HE WHO PAYS THE PIPER CALLS THE TUNE: ONLINE REVIEW ELICITATION BY SELLERS AND THIRD-PARTY PLATFORMS IN B2B MARKETS

Jürgen Neumann  
*Paderborn University, juergen.neumann@wiwi.uni-paderborn.de*

Dominik Gutt  
*Paderborn University, dominik.gutt@uni-paderborn.de*

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Research in Progress

Neumann, Jürgen,1 Paderborn University, Paderborn, Germany, juergen.neumann@upb.de
Gutt, Dominik,1 Paderborn University, Paderborn, Germany, dominik.gutt@upb.de

Abstract

Customers rely substantially on online reviews to make informed decisions. Despite the rich body of literature on online reviews, little is known about the role of online reviews in business-to-business (B2B) markets. In particular, it is unclear how providing past customers with incentives in exchange for their reviews (that is, review elicitation) affects the resulting reviews in such markets. Using a comprehensive data set from a large B2B online review platform, we investigate different types of elicitation that include email invitations, donations to charity, and gift cards. In contrast to previous research, we also observe review elicitation from both the third-party platform and individual sellers. In line with our hypotheses derived from relationship marketing and theory on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, we find that seller-initiated elicitation is associated with an increase in review ratings, whereas elicitation initiated by the third-party platform is associated with a decrease in ratings. In addition, the correlation between any type of elicitation and review text length is negative except for gift cards given by the seller. Our results come with substantial managerial implications for B2B review platforms, sellers, and customers.

Keywords: Online Reviews, Review Elicitation, B2B Relationships, Third-Party Platform.

1 Introduction

Online reviews are omnipresent in today’s online landscape. A central aim of providing customers with reviews is the reduction of information asymmetry between sellers and customers and the establishment of trust in the product or service (Dellarocas, 2003, Babic Rosario et al., 2016). However, research has found that reviews are often biased (Hu et al., 2017) and that different market participants set different goals with respect to online review collection (Chen et al., 2017). Whereas third-party platforms such as Yelp and TripAdvisor might want to ensure that reviews of a particular hotel are truthful, the managers of that hotel aim to receive especially positive reviews to improve their own reputation. To allow participants to achieve these goals, online review systems can implement features to elicit reviews from their customers, such as asking past customers for feedback via mail and offering payment in exchange for reviews.

Although recent studies have analyzed how measures such as asking for feedback via mail (Askalidis et al., 2017) and offering rebates (Cabra Li, 2015) or reviewer reputation systems (Shen et al., 2015) affect reviewing behavior (rating and length) in business-to-consumer (B2C) and consumer-to-

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consumer (C2C) markets, no study has scrutinized the influence of review elicitation measures in a business-to-business (B2B) market. Still, B2B review platforms such as TrustRadius, G2Crowd, and Capterra are growing steadily, and previous literature suggests that reviews affect sales in the B2B context (Pavlou, 2002). On such platforms, customers can, in a professional context, review business software. These platforms strongly engage in review elicitation. For instance, approximately 28% of the recent reviews for Skype for Business on G2Crowd are organic; the remaining reviews were either solicited by mail or monetarily incentivized. Interestingly, reviews on third-party B2B platforms are invited/incentivized by either the third-party platform itself or the seller. Because eliciting reviews is costly in terms of finding reviewers and providing them with incentives, it is necessary to understand how such measures influence reviews in the B2B market. Because the B2B context is inherently different from the B2C context, for instance in terms of perceptions of trust (Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002) and decision complexity (Oliveira and Roth 2012), existing findings from the large body of knowledge on online reviews do not necessarily hold. In line with this, previous studies call for more insights on reviewing behavior in B2B environments (Gutt et al. 2019). More specifically, review elicitation in a B2B setting might be different from a B2C setting because reviews are written in a professional context. Each reviewer represents a business, and each review is consequently part of a business relationship. Thus, the motivation to write reviews and the reaction to incentivized reviews could differ from the B2C setting. Furthermore, no empirical work has investigated review elicitation from two different sources (third-party platform and seller) simultaneously. Therefore, studying B2B review platforms offers a unique way to observe review elicitation in a B2B setting with multiple sources of elicitation. Because review ratings positively affect sales (Babic Rosario et al. 2016) and review length is positively associated with the helpfulness of reviews (Kuan et al. 2015), we plan to investigate the relationship between review elicitation and these measures by posing the following research question:

