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THE VALUE OF A REVIEW

A conceptual analysis of online reviews

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Summary

This explorative research addresses a gap in research on online reviews by asking *How should we understand online reviews and how are they perceived and used by the stakeholders involved?* Online reviews are a very influential means of information that can greatly affect businesses positively or negatively. They provide a resource of information about products or services. This research shows that defining a review is problematic; the meaning and value of an online review is dependent on the values, uses and interpretations of its stakeholders; reviewer (the writer of the review), reviewee (the reader of the review) and reviewed (the recipient of the review). It is shown that reliability is an important value for all stakeholders involved. Online review platforms play an important role in the reliability of online reviews. Furthermore, they help define a review and reviewer, by setting the rules for use of the online review platform.

In the first part of this research, a business ethics stakeholder perspective provides insight into who is involved in online reviews, what value exchanges take place between stakeholders and how stakeholders interpret and use online reviews. The main stakeholders are identified and their relation to online reviews is explored. The second part of this research investigates characteristics of online reviews and their connection with their stakeholders and values. It is shown that online reviews are always on a spectrum of positive versus negative. They are either more, or less beneficial and can pose as both threats and opportunities to stakeholders involved. Furthermore, reliability is identified as an important value in online reviews. This research is concluded with a case study where the practice of a verified purchase is analysed with regards to the stakeholders of online reviews. This case study highlights that reliability of an online review can be achieved only to a certain extent and at the expense of different other values that differ per stakeholder.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The sharing of information and experiences has probably been done since whenever it was that humans found a way to communicate with one another. One can imagine it would certainly be helpful to know if your fellow cave-friend had some serious stomach pains after eating those delicious looking berries. Communicating experiences, be it word of mouth or otherwise, can be vital in sustaining life.

Using the information and evaluations provided by others to make an informed decision, is also not something new to mankind. Neither is using the information gathered from others about a service or product, in order to make a more informed purchase decision (Constantinides and Holleschovsky, 2016). ‘Word of mouth’ is a valuable method of providing and gathering information specifically about products or services. As Hennig-Thurau, Walsh and Walsh (2003) define it in their research paper about electronic word of mouth, word of mouth is: “all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers” (p.51).

The internet has had a huge impact and influence on the concept of word of mouth. There is now an online version of opinions and evaluations that can be used as a source of information about products, services, companies, or even about other people. Before checking in at a hotel for example, you can check first how other guests have described the bathroom facilities that are so important to you. Or if you want to know more about the delivery times of that restaurant you’re thinking about ordering at tonight, you can check what other customers had to say about how long they had to wait for their meals. The concept of ‘word of mouth’ now has its own digital version. This ‘electronic word of mouth’ (eWOM) is a source of information very important to, and even empowering for, customers (Constantinides and Holleschovsky, 2016; Fawkes and Gregory, 2000; Ghazi, 2017; Mladenovic et al, 2019; Zhu and Zhang, 2010). In their review of literature about eWOM, King, Racherla and Bush (2014) borrow from the research of Hennig-Thurau et al (2003) and explain electronic word of mouth as: “Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” and “informal communication between consumers through the internet where information about goods, services and sellers are posted” (King, Racherla & Bush, 2014, p.167; Hennig-Thurau et al, 2003). eWOM can include, for instance, discussion fora, blogs, social media and product reviews. Online reviews about products or services are thus one of the forms of eWOM (King et al, 2014).

Purchasing decisions are significantly influenced by online reviews (Constantinides and Holleschovsky, 2016). What logically follows is that online reviews also have an impact on sales (Zhu

and Zhang, 2010; Yao, Viswanath, Cryan, Sheng and Zhao, 2017). Because this collective information is used as a source of information to make an informed purchase decision, or decide whether or not to have any dealings with a specific company, the information is valuable. As Yao et al (2017) claim in their research about manipulation of online reviews by AI, studies found that a one star increase on Yelp can lead to a 5% to 9% revenue boost for restaurants (Yao et. al., 2017). Online review information is of use to both the public and the companies that are being reviewed either directly or indirectly. The impact online reviews can have also bring about a myriad of ethical concerns. Any ethical analysis, however, will be impeded by the lack of clarity when it comes to the conceptual understanding of online reviews. Therefore, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of what an online review is and what it means for all stakeholders involved.

1.1 An understanding of online reviews

The question of what online reviews are is not easily answered. In fact, how we should understand online reviews is a question that this research hopes to answer, at least in part. Of course there are several definitions to use as a starting point. These definitions will be outlined here and followed in subsequent chapters by an analysis and critique serving the purpose of this research.

Simply ‘Googling’ the question; what is an online review? provided as a first hit the website of an international academic publisher. They state the following answer: “A review of a product or service *made by a consumer* who has experienced a service or purchased a product.” (*What Is Online Reviews | IGI Global*, n.d.). In scientific discourse about online reviews, similar answers can be found.

Online reviews are referred to in several researches as a form of online word of mouth or electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Constantinides and Holleschovsky, 2016., Fawkes and Gregory, 2000., Ghazi, 2017., King et al., 2014., Mladenovic et al, 2019., Zhu and Zhang, 2010). A clear and precise definition of online reviews is given by Constantinides & Holleschovsky (2016) in their research about the impact of online product reviews on purchasing decisions. They describe online reviews as follows; “Online *consumer* reviews are subjective opinions and summarize experiences, attitudes, and opinions, expressed by *consumers*.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.217, §1). Though Zhu and Zhang in their research about the impact of online reviews on sales do not specifically define online reviews, they do refer to them as online *consumer* reviews and also see them as a form of eWOM (Zhu and Zhang, 2010).

Not only marketers are interested in online reviews. Albeit for different reasons, online reviews are also on the radar of political and ethical organisations. One such *investigative organisation* is the Dutch ‘Autoriteit Consument & Markt’ (ACM, translates as: Authority Consumers & Market). This

independent regulator aims to protect consumer interests and ensure fair competition between companies. In light of their cause, they have conducted an investigation into online reviews and their impact on consumers as well as companies (ACM, n.d.). According to the ACM (2017) in their report on online reviews, online reviews are an evaluation of a service, product or company that has been submitted to an online review platform. The report specifically defines the contents of a review as being given or written by a consumer, and this consumer then gives “on the basis of their own experiences, a rating to the quality of the product, the service and/or the provider of the product or service.” (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017, §1.1, p.3.). In their terminology, the word consumer is not included in the definition of online reviews, however, in their explanation of an online review, the reviewer is specifically mentioned as being a consumer. It is unclear if the consumer in question should have a direct relationship with the subject of its review or, in other words, if the consumer has actually purchased the product or service they are reviewing.

A research paper by Mladenovic, Krajina and Milojevic (2019) about consumer motives for writing online reviews after their vacation, refers to online reviews as a tool used by individuals to share their opinions and experiences. They refer to online reviews as online word-of-mouth (WoM), communication, which is their name for what others have called eWOM. They refer to the reviewers simply as *individuals* that are performing the act of reviewing. They refer to the persons who use the reviews as a source of information as *consumers*. Though they do not explicitly define an online review, they explain it in terms of use; it is an information tool for the consumer and for the writers of the review it is an advice, something that is meant to be helpful to prospective customers (Mladenovic et al, 2019).

Discourse about online reviews shows a strikingly similar understanding of the phenomenon: It is at least hinted at the ‘experience’ with the product or service that the reviewer has or had and all definitions include a reference to the actor, the one who is doing the reviewing. Either by mentioning the actor as part of online reviews (online *consumer* reviews) or by explicitly mentioning the actor in the definition (Online consumer reviews [...] expressed by *consumers*.). An interesting difference is that not in all definitions it is made explicit that the consumer needs to have consumed, or have first hand experience with, specifically that product or that service from that specific retailer.

It is a difficult, if not impossible, undertaking to define what online review communication is or find its essence. Strategies to deal with definition difficulties can be drawn from discussions about other hard-to-define concepts. In his ‘Taxonomy of Privacy’, Solove (2006) faces similar problems of defining the concept of privacy. An abstract noun such as ‘privacy’ is difficult to make even the slightest bit seizable in a definition without getting too broad or too vague. Solove uses this one very on-point

sentence that explains the problem quite well: “Privacy seems to be about everything, and therefore it appears to be nothing.” (Solove, 2006), p. 479).

In his earlier paper ‘Conceptualizing Privacy’ he states that: “universals are neither necessary nor even useful in explaining how words and concepts apply to different things.” (Solove, 2002, p1126). Rather than trying to find the essence of privacy or trying to find the waterproof definition, he simply acknowledges that “Privacy is too complicated a concept to be boiled down to a single essence.” (Solove, 2006, p. 485). So instead, he offers the method of focussing on the activities that create the problems regarding privacy. He shows that although there is a significant difference between activities, they also share many commonalities. He proposes to understand privacy as a family resemblance concept, borrowing Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance (Solove, 2002, p. 1126). According to that, certain things can still be related to each other without having a single characteristic in common.

Though an online review is much more tangible than the concept of privacy, a similar difficulty occurs when trying to define it. In the definitions of online reviews explored so far, a reviewer is generally referred to as a person who actually purchased the product or service that they are giving the review about. However this is not necessarily the case, for instance with platforms where you can leave a product review without purchase, but also in case of false reviews. A major ethical concern about online reviews is that their contents are not always to be trusted. Due, in part, to the fact that the person giving a review does not always do so from their actual experience with the product or service they are reviewing. Another phenomenon with online reviews leading to conflict, is that the person who writes the review might have certain intentions that do not come across to the recipient of the review. A reviewer might for instance write a review as constructive feedback, however the recipient could take this as an insult instead. The contents of online reviews could mean anything to anyone, thus the concept can only be understood to have different meanings. An online review stands for a myriad of values and interpretations that are inextricably linked to the stakeholders involved and context that they are in.

1.2 The ‘onlinedness’ of online review communication

“Technological and scientific developments in communications have caused more social, political, cultural, legal and moral problems than they have ever intended to solve” (Christians & Traber, 1997, p. 30 §1). What they have also caused is a multitude of possibilities from marketing, and thus economical, perspective. With these possibilities, of course, also problems arise. Problems that impact society from an economical perspective.

Throughout the ages, non-mediated communication through natural channels was the foundation of human relationships. Contemporary or modern communications have an artificial aspect that Christians

& Traber (1997) argue has caused a substantial shift, away from the human axis of communications (Christians & Traber, 1997). According to them, the side effects of this shift are threefold; “[...] a growing apartheid between interlocutors; [...] an easy introduction of noise into messages; [...] the curbing of all direct and immediate responses, preventing lineal messages from developing into dialogue. (Christians & Traber, 1997, p.31., §3). These three side effects apply to what we could now call ‘old media’ (such as radio and television). Christians and Traber (1997) describe the loss of democracy that the mass media of television presents. Television media are closed off to the general public to participate in, however the message does reach the masses very easily. “A foolish commentator blabbing out stupidities to an audience of 200.000 people can have a 200.000 times stronger effect on public opinion than a wise man talking with his or her next door neighbor” (Christians & Traber, 1997, p 34., §3). In other words, the ones holding the power to generate the message, are the ones holding the power.

Today, it can be said that the power of mass media is already more equally distributed amongst the people, at least in Western societies where there is frequent internet access. Internet and wireless access is even referred to as a *basic need* by Dutch government (“Geen Gezeik, Iedereen Bereik: Internet Is Een Basisbehoefte,” 2016). The accessibility of the internet has allowed for the possibility to enter the communication in any discussion or discourse about any subject, on whatever online platform and whatever medium capable of granting Internet access. This has put the power back into the hands of the public, at least to a certain degree. Fawkes and Gregory (2000) state that:

“These types of communication have always been available through a variety of media, but the contribution of the Internet facilitates them all. In addition, the Internet has three features which distinguish it from traditional media: its reach is vast, to virtually all parts of the world — access does not depend on location; it is not time-bound, it can be accessed when the user wishes; and it is capable of providing interactivity in a manner unprecedented in any communication medium.” (p.111, §5.)

The audience has become active in processing information, as opposed to their former more passive role as an information recipient (Bowen, 2013).

Constantinides & Holleschovsky (2016) observe a migration of control. Companies and marketers now have less control on communication channels and messages. Part of their control has migrated to consumers. Consumers have become more assertive, critical and powerful. According to Constantinides & Holleschovsky (2016), the power and control is in the ‘obtaining’ of information. The

migration is due to finding sources of information other than companies and marketers, which are the consumers themselves sharing their experiences and information. Thus, not only does the power shift stem from consumers taking control of how and where they *obtain* information, it also stems from the possibility of shifting their sources to a source where the consumers who obtain information, also *create* the information.

Accessibility to the Internet has given power to consumers over retailers and manufacturers. The accessibility to all the information and communication the Internet has to offer, gives consumers the benefits of convenience, value, connectivity and protection. Convenience is given, for instance, by the ability to be anywhere with anyone at any time on the Internet. An example of value is the accessibility of better offers, as, for instance, it is easy to compare prices on the Internet. Connectivity means, for example, access to experts, communities and social networks. Protection is again provided by accessibility of the Internet, for instance of governmental legal sources, activists and consumerist support (Umit Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2007).

