

# **The Effect of Profanity and Quality on Perceived Review Helpfulness and Purchase Intentions**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Online customer reviews have become increasingly important in the word-of-mouth marketing space. Thirty-eight percent of U.S. internet users reported that online reviews are very important to them before making a purchase, 17% always consult online reviews before buying a product, and 25% report that customer product reviews are important when picking an online retailer (Clement 2019). User reviews are available on such platforms as Amazon, eBay, Yelp, Trip Advisor, Yellowpages, Angie's List, Better Business Bureau, Google, Facebook, and more. In fact, 40.5% of Amazon users named product reviews and recommendations as a key factor to shop on the site (Sabanoglu 2020). Moreover, 205 million total customer reviews have been submitted to Yelp (Clement 2020).

Online reviews are clearly more relevant to customers—and marketers—than ever. As such, previous research on this subject has focused primarily on determining what characteristics make for an effective customer review, ranging from the use of profanity to the readability of the text.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Online customer reviews fall under a section of the word-of-mouth (WOM) umbrella (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) known as electronic WOM (eWOM), an area that has been discussed at length since the 1990s (Breazeale 2009). A user-generated online review is typically composed of a subject line, a star rating (often from one to five), and a body of text. Reviews can vary in length, valence, and quality—and can sometimes include profanity. Profanities are connotative in meaning and serve to communicate emotions, the interpretation of which is dependent on one's personal experience with culture and language (Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Some of the most popular profanities are “s--t,” “f--k,” “d--n,” “b---h,” and “c--p” (Kirk, 2013).

Prior research exists on the use of profanity in customer reviews. Review valence and profanity, for instance, are closely linked. Hair and Ozcan (2018) found that customers perceive negative reviews containing profanity as less useful due to decreased perceived reviewer objectivity, whereas readers perceive positive reviews with profanity as more useful due to increased perceived reviewer credibility. Furthermore, longer positive reviews are seen as more useful (Hair and Ozcan 2018).

In related research, Lafreniere (2018) found that profanity can increase or decrease readers' attitudes toward a customer review, but censored profanity adds no value to reviews. The impact of profanity is less pronounced when not used diagnostically—such as when a review contains multiple instances of profanity or a product is already expected to feature the attribute relayed by the profanity—indicating that profanity communicates dual meanings about the reviewer's personal feelings toward a product and the product's characteristics (Lafreniere 2018).

Review helpfulness is another facet of the online customer review area that has been explored at length. A “helpful customer review” has been defined as “a peer-generated product evaluation that facilitates the consumer’s purchase decision process,” noting also that review helpfulness may be considered an expression of review diagnosticity (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). Generally speaking, lengthier reviews (Mudambi and Schuff 2010) and more readable text (Korfiatis et al. 2012) are seen as more helpful.

Current literature touches on the relationship between review valence and review quality. Review quality is “the quality of a review's contents from the perspective of information characteristics (relevance, understandability, sufficiency, and objectivity)” (Park et al. 2007). Lee et al. (2008) found that high-quality negative reviews are more influential on customer attitude toward a product than low-quality negative reviews. Even so, both low-quality and high-quality negative reviews imbue greater influence on the attitudes of customers who are more involved in the purchasing process (Lee et al. 2008).

## **HYPOTHESES**

Although research exists regarding profanity in both online reviews and quality of online reviews, the link between these two subjects has not yet been established. Because low-quality negative reviews are seen as less influential (Lee et al. 2008) and negative reviews containing profanity are seen as less useful (Hair and Ozcan 2018), we hypothesize that readers will find low-quality negative text containing profanity even less helpful. The drawbacks of low-quality writing will amplify the drawbacks of profanity in a negative review. Despite the established effects of profanity in negative reviews (Hair and Ozcan 2018), we hypothesize that profanity will instead add to the value of high-quality negative text, which is seen as more influential (Lee et al. 2008). Profanity will increase the perceived helpfulness of high quality reviews.

Considering that more readable text is seen as more helpful (Korfiatis et al. 2012) and positive reviews containing profanity are seen as more useful (Hair and Ozcan 2018), we hypothesize that high-quality reviews containing profanity will be seen as even more helpful. The benefits of high-quality writing will amplify the benefits of profanity in a positive review. We also hypothesize that less readable text, which is seen as less helpful (Korfiatis et al. 2012), in combination with profanity, which is seen as more useful in positive reviews, will result in a neutral effect. The drawbacks of poor writing will counteract the benefits of profanity in a positive review.

Using an experiment with a design of 2 (valence: positive vs. negative)  $\times$  2 (profanity: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (review quality: high vs. low), we plan to test our hypotheses using samples on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). As longer (shorter) reviews are considered more (less) helpful (Mudambi and Schuff 2010) and useful (Hair and Ozcan 2018), we will use sample reviews at average length of 200 characters (“2018 ReviewTrackers” 2018), and will implement only one instance of profanity per review to ensure greater diagnosticity (Lafreniere 2018). We will run manipulation checks for all three of our manipulations. This controlled experiment will test the effect of the three-way interaction between valence, quality, and profanity on perceived review helpfulness and purchase intentions. Adapting work by Kim and Gupta (2012) and Hair

and Ozcan (2018), we will measure perceived reviewer objectivity and perceived reviewer credibility as potential mediators of our findings.

## DISCUSSION

Our research may provide further insight into what makes an effective customer review, enabling online platforms to offer better guidelines to users to write better reviews that may result in increased purchase intentions from readers. For instance, profanity use is currently a violation of Amazon's community guidelines, but we may demonstrate that allowing such expression is valuable.

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