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Agreeableness and perception of online hotel reviews

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Introduction

Online user-generated reviews about travel destinations, hotels, and tourism services have become important sources of information for travelers (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007), as each year hundreds of millions of potential customers consult online reviews (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Prominent examples of consumer review platforms are websites such as Tripadvisor and Booking.com. Millions of global travelers share their opinions regarding the quality of hotels on these websites (Jeacle & Carter, 2011).

According to Chevlier and Mayzlin (2006), online user-generated content substantially influences the sale of products. Their study suggests that the influence of online consumer reviews is especially strong for experience goods such as tourism products and services, because their quality is intangible and unknown prior to consumption. Thus, potential consumers use online consumer reviews as a way to reduce risk and uncertainty during a purchase (Chen & Lee, 2008).

The consumer reviews found on travel and hospitality online communities provide the customer with a view of another person's prior service experience. These reviews reassure consumers that a business will deliver the service they want (Sparks & Browning, 2011). However, consumer trust can also be negatively affected, because websites also provide critical reviews.

Three-quarters of tourists consider online customer reviews as an important information source when planning a trip (Gretzel & Xiang, 2010). Customers see online customer reviews as relatively unbiased and more trustworthy than marketing messages (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Ye, Law and Gu (2009) found that positive online reviews lead to an increase in hotel bookings. However, research

suggests that negative information tends to have a stronger effect on customers (). Furthermore, not all reviews have an effect, and not all potential customers are affected equally.

Review sites such as TripAdvisor depend on their trustworthiness in order to be successful. Mayer et al. (1995) argue that trust between two parties is based on both the customer's tendency to trust and the trustworthiness of the company to be trusted. Trust is not just based on the general trustworthiness of the company, but also on the tourist's propensity to trust.

Whether someone tends to be trustful is part of their personality. In psychology, personality is understood to be primarily defined by five dimensions, the so-called 'big five': openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (John & Srivastava, 1999; Rose et al., 2010). Agreeableness is the most important dimension with regards to trust. Agreeable individuals tend to be 'friendly, courteous, considerate, accommodating, tend to avoid conflict, co-operative, helpful, forgiving and show propensity to trust' (Tan & Yang, 2013, p. 27).

Research has been done on how TripAdvisor and other websites that provide online user-generated reviews try to engender trust (Jeagle & Carter, 2011). However, little research has been conducted on the influence of customers' propensity to trust and the perception of online reviews. In this article, I will investigate the relation between the personality trait of agreeableness and the perception of online hotel reviews.

Therefore, the main research question is: what is the relationship between agreeableness and the perception of online hotel reviews? More specifically, I examine the following sub-questions:

1. Is agreeableness positively related to use of online reviews before booking a hotel?
2. Is agreeableness positively related to trust of online hotel reviews?
3. Is agreeableness positively related to booking flexibility in the presence of positive reviews?
4. Is agreeableness positively related to booking willingness in the presence of negative reviews?

Methods

To investigate the relation between agreeableness (independent variable) and perception of online reviews (dependent variable), an online survey was carried out.

Population and sample

The population for this study is defined as Dutch students who have Internet access, use Facebook and are between the age of 18 and 25. This population was selected for their availability and the fact that they are likely to use internet applications such as review platforms.

Convenience sampling was used and data was collected using an online survey facility (<http://www.survio.com>). The self-administered questionnaire was published as a status update on Facebook. In total, 46 people answered the questionnaire. Nine participants did not fit the population criteria and were excluded from further analysis. Thus, the final sample size was 37. Of these

participants, 26 (70%) were women and 9 (30%) male. The fact that 70% of the sample is female is a substantial diversion from the population of Dutch students, which is nearly evenly divided by gender (48% vs. 52%; CBS, 2012, p. 101). As no sampling frame was used, response rate could not be determined. However, 51% of page visitors started and completed the questionnaire. All participants answered all questions. For the purposes of the assignment, the total number of participants was artificially inflated from 37 to 300 participants.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part of the questionnaire contained questions to find out participants' level of agreeableness. To measure this a 10-item short version of the Big Five Inventory was used (Rammstedt & John, 2006, p. 210). The participant was asked to rate the statements on personality on a five-point scale from "disagree strongly" to "agree strongly". Items 2 and 7 from the scale were used to measure agreeableness. The polarity of question 7 was reversed.