1.3 Ethics of online reviews

The current discourse about ethics of online reviews is very practical. Consisting of, for instance, rules and regulations, often without a clear and sound ethical foundation and conflicting in their definition of the concept of online reviews. The topic is mostly written about by marketing professionals or authorities, in an attempt to deal with ethical challenges that arise from an ever growing impact of online reviews. The small discourse on a more scientific level is mostly conducted from economic or psychological perspective and very empirical in nature.

With the transition of offline practises into the online virtual world, earlier notions of moral concepts needed to be reassessed. Information sharing and obtaining via digital information technologies has stretched the moral values of printed information such as in books, newspapers and letters. The development of new moral theories was required; theories that recognise the risks and benefits of communicating information via modern information technologies. Not only privacy was in need of reassessment but also the moral values of ownership, confidentiality, the veracity of the information and trust (Sullins, 2020).

In her ‘Ethical Guidelines for Digital Engagement’, Bowen (2013) states that: “[...] the characteristics of the Internet and its audiences multiply the role for ethics and ethical analyses” (p.121. §3.) She turns towards classic social media cases in order to distill ethical guidelines for digital engagement. She argues that the consumption and production of information have changed dramatically over the last few decades due to the possibilities that arose in online communication. The fundamental

change that the Internet has engendered in the interaction between people, businesses, organizations and government, brings rise to the need for ethical standards and examinations that are tailored to the medium (Bowen, 2013). Though social media is not exactly online reviewing, the statements made for the importance of ethical consideration are equally applicable to online reviews and online communication in general. Not only because they both involve and affect human stakeholders, also because they share a similar change of moral values in shifting from an offline to an online concept.

The complications that online reviews bring are one of the reasons that there are *investigative organisations* in place, such as the Dutch Autoriteit Consument & Markt (Authorities Consumers and Market, ACM). Their research about online reviews (2017) states that it is likely that both consumers and companies might place fake or unreliable reviews. The ACM (2017) believes that especially by a lack of transparency, there is a future risk of damage to companies and misled consumers. Furthermore, misleading representation of reviews might be caused by the method employed by the review platform (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017).

Ethics ‘tailored to the medium’ of online reviews is not largely discussed and widely researched. Not only are fraudulent practices of false reviews an issue that warrant an ethical perspective. The shift of power from companies to consumers is visible and the impact that online reviews can have on those involved with them is considerable. It is important to start generating research-based intelligence in order to provide well founded ethical advice and strategies that are specifically tailored to online reviews. As a starting point for future ethical strategies tailored to the medium, this research will provide a conceptual analysis of online reviews.

1.4 Research question

The following research questions will be answered:

How should we understand online reviews and how are they perceived and used by the stakeholders involved?

- *Who is involved in online reviews and what does online review interaction between stakeholders reveal about online reviews?*
- *What characteristics are ascribed to online reviews and how do they manifest in online review stakeholder interactions?*

1.5 Methodology

The purpose of this research is to give an overview and perspective on online reviews by providing a conceptual analysis. However, the end result should be able to provide direction to any ethical issues that occur, or could occur, with online reviews. Therefore, a bottom up approach with a focus on stakeholder relations and values is used. This explorative research focuses on scientific literature and articles about online reviews. It is supplemented by studying and analysing relevant online review cases and providing hypothetical cases.

Different stakeholders are involved with online reviews, who all have their own values, interpretations, uses and understanding of online reviews. The ethical implications are numerous, depending on how online reviews are used and by whom. Rather than simply assuming that an online review 'is' what it is supposed to function as (however broad this might be conceived and interpreted), this research will attempt to derive the meaning of a review from its use. First by examining the stakeholders involved, second by examining characteristics ascribed to online reviews and the relation to their stakeholders. Case examples and hypothetical examples will be provided to identify ethical problems with online reviews in relation to their stakeholders.

Stakeholder analysis is typically used in the field of business ethics (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnell and de Colle, 2010., Freeman and McVea, 2001., Freeman, 1984., Dunham, Freeman and Liedtka, 2006.) Because online reviews involve and impact businesses and their (prospective) customers, stakeholder analysis will be used as a starting point for exploring who are involved with online reviews and how they are, or might be, affected by them. The stakeholder analysis in Chapter 2 'Stakeholders of online reviews' will provide an overview of the stakeholders and their interactions with online reviews.

Chapter 3 'Online reviews and online review interaction' will analyse the values at stake in online review interaction and explore where conflict and tension between stakeholders takes place. The analysis is informed by a review of literature and general discourse about online reviews such as blogs and newspaper articles. Case examples and hypothetical examples will be used in the analysis. In chapter 4 the role of the online review platform will be addressed. Followed by an analysis of possible consequences for different stakeholders by exploring the verified purchase solution of review platforms as a means to ensure more reliability of online reviews.

1.5.1 Stakeholder Analysis

The first part of this research consists of a stakeholder analysis. Stakeholder analysis is helpful to identify how value is created and traded. Since online reviews are considered valuable information, stakeholder

analysis can help identify what exactly is being valued and by whom of those who are affected by online reviews (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnell & de Colle, 2010).

There are several stakeholders involved in online reviews that will all be examined and addressed. There are their writers (reviewers), the ones who read them (reviewees), the recipient of the review (reviewed), and the platform on which the reviews are collected and presented (review platform). Each of these terms are developed and analysed further in Chapter 3. Since ethics involves morals, values and behaviour of human beings, it is important to investigate the stakeholders of online reviews in an attempt to clarify how to understand them and their ethical implications. In order to do so, business ethics stakeholder theory will be used to analyse the stakeholders of online reviews.

1.5.2 Literature review

In order to identify relevant articles and research papers to provide description of online reviews and their interpretation and use, both Google searches and Google Scholar searches have been conducted. Initially, the search term 'online reviews' was chosen as a starting point in order to identify general themes related to online reviews. A 'bottom-up' search strategy was required since a relatively small number of studies exist on the topic.

An initial search of the terms 'online reviews' and 'what are online reviews' on Google scholar was used to gain a general understanding of what research related to online reviews has been conducted so far. The titles of the first ten pages of results were scanned to identify specific words related to online reviews. These words were listed and subsequently used to search how many times these words appeared within the first ten pages of the Google Scholar search results. These terms provided a general direction to explore online reviews. Researches that appeared in this searchstring mainly include marketing research focussed on the influence of online reviews on sales and on companies. Terms used in the titles and descriptions (amongst others: manipulation, fraud, helpfulness, consumer consideration, contribute, online word of mouth, influence, affect consumers) were used to inform other search strings on both Google and Google Scholar ('Impact of online reviews', 'impact of online reviews on purchase decisions', 'fake reviews', 'motive for writing online reviews', 'motive for writing online reviews').

From the results, due to scope limitations, the first 10 summaries were reviewed to select the most relevant research on Google Scholar. In the Google search the first page of results were scanned for relevance. Criteria for relevance were that the research gave a general description of online reviews and/or gave information about the relation of online reviews with one or more of their stakeholders such as motives and impact. Furthermore, research papers making explicit claims about how reviews are used,

can be used and/or should be used were selected, since they fit the criterion of gaining understanding of a concept by examining its use. The sources cited in the articles were subsequently searched and their summaries were reviewed in order to determine if they fit the inclusion criteria of this research.

To analyse the research papers with a bottom up approach, all claims about online reviews, their writers and or readers, were highlighted. These quotes were used to identify fitting key terms describing online reviews. The key terms were grouped and assigned to different categories functioning as umbrella terms that are related to online reviews. Online reviews were then analysed from the perspective of each category that emerged from the stakeholder analysis and the data.

Chapter 2: Stakeholders of online reviews

In order to better grasp the difficulties and opportunities with online reviews, it is important to understand who is involved in them. This chapter aims to answer the following question: *Who is involved in online reviews and what does online review interaction between stakeholders reveal about online reviews?* To answer this question, this section will draw on stakeholder analysis theory.

Stakeholder analysis is a practical framework and stems from the field of business ethics, in which questions about the moral rules that should guide a firm's engagement with their customers is just one small example. It has been developed to address business-related ethical problems such as the connections between ethics and capitalism, the trade and creation of value in a continuously changing global business environment and the question how managers can better create value and connect business and ethics more explicitly (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnell and de Colle, 2010., Freeman and McVea, 2001, Weitzner & Deutsch, 2019).

What seems generally accepted in literature about stakeholder theory is that stakeholders at least include customers, suppliers, employees, financiers, and communities (Freeman, 1984., Dunham, Freeman and Liedtka, 2006., Parmar et al., 2010). However, opinions on the boundaries of what constitutes stakeholders differ. As Dunham et al. (2006) describe it, the theoretical silence over who should be included as a stakeholder and the lack of a more specific definition, leaves us to wonder.

This fits with the claim of Moriarty (2017) in their article outlining business ethics, addressing the problem that: "stakeholder theorists have not provided a clear rationale for drawing a line in one place rather than another." (Moriarty, 2017). Though stakeholders typically include employees, shareholders, the community, suppliers and customers, other groups can have stakes in the firm as well; creditors, competitors and the government. (Moriarty, 2017).

Freeman first explains stakeholders as "those groups which make a difference". He then continues with a more formal definition "A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p.46, Freeman,2001, p.2). Dunham et al. describe stakeholders as a "group that the firm needs in order to exist, specifically customers, suppliers, employees, financiers, and communities" (Dunham, Freeman, & Liedtka, 2006: 25). Weitzner and Deutsch (2019) define stakeholders as "individuals or groups who are affected by a firm's decisions and actions or those who could affect the performance of a firm via their own decisions and actions." (Weitzner & Deutsch, 2019, p.694).

Despite the apparent unclear demarcation of stakeholders, stakeholder analysis is still an effective tool to discover and analyse problematic areas or possible friction by shifting the point of view and addressing different perspectives. All definitions show a connection of the company or business with other persons, groups or individuals. The definition that Weitzner and Deutsch (2019) provide however, shows clearest how stakeholder theory can be used to provide information about online reviews by analysing what online reviews mean to the different people that are involved in them. Though stakeholder analysis normally is mainly from the point of view of the company, its purpose is to be comprehensive and inclusive for all parties that have a stake in the company. However, this research is not performed by a company and is not specific to a company in their dealings with online reviews. As such, stakeholder analysis will be used to develop a more general understanding of the relationships and value exchange between persons that are connected to online reviews.

In this research, the specified definition of Weitzner and Deutsch (2019) is applied to online reviews rather than a firm or a company, in order to identify the most important stakeholders of online reviews, i.e. those that affect others via online reviews and those that are affected by online reviews: Those who write the review, those who read the review, those the review is about. Furthermore, the review platform is equally important to analyse because it plays an important role in deciding the manner in which online reviews are shaped, who gets to write them, who gets to read them and how they get to be read or used in general and by whom.

Due to the scope of this research, the focus of the corporate stakeholder will be limited to a general interest of a company. It will be assumed that all involved parties with the company will have a general interest in the success of the company that is the recipient of the review (either as e.g. employee, shareholder or supplier). It should be mentioned though that for instance employees of a company could have different views and values than those of the company they represent. This potential friction would give even more depth to this conceptual analysis, but the scope of this research is too limited to incorporate inter-company stakeholders as possible separate points of view. Furthermore, the purpose of this research is not to specifically analyse a company perspective, but rather give a more broad and general overview that gives an equal regard to stakeholders that are not otherwise related to the companies that the review is about. Since stakeholder theory states that equal treatment of stakeholders is a necessary condition, equal regard of stakeholders in the analysis of online reviews is warranted (Parmar et al, 2010).

If stakeholder theory is applied by platforms themselves, it is likely that the outcome of what constitutes a 'good' or 'fair' reviewing system, would differ from other platforms. Instead, this research provides an overview of different online review practices by different online review platforms (that might

or might not have been informed by a stakeholder analysis the platform has conducted themselves), in order to highlight those differences. Thus viewing the company itself as one stakeholder in the practise of online reviews that is equal to the other stakeholders, ensures a more objective account of how online review platforms deal with online reviews. It is precisely the reason for conducting this conceptual analysis that the differences in online review practices might be presented and highlighted in hopes of eventually finding a consensual common ground in future research that can be applied by any and all platforms.

The analysis below starts with a terminology section, for a clear distinction between how a certain party is understood in this particular research, as (possibly) opposed to how it is understood in research and examples that are used and described in this research. This terminology will be followed by an exploration of the relation between stakeholders and online reviews, based on stakeholder analysis theory. The review itself will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.1 Exploring reviewers

In this research, the term 'Reviewer' refers to a person or technology writing and or rating and subsequently posting an online review.

