Is Beauty Helpful? Effects of Reviewer Attractiveness on Perceived Helpfulness of Online Review

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate the impact of reviewer attractiveness on perceived helpfulness of the online review. Extending the selective-accessibility model by generating the fitness hypothesis testing and integrating it with the original similarity hypothesis testing, we hypothesize that the review with an attractive reviewer’s consumption photo is perceived as more helpful than the average-looking reviewer’s. Besides, the effect is moderated by consumers’ appearance self-esteem (ASE). With two online experiments, we found that the review with an attractive reviewer’s consumption photo is equivalently helpful compared to the review with an average-looking reviewer’s. Moreover, the attractive reviewer’s review is perceived as less helpful if the consumers are low in ASE. These findings provide evidence against the conventional wisdom that “what is beautiful is good” and point out that at certain condition beauty might backfire. Our conclusions are highly relevant to online retailers, third party websites, and online merchants.

Keywords


Introduction

“Personal beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of reference.” ——Aristotle

Amid the rise of social media and user-generated online reviews, consumers are increasingly relying on their peers for product evaluations, such as online reviews posted on e-commerce platforms (Yin et al. 2014). These websites increasingly harness the power of reviewer-contributed photos, often with a consumption photo wherein the reviewer himself/herself posing as a model (e.g. in websites such as Amazon.com). One of the most eye-catching feature is the reviewer’s physical attractiveness. A reviewer’s attractiveness refers to the degree to which the physical appearance of the reviewer exposed in the online photo review is appealing to consumer. It is a comprehensive evaluation of the physical appearance in the photo including facial attributes, body type, skin tone, hair style, and other related elements (Bower and Landreth, 2001). In the online shopping environment where consumers are uncertain about their evaluation of the focal product, a photo of the reviewer using the product can be very helpful in two ways. First, as the saying goes that a picture speaks louder than a thousand of words, the photo with the product on display with a real-world person can be a highly effective way of illustrating the performance of the product. Moreover, when consumers face online reviewers written by other consumers, they also need to assess the quality of source – a photo of the reviewer is highly salient source of information about the identity of the reviewer.
However, the effect of reviewer attractiveness will be different from those of vendor-hired professional models. In traditional advertisements, “what is beautiful is good (henceforth WIBIG)” is highly recognized and companies are hiring attractive models, celebrities, and endorsers to promote their products. Consumers understand that these highly attractive promoters are professionals and can be unrealistically attractive, thus it may not be practical to compare themselves with such highly attractive social others. But when the beauty is no longer unreachable but so called everyday people, the social comparison motivation would be salient. As social comparison matters to shape the persuasion effect of beauty (i.e., attractive people) (Buunk and Dijkstra 2011), there is a reason to doubt whether the WIBIG mantra can extend to this new context of user-contributed online reviews, which is so far largely absent from the literature.

In this paper, we attempt to answer this question by exploring the persuasion effect of reviewer attractiveness. In particular, we focus on its influence on perceived review helpfulness, or the extent to which such a review is perceived by consumers to facilitate their purchase decision process (Yin et al. 2014). Reviewer helpfulness, which is routinely tracked in many online review systems, is of special interests because consumers are heavily relying on the reviews before they purchase the focal product, and helpful reviews provide strategic advantage in consumer attention and stickiness (Yin et al. 2014). Therefore, we regard it as a unique dimension of persuasion highlighted in the online review context (Karimi and Wang 2017). To relate reviewer attractiveness to perceived review helpfulness, we extend the selective accessibility model (Mussweiler and Strack 2000) from the social comparison literature. We argue that the main goal for consumers to read a photo review is to assess whether they fit the product or not, formulating a null hypothesis on fitness. Depending on consumers’ evaluation about reviewer’s performance in using the product and (dis)similarity knowledge between the review and themselves generated by (dis)similarity hypothesis testing process, consumers would accept/reject the fitness hypothesis, which result in difference in perceived helpfulness of the review. With two online experiments, we found that the online photo review with an average-looking reviewer’s consumption photo is equivalent to that of attractive reviewers’ in perceived review helpfulness. Moreover, the effect of reviewer attractiveness on perceived review helpfulness depends on consumers’ appearance self-esteem (ASE), the self-worth a person derived from own appearance characteristics like body-image and weight (Argo and White 2012). It is worthwhile to mention that for the low ASE participants, the review with the attractive reviewer’s consumption photo is less helpful relative to that with the average-looking reviewer’s, identifying a boundary condition when beauty backfires.