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions on online review perception and use. Items on this topic were specifically created for this research since no available questionnaire items were found during literature review. A seven-point scale from 'never' to 'always' was used to measure the frequency of use of online reviews before booking a hotel. Subsequent items asked participants to rate statements regarding online hotel reviews on a five-point scale from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly'.

To measure trust in online reviews, participants were asked to rate the following on an agreement scale:

Online hotel reviews on websites such as TripAdvisor are...

1. *Trustworthy?*

2. *Reliable?*

To determine whether positive reviews would make choices of customers more flexible, respondents were asked to rate the following trade-offs:

If the reviews of an hotel are very positive...

1. *I'm willing to pay more money*

2. *I don't mind a less favorable location*

Finally, willingness to book in spite of negative reviews was measured with the item: '*When I read a negative review on the hotel I wanted to book I don't let it influence my decision.*' In addition to the research variables, the demographic variables of gender, age and education were measured using a multiple-response format.

Analyses

As all variables in this study were measured at the interval level and were thus described in terms of means and standard deviations. I used Pearson correlation tests to assess relationships between variables.

Findings

Descriptive findings are first reported for the main variables of agreeableness, use of online reviews and trust. Subsequently, the relationship between agreeableness and the dependent variables is investigated using correlational analysis.

Agreeableness

Responses to two five-point scale questions from the big five inventory were averaged (controlling for polarity) to measure agreeableness. The lowest possible score for agreeableness was 1 and the highest 5. On average participants scored

3.70 on agreeableness. This is a slightly higher than a neutral score of 3. Standard deviation for this variable was 0.75, indicating that the responses were relatively close together.

Use of online reviews before booking a hotel

To measure use of reviews a seven-point interval scale was used. On average, the participants scored 4.73. Thus, given that the midpoint of the scale is 4, many participants frequently use online reviews. The standard deviation was 1.67, indicating that the responses were neither far apart nor close together.

Trust in online reviews

To potentially increase reliability, responses to the two five-point scale questions on 'trustworthiness' and 'reliability' of online reviews were averaged to measure trust in online reviews. This new variable comprised an interval scale from 1 to 5. The mean response was 3.33, well above the midpoint of the scale. Standard deviation for this variable is 0.77, indicating that the responses were relatively close together.

Booking flexibility with positive reviews

Participants were asked about flexibility related to price and location in the presence of good reviews on a five-point scale. On average, the participants reported mean flexibility of 3.05 concerning price and 2.84 concerning location. Thus, participants are somewhat flexible in booking a positively-reviewed hotel. The standard deviations regarding price and location were 0.96 and 0.97 respectively, indicating that the responses were relatively close together.

Willingness to book in spite of negative reviews

Participants rated their willingness to book a negatively-reviewed hotel on a five-point scale. Participants reported an average willingness of 2.69, suggesting

ambivalence about booking in the face of negative reviews. The standard deviation was 0.9, indicating that the responses were relatively close together.

Effects of agreeableness on review use and trust

Correlations are interpreted according to the following rules of thumb (Bryman, 2012): any value above $r = 0.5$ is considered a large correlation, 0.3-0.5 is moderate and 0.1-0.3 is small (<0.1 is negligible).

There was a small significant relation between agreeableness and use of online hotel reviews ($r = .12, p = .04$). Participants who were more agreeable, indicated that they made more use of online reviews. The correlation between agreeableness and trust in online reviews was not significant ($r = .06, p = .27$).

To understand how positive reviews influence flexibility in booking a hotel room, the participants were confronted with trade-offs about money and location. The results show that participants who scored high on agreeableness were significantly less likely to accept a higher price or a less favorable location when presented with very positive reviews (price: $r = -.19, p = .001$; location: $r = -.18, p = .001$). The correlation coefficients are negative with an absolute value between 0.1 and 0.3, indicating a small effect. This counterintuitive result will be elaborated on in the discussion.