An important player in online reviews is the one who writes or fills in the online review; the reviewer. With the movement from offline towards online word of mouth, not only has the reach of reviews changed dramatically, in becoming huge in scope and open to a big public to read them, also the number of reviewers and type of reviewers has changed in a major way.

Reviewers in the broadest sense are the creator of the review. In most cases, these are persons. These persons could have different reasons for placing the review. As was briefly mentioned in §1.1, Mladenovic et al. (2019) have investigated reviewer motives, specifically the motives of reviewers who reviewed their vacation reviews. In their research, reviewers were actual experiencers of the respective vacation they were reviewing and their most important motive for placing a review was to help others by informing them (Mladenovic et al, 2019). The motive was mostly altruistic, or what they refer to as “prosocial behavior [...] is voluntary, intentional behavior” (Mladenovic et al, 2019, p.250 & 252). Reviewers can also be extra motivated to place reviews by offers of receiving money, free products, or the chance of possibly winning something (Siddiqi, Sun, and Akhtar, 2020, p.2).

Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) describe the audience of review platforms and mention the reviewer in this description also. The audience they describe consists of both reviewers (the ones

writing the reviews) and reviewees (the ones reading the reviews). “The predominant audience on review platforms is consumers seeking product information about a prospective purchase and those writing the reviews.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.271, §2). Aside from mentioning that reviewers are part of the audience of online review platforms, no further elaboration is given about the reviewer.

Zhu & Zhang (2010) state that: “[..]reviewers are not a randomly drawn sample of the user population. [...] extremely satisfied and extremely dissatisfied customers are more likely to initiate WOM [refers to Word Of Mouth] transfers.” (Zhu & Zhang, 2010, p.133, §3). They clearly frame the reviewer as a customer and a user, implying that the reviewer has had an experience with the respective product they are reviewing. Furthermore, they ascribe feelings to these reviewees that prompt the writing of the review, calling the reviewees most likely to be either extremely *satisfied*, or extremely *dissatisfied customers*. They also mention the possibility for reviewers being companies themselves that praise their own products (Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

What could be viewed as ‘online reviewing’ are endorsements and advertorials by public figures. For example a celebrity model speaking about the ease of applying a specific brand of mascara. Although endorsements from celebrities have gone hand in hand with advertisement for a long time, new phenomena such as ‘youtube/instagram artists’ and ‘youtube/instagram celebrities’ have given rise to a whole new dimension of endorsement. The expert, or critic review, has also moved from offline to online spheres.

Though an endorsement or critic review, concerns opinions of persons about a product or service, it is already widely recognised that having a certain public status or being an expert in, for instance, food or music, warrants particular ethical handling. There are very specific rules about clarity of who is doing the endorsement and whether the endorser receives anything in return for their efforts. In case of critics reviews for instance, it has to be made clear that this concerns independent expert reviews that have no conflict of interest with the recipient that is reviewed. Without straying too far into the ethics of product advertisement, it should be mentioned that online reviews can involve any person doing the reviewing. Specific rules and regulations are in place to deal with persons of interest and their (bought) opinion about products and services. Furthermore, reviews of ‘the common people’ are generally designed to not focus on who does the saying, but rather what is being said (either in words, ratings or both) and in most cases, the quantity of the message is also an important factor. Therefore, this research focuses on online reviews as a phenomenon that does not visibly acknowledge or credit any weight or status that the reviewer might have outside of them being thought of as a user of a product or service. It should also be emphasised that the reviewer is mostly *thought of* as a person that has first hand experience with the product or service that they reviewed. This does not mean that they indeed are reviewing based on user experience. They

might also have the user experience, but are not a customer of the product they are reviewing on the particular platform.

In case of what is often referred to as a ‘fake review’, a review is for instance placed by the company itself. Companies could place reviews themselves or encourage their employees or close friends and family to place reviews. These reviews might be based on personal experience, but even if they are, it is debatable whether they are unbiased if the reviewer has any close relations with the reviewed. Companies could also choose to place negative reviews or encourage placement of negative reviews with their competition.

Another phenomenon that should be mentioned when exploring reviewers, is that of AI review systems. In their research about automated crowdturfing attacks and defences in online reviews systems, Yao et al (2017) describe the possibility of AI being used to create or generate online reviews that seem so real that they would be indistinguishable from ‘real’ online reviews (Yao et al, 2017). This particular AI could be considered an online reviewer, since it places a review. This leads to an interesting dichotomy between ‘reviewers’; those that give an account of their actual experiences and those that merely use the platform to place a text and or rating connected to a product or service, posing as a review, but not being an actual account of the experience. Are the latter still reviewers?

If we adopt the definition of a review as being an account of an actual experience, then they would not be reviewers as theirs was not an actual review. It is irrelevant here if they are real people or AI who do the reviewing. However, denying them as reviewers seems like being in denial of what is actually happening. If we look at the definition of online reviews as something that *should* ideally be an account of an actual experience, it is easier to acknowledge that this is alas not always what is actually happening. Thus framing a reviewer as anyone (or *anything*) that can place a text and or rating of a product and service on an online platform, regardless of their intentions, seems to give the most comprehensive understanding of what is actually happening with online reviews.

2.2 Exploring reviewees

In this research, the term ‘Reviewee’ refers to a person or technology reading or otherwise using an online review for any intended purpose.

In her article about ethical guidelines for digital engagement, Bowen (2013) describes the general audience of media and media users. Where the audience was once a more passive information recipient, they are now ‘a more active information processor’ (Bowen, 2013). This shift from passive recipient

towards active seeker of information is very visible in online reviews, where reviewees would constitute as an example of a specific audience within the larger public that Bowen (2013) writes about.

According to Sullins (2020), users of information technology want the information to be quick, easily accessible and free. They also want the information to be secure, stable and reliable. These wishes are a constant struggle for information technology designers that need to make compromises to find a balance between these almost irreconcilably different moral values (Sullins, 2020). With online reviews, the moral values (see §1.3) of veracity and trust that Sullins (2020) describes are especially important; people want to be able to trust that the information provided in online reviews is honest and truthful, thus reliable.

Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) describe reviewees as consumers and more specifically, consumers with a goal: seeking information about a prospective purchase by way of using online reviews: “The predominant audience on review platforms is consumers seeking product information about a prospective purchase and those writing the reviews.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.271, §2). Interestingly, though they use the term ‘predominant’, in this specific description of the review platform audience, they do not mention parties that might be understood in this research as the ‘reviewed’ the recipient of the review.

The most important motives for reviewees to read online reviews are, according to Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016): “Information seeking, Risk reduction, Quality seeking and Social belonging ” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.273, §1). With these motives ascribed to reviewees, it becomes more apparent that there is an emphasis on reviewees being prospective consumers. These consumers are using online reviews as an information source to reduce risk that might be involved with a purchase and to try and ensure the best product quality. Their research describes as a problem statement that online reviews have become a ‘major managerial challenge’ and ‘an important reputation management issue’ (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.271, §1). In other words, companies need a good understanding of online reviews in order to better deal with them. Though it makes sense from this point of view to focus on reviewees as being prospective consumers, thus trying to identify their needs and preferences, it leaves out another important party as a represented reviewee, namely companies themselves. Not only are companies the recipient with a close connection to the subject that the review is about (the product or service that the company provides), they are also represented in the population of reviewees.

Companies can be taking in the review information for multiple purposes: Monitoring behavior (for instance taking out reviews with swear words), monitoring their own products or services and using reviews as feedback, trying to filter out customer complaints and possibly taking actions (such as getting

in contact with the reviewer to discuss the contents of the review). It is particularly interesting for companies to take into account their role as reviewees, when considering the built of the customer platform (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016).

The data that online reviews might hold for companies, for instance to improve their quality or service, is very valuable. This data cannot only be of value to a stakeholder that is directly invested in the online review data-set. ‘Outside’ parties such as researchers might also benefit from using an online review data-set. There are software technologies catering the use of online reviews as a data-set. These technologies are capable of ‘mining’ reviews. This mining, data mining or text mining is primarily done using software and algorithms. This software is built to identify key words or key characteristics to filter out on a large scale. The data can be used for instance to improve a product or service. The use of data from a collective of online reviews, does not solely have to be done and used by immediate stakeholders such as the product retailer for instance. As Winkler et al. (2016) show with their research about toy surveillance from online reviews, text mining can also be done by researchers in order to gather information for the goal of improving childrens’ safety (Winkler, Abrahams, Gruss & Ehsani, 2016., What Is Review Mining | IGI Global, n.d., Wikipedia contributors, 2020). The example of Winkler et al.’s research will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, §3.6.

Acknowledging that the reviewees are not only (prospective) customers, but also companies themselves or even researchers, gives a more comprehensive understanding of the possibilities that online reviews represent as a ‘data-set’ to be explored.

2.3 Exploring reviewed

In this research, the term ‘Reviewed’ refers to the person that is ultimately affected by the online review and that is the recipient of the review. This could either be direct: for instance the services of a delivery person that owns the business are rated, or indirect: for instance a product’s usability is rated, ultimately possibly affecting its distributor and or manufacturer. In this case, the product is the subject of the review. Another indirect form is the rating of the delivery person (for instance their politeness), indirectly affecting the distributor and or manufacturer. In case of rating a service such as politeness, politeness would be the subject of the review.

Since the latter already point towards a more complex string of human relations, the term reviewed will be used for any human entity or collective in the form of a business, that might be the recipient of the review (and thus possibly affected), either directly or indirectly.

The reviewed represents the recipient of the review. The Autoriteit Consument en Markt (ACM, Dutch authority consumer and market, 2017) states that reviews are important for business. They get feedback on their products and services and they can use reviews to attract (new) customers. Businesses notice the positive influence of positive online reviews on their sales figures (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017).

This is a more direct influence of online reviews; it is a source of information and possibly good or bad advertisement. However this is not the only way in which online reviews are important for businesses. There is a more indirect influence that online reviews have on how well a company is performing. This is the influence that search engines have on generating traffic to specific websites. This is a very elaborate and intricate business, where online reviews are only a small part in the workings of e.g. Google to show a specific order of websites or show certain websites at all. Since the workings of search engines are a subject in their own right, only a short elaboration of online reviews and the example of Google will be provided.

Google has two ways of showing results that are influenced by ratings; the advertised search results via Google adwords and the natural searchresults. In the advertised search results, Google shows review ratings if a company has collected at least 150 reviews in the last 12 months with an average rating of 3.5 or higher, via a trusted partner of Google¹. These trusted partners are review platforms that collect publicise and manage online reviews for companies. An example of this, Trustpilot, will be more elaborately discussed in § 3.5.5. For the natural influence of Google search ratings, online reviews do not have to have a an average rating of 3.5 or more and there does not have to be a minimum amount of reviews (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017, p.7; *About Seller Ratings Ads Extensions - Google Ads Help*, n.d.).

This means that generating online reviews and ratings is a part of a companies search engine 'status' so to speak, where in short the rule is; the higher the ranking, the better. Companies can influence this by focussing on generating as many reviews as possible. Because these online reviews are important to businesses directly, as well as by their influence on search engine ratings, there are several companies offering paid services to help businesses with online reviews in one way or another.

The reviewed as a stakeholder has the most stakes in online reviews. If one online review is personal for a reviewer, all reviews are not only personal for the reviewed but also (in)directly linked to their business revenue. For better or worse, online reviews are very impactful for the reviewed party.

¹ Ausgezeichnet.org, Bazaarvoice, Bizrate Insights, eKomi, E-Komercio, Feedatly, Feedback Company, Feefo, Hardware.info, Heureka.cz, KiyOh, Klantenvertellen, kuchikomiking.jp, osaifu.com, Poulpeo, PowerReviews, ProductReview.com.au, Reputation.com, ResellerRatings, Reviews.io, Reevo, Shopper Approved, ShopVote.de, ShopAuskunft, Sitejabber, Trusted Shops, TrustPilot, Verified Reviews, Yopi.de, Yotpo (*About Seller Ratings Ads Extensions - Google Ads Help*, n.d.).

2.4 Exploring review platforms and their capabilities

In this research, the term 'Review Platform' refers to an online website, that can either be a standalone website, or a specific page of another website, with the purpose of gathering and showing reviews. In which way these reviews are presented or what specific information or characteristics they pertain to, is not yet implied in the definition and can differ per website. All platforms referred to as review platforms in this thesis are easily accessible to every internet user, meaning that its online reviews are directly available for viewing when surfing to the website, without any prerequisites. Furthermore, all websites by definition of being a website, have in common that the information stored can possibly be indefinitely stored, copied or accessed by virtually anyone. This holds for review platforms as well.

The review platform can have a different meaning for their different users. For the reviewee and the reviewed it is (an important) source of information. For the reviewer it is a platform that allows them to use reviews for whatever motive they might have. Referring to online reviews as a tool used by individuals to share their opinions and experiences, highlights the meaning of the review platform that holds the reviews, for reviewers rather than reviewees or reviewed (Mladenovic et al, 2019).

Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) have identified four different main types of online reviews platforms: retail websites, independent reviewing platforms, video-sharing platforms and personal blogs. (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016., p. 271.). This research will focus on the online retail website and independent consumer review platforms, because they are intended for a wider reviewing audience. Online reviewing on personal blogs and video-sharing platforms is not part of online reviews in this research, as discussed in §2.2. It is different from online reviewing on retail websites and independent consumer platforms because there is an emphasis on who is doing the reviewing.

The distinction that Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) provide between online retail websites and independent consumer platforms is one that is adopted in this research with an added note. Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) make no clear distinction between online retail websites that only sell their own in house products and websites, like well-known Amazon.com, that also allow other retailers to use their medium to sell their products. There is also the possibility of a platform existing solely as an intermediary, with no products of their own to sell to the platform customers (Takeaway.com). They might be selling service products to their retailers, however the customer only receives products directly from the retailers on the website. This distinction can be of influence to the amount of trust a consumer might have in the online reviews placed on the platform, due to the fact that the immediate interests of the online review platforms differ.

The connection or role of the reviewed is linked to the credibility of the reviewing platform (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016). This connection is important when examining ethical implications of online reviewing. It also plays an important role in the influence an online review can have on a purchase decision: “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 influenced by the format characteristics of the review and the online review system design” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016., p. 276). Their research concludes that the reliance on reviews (influence on making a purchase decision) can be increased with a focus on the review platform. A review platform should build trust and provide reliable reviews (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016).

This building of trust to increase reliability is not only an interesting suggestion from a marketing perspective for increasing the influence of online reviews. For the purpose of this research, it is interesting because reliability is an important value for information seekers such as reviewees (Sullins, 2020). The more trust a reviewee has in a platform, the more reliable the platform is perceived to be and the more power the platform and its contents receive. This makes it all the more important that this trust is well deserved rather than being accomplished by deception of some sort. It is very likely that tactics for the gaining of trust by immediate stakeholders (those who are dependent on good reviews), might differ from the tactics of those who have nothing to gain by either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ reviews.

Depending on the platform, general review scores could be manipulated to a smaller or bigger degree. For instance, a reviewer is not necessarily someone with firsthand experience, at least not the ‘honest’ experience that might be expected from the person who reads the review. The likelihood of this depends greatly on the set-up that is provided on the review platform.

There are several ways in which online reviews can be manipulated; 1) review grating, 2) review flagging and 3) Fake reviews (Richman, 2020). Review grating is filtering customers before inviting them to place a review with the intention of encouraging positive reviews and keeping negative experiences as private feedback. This can significantly reduce the amount of negative reviews that are publicly shown. Review flagging can be done if a review platform offers companies the ability to flag reviews for removal if they do not adhere to the guidelines of the particular platform. An example of this would be a review that contains profanities. Flagging does not necessarily mean that for instance negative reviews are removed more frequently than positive reviews. If a company flags ALL reviews containing profanities, a certain balance could still be kept as a review can just as well contain profanities if it is overall positive as negative (e.g. ‘The food was *f*cking* nice’ versus ‘I *f*cking* hated the food’). A company could however choose to only flag negative reviews and try to get the platform to remove them on the basis of their own

regulatory guidelines (Richman, 2020). Fake reviews have already been briefly discussed in the context of who does the reviewing in §2.1 and will be discussed further in chapter 3. In the context of reviewing platforms, it is important to mention that the likelihood and possibilities of false reviews are connected to the build of the platform.

For the purpose of this research it is important to include the review platform as an actor in the dynamics of online reviews and their stakeholders. However it is not the purpose of this research to examine review platforms to such a degree that all their differences and specific set-ups and their ethical implications can be discussed in great detail. Rather it is important to understand that there are differences between online review platforms that might have a different impact on values such as reliability. It is important to acknowledge that though ultimately human stakeholders make decisions of using online reviews in a certain way, the platform plays an important facilitating role in the degree to which online reviews can be used in a particular way and it shapes to a certain extent the way in which reviews can be used and read. A short general description of review platforms and their general capabilities will be given below. An overview can be found in Table I: Review platform general characteristics.

2.5.1. Bol.com

Dutch retail website Bol.com provides room for various retailers with a myriad of products to sell them via their platform. They also sell their own products via their platform. Bol.com allows for online product reviews to be placed by everyone that owns a Bol.com account. They do not clarify their reasoning for this. The idea behind it might be that a specific brand or product is not necessarily linked to a purchase on their particular platform, but the information can still be useful to provide insight in the experience with for instance a product.

With this product reviewing set-up, I could for instance use my mother's vacuum cleaner and subsequently leave a review of that specific product (if they sell it on Bol.com that is) on Bol.com. In this scenario, I am not a consumer of that particular product, but I do obviously have experience with it as a user. In the case of Bol.com though, I could also leave product reviews without having had any experience other than maybe reading the product description (or not even that). I merely have to be a Bol.com account holder in order to partake in product reviewing on their platform. Though when one has actually purchased a product via Bol.com, one receives an email asking how many stars one thinks the purchase is worth. It is not specified in the reviews whether the product purchase was verified or not.

In order to leave a review of the experience one had with a specific retailer that offers products on Bol.com, one needs to have bought a product on Bol.com. One is provided with an email asking for the buyer to rate their experience with the retailer. The possibility of winning a gift certificate is offered as an

incentive to write a review. The email's subject is phrased: "[name customer] your review of the retailer is worth money".² Whether or not an email is sent, is decided by the retailer themselves and not Bol.com. They could decide to send an email only when they think a more positive review is likely. They specify that they are asking for a review of the experience with the retailer (in terms of service) and not the product itself. Retailers' services cannot be rated without this link. One has to have bought a product on Bol.com with that specific retailer in order to rate them. If there are any malintentions (e.g. retailer rating themselves positively to balance out the reviews in their favor or competition trying to negatively influence the rating balance of a competitor) the malicious reviewer has to actually make a purchase. Bol.com makes checks for the possibility fraud. Both review options of product and retailer are a star rating 1-5 with the possibility of adding a message and or answering more specified directive questions. One can place a review with a name of their choosing³. Bol.com offers some tips to consumers about placing a review, but there are no rules or guidelines presented. Reviewed retailers cannot leave comments or reactions to the reviews they receive. A review can be removed by Bol.com based on their judgement on the necessity⁴ (bol.com, n.d., *Hoe Verwijder Ik Een Bol.Com Beoordeling?*, 2017).

2.5.2 Takeaway.com

Takeaway.com is a platform where restaurants can offer their menu for take-out or delivery. They do not have their own prepared food products to sell to customers of the platform. The purchase is done via Takeaway.com, which is acting as an intermediate, processing the orders and order payments and passing the orders on to the restaurants. When an order has been marked as successfully placed and processed, the customer gets an email with a review link. The customer can rate both product quality and the delivery service with a 1-5 star rating and they can write an accompanying message if they wish. All confirmed customers receive an invitation to place an online review on the Takeaway platform (shown at the page of the restaurant concerned) for each order placed. No incentive is used to make placing a review more attractive. It is not specified in the reviews of the purchase was confirmed, however, as opposed to Bol.com, it is not possible to place a review without having placed an order. Reviews can be placed anonymously if the customer prefers. Takeaway.com does not offer specific rules or guidelines to consumers about placing an online review. Reviewed restaurants cannot leave comments or responses on

² This is a quote from an email sent by Bol.com to me as a customer.

³ Information was gathered using Bol.com platform, chat, and information provided to me as a customer.

⁴ Reasons for removing reviews on Bol.com "When the review is posted to the wrong provider.

When it can be proven that the review is fraudulent.

When personal information is displayed in an assessment.

When the assessment is in conflict with laws and regulations. This also includes offensive, discriminatory or hurtful statements." (bol.com, n.d., *Hoe Verwijder Ik Een Bol.Com Beoordeling?*, 2017) Verified with Bol.com customer service.

the reviews. Reviews are generally not removed, unless Takeaway.com decides it is necessary⁵ (*Hoe Verwijder Ik Een Thuisbezorgd Beoordeling?*, 2017., “Gerommel Met Recensies Op Thuisbezorgd: Slechte Regelmatig Verwijderd,” 2019). Takeaway.com offers restaurants the possibility of flagging reviews. The website does not openly show which reviews were flagged and how many reviews in their respective star category were flagged by the restaurant.

2.5.3 Amazon

Customers can leave a ‘customer review’ at Amazon if they meet the eligibility requirements of the community guidelines. These guidelines are elaborate and clearly stated as a prerequisite for becoming a reviewer⁶. Amazon mentions in the product review if it is a verified purchase. Amazon account holders can also comment on reviews, they might for instance ask additional questions or let the reviewer know it was a helpful comment. This ‘customer discussion’ resembles a forum, but the initial message is a shared experience with a product. Amazon has started a pilot where retailers can also comment on reviews. This is now done as a pilot in a limited capacity and retailers are authenticated by Amazon. (*Amazon.Com: Official Comments on Customer Reviews*, n.d., *Customer Discussion Guidelines*, n.d.). Customers can place a product review on a any product, also products that are not bought via Amazon, but only if they have purchased for at least 50 euros/50 dollars via a verified payment in the last 12 months. Customers wanting to place a product review can choose the name that is displayed. Customers can only review retailers if they actually purchased a product with that retailer (*Amazon.Com Help: Community Guidelines*, n.d.).

Amazon has developed an ‘early reviewer program’ where they encourage customers to rate the product they have purchased. If they do, regardless of whether the review is more negative or positive, they receive “a small reward (e.g. a \$1-\$3 Amazon.com Gift Card) for helping future shoppers” (*Amazon.Com Help: What Is the Early Reviewer Program?*, n.d.). Selection of customers is at random within the group of products that is part of the early reviewer program. Customers are unaware before

⁵ Reviews are not removed with the exception of rude language, if it is clear the review is placed by mistake or if it is fake. Takeaway.com is the deciding party on when this is the case. (*Hoe Verwijder Ik Een Thuisbezorgd Beoordeling?*, 2017). Another condition is the that the reviewer requests removal of their review (“Gerommel Met Recensies Op Thuisbezorgd: Slechte Regelmatig Verwijderd,” 2019) .

⁶ “you must have spent at least \$50 on Amazon.com using a valid credit or debit card in the past 12 months”

“you should only submit content related to that topic.”

“Customer Reviews and Questions and Answers should be about the product.”

- Respecting others, e.g.; No threats, no swearing, no disclosing info invading privacy.
- No promotions and commercial solicitations, e.g.; no content by yourself, relatives, associates, close friends. No content concerning competitors, no offering of compensations, no affiliate url postings.
- Sexual content, e.g.; No nudity or sexually explicit images or descriptions.
- Infringing content, e.g.; only posting your own content or content with permission.
- Illegal activity, e.g.; threatening/joking about harm to others, offering fraudulent goods/services.

(*Amazon.Com Help: Community Guidelines*, n.d.)

purchase if their product is within this program. The reviews are shown with a marking, so that readers of the review are made aware that they are viewing a review that has been reviewed by a customer who has received extra motivation for placing the review. Amazon states that sellers cannot influence the reviews or reviewers participating in this program, they can however select the products participating in this program (*Amazon.Com Help: What Is the Early Reviewer Program?*, n.d.).

2.5.4 Google Maps as independent review platform

Everyone can place a review on Google Maps, linked to any company that is shown by Google. It is not possible to do so anonymously. The name that is linked to your Google account will be visible with the review, along with other reviews you have written on Google Maps and pictures you might have added to Google Maps. Google offers no incentive for placing a review, however it might be possible that retailers ask their customers or non-customers to write a Google review. They can possibly offer incentive or even compensation for writing a (good) review. Reviews on Google are not preset to ask for a product or service review. Customers can just place a review, deciding what they base their score on. Since the platform gives the opportunity to review a company, it is likely that customers will mostly rate the services offered by the company however they could also choose to rate/elaborate on a product sold by the company. A reviewer can decide to revise or delete their review themselves. Google has an elaborate set of rules for what is prohibited in their online reviews. Google allows for the reviewed party to react to their received reviews. These reactions are placed underneath the individual review. There are possibilities for the reviewed party to ask Google to remove a review, which Google takes under consideration using their specific conditions⁷. Google takes precautions to avoid or remove false reviews. They have a content policy for reviews (*Prohibited and Restricted Content - Maps User Contributed Content Policy Help*, n.d., *Reviews Schrijven En Beoordelingen van Plaatsen Toevoegen - Computer - Google Maps Help*, n.d., *Verwijdering van Review Aanvragen - Android - Google Mijn Bedrijf Help*, n.d., *Hoe Verwijder Ik Een Google Review?*, 2020).

⁷ "Spam: Google uses automatic spam detection to remove spam messages. Think of promotional or commercial content, copy / paste or writing multiple reviews for one company via multiple accounts.