Our paper contributes to theory in three ways. First, we extend the existing selective accessibility model by creating fitness/unfitness hypothesis testing, using the knowledge from (dis)similarity hypothesis testing and evaluation of reviewer’s performance of consumption. Our extension expands the explanatory scope of selective accessibility model. Second, we found evidence against the conventional wisdom that “what is beautiful is good” since we found a crucial boundary condition that when beauty backfires. Thus, we support our contention that the source in online review context (i.e. the reviewer) is different from source in the traditional advertisement (models, celebrities, and endorsers) since consumers usually compare themselves with the reviewer but seldom relate themselves to the source who are unrealistically unreachable. This conclusion advocates theoretical attention on the discussion of emerging communication source. Third, we extend the consequences exploration of reviewer’s identity-relevant social information to perceived review helpfulness by focusing on a special format of photo-based social information (reviewer attractiveness).

We also provide implication for industry practice. From the online platform’s point of view, understanding persuasion effect of reviewer attractiveness helps the online platform formulate better policies and strategies around reviews with the reviewer as a model, such as whether to filter/rank/recommend online reviews based on reviewer attractiveness.

The other parts of the paper are organized as following. First, we review the literature about the effect of physical attractiveness and the disclosure of reviewer’s social information. Then we develop our hypotheses by reshaping the selective accessibility model to build up the (un)fitness hypothesis. And we introduce how we conducted a pilot study to measure the reviewer’s attractiveness and an online experiment to examine both the main effect of reviewer attractiveness and the moderation effect from ASE. The expected results, general discussion, and contribution are also discussed.
Literature Review

Persuasion Effect from Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness refers to the degree to which the appearance of source is appealing to the recipient (Patzer 1985). The conventional wisdom depicts the established stereotype that what is beautiful is good (Dion et al. 1972; Kim & Sohn, 2016; Langlois et al. 2000). The intuition has been empirically supported by plenty of research in the discussion about social others including celebrity, endorser, and models. For instance, the attractive sources can elicit significantly greater persuasion on both a verbal and behavioral measure of target agreement since they possess characteristics that dispose them to be more effective sources (Chaiken 1979). Results from physical attractiveness of endorser discussion validates the positive “attractiveness effect” on brand attitude and purchase intention (Till and Busler 2000). Besides, endorser’s attractiveness can increase favorable brand attitudes since they are perceived as more appropriate (Wright 2016). Another study indicates that women showed a more positive attitude toward the product when it was promoted by an attractive as opposed to a moderately attractive model (Buunk and Dijkstra 2011). Products with thin models who are usually perceived as more attractive would be perceived to be of higher quality compared to those with average-bodied models (Kim & Sohn, 2016). We conclude that the existing persuasion effect of physical attractiveness discussion mainly investigates the source in the traditional advertisement and the discussion regarding referent consumers in online review is scarce. However, the persuasion effect from reviewer in the online photo review as source might be distinctively different from source in traditional advertisement created by company or other agents. The reason is that consumers or on the online review context, consumers will instinctively compare themselves with the reviewer in the review. Models, celebrities, and endorsers are generally professional in aesthetics, dominated by attractive others, and unrealistic so that consumers don’t have the need to compare themselves with the source and therefore engage in social comparison relatively infrequently. However, the reviewers who are so called every-day people, among whom the average-looking social others dominate (Wright 2016), will be perceived as an anchor obtainable and reachable. Consequently, the comparison motivation with social others is salient and the reviewer’s social information is the most accessible that consumers would compare their physical attractiveness with the reviewer’s. Since the persuasion effect of source’s physical attractiveness is different in the scenario with comparison or without comparison (Buunk and Dijkstra 2011), there is a reason to doubt the conventional wisdom that “what is beautiful is good” is still valid in the context when the online photo review reveals reviewers’ physical attractiveness. Therefore, we aim to fill in the gap of source difference in the “beauty” discussion by investigating the persuasion effect from reviewer attractiveness in the online review context.

