Online Reviews in B2B Markets: A Qualitative Study of Underlying Motives

Janina Seutter
Paderborn University, janina.seutter@wiwi.uni-paderborn.de

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ONLINE REVIEWS IN B2B MARKETS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF UNDERLYING MOTIVES

Research in Progress

Janina Seutter¹, Paderborn University, Paderborn, Germany, janina.seutter@upb.de

Abstract

While online reviews in Business-to-Consumer (B2C) and Consumer-to Consumer (C2C) markets have reached an advanced state of maturity in both academia and practice, the study of the dynamics of online reviews in the B2B market is still in its early stages. For this market, there are numerous unanswered questions concerning online reviews. The growing number of B2B review platforms and reviews makes it increasingly important to better understand the heterogeneous motives for writing online reviews for a business partner. Structured by the scales of the Motivation Sources Inventory, the literature on online reviews in the B2C market, and specifically the motivation underpinning review writing, and the characteristics of B2B review platforms, a semi-structured interview protocol is derived and presented. This research-in-progress describes the concept and proposed next steps of a qualitative study aimed at identifying the underlying motives for writing B2B online reviews.

Keywords: Online Reviews, B2B Market, Motives, Qualitative Study.

1 Introduction

Online reviews are considered important due to the significant impact they have on consumer decision making. The vast majority of consumers read online reviews before making a purchase decision (Collinger, 2017). A comparably young, but growing practice are online reviews in B2B markets. The biggest B2B review provider, G2.com, had attracted more than 1.5 million reviews (G2, 2021). The electronic commerce in B2B markets is a big and revenue-generating industry. In Germany alone, the e-commerce volume accounted for a total of 1.3 billion euros in 2018 (IfH Köln, 2019). In an international survey of 560 employees in procurement, when asked which aspects of the online buying experience from the B2C market they would like to see in the B2B purchasing process, 18% stated that they would like to have more online reviews (Sana, 2019). In the evaluation phase of a supplier, as many as 33% of respondents claimed that online reviews would help them to choose a particular supplier (Sana, 2019). These statistics show, firstly, the size and economic importance of the B2B market, and secondly, the perceived value, according to procurement employees, of online reviews as a potential source of information for evaluating suppliers. While research has answered many important questions with regard to online reviews in B2C marketplaces, it has almost entirely neglected reviews in a B2B context (Steward et al., 2018). Given the increasing use of online reviews in B2B decision making, both academia and practitioners are confronted with new questions, for example, how B2B online reviews affect the decision making of business customers. One of the first qualitative studies in this regard to have specifically investigated how B2B buyers react to conflicting reviews has shown that B2B buyers aim to resolve differences in reviews (Steward et al., 2018). In a quantitative study on the effect of B2B online reviews, results indicate that the valence and volume of B2B online reviews have a positive

¹ This work has been supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) within the Collaborative Research Center 901 “On-The-Fly Computing” under the project number 160364472-SFB901.
influence on sales (Mai and Liao, 2021). These studies serve as evidence that B2B online reviews are indeed valuable and have an effect on B2B buyers. However, questions that focus on the writing of B2B online reviews (e.g., What motivates authors of B2B online reviews to write online reviews?) have not yet been investigated in academia. In research on B2C online reviews, the identified motives for review writing provided the basis for follow up research on the design of review systems (i.e., incentivitation strategies; e.g., Yu et al., 2020; Burtch et al., 2018). Similarly, it seems important for both scholars and practitioners from the B2B market to better understand the underlying motives for writing B2B online reviews in order to develop strategies on how to (best) elicit reviews from business customers.

One might ask, why should motivations for online review-writing differ for a B2B as opposed to a B2C context, apart from the obvious difference between reviewing a work-related purchase rather than a private purchase? There are other systematic differences between B2C and B2B markets we need to consider when it comes to review-writing. One of the main characteristics of business marketplaces is that companies aim to maintain a competitive advantage (Godes, 2012). By implication, it is not in the interest of a B2B reviewer to openly draw attention to their own (quality) suppliers, which may have taken company time and money to find, by trial and error. On the other hand, B2B relationships are characterized by a higher degree of professionalism and longevity than B2C relationships (Vosgerau et al., 2008), and a business customer might therefore feel more obliged to answer a request to write a B2B online review compared with a private customer. A third difference is the complexity of purchase decisions and processes in companies. A purchase decision can involve decision-making processes across different departments and hierarchical levels and involve several people (Müller et al., 2018). In addition, the purchasing person is usually not the user of the purchased product (Müller et al., 2018). Since the buyer, user and reviewer are usually one and the same person in B2C markets, the complex purchase process represents an important difference between B2C and B2B marketplaces. These differences between the markets indicate that the motivation to write a B2B online review might fundamentally differ compared to the motivation underpinning a B2C online review. Given the increased relevance of, and interest in academia and practice, of B2B online reviews this research takes a first step towards identifying the underpinning motivation of writing B2B online reviews. Thus, we formulate the following research question:

**RQ: What are the underlying motives and hindrances to online review writing in the B2B market?**

The paper focuses on presenting the outline of a qualitative research study aimed at identifying what motivates B2B customer to write B2B online reviews. As quantitative research often struggles to take into account the complexity of the reviewing situation and motivation interactions (Wu, 2019) we take on a qualitative approach to explore this question. To the best of our knowledge this is the first empirical study to investigate online reviewers’ motivation in B2B markets, and therefore contributes novel empirical evidence to the literature on B2B online reviews. In this research-in-progress we provide a detailed background of related literature and conceptualization for this research project. First, as one of the first qualitative studies on online reviewers we aim to provide a rich and grounded description of why people contribute online reviews in a business-related context. We expect that both scholars and practitioners will be able to benefit from the future insights gained from this study, as they lead to a better understanding of motivational mechanisms behind collecting and using B2B online reviews. Specifically, the interview results will help B2B companies to make informed decisions about collecting online reviews from their customers.

### 2 Motivations for Writing Online Reviews

By investigating the underlying motives to write online reviews in B2B markets, we add a new perspective on the research stream that deals with motives in writing online reviews. Previous research on the motivation for writing online reviews has been either on the identification of the motives or on the impact of (singular) motives on the online review itself (e.g., the volume, valence, or quality of the review) in particular for online reviews in B2C markets. The literature has differentiated between intrinsic motives, e.g. enjoyment and altruism, and extrinsic motives, such as economic incentives
Online Reviews in B2B Markets

(Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Cheung and Lee, 2012; Wu, 2019). Table 1 shows an overview of previously identified motives in the B2C market.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Effects on Reviewing Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concern for Others</td>
<td>A genuine desire to help others make a better purchase decision</td>
<td>• Elicits positive eWOM (Jeong and Jang, 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Incentives</td>
<td>Receiving a reward for the writing as a sign of appreciation</td>
<td>• No quality differences between paid and unpaid reviews (Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Performance-contingent rewards improve review quality (Wang et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive bias in reviews due to reciprocity effect (Cabral and Li, 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Enhancement</td>
<td>Enhancing one’s self-image vis-à-vis other consumers</td>
<td>• Social norms effective for motivating people to write longer reviews (Burtch et al., 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Attention-seeking strategy: reviewers seek to review popular products but avoid crowded review segment (Shen et al., 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Benefits</td>
<td>A sense of emotional involvement with the group</td>
<td>• Number of friends and fans positively impacts review volume (Singh et al., 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Summary of previously identified motives for writing online reviews in B2C markets.

The effects of the previously identified motives for writing online reviews in B2C markets on the volume, valence or quality of the reviews have been investigated in detail. For instance, the genuine desire to help others make a better purchase decision elicits positive eWOM from restaurant visitors (Jeong and Jang, 2011). Several studies have already looked into the effects of the use of economic incentives. No qualitative differences are observed between paid and unpaid reviews (Wang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2012), but performance-contingent incentives improve quality (Wang et al., 2012). Another study observed a positive bias due to the reciprocity effect when economic incentives were used (Wu, 2019; Cabral and Li, 2015). The self-enhancement motive can be stimulated through social norms (e.g., volume of reviews authored by other reviewers) and effectively increase the length of reviews (Burtch et al., 2018). The effect of how the sense of involvement with the group has an impact on reviewing behavior can be observed among Yelp users, as the number of friends and fans positively impact the number of reviews written (Singh et al., 2016).

The overview of the previous literature on the motivation for writing online in B2C markets provides a starting point to identify and, in a next step, distinguish motives in B2B markets from those in B2C markets. Furthermore, it becomes evident from the numerous publications that deal with the effect of singular motives on the characteristics of online reviews, that a list of the underlying motives can serve as a good starting point for subsequent research. In this respect, this study represents a first step towards promoting research on the motives of B2B reviewers.