Advertisements: links to other websites, email addresses or telephone numbers. Irrelevant Reviews: Reviews are not about politics, religion or social commentary. Personal resentment or tirades do not belong here, just like personal attacks. Inappropriate: Defamatory, offensive, or obscene language. So curse, for example. Conflict of Interest: An unfair assessment of an employee or owner. Do not offer money, services or products for a review. Illegal Content: Copyright protected content, links or references to illegal content. Sex: is always removed, reported where necessary and the relevant Google account closed. Personal information: Think social security number, credit card number, driver's license information, etc. Hatred: Incitement to hatred based on gender, religion, background or origin." (*Prohibited and Restricted Content - Maps User Contributed Content Policy Help*, n.d., *Hoe Verwijder Ik Een Google Review?*, 2020)

2.5.5 Trustpilot as independent review platform

Trustpilot is an independent platform that advertises itself as “The world’s most powerful review platform, free and open to all” (*About*, n.d.). The initiative is an example of platforms that have allowed a migration of control over information towards consumers, as both Fawkes and Gregory (2000) mention in their research in online communication and Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) mention in their online review related research. As founder of Trustpilot states:

“I started Trustpilot to give all consumers a powerful voice and all companies a way to listen, respond and continually improve. That builds trust because this happens in a transparent environment with no pre-moderation or censorship.” (Peter Holten Mühlmann, founder and CEO, Trustpilot, n.d.).

Everyone can place a review on trustpilot when they log in on trustpilot via verification (either an email code, verified gmail address or facebook). Customers can choose what name will be shown with their review. Customers can also choose to place an anonymous review. Companies can respond to reviews. Companies can pay for extra services such as advanced analytics and review insights. Companies have a limited option in the free version to invite customers to place a review. They have more elaborate options in the paid version to invite customers to place a review. Similar to Google maps, reviewers can choose what to review. In their message they can choose to say something about product quality and or service. In ratings of e.g. Ikea, it is common that reviews also elaborate on product quality. There is no verified purchase. Trustpilot has their own rules and regulations for managing online reviews. There are tips for reviewers, but no specific instructions for placing a review. Companies are given the opportunity to report reviews that they think are in violation of the trustpilot guidelines⁸. It is not made explicit how Trustpilot determines misuse or if there was no service or purchase experience It also remains unclear if an employee (for instance an Ikea shop assistant) is allowed to place a review if they purchased a product. Trustpilot shows openly the amount of reviews in their respective star category, that were flagged by the company. Customers can gain insight in how the flagging options are used by companies (*Hoe Consumenten Reviews Kunnen Rapporteren Die in Strijd Zijn Met Onze Richtlijnen*, 2020).

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- ⁸ ● Incriminating or illegal contents, e.g.; threats or hateful and discriminating language.
 - No personal information, e.g.; phone numbers, email addresses.
 - Advertisements for other companies or non-related products
 - There was no service or purchase experience, e.g.; the review is placed by an employee or it is a false review. (*Hoe Consumenten Reviews Kunnen Rapporteren Die in Strijd Zijn Met Onze Richtlijnen*, 2020).

2.5.5 External reviewing software

As mentioned earlier in §2.4, reviewing platforms that are online retail websites, can be of many different varieties. Though larger websites such as Takeaway.com build their own unique software, smaller webshops often use software provided by external parties that is specially designed for an online webshop. Software providers often also provide for review software.

The Dutch non profit organisation ‘Stichting Webwinkelkeur’ is a platform offering online retailers the an online retailer quality mark, but also a pre-set system of gathering online reviews. This is a similar revenue model to that of Trustpilot, however this review software is integrated directly into the webshop itself. It is not an independent platform where there are options for both the consumer audience as well as the retailer audience to work with online reviews. This external review software is designed to cater online retailers but also hold in high regard the ‘honesty’ of the reviews, since this gives the review more impact. With good use and monitoring of online reviews, this is in favor of the retailer (*Reviews Verzamelen Voor Jouw Webshop Doe Je Met WebwinkelKeur!*, 2020). This marketing perspective on honest use of reviews fits the findings of Constantinides and Holleschovsky (2016) about ideal conditions of an online review platform. Webwinkelkeur also offers their retailers the ‘negative review quarantine’. This is a period of 14 days in which a ‘negative’ online review is only visible to the retailer because:

“Negative customer reviews can be annoying, especially when they are unfounded. We will therefore keep negative experiences in quarantine for 14 days. During that time, the experience is only visible to you as a webshop. You can then contact the customer and provide a suitable solution. The customer then has the option to change or delete his experience. Of course the customer is completely free to do this.” (*Negatieve Reviews Eerst 14 Dagen in Quarantaine*, 2020. Translated from Dutch).

This way of dealing with ‘negative’ online reviews has also been suggested as a good solution (a solution to the problem that negative reviews might pose for the reviewed party) for dealing with negative reviews by the ACM (2017).

Platform	Bol.com	Takeaway.com	Amazon	Google maps	Trustpilot
Separate review for product/service	V	-	V	-	-
Product review	V	V	V	Unspecified	V
Service review	V	V	V	Unspecified	V
Comments by retailer	-	-	Limited, pilot	V	V
Rating (e.g. stars, numbers)	V	V	V	V	V
E-mail asking for review	V	V	V	-	Retailers can invite
Extra incentive for placing review offered	V	X	V	-	-
Extra measures ensuring verified purchase	For service only	V	V	-	Unclear
Company guidelines for removing reviews (not public)	V	V	V	V	V
Public rules and regulations that need to be followed by reviewers	-	-	V	V	-

Table I: Review platform general characteristics

Chapter 3: Online reviews and online review interaction

The term 'Review' in this research refers to the actual message or contents. Their specific characteristics or level of information given and the characteristics of that information (e.g. in terms of trustworthiness) are for a large part depending on a preset of requirements and characteristics of the given platform at which the review is posted. For the purpose of this thesis, a review always refers to a message posted on an online platform, where the platform has the specific purpose of gathering and showing reviews.

This chapter aims to provide an answer to the question: *What characteristics are ascribed to online reviews and how do they manifest in online review stakeholder interactions?* As was explored briefly in Chapter 1, §1.2, online reviews generally are roughly defined as: *an evaluation [all definitions have in common that the reviewer is a person and either explicitly or implicitly it is mentioned that this person is a consumer] of a product or service, posted online.* Taking a somewhat loose definition is a good starting point for exploring how certain parties with an interest in online reviews deal with the phenomenon. This chapter will focus on different areas of expertise that have researched - or written about - online reviews. Their information will help build a framework for understanding online reviews, by analysing how online reviews are defined and described and what characteristics are ascribed to them. More importantly, it will shed light on the difficult undertaking of trying to understand online reviews.

We can approach the way we think about online reviews by categorising them as follows in Table II: Key terms matrix. The values explored in chapter 2 suggest that positivity, negativity, benefits and reliability are important. The findings help structure the key terms for characteristics of online reviews. All key terms have in common that they are, in relation to their stakeholders, anywhere on a spectrum between negative and positive. First, the key terms will be outlined in the context provided by the research they are derived from in §3.1.1 - 3.1.13. Secondly, the key terms will also be used as a starting point to explore different meanings of the term in relation to online reviews and their stakeholders in §3.2 - 3.7.

Key terms have been extracted from online articles and research using a bottom up approach. All claims about online reviews, their writers and or readers, were highlighted. These quotes were used to identify fitting key terms describing online reviews. They function as a point of departure to explore the relation of the key terms and online review stakeholders in different contexts. The key terms were

grouped and assigned to different categories based on stakeholder analysis of online reviews. Online reviews were then analysed from the perspective of each category that emerged from the data in relation to their stakeholders resulting in an overview of online review stakeholder interactions in §3.8 - 3.9.

3.1 Overview of online review characteristics

How online reviews are being interpreted depends on the interpreter (reviewer, reviewee, reviewed) and their context of using and processing the online review data. Furthermore, all online reviews have in common that they are data. This data can be influential, threatening, be more or less reliable and provide for opportunities. These categorisations are again connected. For instance, a review can be threatening because it is unreliable and also influential. Because it can also be reliable and influential, it could be an opportunity. The impact that online reviews can have as online (big) data can for all involved parties be a risk or opportunity or maybe an even better suited umbrella term: unbeneficial or beneficial.

Because online reviews are a freely and easily accessible resource, everyone and anyone with an appropriate device with internet access has access to them, increasing their influential properties. The contents of a review can be framed as a complaint, or could even be such a negative account of the recipient (whether or not it is reasonable or true) that it might be demonising the recipient. This could be threatening to companies that are the recipients of the review. Reliability is another important word that is widely discussed in discourse about online reviews. The contents might be fake or misleading, even more so because of their free and accessible nature. This threatens their reliability. As a resource of information, online reviews also provide for the opportunities to use the data as feedback, service for complaint handling and a contribution to developing product quality.

Online review spectrum ↓			
Negative / Positive			
Online data ↓			
Unbeneficial / Beneficial			
<i>Influence</i>	<i>Reliability</i>	<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>Threat</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Free; ● Accessible; ● Resource 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Misleading; ● Fake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Feedback; ● Complaint; ● Contribution to product quality; ● Convenient; ● Helpful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fake; ● Demonising; ● Misleading; ● Complaint

Table II: Key terms matrix

3.1.1 Positive & Negative

Zhu & Zhang (2010) state that “[...]reviewers are not a randomly drawn sample of the user population. Anderson (1998) finds that extremely satisfied and extremely dissatisfied customers are more likely to initiate WOM [refers to Word Of Mouth] transfers.” (Zhu & Zhang, 2010, p.133, §3). The ACM (2017) shows similar findings: “Consumers are generally not inclined to post a review unless they have an explicit positive or negative experience.” (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017, p.8.). This suggests that people who had a somewhat average experience, are less inclined to leave a review.

3.1.2 Influential

Online reviews are significantly influential to consumer purchase decisions: “[...]several studies show that professional reviews can significantly influence consumer’s purchasing decisions.” (Zhu & Zhang, 2010, p.133, §2). “[...] Information provided by online peers influences customer perceptions, preferences and decisions much more than information provided by companies (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008).” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.271, §1). However they also mention that there are conditions in order for online reviews to be truly influential: “Online reviews influence consumer purchasing decisions only when consumers’ reliance on online reviews is sufficiently high when they make purchase decisions.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.276, Chapter 5, §1).

3.1.3 Free, accessible & a resource

Free and accessible information has become an important resource for consumers to help them make decisions. “With the Internet’s growing popularity, online consumer reviews have become an important resource for consumers seeking to discover product quality” (Zhu & Zhang, 2010, p.133, §1). “[...] reviews are highly popular among consumers considering a purchase.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.276, Chapter 5, §1). Furthermore, free and easy access has given consumers another way of gaining product or service information than traditional methods of marketing communication. “Free and easy access to such information [referring to personal opinions and experiences shared about companies, brands, products or services] has weakened the power of marketing communication [...] (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008).” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.271, §1).

3.1.4 Reliability

“The information in consumer reviews is widely considered as more reliable than marketer-sponsored information (Bickart and Schindler, 2001)”. (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.272, §1). In order to advance the reliability of online reviews, they state that user friendly design and measures to build trust are very important. “Consumer reliance on reviews and platforms is increased by a user friendly design and trust building measures (Dellarocas, 2010; Huang and Benyoucef, 2012).”(Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.275). The reliability of online reviews is furthermore dependent on the reliability

of the reviewer. A reviewer could be given incentive to place a positive review. A reviewer could not give an honest account of their experience. A review could be fake.

3.1.5 Misleading

“At the same time, online reviews can be misused to mislead consumers [...]” (ACM, 2017, p.3, §1.2). The ACM specifically mentioned misleading of consumers. They explain that Dutch law states that there is deception at play when a company pretends to be a consumer and posts a fake review. The ACM also states that reviews where the reviewer is paid by the company to place them without mentioning this, is misleading. “For example, under article 193g of Book 6 of the Dutch Civil Code, it is misleading if a company presents itself as a consumer and posts an unreal review about its product or service or pays someone else to write a positive review without mentioning it with the review.” (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017, p4, 1.3, §3).

Research by Siddiqi et al. (2020) about ulterior motives for writing online reviews suggests that they render the information in online reviews deceptive and exaggerated: “[...] online hotel reviews have ulterior motives, which tend to render the information deceptive and exaggerated.”(Siddiqi et al 2020, p.1). Offering ulterior motive in the form of what they call monetary and non-monetary awards “nudge reviewers to write successive or supplementary reviews on travel and third-party online forums” (Siddiqi et al, 2020, p.1).

3.1.6 Fake

The ACM (2017) understands every review placed by a company about their own product or service, as a fake review (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017). They do not mention the specific actor who counts as representative of a company. Therefore the boundaries of who is and is not allowed to place a review on a product or service their company offers if they work there, is unclear. One can imagine that with very large companies, like for instance Unilever, ethicality of an employee rating cleaning product they use at home that is produced by Unilever, is a bit far stretched to count as fake or misleading.