Impact of Reviewer’s Social Information

For the purpose of research, reviewer’s social information of reviewers refers to information about reviewer’s identity-relevant attributes like geographic, appearance, and so on. It shapes community members’ judgment of products and reviews (Forman et al. 2008). Therefore, its consequences exploration is catching more theoretical attention but the research is limited to traditional persuasion effect. For the impact on reviewer-consumer similarity, the disclosure of reviewer’s demographic information along with the online review will influence perceived similarity between reviewer and consumer, changing the persuasion effect of the review (Naylor et al. 2011). For the influence on product sales, reviews that contain self-disclosure is more beneficial to online retailers because content source characteristics may be used to reach judgments about the product and guide purchase behavior (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2011). Besides, reviewer’s expertise information formulates a boundary condition for the effect of source certainty on purchase decision (Karmarkar and Tormala 2010). However, the influence of reviewer’ identify information on review helpfulness is seldom discussed (Karimi and Wang 2017). Perceived helpfulness is regarded as potential benefits that online retailers can gain from online review and review providers since consumers are more receptive to and influenced by reviews that are perceived to be more helpful (Karimi and Wang 2017) and it provides strategic advantage in consumer attention and stickiness (Yin et al. 2014). Besides, perceived helpfulness is highly related to reviewer attractiveness since reviewer’s consumption photo is a unique and important attribute of online photo review. Therefore, discussion of reviewer’s social information on helpfulness would broaden the potential influence discussion to a valuable concept in the online review context.
Theoretical Development

Reviewer Attractiveness and Perceived Review Helpfulness

In the online shopping environment where consumers cannot feel and touch the product they are interested in, they feel highly uncertain about their performance with the product (Hong and Pavlou 2014). Therefore, the motivation for consumers to read the photo review is to evaluate their own performance in using the product, or more specifically whether they fit the product or not since fit is the biggest concern under the scenario. Generally, consumers would unconsciously develop a null hypothesis that the product would be a good fit but need to test their hypothesis by vicariously observing the reviewer’s performance with the product. In this process, social comparison occurs since the photo review exhibits other consumers’ consumption behaviors specifically associated with the product sought by the consumer (Dahl et al., 2012). More specifically, the virtual environment makes the social comparison salient since online consumers have to rely on observing the reviewer using the product to evaluate their own performance. As the most eye-catching feature, a reviewer’s physical appearance will affect both the consumer’s perceived similarity with the reviewer and the reviewer’s performance with the product. To sum it up, the motivation for social comparison is to accept or reject the null hypothesis that the consumers fit the product, and the self-evaluation is accomplished by comparing the physical attractiveness between the reviewer and the consumer and evaluation of the reviewer’s performance.

We theorize on the selective accessibility model since it adopts an informational and integrative perspective on social comparison consequences (Mussweiler et al. 2004). According to the model, similarity testing selectively makes accessible knowledge indicating target–standard similarity, whereas dissimilarity testing selectively makes accessible knowledge indicating target–standard dissimilarity (Mussweiler et al. 2004). Due to the egocentric nature of social comparison, consumers will infer whether they fit the product or not with similarity/dissimilarity knowledge from comparison with the reviewer and the evaluation of how the reviewer performs in the product.

