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Consumer Experiences with Online Consumer Reviews: A Phenomenological Exploration

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As an influential means of electronic word-of-mouth, online consumer reviews act as a vital resource for consumers to seek quality information before they purchase new products (Utz, Kerkhof, & van Bos, 2012). Extant research has gained insights into how consumers refer to online reviews when purchasing products or services. For instance, consumers have preferences of online reviews written by reviewers with better reputations and higher exposure (Lu, Jerath, & Vir Singh, 2013). While prior studies have focused on the effects of online reviews on consumers' decision making using quantitative approaches, qualitative, inductive research that illuminates consumer behavior on online reviews as a phenomena is scant (Yin, Bond, & Zhang, 2014). It is necessary to deepen current understanding about how consumers, recipients of online review messages, perceive and/or experience them for shopping, posing an important question: What does experiencing online consumer reviews mean to consumers? More specifically, are there key themes emerging from consumers' experiences of online consumer reviews? This research aims to answer these questions by identifying key themes/meanings underlying consumers' experiences with online consumer reviews for fashion/apparel shopping from the perspective of their users – consumers.

This study used a phenomenological approach to study consumer experience with online consumer reviews for shopping. A phenomenological study is qualitative research exploring individuals' lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Polkinghome, 1989) and the main aim of phenomenology is to identify the essence of the focal experience for many individuals. Two major components involve *what* they experienced and *how* they experienced it inquiries (Polkinghome, 1989). Phenomenology has been widely used in consumer research to define a complex description of the essence of various consumption phenomena (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), and was applied to look into the phenomenon of consumer experiences of online consumer reviews for fashion/apparel shopping in this study.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with online review users for fashion/apparel products. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The interview data were auto-taped and transcribed, followed by interpretation. Interpretation was conducted based on verbatim transcripts of the in-depth interviews, which was an iterative back-and-forth process of comprehending the whole data as well as relating the partial text to the whole structure (Bleicher 1980). Based on the transcripts, the common concepts or ideas mentioned by the participants were identified as key themes (Thompson et al., 1989), and three themes emerged as follows.

The Theme of Exchange: "...a consumer, spend their money to get this...They have to do exchange something they work hard for to buy products. So I wanna know, do you think it works

that money that you spend.” Prior study only relates to the concept of “exchange” to consumers’ sharing experiences and opinions by writing reviews (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008). In this study, an exchange is related to a consumer’s investment and product of an outcome. That is, her/his investment of time and money on searching online reviews for a product is accompanied with the hope of getting equal amount and valence of product information. In an exchange, not only do consumers expect equal transaction between time and product knowledge, but also they want to get as much information as possible within limited time invested. Meanwhile, consumers want to be wiser in the exchanges by spending the least amount of time while getting the most amount of product information.

The Theme of Expectation: “...it will be safer by spending money online knowing that, okay, these people like it or these people do not like it.” Expectation refers to a consumer’s existing anticipation or prediction regarding expected level of performance of a product. Consumers formulate expectations about goods/services based on their prior experiences with them (Rust, Inman, Jia, & Zahorik, 1999). Our findings reveal expectations to be multitudinous, embracing the expectation of product, the expectation of transaction, the expectation of online reviews, and the expectation of review websites. Online consumer reviews help them to enrich or enhance expectations throughout decision-making processes, including before, during, and after the purchase. One participant stated that expectations also include a sense of awareness of potential problems, besides awareness of product benefits. Expected quality of a product is a core component of consumers’ expectations formed through searching online consumer reviews pertaining to the product.

The Theme of Negativity Bias: “Sometimes when I see all the bad reviews, it overweighs all the goods. So I won’t purchase it.” Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) define negativity bias as the phenomenon in which negative information is valued more than positive information. Negativity bias of online consumer reviews occurs when consumers’ perceptions of others’ experiences are less weighted than that of true product performance. Consumers assume that reviews are objective reports of product quality and performance, written by actual users of the product. Relatedly, consumers pay more attentions to negative reviews than to positive ones. For purchase decisions, review readers rely on the reasons for negative reviews, which help predict post-purchase experiences with the same product in the future. Taken together, it is shown that positive and negative reviews have distinctive psychological motives (i.e., consumers seek negative reviews to persuade or prevent themselves to buy, and positive reviews to strengthen their buying intentions), while users generally give more credence to negative than positive ones.

This qualitative study enriches the current understanding by providing a theoretical underpinning of consumers’ experiences with online consumer reviews. The study has two implications. At the academic level, this study provides a theoretical model explaining online consumer reviews. It also sheds light on online word-of-mouth marketing that benefits both companies and consumers at the market level.

References available upon request