

8-9-2021

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Recommended Citation

Safi, Roozmehr, "Determinants of the Usefulness of Multidimensional Online Reviews: Insights From Secondary Data and Experiment" (2021). *AMCIS 2021 TREOs*. 37.
https://aisel.aisnet.org/treos_amcis2021/37

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Determinants of the Usefulness of Multidimensional Online Reviews: Insights From Secondary Data and Experiment

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Buyers increasingly rely on consumer online reviews in making their purchase decisions. Accordingly, many online platforms view capturing and presenting online reviews as an effective way of attracting traffic to their websites. Understanding what reviews are more important, or “useful,” from the perspective of review readers has accordingly become an important agenda for practitioners and for academics. Prior research has identified various aspects of online reviews that make a review more useful. This research has identified factors such as certain review characteristics (e.g., review star rating, review tone, review length), review writers’ characteristics (e.g., experience, popularity), and product/service characteristics (e.g., utilitarian vs. hedonic) as important determinants of review usefulness. Although this research on the antecedents of review usefulness had insightful outcomes, it appears to have not expanded in line with how online review capturing and presentation itself has evolved over recent years.

Specifically, a relatively new trend among review websites is capturing and displaying information in more nuanced ways. For example, websites such as Tripadvisor.com and Yelp.com now use multidimensional online review systems that not only capture buyers’ opinions about their overall purchase or consumption experience, but also capture their opinion about various aspects of their experience. For a restaurant, for example, some subdimensions are food quality, value for money, and atmosphere. Similarly, for a product these subdimensions are product quality, appearance, value for money, and durability. Despite this new, trending approach, our understanding about review usefulness for multidimensional reviews is very limited. In fact, I am unaware of any research in this domain.

This research aims to fill this knowledge gap by shedding light on factors that contribute to multidimensional review usefulness. It investigates the effects of review writers’ opinions about various dimensions of a product on the degree to which readers find the review useful. The study predicts certain patterns in the distribution of ratings of quality subdimensions, specifically, their degree of dispersion, as well as the nature of those quality subdimensions (search versus experience attributes) to play significant roles in determining review usefulness. The study uses a unique source of secondary data to empirically investigate these topics. Results from secondary data are next supplemented and further scrutinized with results from a controlled experiment in which subjects are presented with experimentally manipulated reviews. Together, this study contributes to our currently limited understanding about determinants of the usefulness of multidimensional online reviews.