When the reviewer is physically attractive, consumers would perceive high attractiveness of reviewer, whose appearance generally outperforms the consumer’s. Therefore, the consumer is likely to experience an upward comparison. To achieve self-enhancement by the comparison process, consumers would be biased toward the favorable direction to test the similarity-hypothesis and simultaneously perceive that the reviewer performs well in the product. Therefore, they would unconsciously selectively search for evidence that they are similar or equal to the attractive reviewer in physical appearance features like skin tone and body type. This process would generate judgment-relevant knowledge which is biased toward similarity, facilitating consumers to construct the perception that their appearance is similar to the attractive reviewer’s. The attractive-similarity knowledge is more informative since the self-related knowledge will increase its cognitive accessibility and favorability so that it will be more likely to be used for a subsequent judgment about the self-evaluation (Mussweiler et al. 2004). Besides, the knowledge is more helpful and useful because “similar” knowledge is conceptually more relevant to the consumers’ appearance and evaluation of their fit in the product. Therefore, the biased attractive-similarity knowledge will be more likely to decrease the uncertainty of performance and increase the likelihood to support the fitness hypothesis. Thus, reviewer’s attractiveness is more diagnostic and of higher information quality, persuading the consumers to perceive the review as more helpful.

On the contrary, when the reviewer is average-looking, the consumer is likely to experience a downward comparison. The reason is that consumers would perceived their physical appearance as superior to the average-looking reviewer’s since they usually have biased perception about themselves that they are better than the average (Alicke et al. 1995). The downward comparison will result in orientation to test dissimilarity-hypothesis and form the conception that the reviewer performs poor in the product. Consequently, consumer selectively searches for evidence that they are dissimilar to the average-looking reviewer in the appearance attributes. This process would generate judgment-relevant knowledge which is biased toward dissimilarity with the average-looking reviewer. So they make the judgment-relevant knowledge salient but biased toward constructing a perception that their appearance is dissimilar to the average-looking reviewer’s. Compared to the review with the attractive reviewer, the knowledge generated from the review with the average-looking reviewer is less informative since dissimilarity knowledge is more ambiguous than similarity knowledge. Besides, the knowledge is less helpful and useful since dissimilarity knowledge is conceptually less relevant to evaluate consumers’ performance in the product.
Therefore, it is of lower information quality to facilitate the decision-making process. Moreover, the biased average-looking-dissimilarity knowledge and the conception that the reviewer perform poor in the product is less likely to accept/reject the fitness hypothesis. Thus, the attractiveness of average-looking reviewer is less diagnostic and perceived as less helpful. To sum it up, the review with average-looking reviewer is deemed as less helpful than that with attractive reviewer. Therefore, we hypothesize that

H1: Online photo review with an attractive reviewer’s consumption photo will be perceived as more helpful than that with an average-looking reviewer’s.