*How do different review elicitation measures from different sources affect reviews in terms of rating and length in B2B markets?*

To this end, we derive hypotheses from relationship marketing (Palmatier et al., 2006) and insights on motivation to write reviews (Askalidis et al., 2017). We hypothesize that reviews incentivized by the seller are more positive because the seller invests in the relationship, whereas reviews incentivized by the third-party platform are more negative because reviewers try to be more truthful. Finally, we hypothesize that any incentivized review is shorter because intrinsic motivation is crowded out by external incentives (Cerasoli et al., 2014). Analyzing a comprehensive data set of more than 500,000 reviews from a large B2B review platform, we find first support for our hypotheses. In our data, we observe whether reviewers are invited by mail without an incentive or provided with an incentive (such as an Amazon gift card) by either the third-party platform or the seller. We also can observe whether the platform has offered to donate money to charity in exchange for writing a review. In detail, our results from a two-way fixed effects regression suggest that, depending on the type of elicitation, the elicited review’s rating (measured on a scale from zero to ten) differs from organic reviews by about –0.1 to 0.6 rating units. In line with our hypotheses, elicitation is associated with lower ratings when done by a third-party platform and associated with higher ratings when done by the seller. Examining the length of elicited reviews, we find that, except for monetary incentives by the seller, reviews are significantly shorter by up to about 98 characters.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to empirically scrutinize the impact of different types of elicitation that involves (1) a B2B review context, and (2) elicitation measures from both a third-party platform and a seller. Our preliminary results provide substantial managerial implications. Third-party platforms need to be aware that, although eliciting reviews can lead to negative/more truthful reviews, the resulting reviews are significantly shorter, which is often associated with a lower perceived helpfulness (Kuan et al., 2015). Sellers, however, seem to be able to effectively increase their reputation by giving monetary rewards to customers in exchange for their reviews. From a customer perspective, these insights are valuable because customers need to be aware of potential biases induced by different types of elicitation when making a purchase decision. Finally, we enrich the scholarly discussion of online reviews in B2B—especially on its drivers—that has been largely ne-
glected by prior research. Moreover, our results underscore the need for research to investigate whether reviews elicited by sellers or third-party platforms are different in B2C markets.

2 Related Literature

Trust between two business parties is one of the main facilitators of business transactions (McKnight et al. 2002). The literature has, by and large, reached the consensus that online reviews are a primary way to build trust between customers and sellers in B2C markets (Ba and Pavlou 2002, Pavlou and Dimoka 2006). In essence, online reviews erode the information asymmetry between buyer and seller prior to purchase, allowing the buyer to inspect features of the products and characteristics of the sellers based on the feedback provided by previous customers (Dellarocas 2003). Studies have thus documented a wide range of positive implications of online reviews. For instance, they can support customer decision making, and positive online reviews can increase a seller’s sales (Babic Rosario et al. 2016). Due to these effects, a considerable number of studies have investigated how sellers in B2C markets can effectively elicit online reviews from buyers. Scholars have analyzed multiple methods of review elicitation and their respective impact on a review’s rating and length. Table 1 provides an overview of existing studies in this specific research area—including our own to show how it adds to this particular stream of literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Types of Elicitation</th>
<th>Source of Elicitation</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Market Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Askalidis et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Mail invitation</td>
<td>Seller</td>
<td>4 major online retailers</td>
<td>Rating, length, helpfulness</td>
<td>B2C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burtch et al. (2018)</td>
<td>SMS invitation with/without coupon or social norm</td>
<td>Seller</td>
<td>Retailer, Amazon Turk</td>
<td>Volume, length</td>
<td>B2C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Rebate</td>
<td>Seller, Third-party</td>
<td>None (theoretical model)</td>
<td>Truthfulness/rating, volume</td>
<td>C2C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khern-am-nuai et al. (2018)</td>
<td>Coupon</td>
<td>Seller</td>
<td>Retailer, Amazon</td>
<td>Rating, length, textual features</td>
<td>B2C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shen et al. (2015)</td>
<td>Reviewer reputation system</td>
<td>Seller</td>
<td>Barnes and Noble, Amazon</td>
<td>Average rating deviation, volume</td>
<td>B2C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This study</td>
<td>Mail invitation with/without gift card or donation to charity</td>
<td>Seller, Third-party</td>
<td>Third-party B2B review platform</td>
<td>Rating, length</td>
<td>B2B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Overview of Research on Review Elicitation.