The questionnaire also included an item on how negative reviews influence willingness to book a hotel. The results show that people who score high on agreeableness are significantly less likely to disregard negative reviews in their decision ($r = -.37, p < 0.001$). In other words, this moderate correlation showing that highly agreeable people are more influenced by negative reviews.

Discussion

The present findings reveal the relation between agreeableness and the perception of online hotel reviews. Previous research describes how review websites try to create a trustworthy appearance (Jeagle & Carter, 2011). This study adds to existing literature by investigating the trust relationship between hotel review website and the customer from the customer perspective.

No significant correlation between agreeableness and trust in online hotel reviews was found. This could be because a consumer's personality structure does not have much of an influence on their trust in online hotel reviews. However, the results of the research show that there is a small correlation between agreeableness and the use of online hotel reviews. This effect could be due to a different aspect of the agreeableness trait than trust, such as valuing the opinions of others (Tan & Yang, 2013).

Furthermore, findings show that there is a significant moderate correlation between agreeableness and the influence of negative reviews. While a relationship between agreeableness and trust of online hotel reviews in general was not found, agreeableness may lead to a higher level of trust in negative reviews specifically. Therefore, agreeable individuals might be quicker to believe negative reviews and thus these reviews could have a bigger influence on the decision not to book a hotel.

The finding showed that people who score high on agreeableness were significantly less likely to accept a higher price or a less favorable location when presented with very positive reviews on a hotel was counterintuitive. This might be explained by the idea that agreeable people are more considerate (Tan & Yang, 2013, p. 27). Because they are more considerate they might consider other choice criteria such as price and location as more important than a very positive review.

Limitations

A possible limitation of this study is that only two questionnaire items were used to measure agreeableness. The items were taken from an already abbreviated Big Five personality test. Therefore, the reliability of this study could have been enhanced by asking participants to rate more items regarding agreeableness. Furthermore, questions on online hotel review perception were not taken from other scientific articles, because they were specific for this study.

Convenience sampling was used for this study, so the sample does not represent the population. Only people who are my friends on Facebook were able to fill in the questionnaire. My Facebook friends that are studying are not a representative sample of the actual Dutch student population. Furthermore, the nature of voluntarily filling in a questionnaire attracts and excludes certain types of people from the sample.

A final point that is important to mention is the fact that declaring intention is not the same as actually acting on it. People might choose answers in the questionnaire that are different from their reaction when they are presented with the same situation in real life. For example, people who say that they don't let negative reviews influence their decision on booking at a hotel, might actually be highly influenced by a negative review when they have to make a real hotel reservation that involves spending their own money in that moment.

Implications for the travel industry

There is a large body of research on tailoring website content to user profiles (Calegari & Pasi, 2013; Pera & Ng, 2013; Bobadilla et al., 2012). User profiles are constructed from digital data that is gathered by the website and external third parties. By creating user profiles and sending tailored information

towards potential customers, online marketers can better target their marketing messages. The user profile is a collection of data that represents the user's identity.

According to Klimstra et al, 2013, p. 213: 'Personality is among the most important factors contributing to individual differences in identity formation'. Therefore, collecting data on a user's personality is vital in creating a user profile. This study can be seen as a first step in investigating the relation between consumer personality and the perception of online hotel reviews. Commercial enterprises such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com could use this study as a blueprint to investigate how consumers with a certain personality types react to the content on their website. By knowing how a consumer will react to the content, the content can be adjusted in order to create the desired reaction.

Combined with user profiling to find out the consumer's personality, this would create the opportunity to identify a consumer's personality type and adjust the content on the website based on his/her personality. On websites such as TripAdvisor consumers would see tailored information that fits their personality and will result in a reaction that has been researched before, much like approaches increasingly taken by Facebook and OKCupid.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

SPSS Tables



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