It seems as though ACM concerns companies 'posing' as consumers and framing the product as 'fake' review. It is unclear if a company is allowed to post reviews if it is mentioned that they are from the company. This is a major ethical concern that is not being addressed here. Amazon provides a very clear rulebook for their reviewers, in which they state that “In order to preserve the integrity of Community content, content and activities consisting of advertising, promotion, or solicitation (whether direct or indirect) is not allowed, including [...] Creating, modifying, or posting content regarding your (or your relative's, close friend's, business associate's, or employer's) products or services.” (*Amazon.Com Help: Community Guidelines*, n.d.) Amazon does not frame this as a ‘fake’ review but rather as a form of

advertisement, promotions or solicitation. It is clear that Amazon includes employee reviews as ‘not allowed’.

Companies can also buy (fake) reviews. An article by a prominent Dutch news channel NOS (2019) explains how easily fake reviews can be bought. There are several websites offering to generate (good) reviews on behalf of your company. These reviews are often made up of general remarks such as i.e: good company, and a maximum rating. There are also review accounts that can be bought and exchanged with other customers to enable fake reviews. Furthermore, negative reviews for competition can also be bought (NOS, 2019).

3.1.7 Opportunities for businesses & Data

“Data collected through monitoring of review platforms can be used for product-design-development, learning, tracking consumer concerns and the development of influencers themselves [...]” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.274). These data applications that Constantinides and Hollechovsky (2016) describe are an opportunity for businesses to use online reviews to make informed business decisions. These characteristics also seem to have some similarities to big data. As Davis and Patterson describe in ‘Ethics of big data’; “Nobody in history has ever had the opportunity to innovate, or been faced with the risks of unintended consequences, that big data now provides.” (Davis & Patterson, 2012, p.1). Thus innovative opportunities such as using online review data as big data, could also have potential unintended consequences.

3.1.8 Feedback & Complaint

“Online reviews can also make a significant contribution to product quality and service by providing the company with direct customer feedback” (ACM, 2017, p.3, §1.2). In this case, feedback is used by the company to improve their product quality and service. This is feedback used as an opportunity for the business to develop. Review platforms and companies can frame negative reviews as complaints by addressing them as something that is ‘solvable’. “The reviews with an unsatisfactory mark are then put on hold for a short period of time, for example two weeks. During this cooling-off period, the company is given the opportunity to contact the consumer who has written a negative review.”

3.1.9 Contribution to product quality

“Online reviews can also make a significant contribution to product quality and service by providing the company with direct customer feedback” (ACM, 2017, p.3, §1.2). Producers and companies have a new source at their disposal if they effectively use online reviews to gather information about their products. This way they can make more informed improvements to their product or service quality, that could cater more directly to the needs of their customers.

3.1.10 Convenient

“[...] retail websites are the most used review platforms for checking online reviews. The combination of shopping and checking reviews for the product, seems to be appealing due to its convenience.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.276, Chapter 5, §2). Online reviews that are incorporated into the platform where a customer can also purchase the product, offer a convenient way of gathering information about the product before potentially buying it.

3.1.11 Helpful

“Online reviews help consumers in their choice process, for example as a selection criterion or last check.” (ACM, 2017, p.3, §1.2). This could also be considered informative, or even a resource. However this characteristic is specifically mentioned as helpful, since it is exactly the statement made in the articles and it better suits the connection that the ACM makes here, namely specifically to consumers .

The review itself is helpful to consumers. Mladenovic et al (2019) show in their research about motives for writing reviews after a vacation, that ‘helpfulness’ is a factor of importance also to the reviewer. They show that an important motivation for writing a vacation review, by especially their female research subjects, was in order to be helpful to other future vacationists. “[...] the most common motive is helping vacationers.” They refer to this altruistic behavior as “prosocial behavior [...] is voluntary, intentional behavior” (Mladenovic et al, 2019, p.250 & 252).

3.1.12 Threat

“In order to mitigate threats on revenue or reputation, companies are forced to develop monitoring capabilities and quick responding in diverse review platforms [...]” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.272, §1). Here Constantinides & Holleschovsky specifically refer to the general impact of negative reviews. These thus also include honest and real experiences. The ACM (2017) specifically mentions the threat that unreliable reviews can have a negative impact on an even playing field between companies: “unreliable reviews can therefore also have a negative effect on the level playing field between companies” (ACM, 2017, p.3, §1.2).

According to Siddiqi, Sun, and Akhtar (2020) in their research paper about ulterior motives for placing an online review, reviewers can be influenced by money, free products or services or gaining a certain expert or honorable status as a reviewer. Because of this “[...] online reviews exert various threats for businesses and challenges for policy makers by recipients’ articulations of hidden motives in such reviews” (Siddiqi, Sun, and Akhtar, 2020, p.2).

3.1.13 Demonising

“[...] online reviews can be misused [...] to put companies in a negative light”. (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017, p.3, §1.2). This is characterised as demonising, because the ACM specifically references the

effect of *unreliable reviews*. They mention the unfairness of the impact of unreliable reviews on companies. This does not mean that honest reviews could not have an equally negative impact on companies.

In general, negative word of mouth, which includes online reviews, is potentially very harmful to companies. If this negative information is untrue, this paints an unfair picture of the character or dealings of the reviewed company: “Negative word-of-mouth (WOM) created within e-communities and spread to others can be very harmful for a firm at the post-purchase stage. Harmful *rumors* started inadvertently or maliciously linger for years on the Web, causing harm much after they were originally created.” (Umit Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007, p.54).

A painful effect of negative reviews is that they do negatively influence consumers: “[..] when it comes to negative reviews, most consumers are less critical; products or services with negative reviews are unceremoniously discarded, without checking whether reviews are genuine.” (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017, p. 6.). Negative online reviews can have harmful consequences for the reviewed, even if they are untrue and could count as misinformation.

3.2 Online review spectrum of negative versus positive

An online review mostly includes a rating in the form of a grade or star on a scale of for instance 1-10 of 1 to 5 stars. A 0 or 1 being the most negative. Depending on the platform, the rating is accompanied by an explanation in the form of a text. It might even follow a certain format, where the reviewer can enter their opinion about specific points such as e.g. the fit of the shoe, the color, the overall quality etc. All online reviews are always somewhere on a scale ranging from negative to positive.

Since online reviews are mostly either extremely positive or extremely negative, if there are smaller numbers of reviews available, this could influence the reliability of the average ratings. This means that a small sample of reviews could exist of reviews by reviewers that are possibly either extremely satisfied, or extremely dissatisfied customers. Furthermore it is questionable how an average rating should be interpreted by reviewees. There could be a different meaning of the average of a 5.5 for instance, if five out of ten reviews were graded with a 1 and five out of ten reviews were graded with a 10 as opposed to ten out of ten reviews graded with a 5.5. What this could or should mean is mostly very much open to the interpretation of the reviewee.

What can be viewed as positive for one, can be negative to another. This same logic could also be applied to online reviews. Take for example a contractor that is being reviewed on an online review platform of some sort. If a reviewee wanting to make an informed decision finds it important that the contractor is very communicative and friendly, one review saying that the work was exquisite but the

contractor was maybe a bit grumpy and not too talkative, might dissuade the reviewee. If another reviewee is more drawn to the idea of having a contractor who will not talk and just deliver the work, they might be persuaded by exactly this same review.

Now if the contractor would market themselves as a ‘no nonsense just good work’ sort of business, this review would not be a ‘possible threat’ to their reputation. However if they would market themselves as being very sociable and communicative about and throughout the contracting process, this review could be a possible threat to the reputation they are pursuing. It does not only depend on how the writer of the review intended the review to come across. How the reader that wants to make an informed decision interprets the message, is equally important. Furthermore, how the review will impact the reviewed, is again in part determined by how they interpret the review and how they want to be perceived.

3.3 Online reviews as online data

The Internet's vast reach, low threshold accessibility, its independence from location and timelessness were explored and defined previously as ‘onlinedness’. This onlinedness of online reviews makes them influential as a free and accessible data-source, generates questions about the degree of reliability, and invites specific threats and possibilities or amplifies their reach.

Contrary to the starting point of looking at *use* of online reviews to determine their meaning, the mere existence of online reviews can already be of impact. The passive existence of this data in itself can be beneficial or unbeneficial, for instance the impact that positive or negative reviews on an independent review platform can have on a company that is not actively participating in any review related business. Active participation in, and use of, online reviews can influence the benefits or losses from online reviews.

The onlinedness makes online review data bigger, with the possibility of being used as big data. A reviewee reading product reviews on Amazon to make an informed purchase decision is not treating online reviews as big data. Amazon ranking their suggestions based on reviews however, is treating the reviews as big data. Though it is not the purpose of this paper to go into debate about big data, it is important to note that online reviews are a data source that can be used for different purposes. The use of online reviews by a particular party, frames them as something particular; to the reviewee in this example they are a tool to make an informed decision, to Amazon in this particular use; big data.

3.4 The influence of an online review

A big part of the influence and impact an online review can have, is brought about by its onlinedness. The accessibility of Review platforms and their free use, make for a good resource for all stakeholders. The

review itself is very influential for reviewees who use them as an information source and for companies. Positive reviews can have a positive influence on reputation and revenue (Yao et al, 2017). As was mentioned in the introduction in Chapter 1, a one star increase on Yelp can lead to a 5% to 9% revenue boost for restaurants (Yao et al, 2017). Positive reviews could be beneficial to companies, negative reviews could be a threat.

For consumers, the influence of online reviews on their purchase decisions is visible. Zhu and Zhang (2010) even mention that this influence is significant. Reviewees rather rely on information that is provided by their peers (which they hope online reviews are), making the influence of online reviews on purchase decisions much more than that of information provided by companies (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). The fact that a review has influence, makes the reviewer influential; they contribute with their online review.

A reviewer can also influence the reviewed by placing an online review. There have recently been two media cases about customers of a food ordering platform, that received their money back inreturn for removing their ‘negative reviews’ (Hermans, 2019., “Vural Kreeg Geld Terug Na Verwijderen Slechte Recensie Op Thuisbezorgd,” 2019). This shows that these restaurants involved were willing to pay in order for the reviews to be removed. This makes a review a considerably powerful tool.

Another example of my own experience was that the company in question would not adhere to my refund request (which was legitimate according to their own regulations in line with those of Dutch law). After several phone calls and emails, the request was still not granted. At that moment I decided to leave a complaint on a review website. I came to know from work experience that this often prompts companies to ‘do the right thing’ as it felt in my experience as a customer. After voicing my request again on this review platform, I indeed received the requested refunds. Furthermore, in my experience the wording of the messages in public that were exchanged by the company, were much nicer and apologetic as in my earlier non-public discourse with them. This example shows the power of this kind of publicity for consumers, but also reveals the pressure this can put on companies. Online reviews can be considered one of the contributors to what Umit Kucuk and Krishnamurthy (2007) call the power shift in favor of consumers over manufacturers and retailers (Umit Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2017).

3.5 The reliability of online reviews

Reliability of online reviews is an important factor. Reviewees want to be able to trust the information that is in an online review (Sullins, 2020). The problem is that an online review is not necessarily always very reliable. Most authors concerned with online reviews agree however that this *should be* the case. The more reliable the review, the better it is for either commercial ends such as increasing revenue, or more

political interests such as securing fair and honest trading for companies as well as consumers. Thus *reliability* should be considered when evaluating online reviews. When applying viewing reliability as a characteristic of online reviews, it should be anywhere on the spectrum between reliable and unreliable. It is a question of degree, on a scale that is not yet very clear. Therefore it makes sense to treat reliability as a value to be strived for in online reviews.

As was discussed earlier in Chapter 1, §1.3, the Dutch ACM (2017) has mentioned in their report the negative effects of fake reviews. Fake reviews might be a bigger concern that the ACM (2017) makes them out to be. According to an article by NOS (2019), there is an entire market for fake reviews. What also adds to the scope of the problem of fake reviews is the information that AI reviews are indistinguishable from real reviews (NOS, 2019., Yao et al, 2017).

As was mentioned earlier in §2.4, fake reviews are not the only way in which reliability of reviews can be impacted. Another influence, especially on the overall average ratings is review grating, where companies specifically invite consumers that they think are likely to have had a positive experience, to place a review. Furthermore it was discussed that companies can flag reviews to be removed from a platform, following that platforms rules for removal. The company could apply this strategy only to their negative reviews (Richman, 2020). It was also addressed that providing an incentive for placing a review, might “render the information deceptive and exaggerated.”(Siddiqi et al 2020, p.1). A reviewer could also choose to place a review that has nothing to do with the subject or the recipient. They could use the review link to joke around.