Please note that, although we are aware that a number of studies investigate the impact of review elicitation on the likelihood to write a review (Chen, 2010), this study focuses solely on those that investigate the length and the rating of a review. By and large, the elicitation types investigated in the literature can be categorized as follows: (1) no incentive, (2) nonmonetary incentive, and (3) monetary incentive. The first category comprises studies that analyzed email or SMS invitations without incentives. Empirical evidence suggests that reviewers who are invited by email write more positive reviews and finds that these are both shorter and perceived as less helpful (Askalidis et al. 2017). In the second category, studies have analyzed the effect of incorporating social norms into elicitation mails,
such as comparing the customer’s reviewing activity with that of other reviewers. It has been found that emphasizing social norms positively affects the length of reviews (Burch et al. 2018). Scholars have also studied the effects of nonmonetary incentives, such as reviewer reputation programs, which give reviewers rankings (Shen et al. 2015). In the third category, studies investigated methods that include giving reviewers money in the form of coupons or rebates. There is a positive relationship between offering rebates or coupons in exchange for reviews and the rating of those reviews (Cabral and Li 2015, Khern-am-nuai et al. 2018). One theoretical model suggests that if a platform awards the rebate, reviews tend to be more negative/truthful (Chen et al. 2017).

As presented in Table 1, no empirical work has examined elicitation from different sources even though theoretical work suggests differences in review behavior depending on the source. Furthermore, no study has investigated review elicitation in a B2B reviewing environment. As argued above, there are inherent differences between reviewing in a B2C setting and reviewing in a B2B setting. Our study addresses these gaps in the literature in two major ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, we are the first to analyze review elicitation in a B2B context. Second, most of the literature focuses on elicitation initiated by the seller. Our study provides a unique setting in which we can observe elicitation initiated by two different sources: sellers and platform.

### 3 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

As discussed earlier, B2B reviews are part of a business relationship. Therefore, we delineate hypotheses on the effective elicitation of online reviews in B2B markets by borrowing theory from relationship marketing, defined as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 22). A sizeable body of literature on relationship marketing has found that when one party invests in the business-customer relationship, it can spur favorable reactions from the other because it prompts gratitude-related reciprocal behavior by the recipient of the investment (Palmatier et al. 2009). Sellers, for example, benefit from such investments in the form of customer loyalty (Garnefeld et al. 2013), commitment (Palmatier et al. 2006), and word of mouth (Palmatier et al. 2006). This study is mainly interested in the relationship between relationship investment and electronic word of mouth—that is, online reviews, which is the most prevalent form of word of mouth in online markets (Dellarocas 2003, Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). According to relationship marketing literature, investments generate expectations of reciprocity that lead to favorable word of mouth dissemination by the customer about the party that invested in the relationship (Anderson and Weitz 1989, Ganesan 1994). A recent study on Airbnb, for example, provides empirical evidence for the positive impact of seller effort on the seller’s rating through reciprocal buyer behavior (Proserpio et al. 2018). The literature identifies relationship investments into the relationship with a customer in the form of gifts, sales agent support, or loyalty programs, for instance (Wulf et al. 2001, Ganesan 1994). In our case, relationship investment is represented by the seller eliciting a review. Depending on the type of elicitation, the investment differs in strength. Providing a gift in the form of an Amazon gift card should be a stronger investment than kindly asking for a review without further incentives. Because relationship investment by a seller should prompt positive gratitude-based reciprocity, we expect that eliciting a review would lead to higher ratings for the seller. Thus, we formulate Hypothesis 1 as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** A customer’s online rating should be higher than an organic rating when the seller elicits the review.