3 Theoretical Foundation

Motivation has been examined from a great variety of perspectives (e.g., need-based, Maslow, 1943; intrinsic; Deci, 1975 or expectancy; Vroom, 1964). Based on an integrative taxonomy of motivation sources the Motivation Sources Inventory was developed (Barbuto Jr and Scholl, 1998). It contains five subscales to measure the sources of Motivation. The items are often used to measure e.g., the underlying work motivation of employees in a company (Barbuto Jr, 2005; Bodur and Infal, 2015). The Motivation Sources Inventory distinguishes between five sources of motivation, i.e., two intrinsic motivations (Intrinsic Process Motivation and Internal Self-concept Motivation), and three extrinsic motivations, i.e., Instrumental Motivation, External Self-concept Motivation and Goal Internalization Motivation. In our study we seek to identify the motives for performing the task of writing an online review in a work-
related environment. As the items of the Motivation Sources Inventory have been used in previous research to identify underlying motivations in work-related environments, we consider it to be a suitable basis for the structure of our interview protocol. Table 3 provides a definition and examples of how to describe and clarify each of these motivations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation Sources Inventory</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Exemplary Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Process Motivation</td>
<td>Individual performs a certain kind of work for the sheer fun of it.</td>
<td>I only like to do things that are fun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental Motivation</td>
<td>Individuals’ behavior will lead to certain extrinsic tangible outcomes.</td>
<td>I would work harder if I knew that my effort would lead to higher pay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Self-concept Motivation</td>
<td>Individual is primarily other-directed, seeking affirmation of traits, competencies, and values.</td>
<td>It is important to me that others approve of my behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Self-concept Motivation</td>
<td>Individual sets internal standards for traits, competencies, and values that become the basis for the ideal self.</td>
<td>I like to do things which give me a sense of personal achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Internalization Motivation</td>
<td>Individual adopts attitudes and behaviors because the content is congruent with personal value systems.</td>
<td>Unless I believe in the cause, I will not work hard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Motivation Sources Inventory according to Barbuto Jr and Scholl (1998).

**Intrinsic Process Motivation.** For this source of motivation, the task itself is enough of an incentive as it brings enjoyment to the person that performs the task (Barbuto Jr and Scholl, 1998). In online reviews for the B2C market, this motivation was found in particular in the motives Enjoyment and self-enhancement (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hu and Kim, 2018). B2C reviewers usually act as private individuals and voluntarily take the time to share their experiences in an online review. We argue that this is different for B2B reviewers. Here, the reviewer writes the online review as part of his or her professional work and assumes that, due to this factor, the influence of external circumstances (e.g. that there are company-wide instructions to write reviews) increases and the influence of Intrinsic Process Motivation for B2B online reviews is comparatively low.

**Instrumental Motivation.** If a person expects a behavior to lead to a certain tangible extrinsic outcome (i.e., money, promotions, etc.), this acts as an instrumental reward (Barbuto Jr and Scholl, 1998). In online reviews for the B2C market, this kind of motivation was found in the form of companies offering Economic incentives (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hu and Kim, 2018). This also applies to the B2B market. In fact, discussions with experts from the field revealed that it is common practice for a company to pay $25 to a B2B reviewer for each online review they provide. Hence, we argue that this factor is relevant for the motivation to write a B2B review.

**External Self-concept Motivation.** Here, the self-concept is adopted according to role expectations of a reference group. In order to gain acceptance and status, a person behaves in a certain way to satisfy their reference groups (Barbuto Jr and Scholl, 1998). For B2C reviews this motivation might apply in form of a Social Benefits motive (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Nevertheless, it is evident that most B2C reviews are written by anonymous reviewers and the feedback from the reference group (i.e., other reviewers or review reader) is provided anonymously (e.g., in the form of comments or helpful votes). B2B online review platforms, however, place much emphasis on making the identity of their reviewers more transparent by publishing reviewers’ names, company affiliation and position, as part of the review. We argue that B2B online reviewers take this into account and see themselves in the role of representing a company when writing a review and want to appear more competent to the reference group as a professional user of a software or service.