**Moderation Effect of Appearance Self-esteem**

We argue the connection between reviewer attractiveness and perceived review helpfulness will be moderated by ASE since individual differences in appearance self-esteem have been shown to influence consumers’ reactions to social comparison when exposed to photos of models in advertising (Dahl et al., 2012). First, it influences the generation of the null hypothesis of self performance since individual difference in self-worth would shape the valence of self-perception. Specifically, due to their self-confidence in appearance, the fitness hypothesis for high ASE consumers would still hold true. However, the low ASE group would automatically generate a unfitness hypothesis that they don’t fit the product since they would be more uncertain about their performance. Second, the variation in ASE would result in difference the valence of affective feelings through the social comparison process. When high ASE consumers make social comparisons, they would experience a smaller discrepancy between the perceived attractiveness of reviewer and themselves, which enhances individuals’ self-image and evokes positive affective feelings such as hope and admiration. The positive affective feelings would stimulate similarity hypothesis toward the attractive reviewer. However, when individuals low in ASE compare themselves with a superior comparison target, their self-image may suffer and they will often experience negative feelings such as frustration (Buunk and Dijkstra 2011). The negative feelings would motivate dissimilarity hypothesis that they are deviant from the attractive reviewer in terms of physical attractiveness. Third, the ASE influences how the consumers selectively search for similarity/dissimilarity supporting evidence since the affective feelings shape judgments by influencing the content that comes to mind. Consumers will recall a greater percentage of evidence that were affectively congruent with the affective feelings since positively (negatively) valenced material is more likely to be recalled in positive (negatively) moods (Schwarz and Clore 1996). Thus, when high ASE consumers are in positive affective feelings after the comparison of their physical attractiveness with reviewers’, they would recall the information consistent with their feelings which leads to attractive-similarity and average-looking-dissimilarity. Both kinds of knowledge are more relevant and higher in likelihood to support the existing null hypothesis of fitness. In contrast, low ASE consumers experience an upward comparison which leads to negative affective feelings like jealousy or degration (Bower 2001). They would generate biased dissimilarity from the attractive reviewer, relevant to test the unfitness hypothesis and high in probability to support it as well. Besides, low ASE consumers confronted with average-looking reviewer would experience negative feelings since they would perceive they are similar to the average-looking reviewer and search evidence for similarity with the average-looking reviewer. The average-looking-similarity knowledge and the perception that the average-looking reviewer perform poor in the product lead to that consumers don’t fit the product (unfitness). Consequently, the information is more diagnostic to evaluate their performance. But the relative impact from the comparison with average-looking reviewer is more powerful than that with the attractive reviewer since low ASE consumers’ conception that the average-looking reviewer does not fit the product and similarity knowledge is more likely to confirm the unfitness hypothesis. Therefore, we have the moderation effect of ASE is hypothesized as following.

H2-a: For consumers with high ASE, an online photo review with an attractive reviewer’s consumption photo will be perceived as more helpful than that with an average-looking reviewer’s.

H2-b: For consumers with low ASE, an online photo review with an attractive reviewer’s consumption photo will be perceived as less helpful than that with an average-looking reviewer’s.

**Research Design**

To test our predictions, we conducted two experiments. The first experiment was to validate the instrument to be used in the second experiment – specifically to measure the reviewer’s attractiveness and
test whether consumers can distinguish between the attractive reviewer and the average-looking reviewer. The second experiment, our main experiment, empirically examined the main effect of reviewer attractiveness on perceived review helpfulness and the moderation effect of ASE.

**Experiment 1 – Instrument Validation**

We produced a simplified mockup of a typical online shopping web page with an online photo review. We kept everything else constant except for the attractiveness of the reviewer. The details of how we varied the attractiveness level is discussed in detail next. The purpose of the experiment 1 was to be certain that our manipulation indeed created significant difference in reviewer attractiveness.

*Participants, stimuli, and procedure*

We chose an average-looking dress to be our focal product for three reasons. First, the dress was a relevant product category for a female online consumer. Second, wearing the dress would show all a person's body type, facial appearance and other appearance features, which was consistent with our definition of reviewer attractiveness. Third, the dress was average-looking so that participants were most likely to hold a neutral product evaluation.

We recruited an attractive woman aged around 25 as our “reviewer”. We took photos of this woman wearing the dress, and chose the one similar to the genuine online photo review as our baseline photo review to strengthen ecological validity. Instead of recruiting multiple “reviewers” or using multiple photos of the same person, we chose to Photoshop a single photo to create multiple variations with various levels of attractiveness. This design was to offer us the maximum control over possible confounding factors including the angle, color, reviewer’s gestures, and so on. To achieve different levels of attractiveness, we used Photoshop to modify the facial features, body image, hair style, and skin tone in the photo but keep the light, angle, gesture, facial expression, and other factors constant. We created two versions of the same photo: average-looking and attractive, since those two types of images are most common in the online shopping context and congruent to test our hypotheses. The modifications to photo were done in a way consistent with the most acceptance norm of beauty in China, where we drew our example and experimental subjects. For example, lighter skin tone was generally considered prettier than darker skin tone in China. Noteworthy, the woman’s body proportion fitted the golden ratio.