However, in our environment, it is not just sellers who actively elicit online reviews from customers; the platform itself can elicit reviews on the software that a customer has bought from a seller. Again, relationship marketing states that customers react favorably to the party that invested in the relationship. Because the party in question is the platform, not the seller, and the platform is interested in truthful and informative reviews on a product or service, it follows that a customer would not necessarily provide a high online rating. In line with this, Chen et al. (2017) theorize that when platforms ask for reviews, they should receive truthful and informative ones. When a platform elicits a review, it
openly communicates that it would like to receive informative reviews. Thus, reviewers are encouraged to be critical (that is, rather negative [Sen and Lerman, 2007]). Further, because they are not directly asked by the seller, they should be less inclined to support the seller with a particularly high rating. Therefore, a review elicited by the platform should have a lower rating than a review elicited by the seller. Previous studies have demonstrated that organic reviews are prone to the positivity bias because reviewers are more likely to write a review if they had a positive experience (Hu et al. 2017). If customers are now asked to write reviews for products that they would not review otherwise, the positivity bias should be alleviated. To summarize, customers asked by the platform should be more critical, and their ratings should not be driven by a positivity bias, which implies ratings that are lower than organic ones. We formulate Hypothesis 2:

**Hypothesis 2:** A customer’s online rating should be lower than an organic rating when the platform elicits the review.

Finally, when a party engages in review elicitation, it tries to extrinsically motivate the reviewer. The phenomenon that extrinsic incentives substitute intrinsic motivation has been studied extensively by psychology (Cerasoli et al. 2014). Similarly to other findings on extrinsic motivation for public goods contribution, the literature has recognized that review elicitation provides extrinsic stimuli that crowd out intrinsic motivation of review writing (Askalidis et al. 2017, Khern-am-nuai et al. 2018). Incentives provided by the seller or the platform are not tied to review length, resulting in reviewers spending less effort in writing longer reviews because they are driven by extrinsic stimuli. Thus, we formulate Hypothesis 3 as follows:

**Hypothesis 3:** A customer’s online review should be shorter than an organic rating when the review is elicited regardless of who elicits the review.

### 4 Empirical Analysis

#### 4.1 Data

We obtained a comprehensive data set from a large B2B online review platform. On this platform, users of B2B software, such as Skype for Business, can publish reviews consisting of ratings on a scale from 0 to 10 (represented by a star rating from 0 to 5) and a textual component. The platform employs three methods to elicit reviews: (1) mail invitation, (2) mail invitation offering an Amazon gift card in exchange for a review, and (3) mail invitation offering a donation to charity in exchange for a review. In addition, vendors themselves can invite reviewers and optionally offer an Amazon gift card for the review. Gift cards vary in value, which we cannot observe. The platform varies the value of the gift card depending on the number of existing reviews for the software, because it aims to foster review contribution for software with a low review count. The data set consists of 510,962 reviews posted between August 2012 and August 2018. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the variables of our data set on a review level.