The audience; prospective buyers or consumers, need to trust in the reliability of the reviews in order for the positive influence to occur (Constantinides and Hollechevsky, 2016). Consumers can also rely to a certain extent on the quantity of the numbers. 70 out of a hundred positive reviews is likely to be more reliable than 7 out of ten (DeWees & Minson, 2018). Bigger numbers might also be more likely to generate a more even average when the bias for highly positive and negative reviews is taken into account. As was discussed earlier, customers who were either extremely satisfied or extremely dissatisfied, are more likely to place a review (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017., Zhu and Zhang, 2010).

3.6 The opportunities presented by online reviews

Product reviews that are specific to certain product qualities, might help a business to understand where they can focus their energies for improvement. Some review systems or platforms are very specific for product reviewing. For instance either ratings can be given in specific categories, or a review text describing certain negative features might hold clues. An example of this might be the reviews of a

specific vacuum cleaner where there are mentions of the amount of sound that it is producing in a negative way. This might inform producers that there are (a certain percentage of) people who find it important that their vacuum cleaner is as silent as possible. This information can lead to certain marketing or development decisions, such as for instance creating a ‘silent vacuum cleaner’ for this possible niche. Or make overall product improvements to their entire line to cater to the broad audience or to market their entire brand as ‘silent’.

Another opportunity of online reviews is the opportunity to conduct research that is not meant for marketing or business improvements. Winkler, Abrahams, Gruss and Ehsani (2016) conducted research about ‘Toy safety surveillance from online reviews’. Their research proposes that online reviews can be used for text-mining. For this they use a so-called ‘smoke-list’ which is a way of filtering out data in the form of certain words or combinations of words that have been marked as relevant to their purpose, in this case finding relevant data about the safety of children’s toys. They found that using this form of text-mining is a statistically significant method to identify safety concerns in the reviews about children’s toys (Winkler et.al, 2016). They argue that surveilling the toys through online reviews “could be a gateway to effective prevention of toy-product-related injuries” (Winkler et.al, 2016, p.1). In this example, the keyword ‘opportunity’ is maybe less important than the word ‘data’. There are many opportunities with online reviews because they are a convenient, helpful and lucrative ‘data’ source.

3.7 The threats of online reviews

One of the possible ethical dilemmas presented in online reviews, is that an important benefactor, namely the company itself, is in a lot of cases the owner and distributor of the online reviews. This position of self-interest might be a threat to the ‘ethical use’ of the information and data that online reviews present. This would be a threat for other reviewed, since they might be exposed to competition that is boosting their ratings with false reviews at the expense of the companies on the review platform who try to collect ‘honest’ reviews. Furthermore, false information pollutes the credibility of online reviews. Their trustworthiness might be influenced, which would mean that reviewees might deal with potential false information, decreasing the reliability.

3.7.1 Changing the purpose of online review data

Another threat of online reviews as a data source, is that their initial intended use might not be how they are actually being used. This would potentially involve all actors. As in the example of research for toy safety (§4.6), the use of the online review data might not necessarily have been what the individual reviewers had in mind when posting their reviews. Whatever the first intended use of the data might have

been at the start, is inevitably susceptible to change. This change of data use is especially important to recognise in the conditions of a review platform. The review intentions of the reviewer might not change, the intentions of use of the reviews by the review platform might. This could potentially lead to a situation where reviewers are unaware of how their reviews are being used, and might potentially not agree with this use.

A case example where the intended use of data changed, is a case of the Dutch Orthopedic Association (NOV) (Nederlandse Orthopaedische Vereniging). They used data initially intended to be used ‘just’ as a backlog to trace prosthetic products, to inform improvement of surgery quality. They used data of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ performing hospitals and surgeons to start a conversation between different orthopaedic surgeon divisions countrywide about how the quality of their surgeries could be improved. In the data it was discovered that some hospitals had a lesser number of revisions in the first year after surgery (patients having to come back with complications regarding their prosthetics and or surgery) than others. This data was then used to isolate the hospitals with the highest numbers of revisions, and invite them to an ‘open discussion’ and sharing of knowledge in order to improve the overall quality of prosthetic surgery (Broersen, 2018).

This example shows that the action of gathering this data turned from something non-invasive whatsoever with regards to the surgeons, into something more personal. An innocent registration of the amount of prosthetics turns into a normative judgement of the quality of the performing surgeons. This example is not intended to pass judgement of this situation, it is merely intended to show that data use can change and that one’s influence in its new use might be questionable. The same can occur with online review data. It could happen that this data will eventually be used in a way that the reviewer might not be aware of and might not agree with. Though in the toy safety example it would not be very likely that people would object to making children’s toys safer, they might still object to the idea that their data was used differently than they intended. An example of objection to the new use could be if your online review data about fast food would be used to push an agenda where fast food is praised as a good business venture. This could be a use of your data that you don’t endorse. Whether the benefits of online reviews would ultimately outweigh this possible threat is more suited for an ethical analysis, however change of intended use and its possible consequences should be mentioned as a possible threat.

3.7.2 Framing a review as a complaint

As was mentioned previously in §2.5.5, Stichting Webwinkelkeur (2020) mentions that their online reviewing software offers retailer the possibility of putting a ‘negative review’ in a 14 day quarantine period (*Negatieve Reviews Eerst 14 Dagen in Quarantaine*, 2020). In this 14 day period, the retailer can

contact the customer to discuss their ‘complaint’. Though it is not necessarily problematic to solve customer complaint, it is possibly problematic to interpret an online review as a complaint, as a problem that needs solving. This 14 day quarantine implies that a negative review is always the same as a customer ‘complaint’.

This narrow definition allows for no room to interpret negative reviews as something other than a complaint that can (or should) be ‘resolved’. It would make sense that a person would want to write a review for instance solely for the purpose of informing other (future) customers (Mladenovic et al., 2019). In other words, by framing a negative review as a customer complaint, intent is already implied. When it is indeed the intention of the customer to have their complaint resolved, it would not be so problematic to arrange review platforms to accommodate this. However, if the intent is *not* to leave a complaint in order for it to be resolved, companies might take actions that are not desired by an unsuspecting reviewer. An example of this misinterpretation of intentions, or different use of online reviews, made the news on major Dutch news channel ‘RTL Nieuws’ about online food delivery platform Takeaway.com.

RTL Nieuws (2019) tells the story of a customer that had an interesting encounter with a restaurant where he had ordered online via Thuisbezorgd.nl, the Dutch order and delivery website by the company Takeaway.com. The client had posted a review about his experiences with the food quality and delivery. After this, he received an offer from the restaurant to get a full refund of his money, if he was willing to agree to have his review hidden on the Thuisbezord.nl website. The client complains to RTL Nieuws (2019) that he had not intended to leave the review as a complaint to solve for the restaurant. He has a different conception of how negative the review was and he does not think the approach of the restaurant to online reviews is very ethical, since it might influence the rating and thus trustworthiness of the reviews (“Vural Kreeg Geld Terug Na Verwijderen Slechte Recensie Op Thuisbezorgd,” 2019). A similar instance that occurred to another person also made the news (Hermans, 2019).

This framing of the online review as negative and a complaint leads to actions taken that are arguably a threat to the trustworthiness of the online reviews on this particular platform. What can be deduced from the restaurant’s actions here, is that they are threatened by the review that Vural left, and arguably about similar reviews. They have a certain interpretation of when a review is positive or negative. Furthermore, this course of action poses a threat to reviewers. They might experience this contact over their review as unwanted. In the example of the news article by Hermans, (2019), the customer has even left an anonymous review, which makes it more questionable that they were contacted about removing their review.

The ACM (2017) does not disapprove of a quarantine period: “Such a “mediation option” is a possible benefit to the individual consumer. After all, his problem might be solved.” (Autoriteit

consument & markt, 2017, p.9). However they only approve of this method as long as it is visible for reviewees that this mediation adoption was applied. They argue that if customers do not know what went on behind the scenes, their image of the reviews is distorted (autoriteit consument & markt, 2017).

The ACM (2017) already hints at the distorted picture that a quarantine period of negative reviews might provide. Another implication of the proposed 14 day period of withholding a 'negative review', is that this might implicate the truthfulness of the review itself and threaten the credibility of all reviews on the platform. To illustrate this, a hypothetical example of an online TV retailer will be given:

A retailer receives ten orders for a TV. He then sends every customer a broken TV. All customers leave a negative review. All reviews are put in quarantine. In this time, the retailer offers all ten customers their money back and sends them all new, better, non broken TV's. In this scenario, many different things could happen with the reviews that are highly dependent on how the review platform is organised.

If all reviewers could for instance revise their reviews (and did so), they might change let's say from a one star rating to a five star rating because they are happy with the service. If this were the case, the customers would not actually be reviewing their initial experience; they would be reviewing the service after something went terribly wrong with their initial order. If the website would show the revised reviews as a review for the initial customer experience, an unlucky eleventh customer might not know what they're in for when they purchase a TV with this retailer.

The reviewers might also choose not to post their initial review and maybe not post a review at all, which would arguably be bad for the eleventh customer if the retailer has not learned from their mistakes. However the scenario is played out, the visibility of the process is a very important factor to reduce the threat of false information.

3.8 Online review interactions

So far it has been shown that there are many different intentions with, uses of and interpretations of online reviews possible. These again can differ between the different stakeholders. In general, intentions, use and interpretation can be placed in the following categories presented in Table IV: Review stakeholder interactions.

Reviewer can	Inform others	Harm others	Use for personal gain	Manipulate	Joke
Reviewee can	Gather information				
Reviewed can	Be a passive recipient	Be an active user of information			
Review platform can	Enable	Provide power	Have a bigger or lesser degree of neutrality		

Table III: Review stakeholder interactions

3.9 Online review stakeholder interactions

Within the categories that are presented in Table III: Review stakeholder interactions, different forms of interaction between stakeholders can be possible. It is important to mention that there is a difference between intention, interpretation and use. For instance, a reviewer might not intend to place a review as a complaint, however a reviewed might interpret and or treat the review as a complaint. Another example might be if a reviewer places for instance the text ‘Jesus, that was a nice meal!’. To some, this might be considered as inappropriate language. This does not mean the writer meant to convey something inappropriate to harm others. Furthermore, there can be more than one intention, interpretation or use that applies to online review interaction. An overview of the interactions will be presented below.

3.9.1 The reviewer

The reviewer can (intend to) inform others:

- Reviewees: generally informing them, warning them, helping their purchase decision
- Reviewed: give a compliment, inform to complain, inform to help establish better service

The reviewer can (intend to) harm others:

- Reviewees: reviews might contain information that can be interpreted as shocking, reviewer might use the platform to insult, offend or discriminate, contents can be dishonest, e.g. in order to misinform
- Reviewed: contents can be dishonest e.g. in order to cause damage to the company
- Harm competition: deliberately place false negative information. In this case the reviewer is most likely competing on the same platform, possibly competing for the higher ranking.

The reviewer can (intend to) use their review for personal gain:

- They might leave a review as a complaint with hopes of the reviewed solving the complaint

- They might want to receive a reward, as intended by possibly the platform and or the reviewed: platform intends to reward the reviewer maybe even coerce a review by giving ‘rewards’ (share your experience with others and win something)/give us a good review and receive a free product.
- They might want to receive refunds, gifts, etc. Therefore they might be intentionally lying or giving negative information in hopes of coercing the platform or reviewed into a trade of. E.g. erasing the bad review for a new product, return of funds, etc.

The reviewer can (intend to) manipulate the rankings in their favour. In this scenario they are likely the reviewed themselves if they have a conflict of interest by being otherwise affiliated with the reviewed. Lastly, a reviewer might have intentions that could possibly have nothing to do with the subject, or the reviewed. They might place jokes on review platforms or other such messages that are not intended as a review.

3.9.2 The reviewee

Generally, reviewers would use online reviews as a source of information for different purposes and with different intentions, they might gather information to

- Make an informed purchase decision
- Inform themselves about a company or platform
- Use for research purposes
- The reviewee could have a competing business, they could investigate competition for weaknesses and opportunities
- The reviewee can also be the reviewed, using the information for improving their business
- The reviewee can also be reviewed, managing their customer reviews

3.9.3 The reviewed

The reviewed might be a passive recipient of reviews. This might for instance happen if reviewers place reviews on independent review platforms and the reviewed either does not know about it or does not care for whatever reason to take part in any review interaction. The reviewed might also make active use of online reviews, using the information:

- As feedback to improve products and services
- To inform prospective buyers about the products they offer
- As advertisement
- Use negative feedback as a complaint channel, take complaint service actions if possible (It might not be possible to reach clients to discuss their review as a complaint).

- Use the concept or reviews and review platforms to: Manipulate rankings in their favour. E.g: buy positive reviews, select reviewers more likely to leave positive reviews, select negative reviews to remove.
- Use the concept or reviews and review platforms to: Harm competition. E.g. buy negative reviews.

3.9.4 The review platform

By virtue of its existence, the online review platform takes part in providing different uses of online reviews. The possibilities that a review platform offers, can enable to a bigger or smaller extent the impact of online reviews or certain positive or negative occurrences. The more measures a platform takes for instance to ban false reviews, the more impact this will have on their reliability. The relationship that a platform has with the reviewed, might influence this trustworthiness and reliability as well. If a retailer provides review posting on their own website, they might be considered less reliable than if the platform has nothing to gain from the reviewed.