Then a total of 118 participants were recruited to a survey on Qualtrics.com and were told to rate the attractiveness level of the woman in an image. Each participant was randomly assigned to either an attractive condition (N=59) or an average-looking condition (N=59) to observe the reviewer for thirty seconds, and then evaluates reviewer attractiveness. Then participants were asked to report their perception about reviewer attractiveness. According to the seven Likert scale developed by Ohanian (Ohanian 1990), participants rated the woman’s attractiveness on five dimensions (“sexy”, “elegant”, “beautiful”, “classy”, and “attractive”) from 1 (“very disagree”) to 7 (“very agree”).

*Result and discussion*

First, there was no significant difference between the attractive condition (M=27.521) and the average-looking condition (M=25.409) in terms of total time spent answering the questions (F (1,117) =0.229, p =0.633) (unit: second). About 98% of the participants passed our attention check that asked them to identify the race of the reviewer in the photo. Second, the five items proved to be highly reliable since Cronbach’s alphas and Composite Reliability for reviewer attractiveness were 0.914 and 0.936 respectively. More importantly, the average of these five items for the average-looking (M=4.451) and the attractive conditions (M=5.159) are significantly different (F (1,117) =12.815, p<0.001). Therefore, our manipulation of reviewer attractiveness was successful and we used the same photos in Experiment 2.

**Experiment 2 – Main Study**

Experiment 2 tests H1, H2a, and H2b in an online apparel shopping scenario. We measure participants’ perception of reviewer attractiveness, appearance self-esteem (ASE), and evaluation of reviewer helpfulness. We also capture the demographic information about the participants.
Participants, stimuli, and procedure

A total of 169 participants were recruited to our online experiment at Qualtrics.com. In the experiment, to make the online shopping setting more real so that participants could experience the similar decision-making process as in real life, we created a website page that online consumers usually adopt. The review content was derived from genuine online reviews on the third party website and adjusted to the dress shopping scenario. The online photo review was accompanied by brief positive review text, since most online photo reviews were positively valenced. To simplify the information, we only include the delivery information, the product photo, the logo of the online store and two reviews.

We employed a between-subject design in which each participant saw the same product page of an online-shopping website except that the reviewer they saw varied at their physical attractiveness. Participants were randomly assigned to either average-looking condition (N=86) or attractive condition (N=83). Before seeing the product page, they read the cover story that informed them that they were participating in a program that facilitated an online store’s product launch, and were asked to give feedback on the product. Then they saw the product page for 30 seconds, before the system automatically switched to the survey page. We note that 30 seconds were about the average time for consumers to read all the information. We fixed the reading time to control for the potential difference in participants’ engagement. Then participants were asked to rate reviewer attractiveness, perceived helpfulness of the online photo review they read, their ASE and demographic information including age, education background, income level, shopping experience, weight, and height. They rated perceived reviewer attractiveness on the same items in the pilot study for attractiveness evaluation (Ohanian 1990) from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). Perceived review helpfulness was measured on a seven-point, semantic differential scale, using three items adapted from Yin et al. (2014), including “how do you find the online photo review is helpful/useful/informative (1=not at all, 7=very much).” The ASE was measured on a seven-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely), using the six items adapted from Heatherton and Polivy (1991). The items included that “I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now”, “I feel that others respect and admire me”, “I am satisfied with my weight”, “I am pleased with my appearance right now”, “I feel attractive”, and “I feel good about myself” (Heatherton and Polivy 1991).

Results and discussion

Manipulation checks. We regressed perceived reviewer attractiveness on the reviewer attractiveness conditions (average-looking/attractive). As expected, participants reported that the reviewer in the attractive condition (M= 5.070) is significantly more attractive than in average-looking condition (M= 4.658, F (1,168) = 6.942, p <0.01). Thus, our manipulation was successful.