We calculate the LENGTH of each review text and observe each RATING. Our data set also consists of various dummy variables. The variables prefixed by THIRDPARTY or SELLER indicate third-party driven (THIRDPARTY_CHARITY, THIRDPARTY_INVITE, THIRDPARTY_GIFT) or seller-driven (SELLER_INVITE, SELLER_GIFT) elicitation. Also, review authenticity can be verified by the platform (VERIFIED_PLATFORM), an authentication partner of the platform (VERIFIED_AUTH_PARTNER), the reviewer through business mail (VERIFIED_BIZ_MAIL), a LinkedIn account (VERIFIED_LINKEDIN), or an organization invite (VERIFIED_ORG_INVITE). Moreover, reviewers on the platform can verify themselves as actual users by uploading a screenshot of the software to be reviewed (VERIFIED_USER_SCREENSHOT) or using LinkedIn (VERIFIED_USER_LINKEDIN). Finally, even though they’re being verified, reviewers can choose to be ANONYMOUS.
He Who Pays the Piper

To test our hypotheses, we estimate the empirical model in Equation (1).

\[ Y_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{THIRDPARTY\_CHARITY}_{ijt} + \beta_2 \text{THIRDPARTY\_INVITE}_{ijt} + \beta_3 \text{THIRDPARTY\_GIFT}_{ijt} + \beta_4 \text{SELLER\_INVITE}_{ijt} + \beta_5 \text{SELLER\_GIFT}_{ijt} + \gamma_{ijt} + \alpha_i + \delta_j + \mu_t + \epsilon_{ijt} \]  

(1)

In this Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with fixed effects, \( Y_{ijt} \) represents the outcome variable for the review written by reviewer \( i \) for software \( j \) at time \( t \). We examine RATING and LENGTH (of a review) as outcome variables. \( \gamma_{ijt} \) is a vector that contains review-specific control variables as presented in Table 1 as well as the average rating of all reviews prior to the current one and the number of all reviews prior to the current one. Note that by controlling for the number of existing reviews, we also account for different values of Amazon gift cards. One might argue that the review a reviewer gives depends to a large extent on that reviewer’s unobservable characteristics. Reviewers who are generally more positive and outgoing might give systematically more positive reviews than reviewers who are more introverted and pessimistic. To account for time-constant unobservable characteristics among reviewers, we include reviewer fixed effects \( \alpha_i \). Also, reviewing certainly also depends on the software that is being rated. If reviewers rate a software with generally high quality and many likeable features, they will probably give higher ratings than for low-performing software with limited capabilities. Additionally, certain software sellers might generally provide gift cards of higher values. To control for these unobservable time-constant software characteristics, we introduce software-fixed effects \( \delta_j \). Furthermore, to account for seasonal patterns in reviewing behavior, we introduce \( \mu_t \) as a vector representing month- and year-level fixed effects. \( \epsilon_{ijt} \) denotes the random unobserved error term.

Table 3 presents our preliminary results. Columns (1) and (3) present estimation results for our model without reviewer-level fixed effects, whereas Columns (2) and (4) include them. The incorporation of reviewer-level fixed effects leads to a significant change for the coefficients of seller- and third-party-initiated invitations without incentives. Our results in Column (2) suggest that seller-initiated invites without an incentive do not influence the rating of a review. In line with our first hypothesis, if sellers provide monetary rewards, the elicitation is positively associated with the review’s rating. The corre-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LENGTH</td>
<td>732.9566</td>
<td>433.7275</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RATING</td>
<td>8.5194</td>
<td>1.8055</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRDPARTY_CHARITY</td>
<td>0.0153</td>
<td>0.1228</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.1991</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.4693</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELLER_INVITE</td>
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<td>0.0218</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.0734</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>VERIFIED_PLATFORM</td>
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<td>0.0338</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>VERIFIED_BIZ_MAIL</td>
<td>0.1545</td>
<td>0.3615</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERIFIED_LINKEDIN</td>
<td>0.8435</td>
<td>0.3633</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>VERIFIED_AUTH_PARTNER</td>
<td>0.0006</td>
<td>0.0247</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>VERIFIED_ORG_INVITE</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>0.0151</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>VERIFIED_USER_SCREENSHOT</td>
<td>0.5160</td>
<td>0.4997</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>VERIFIED_USER_LINKEDIN</td>
<td>0.0000</td>
<td>0.0014</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANONYMOUS</td>
<td>0.5090</td>
<td>0.4999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, N=510,962.