By virtue of its existence, it can also give the reviewer, reviewee and reviewed certain power. The reviewer could use the platform to be heard, or possibly to right a wrong by creating some pressure on the reviewed. Reviewees can use the information provided by the reviews on review platforms to make more informed purchase decisions. They might for instance be warned and therefore protected from malpractice of some kind. The reviewed can use the power of online reviews in their marketing, and as free market research with which they could make more informed developments to their business or products.

Chapter 4: A reliable platform for online reviews

The stakeholder analysis and characteristics of online reviews show that there are several factors that stand out in terms of values and use of online reviews by different parties involved. In this chapter, the role of providing reliable information of online review platforms will be addressed. Reliability was shown to be an important value for all stakeholders involved. This will be followed by a hypothetical case study examining the possible changes if the reliability measure of a verified purchase is used by the online review platform. As was addressed earlier in §2.2, information technology users such as reviewers who use online reviews as an information source, want the information to be quick, easily accessible and free as well as (amongst other things) reliable. The first three are very hard to reconcile with the latter. The paradox is that, as Sullins (2020) describes: “Maximizing our value of quick and low cost minimizes our ability to provide secure and high quality information and the reverse is true also.” (Sullins, 2020, §2.2).

The suggestion of a trade-off so to speak, seems equally applicable to specifically online reviews. What would be the trade-off if a reform would be made to the way a platform chooses to address online reviews? So far, it has been shown that online reviews have the power to influence stakeholders. They range on a positive versus negative scale and can be viewed as a threat or opportunity to their stakeholders. Mostly to the recipients of the reviews, since online reviews can influence the performance of a company. Reliability plays an important role in online reviews and has been discussed in relation to its different stakeholders. The online review platform is instrumental in the reliability of its online reviews. The way in which the platform deals with online reviews is decisive in the reliability of their online reviews.

As was shown in chapter 2, online review platforms offer different ways of dealing with online reviews. They all have some form of moderating their reviews based upon the notion of reliability. A noticeable measure for dealing with reliability of online reviews is based on the connection of the review to the product or service that is being reviewed. For instance, online review platforms such as Takeaway.com and Amazon take measures to verify if there was indeed a purchase. Takeaway.com uses a closed off approach where only customers who have placed an order receive a link to place a review. Amazon chooses to show to the reviewees that it concerns a ‘verified purchase’ by placing this text in the review. This measure shows an understanding by the platforms of online reviews as something that ‘should be an account of an actual experience’. They strive to ensure that this is indeed the case, which is in line with marketing research findings that reviewees want to be able to trust that a review is an account

of an experience of a consumer (Autoriteit consument & markt, 2017., Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016., Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

4.1 The online review platform

Many online review platforms already consider their approach to dealing with online reviews in great detail. The driving force behind reliability in online reviews can be to obtain the best revenue. Though the results of striving for reliability might be similar, it is important for outside parties to balance the interests of both consumer and retailer and be critical in their scrutiny of the online reviews processes rules and regulations. If a company has a commercial interest in online reviews themselves, the considerations of maintaining reliability in their online reviews will always be based on the ‘the most reliable reviews possible within the limits of still generating the best revenue for the company’. A well recognised flaw of stakeholder analysis stems from how it is traditionally meant; namely practiced by companies themselves (Weitzner & Deutsch, 2019). Though many practices brought about by companies in online reviews to ensure the reliability are within the best interest of all involved stakeholders, they will always ensure that the company itself is not damaged by their own review reliability practices. For this reason, ethical considerations or frameworks for dealing with online reviews should also be established outside the companies with a financial stake in online reviews.

The measures for dealing with online reviews that are being taken by companies themselves, based on their own assessment and judgement, are invaluable in determining a best practice standard for dealing with online reviews. They can inform research in which current practices can be outlined, examined and discussed. Even without adhering to some overarching guidelines that ensure an ethical practice of online reviews and more reliability, platforms can already contribute to this by using an open and transparent policy of the review platform.

An example of openness and transparency would be to mention if there was incentive offered for placing a review or to make actions taken after the placement of the review visible as a sort of timeline. It could be shown if the retailer has contacted the reviewer after the review. If a review would be removed after this, it could still be made visible that there was a review that has now been removed, accompanied by the reason.

In order to avoid framing a review as a complaint, customers could be offered a wider range of options when asked to leave a review. A review platform could for instance offer the option of ‘sending complaint notification’ to the reviewed, along with placing the review. This process and progress could then again be made visible on the platform. There could even be a second rating offered, one for the initial purchase experience, and one for the service of handling the complaint if a complaint form was sent also.

A platform could declare what they believe their reviews portray and their use; if they are purely informative, and not meant to initiate further actions such as i.e. complaint handling, then this should be made clear. If they are meaning to give a platform and strength to customers who are not being heard or helped, it should be made clear that there is a complaint component where companies are invited to handle complaints. Platforms could even go so far as to provide an entire complaint handling section and very visibly differentiate between reviews and complaints.

Furthermore, platforms could take into account the desires of the reviewers about contact. Similar to asking customers if they wish to send in a complaint, customers could be asked if they prefer to be in contact with the reviewed and even in what manner.

Platforms can offer reviewers a chance to remove their reviews. For instance after a certain period of time. They could also inform reviewers about the possible uses of their data and offer notification and removal if any changes in this use are made.

4.2 Case study: A verified purchase to increase reliability in online reviews

In the scenario of a verified purchase review, what generally happens is that a company (reviewed) sells a product and or service. A customer (reviewer) purchases the product or service and gives an account of their experience via an online review on an online review platform. The review connects the reviewer and the reviewed via its subject; a purchase of a product or service provided by the reviewed. To ensure this connection and show that this connection exists, a platform verifies the purchase and shows the purchase has been verified.

What is true for this scenario is that;

1. There is always a product or service that is being reviewed. The purchase of this product or service has been verified to ensure that there is indeed a product or service that is being reviewed.
2. The review is placed by someone who has access to the review platform to place a review specifically about the verified purchase. This is most likely the person who purchased the product or service (with the exception of someone having access to their account or link to post the review).

A verified purchase can reduce the risk of false reviews, can make false reviews harder to achieve and easier to detect. If reliability can be improved, the benefits for stakeholders can be considerable. Not only do the reviews provide a better source of trustworthy information, the reduction of false reviews levels the field for competing companies. A company does not have to suffer as much unfair rating competition on the platform because their competition uses false reviews.

However, reviews in this scenario could still be subjected to the bias problem, i.e: be either really positive or really negative because customers are more motivated to place online reviews when they had a really positive or really negative experience. Product/service purchase verification also does not guarantee a reviewer that has no ulterior motive that might influence the positivity or negativity of the review in favor of a company or against competition. There could be an incentive given for placing a review, which might influence the degree of positivity/negativity. Regardless, this review becomes part of the other reviews and a rating is submitted to a collective rating that is used to calculate an average rating.

Furthermore, the product or service being reviewed could still be bought by the company to enable reviews. For example, a restaurant owner on the Takeaway.com platform might buy cheap drinks in several different orders, in order to receive an email with a reviewlink. In this hypothetical scenario, the restaurant might even put the drinks back in stock. Thus circumventing purchase verification measures. A similar course could be taken in order to influence the ratings of competition negatively.

Ensuring a verified purchase might also lead to exclusion and loss of potentially valuable information. If a verified purchase is a prerequisite for enabling a review, the description of a reviewer becomes more narrow, excluding all persons as reviewers who's purchases have not been verified. The way in which the platform arranges what constitutes a verified purchase, would frame how and when someone is a reviewer. This could also differ between platforms.

For reviewees this could be very confusing, especially when platforms aren't transparent about how they frame their reviews and reviewers. For instance the timeframe that a platform uses to allow a 'purchaser' to write a review excludes not only non-buyers, but also buyers who did not meet the deadline for leaving the review. This in turn could exclude people and valuable information. Topics such as product lifespan or durability can be important information for certain products and exclusion after a certain period of time could easily exclude any useful information about these factors.

Takeaway.com is a considerably large platform with a devoted review section. The platform can thus not only be used to order a meal, but it can also be used to gain information about a restaurant that is on the platform by reading the reviews. Reviews on Takeaway.com can only be written by those who have ordered via the website (cancellations are excluded). This means that chances of the reviews on this platform being actual accounts of a food delivery experience are relatively high. However, they are all experiences of customers who have ordered with the restaurant via Takeaway.com. This creates the possibility that the experiences of customers who have eaten or ordered directly at the restaurant are different from those who have used the Takeaway platform. An example could be that lower ratings are given for receiving cold food due to delivery issues, while this does not affect the food quality in any way

if customers were to eat at the restaurant. This could create an image about the general quality of the food the restaurant serves, while it is actually very specific to the home-delivered meals.

The option that Bol.com has to allow anyone with an account to place a product review, leaves room for those consumers to contribute valuable product information about a product that they have not per se bought via Bol.com. A monopoly of one lead platform that works as an intermediary as well as a review platform, might exclude important opinions that true experiencers might have to attribute, simply because they did not purchase a product via that platform. This not only excludes data from purchasers from other platforms, it also indirectly strengthens the monopolising role of the platform by creating an image of that platform as an important source of reliable information and the place to buy the products that come up positive. This is not an unlikely scenario. As was shown in §3.1.10, “[...] retail websites are the most used review platforms for checking online reviews. The combination of shopping and checking reviews for the product, seems to be appealing due to its convenience.” (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016, p.276, Chapter 5, §2).

The information in itself might become more valuable, thus increasing the power of the platform that gathers the information. If a verified purchase is a prerequisite for more reliable information and platforms push their retailers to collect more online reviews, they indirectly push purchases and thus revenue.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis addressed a gap in research on online reviews by asking *How should we understand online reviews and how are they perceived and used by the stakeholders involved?* Using stakeholder theory has helped identify the stakeholders involved with online reviews and their different interests, uses, interpretations and values in online review communication. It has been shown that defining a review is problematic; the meaning and value of an online review is dependent on the values, uses and interpretations of its stakeholders. Online review platforms help determine the definition of a review and reviewer, by setting the rules for use of the online review platform.

Online reviews have been ascribed a myriad of characteristics. These characteristics have been brought together and analysed to show that there are some main areas in which online review interaction can be categorised; its influence, reliability, opportunities and threats. Furthermore, it was shown that online reviews are not good or bad in a binary form, but always on a scale ranging from negative to positive. Online reviews can either be beneficial or unbeneficial to their respective stakeholders. For the reviewer, reviewee, reviewed and the review platform, reliability is an important value to strive for in online reviews. In determining the balance between reliability, accessibility and comprehensive representation of ‘truths’ about a product or service, all stakeholders should be taken into account equally. The leading role of companies themselves in determining how online reviews should be addressed can be taken as examples to identify a best practice, but should not be leading in the search for solutions to address ethical considerations of online reviews. They themselves should instead be seen as one of the stakeholders involved that have specific goals and interests that might not fully align with the most ethical practice for all stakeholders involved.

This research has mainly had to draw from marketing research, behavioural sciences and the political field. There might be valuable points of view that have not been taken into account due to limited research about this topic in general and especially outside of the field of marketing research. Furthermore, the scope of this research did not allow for a very wide set of data to be analysed. This research was set up to give a broad overview, which inevitably has caused important details not to be addressed fully or at all. Google personalises search results to a person's previous searches and interests, therefore the internet sources found via Google might differ per searcher. A more focussed search string might reveal other areas of interest that relate to online reviews and their stakeholders. Stakeholder theory was originally designed to identify and analyse stakeholders from a company perspective. Though applying stakeholder theory from an outside perspective might result in a less biased analysis with regards to a specific

company, within the scope of this research it also means that there is less detail in the stakeholder analysis which might result in a less comprehensive version of a stakeholder analysis.

The democratising values that online reviews have for consumers are mainly investigated from a marketing perspective, meaning that the findings are catered towards giving businesses information on how to benefit from online reviews. Investigating online reviews from a perspective of the customer as a human being living in an Internet society, could provide valuable new insights for how to deal with online reviews as a person, not an institute or business.

A lot of findings in this conceptual analysis point out the many different ethical implications of online reviews for their stakeholders. Future research could focus on the ethical concerns of online reviews in order to contribute to a framework for dealing with online reviews from an ethical perspective. Online reviews are an important use of the Internet and affect all stakeholders involved. Though there is some research conducted by institutes that are guarding the interests of consumers and businesses, online reviews deserve much more attention from them. The impact of online reviews should not be underestimated and undervalued, since it is a relatively new phenomenon that is only dealt with on a practical level, mostly by the stakeholders themselves. Some authority over the subject could be taken back by institutions, by investigating the phenomenon and its developments more in terms of structural impact on the (Internet) economy within an internet society.

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