**Internal Self-concept Motivation.** In this case, the individual sets internal standards as a basis for the ideal self. Accordingly, the person is motivated to behave in a way that reinforces these standards. For
B2C reviews this motivation might be prevailing for the motives Concern for other consumers and Helping the company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). B2C reviewers act as private individuals, while B2B reviewers write a review based on a business purchase. One ought to consider the extent to which the business environment either encourages or inhibits Internal Self-concept Motivation. For example, it is necessary to consider to what extent competition among consumers is less pronounced than among employees from different companies.

**Goal Internalization Motivation.** This source of motivation applies when individuals perform certain behaviors because the trait and behavior of a third party is congruent with their personal value system (Barbuto Jr and Scholl, 1998). If a person strongly believes in a cause, the motivation to work towards the collective goal increases. This motivation is based on strong ideals and beliefs. Such motives were not identified in the literature on B2C online reviews. Since we have not found any indication from the B2B online review platforms that ideals and beliefs play a stronger role, we also expect to find that Goal Internalization Motivation is not relevant for B2B online reviews.

4 Method

We believe that a qualitative, inductive approach is best suited to explore the underlying motivation in B2B markets. In general, qualitative research on online reviews is very rare (Wu, 2019), with a preponderance of online surveys that collected data for research on online review motivations in B2C (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Yoo et al., 2013). Relationships between specific types of incentives (e.g., financial incentives or incentives based on social norms) were identified using observational data analyses (Sun et al., 2017; Burtch et al., 2018). Two exceptions worth mentioning here are Wu (2019) and Steward et al. (2018). Wu (2019) examined motivation crowding in online product reviewing, and Steward et al. (2018) studied the question of what happens when a B2B buyer is confronted with conflicting reviews from internal and external review sources. These authors justify their choice of qualitative method by arguing that the complexity of the situation requires a qualitative, inductive approach (Martin and Turner, 1986). A qualitative approach can be particularly suitable if not much knowledge is available on a topic and the aim is to get a basic overview of the topic (van Aken et al., 2007). In addition, interviews constitute an excellent way of exploring people's motivation, feelings and moods. As there are many open questions with regard to the underlying motivation in B2B online reviewing we consider semi-structured interviews of experienced B2B reviewers to be the most appropriate method for our initial investigation into online review writing motivations in this market.

4.1 Research Environment

While Amazon, Yelp or TripAdvisor have transformed the B2C buyer’s journey, B2B companies still struggle with how to approach review management. Considering the limited resources of time, personnel and money, B2B online reviews constitute an important resource to provide insights into customers decision making (Steward et al., 2018). A growing number of B2B online review platforms focus on collecting and displaying B2B online reviews, e.g., G2 (https://www.g2.com), TrustRadius (https://www.trustradius.com), and Gartner Peer Insight (https://www.gartner.com/reviews). It is noticeable, however, that these B2B online review platforms specialize in reviews for software solutions and software-related services. G2, for example, has two different review templates, one for a software review and another for a service review. These platforms collect and provide B2B online reviews on a great range of different categories. Besides that, there are other, usually more specialized B2B online review platforms that focus on a certain industry, e.g., Clutch (https://clutch.co), a platform that provides reviews on companies that offer IT support and marketing services.

G2, TrustRadius and Gartner Peer Insight indicate on their homepages how many reviews they have collected to date. G2, the largest platform, already provides more than 1.5 million reviews (see table 2). Compared to B2C, B2B reviewing platforms seem to place even greater emphasis on the validation of reviewers. Authentication via the LinkedIn profile or the specification of a business email address has become a common standard. Information about the reviewer (i.e., real name, profile picture, information
about job position and employer) and the review source (e.g., review invitation from the seller or the review platform) are customary. The review templates in B2B online review platforms are very extensive. The number of dimensions in the template ranges from 4 for the software review template on G2 to 22 for an extended review covering all sub-dimensions on Gartner Peer Insight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Platform Size</th>
<th>Authentication</th>
<th>No of Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>SaaS companies</td>
<td>&gt; 1.5 m. reviews</td>
<td>LinkedIn, business email address</td>
<td>4 (Software)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 (Service)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TrustRadius</td>
<td>Software and service-based B2B companies</td>
<td>&gt; 340,000 reviews</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gartner Peer Insights</td>
<td>IT companies</td>
<td>&gt; 415,000 reviews</td>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>7 (Main)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22 (Sub)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Examples of B2B online review platforms (visited on 12-11-2021).