4.2 Empirical Model and Preliminary Results

To test our hypotheses, we estimate the empirical model in Equation (1).

\[ Y_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{THIRDPARTY\_CHARITY}_{ijt} + \beta_2 \text{THIRDPARTY\_INVITE}_{ijt} + \beta_3 \text{THIRDPARTY\_GIFT}_{ijt} + \beta_4 \text{SELLER\_INVITE}_{ijt} + \beta_5 \text{SELLER\_GIFT}_{ijt} + \gamma_{ijt} + \alpha_i + \delta_j + \mu_t + \epsilon_{ijt} \]  

(1)}
sponding coefficients are statistically significant. Based on our estimations, one can also conclude that any third-party-initiated elicitation is associated with a statistically significant decrease in the rating except for providing a donation to charity, in which case the coefficient is insignificant and close to zero. Thus, we find partial support for our second hypothesis. Regarding our third hypothesis, we find statistically significant, negative relationships for third-party donations to charity, third-party invitations, and third-party gift coupons. Note that even though intrinsic motivation could be relatively strong if the third-party platform offers a donation to charity, this donation is not tied to review length. Thus, the intrinsic propensity to write a review most likely increases, whereas the motivation to write a lengthy review decreases. For seller-initiated invites, the coefficient is negative but statistically insignificant. Surprisingly, for seller-initiated financial rewards, we find a statistically significant association with a large positive coefficient. A possible explanation for this could be that due to the underlying business relationship, reviewers not only give higher ratings but also write longer reviews to foster the relationship, with a lengthy review containing a lot of positive information.

Finally, because the length of reviews is skewed, we re-estimate our baseline model with the logarithm of length as a dependent variable. The results remain qualitatively unchanged for this specification.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RATING</td>
<td>0.1054779***</td>
<td>0.0170719</td>
<td>-118.9042***</td>
<td>-98.6709***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRDPARTY_CHARITY</td>
<td>(0.0229359)</td>
<td>(0.0687825)</td>
<td>(4.345778)</td>
<td>(15.09825)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RATING</td>
<td>-0.1192126***</td>
<td>-0.1131318***</td>
<td>-3.561995</td>
<td>-35.64855***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRDPARTY_INVITE</td>
<td>(0.0168203)</td>
<td>(0.0310202)</td>
<td>(4.339402)</td>
<td>(6.785004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RATING</td>
<td>-0.033079***</td>
<td>-0.0567762***</td>
<td>-20.93597***</td>
<td>-16.70574***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRDPARTY_GIFT</td>
<td>(0.0077084)</td>
<td>(0.0155312)</td>
<td>(1.751801)</td>
<td>(3.273499)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LENGTH</td>
<td>-85.31503***</td>
<td>-85.31503***</td>
<td>-56.55847***</td>
<td>-64.70996***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LENGTH</td>
<td>(16.0343)</td>
<td>(16.0343)</td>
<td>(10.52207)</td>
<td>(30.74336)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>149.5688</td>
<td>157.351</td>
<td>495.688</td>
<td>157.351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *&lt;p.1; **&lt;p.05; ***&lt;p.01.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Preliminary Results.

When comparing our results with findings from previous literature, we find that our results largely correspond to findings on the impact of elicitation on ratings. However, elicitation without an incentive by the seller differs for the analyzed B2B context. In addition, we present novel findings suggesting a negative association between third-party elicitation without incentives (THIRDPARTY_INVITE), and ratings. Furthermore, we empirically support the theoretical proposition by Chen et al. (2017) that platform-incentivized reviews should be more critical. Regarding the length of reviews, we find that seller-initiated elicitation is more positive in our context than in the B2C/C2C context. Moreover, we contribute to the literature by being the first to analyze the relationship between third-party initiated elicitation and review length. Consequently, our study contributes to the literature by supporting some of the existing findings from the B2C/C2C context, revealing differing results for seller-initiated review elicitation without incentives, and presenting novel results on platform-initiated elicitation.
5 Conclusion and Further Steps

