	0,90 %	5,70 %	0,90 %

Table 6. Survey results: 'The review above is written well and objectively.'

	Review no.1	Review no.2	Review no. 3	Review no.4
Totally Disagree	4,70 %	26,40 %	11,30 %	4,70 %
Disagree	9,40 %	46,20 %	36,80 %	14,20 %
Neither Agree nor Disagree	22,60 %	17,90 %	23,60 %	40,60 %
Agree	55,70 %	8,50 %	24,50 %	36,80 %
Totally Agree	7,50 %	0,90 %	3,80 %	2,80 %

Table 7. Crosstabulation Hours spent on Social Media and Age of respondents

Agegroup_respondents * Hoursgroups_SocialMedia Crosstabulation

			Hoursgroups_Socialm		
			1.00	2.00	3.00
Agegroup_respondents	1.00	Count	6	8	
		% within Agegroup_respondents	35.3%	47.1%	0.0
		% of Total	5.7%	7.5%	0.0
	2.00	Count	19	18	2
		% within Agegroup_respondents	26.4%	25.0%	34.7
		% of Total	17.9%	17.0%	23.6
	3.00	Count	3	4	
		% within Agegroup_respondents	27.3%	36.4%	18.2
		% of Total	2.8%	3.8%	1.9
	Double-click to activate		3	2	
		Agegroup_respondents	50.0%	33.3%	16.7
		% of Total	2.8%	1.9%	0.9
Total		Count	31	32	2
		% within Agegroup_respondents	29.2%	30.2%	26.4
		% of Total	29.2%	30.2%	26.4

Gender_respondents * ImportanttoknowWHOwrotereview Crosstabulation

			ImportanttoknowWHOwrotereview						Total
			N/A	Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Totally Agree	
Gender_respondents	Female	Count	3	2	7	13	16	9	50
		% within Gender_respondents	6.0%	4.0%	14.0%	26.0%	32.0%	18.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	2.8%	1.9%	6.6%	12.3%	15.1%	8.5%	47.2%
	Male	Count	7	2	4	18	17	8	56
		% within Gender_respondents	12.5%	3.6%	7.1%	32.1%	30.4%	14.3%	100.0%
		% of Total	6.6%	1.9%	3.8%	17.0%	16.0%	7.5%	52.8%
Total		Count	10	4	11	31	33	17	106
		% within Gender_respondents	9.4%	3.8%	10.4%	29.2%	31.1%	16.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	9.4%	3.8%	10.4%	29.2%	31.1%	16.0%	100.0%

Table 8. Crosstabulation Gender and frequency of checking online customer reviews

Gender_respondents * Beforebookingcheckingreviews_frequency Crosstabulation

			Beforebookingcheckingreviews_frequency					Total
			Not sure	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	
Gender_respondents	Female	Count	1	0	11	20	18	50
		% within Gender_respondents	2.0%	0.0%	22.0%	40.0%	36.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	0.9%	0.0%	10.4%	18.9%	17.0%	47.2%
	Male	Count	1	4	16	19	16	56
		% within Gender_respondents	1.8%	7.1%	28.6%	33.9%	28.6%	100.0%
		% of Total	0.9%	3.8%	15.1%	17.9%	15.1%	52.8%
Total		Count	2	4	27	39	34	106
		% within Gender_respondents	1.9%	3.8%	25.5%	36.8%	32.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	1.9%	3.8%	25.5%	36.8%	32.1%	100.0%

Table 9. Crosstabulation Gender and Importance given to Customer Reviews

Gender_respondents * Importanceonlinereviews Crosstabulation

			Importanceonlinereviews					Total
			1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	
Gender_respondents	Female	Count	1	2	11	23	13	50
		% within Gender_respondents	2.0%	4.0%	22.0%	46.0%	26.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	0.9%	1.9%	10.4%	21.7%	12.3%	47.2%
	Male	Count	3	5	11	28	9	56
		% within Gender_respondents	5.4%	8.9%	19.6%	50.0%	16.1%	100.0%
		% of Total	2.8%	4.7%	10.4%	26.4%	8.5%	52.8%
Total		Count	4	7	22	51	22	106
		% within Gender_respondents	3.8%	6.6%	20.8%	48.1%	20.8%	100.0%
		% of Total	3.8%	6.6%	20.8%	48.1%	20.8%	100.0%

Table 10. Crosstabulation Gender of Respondents and finding reviews credible and honest

Gender_respondents * Reviewsarecredibleandhonest Crosstabulation

			Reviewsarecredibleandhonest				
			Agree	Disagree	N/A	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Totally A
Gender_respondents	Female	Count	28	4	3	11	
		% within Gender_respondents	56.0%	8.0%	6.0%	22.0%	4
		% of Total	26.4%	3.8%	2.8%	10.4%	1
	Male	Count	26	8	6	13	
		% within Gender_respondents	46.4%	14.3%	10.7%	23.2%	3
		% of Total	24.5%	7.5%	5.7%	12.3%	1
Total		Count	54	12	9	24	
		% within Gender_respondents	50.9%	11.3%	8.5%	22.6%	3
		% of Total	50.9%	11.3%	8.5%	22.6%	3

Table 11. Crosstabulation Gender and Importance of knowing who wrote the review