4.2 Sample Selection

To conduct a qualitative study, one first needs to decide how to recruit a sample of reviewers as informants for the study. The sampling strategy is a key element of the grounded theory method and enables to focus on the developing theory and make sure it is grounded in the data (Urquhart et al., 2010). For a qualitative study, it is important to select “information-rich cases […] from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990). The study follows a theoretical sampling procedure (Charmaz, 2006), starting with an initial sample that includes business customers from different industries (e.g., Hospital & Health Care, Aviation & Aerospace, Mechanical or Industrial Engineering or Information Technology & Services), company sizes, and career level. For our initial sample we will focus on B2B customers with practical experience of writing B2B online reviews. We plan to approach experienced B2B reviewers that have recently (within less than 12 months before the interview) written a review on a B2B review platform. As reviewers on TrustRadius usually give their full name, the name of their employer, and job title, this platform is particularly well suited to build a sample of “information-rich cases” and specifically select participants with different backgrounds and perspectives to avoid the “more-of-the-same” path (Urquhart et al., 2010), considering the industry, job position and size of the company. An initial set of 10 interviews with business customers will be conducted and analyzed in a first step. More interviews will be conducted until we reach saturation within the collected data (Marshall et al., 2013). The initial set of 10 interviews is comparable to Wu (2019) who recruited nine online reviewers for semi-structured interviews in their initial round.

Figure 1. Anonymized example of available information about a reviewer on TrustRadius.
4.3 Data Collection

The data collection follows a semi-structured interview protocol, divided into three segments: The first segment aims to capture the intrinsic, the second the extrinsic motivation, and the third is open-ended. To add structure to the interview and facilitate the analysis of the interview transcripts, the questions are loosely based on the five different sources of Motivation from the Motivation Sources Inventory (Barbuto Jr and Scholl, 1998), and adapted to the context of B2B online review writing. The purpose of this procedure is to ensure that the different sources of motivation identified in the integrative taxonomy of motivation sources in Barbuto Jr and Scholl (1998) are incorporated into the interview protocol. Since this is an exploratory study, the items are supposed to offer interviewees a wide range of possible solutions. To this end, the protocol also includes an open ended item, following the narrative interview technique, which does not address any particular motivation derived from literature, but should allow us to learn more about the reviewing process, and to identify relationships among different motivations or even identify new motives (Küsters, 2009; Rieder et al., 2021). We plan to conduct and record the interviews through video-calls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items from the Interview Protocol</th>
<th>Possible Source of Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intrinsic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which internal factors drive you to write a B2B online review?</td>
<td>Intrinsic Process Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is important to you when writing a B2B online review?</td>
<td>Internal Self-concept Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extrinsic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What effect would you like your B2B online assessment to have on the reader(ship)?</td>
<td>External Self-concept Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your goal when writing a B2B online review?</td>
<td>Goal Internalization Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which external circumstances or situations prompt you to write B2B online reviews?</td>
<td>Instrumental Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reviewing Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please describe a situation in which you usually write a B2B online review.</td>
<td>Open item for possible new motives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Excerpts from the interview protocol.

5 Next Steps

Based on the literature on B2C online reviews and the characteristics of B2B online review platforms we are convinced that the investigation of the underlying motives for writing B2B online reviews can be of interest to both academia and practice. We plan to extend this research-in-progress by taking the following four steps:

First, we will conduct interviews with business customers who already have practical experience in writing B2B online reviews. In the first step, the sample will be restricted to reviewers of the bigger B2B online review platforms such as G2, TrustRadius and Gartner Peer Insights. Second, after we will have systematically gathered the data through interviews, we will analyse the interview protocols to identify the overarching motives in the process of writing B2B online reviews. The analysis will be carried out in the spirit of a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Urquhart et al., 2010) and is supported by using the text analysis software MAXQDA. In this way, we hope to be able to observe motives and match the motives with the underlying motivation according to the Motivation Sources Inventory. Third, the results of the interviews will be used to develop hypotheses with regard to the underlying motivation for writing B2B online reviews. In addition, the results of the interviews will be used to develop a questionnaire for a quantitative survey among B2B customers. The questionnaire will be distributed among B2B customers to validate the previously identified motives.
Finally, as research on B2B online review is still in an early stage, we aim to elaborate further possible research questions, for example, whether and how different elicitation measures in B2B markets impact the volume, valence and quality of B2B online reviews.

References

Online Reviews in B2B Markets