The positive effects of online reviews are increasingly well documented for sellers and customers in B2C markets because they reduce the information asymmetry between buyers and sellers (Babic Rosario et al., 2016). Moreover, empirical studies have investigated monetary and nonmonetary means of how sellers can actively elicit online reviews from customers. This notwithstanding, few studies have discussed online reviews as a potential means of reducing the information asymmetry in B2B markets. This is all the more surprising, bearing in mind that scholars have highlighted that trust should be even more important in B2B markets than in B2C markets (McKnight et al., 2017). As of now, no empirical study has investigated how online reviews can be effectively elicited in these markets. Our research-in-progress paper represents a first step toward narrowing this obvious gap in the literature.

A key feature of this study that sets our work apart from previous studies is that we distinguish between rating elicitation initiated by sellers and by third-party platforms. Built on the theoretical framework of relationship marketing, we hypothesize that when rating elicitation is initiated by sellers, customers should give higher ratings (H1). Yet, when rating elicitation is initiated by the third-party platform, which aims at collecting truthful and informative reviews, a customer should give lower ratings (H2). Finally, we hypothesize that review elicitation, regardless of who initiates it—the seller or the third-party platform—should lead to a decrease in effort invested in review writing (H3). Empirically, we find support for H1 and H2, especially for elicitation with monetary incentives. That is, when initiated by the seller, reviewers give higher ratings, whereas when initiated by the third-party platform, reviewers give lower ratings. Furthermore, this association seems to be asymmetric because seller-elicited ratings are much more positive than third-party-elicited ratings are negative. However, we find just partial support for H3 because only reviews elicited by the third-party platform are associated with shorter review texts, not reviews that provide monetary incentives from the seller. A potential explanation could be that reviewers are more likely to write lengthier reviews with positive information to further support the underlying business relationship.

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to investigate online review elicitation in B2B markets. Our results add a valuable new dimension to the online review literature because previous studies have, by and large, neglected the potential use of online reviews in B2B markets. Also, by distinguishing between seller-initiated and third-party-platform-initiated rating elicitation, we propose to extend the current theoretical framework on relationship marketing (Palmatier et al., 2006). These results carry valuable practical implications for sellers and third-party platforms, as well as avenues for future research. Based on our results, sellers can invest in rating elicitation in B2B markets to improve their online ratings. To accumulate more moderate ratings, third-party platforms can also engage in rating elicitation. Yet, in fact, sellers seem to be more successful collecting higher ratings than third-party platforms are in collecting moderate ratings. For scholars, this highlights the need for differentiating between the sources of rating elicitation in B2C markets. Moreover, future research should empirically analyze the economic effects of online reviews on, for instance, sales in B2B markets.

We plan to extend this research-in-progress in five major ways. First, our empirical analysis relies on observational data, and our current empirical model does not allow for a causal interpretation of the results. We plan to collect data on the same software products from a different B2B online review platform to estimate the causal effect of elicitation types on a customer’s review by eliminating endogeneity concerns—similar to the strategy of Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) in their seminal study. Second, we plan to extract the textual features of reviews to analyze if reviewers talk about systematically different product aspects, given the type of review elicitation they receive. Additionally, we plan to use text mining to incorporate more measures for review quality. Third, we would like to investigate whether reviewers who have received multiple gifts over their time as a platform member give reviews that are different from reviewers who have simply received one gift. Fourth, we plan to collect review data for comparable software products in the B2C context to provide a direct comparison between B2C and B2B review elicitation. Finally, in our analysis, we control for unobserved reviewer characteristics, such as the reviewer’s position within the firm. In the future, we would like to investigate whether these characteristics influence the reviewers’ rating behavior.
References