Construct reliability and validity. Cronbach’s alpha for review helpfulness was 0.950 and that for ASE, 0.926. Composite Reliability for the two constructs were and 0.936 and 0.942 respectively. Both indicated adequate internal consistency reliability for the major constructs. We also conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess convergent validity and discriminant validity of the two constructs. The loadings for each factor were higher than 0.7. The average variances extracted (AVEs) for review helpfulness and ASE were above 0.5 (AVE_review perceived helpfulness= 0.863, AVE ASE= 0.731). The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of correlations were 0.436 (< 0.85).

Main Effect from Reviewer Attractiveness. First, there was no significant difference between the attractive (M= 255.002) and the average-looking (M= 197.024) conditions in total time spent answering the questions (F (1,168) =0.365, p=0.547) (unit: second). To test H1, we averaged the three items on perceived helpfulness and used ANOVA analysis. As shown in Figure 1, our analysis revealed that participants in the attractive (M=5.072) and average-looking conditions (M= 5.047) showed no difference in perceived helpfulness (F (1,168) = 0.021, p= 0.886). Thus, we found there was no significant difference in perceived helpfulness between the average-looking and attractive conditions.

Moderation Effect from ASE. First, there was no significant difference in ASE level between participants in the attractive condition (M=5.163) and the average-looking conditions (M=4.934, F (1,168) = 1.755, p=0.187). To test the moderation effect of ASE, we conducted linear regression analysis that included reviewer attractiveness, mean-centered ASE, and their interaction term. Results of the analysis revealed that the main effect of the reviewer attractiveness is not significant (b=-0.100, t (169) = -0.676, p=0.500). However, the main effect of ASE (b=0.543, t (169) = 8.206, p<0.001) and interaction term between reviewer attractiveness and ASE were significant (b=0.467, t (169) = 3.531, p<0.001). Furthermore, we
performed spotlight analyses for consumers with low and high ASE (1 SD below/above the mean) (Aiken et al. 1991). As illustrated by Figure 2, our analysis indicated that high ASE participants found review with the attractive reviewer’s consumption photo more helpful than that with the average-looking reviewer’s (b\text{conditional effect} = 0.425, t (169) = 2.024, p<0.05). In contrast, low ASE participants found the review with the average-looking reviewer’s consumption image more helpful than that with attractive reviewer (b\text{conditional effect} = -0.626, t (169) = -2.977, p<0.01).

Figure 1. Perceived Helpfulness by Conditions

Figure 2. Moderation Effect from ASE

General Discussion and Conclusion

Our paper investigates the influence of reviewer attractiveness, an emerging IT artifact in the online review, on perceived review helpfulness. We found that the average-looking reviewer’s review is at least equivalent in perceived helpfulness to the attractive reviewers’, indicating that “beauty” is no better than the “averageness” in terms of review helpfulness evaluation. Moreover, we found that ASE is a critical boundary condition for the connection between reviewer attractiveness and perceived review helpfulness since the persuasion effect from reviewer attractiveness is only valid when individual difference in ASE is considered. Moreover, for the low ASE participants, the review with attractive reviewer’s consumption photo is less helpful, which shows evidence for the condition when beauty backfires.

We contribute to theory and related research mainly in three ways. First, to the selective accessibility model, we extend the existing model by creating a dual hypothesis testing process. Specifically, using the knowledge from (dis)similarity hypothesis testing and consumer’s perception about reviewer’s performance of consumption, we build the (un)fitness hypothesis testing to expand the explanatory scope of selective accessibility model. More broadly, we develop a dual hypothesis testing process to extend the comparison from one domain to a related other. The existing model focuses on effect from social comparison on the direct comparison between the target and the consumer. For instance, the consumers might compare their physical attractiveness with others’ (direct social comparison) but the comparison consequence is seldom extended to infer the self-evaluation in other related domains. However, the related hypothesis testing is more prevailing in real life setting and needs theoretical attention. Therefore, our dual hypothesis test which targets at the related domain inference can fill in this gap, which is verified by the empirical finding. Furthermore, the development of (un)fitness hypothesis testing process highlights the salient feature the IT-mediated social environment where uncertainty is a barricade to online consumers interested in purchasing the product. However, the current research focusing on the mediation or moderation effect cannot convey the uniqueness of online review context since it’s universal to all contexts. We set the uncertainty as a motivation to unravel the nature of online shopping context.

Second, for the literature focusing on persuasion effect from the physical attractiveness, we found evidence against the intuition that WIBIG mantra. More specifically, for the low ASE group, beauty will backfire and the attractive reviewer’s impact on review helpfulness is not significantly different from the average-looking reviewer’s. At least, we found boundary condition that when beauty might backfire since when the consumer is low in ASE, the attractive reviewer’s review is less helpful to consumers to build up self-evaluation. This finding shows preliminary evidence for our contention that the source of reviewer is different from source in the traditional advertisement. The possible explanation is that models, celebrity,
and endorsers are usually psychologically distant from the normal consumers so consumers seldom compare the source with themselves. However, consumers usually compare themselves with the reviewer since they share the same identity as online consumers. Besides, considering that reviewer attractiveness is playing a different role in consumers’ decision making process from the traditional source, our finding advocates theoretical attention on the emerging communication source.

Third, for the discussion of impact from social information of online reviewer, we consider its impact on review perceived helpfulness, which provides strategic advantage in drawing consumer attention. The extension will broaden the potential influence to photo-based reviewer social information for online retailers and third-party website, which is recognized as a promising research topic (King et al., 2014).

Besides, our findings offer managerial implication for online retailers, third party shopping website and online merchants. For online retailers and third-party shopping websites, our conclusions provide the theoretical lens to evaluate the effectiveness of online photo review. First, we suggest that reviewer attractiveness and consumer personality traits should be simultaneously considered in designing the review ranking algorithm. Managers and industry experts in E-commerce company on our interviews acknowledge that they only distinguish between online review with a photo and without a photo, ignoring the heterogeneity in online photo review. However, the result of moderation effect from ASE indicates that the interaction between reviewer attractiveness and consumer’s ASE is antecedents to consumer’s perception of review helpfulness. Therefore, including those factors into the review ranking algorithm instead of only evaluating the review by counting the presence of the photo is more effective in predicting review helpfulness and therefore contributing to present the most helpful review to consumers. Moreover, we suggest that what is beauty is not always good. According to interviews, managers and experts believe that the more attractive the reviewer is, the higher quality the review is to facilitate consumer decision-making process. So they are leveraging beautified and attractive photos about consumers’ consumption information to recommend the products to potential consumers. However, our results show evidences against their intuition since at least the average-looking reviewer’s review is perceived as helpful as the attractive reviewer’s and beauty might backfire for low ASE consumers. In such circumstances, the benefits from the costly “beauty” strategy is overestimated. Therefore, the companies should be aware of the potential costs from “beauty” strategy. For online merchants depending on the third-party website to transact with online consumer, we suggest those merchants who are unethically hiring attractive normal people to stop fabricating online photo reviewer. According to our observation, a big number of online merchants are hiring attractive people to generate fake online photo review, assuming that unethical practice will boost potential benefits. However, our results show that their efforts might be in vain since the review with attractive reviewer might be perceived as less helpful compared to the average-looking reviewer’s. Those conclusions will provide economical evidence against their unethical action.

There are several limitations need addressing in the future. First, we limit our product type to dress but the product type might impose influence on effectiveness of physical attractiveness. To solve this issue, we’ll extend our finding to multiple product types including both experienced goods and search goods. Besides, beauty holds different meaning and symbolic functions in different culture, and the consumers might be influenced by their culture to form ASE. Thus, we’ll consider the culture difference in shaping the connection between reviewer attractiveness and perceived helpfulness.

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