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**Online Customer Reviews Within Business-to-Business: Exploring
Elements That Affect Customer Reliance On Online Customer Reviews**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential importance of online customer reviews within business-to-business and identify the significant elements of online customer reviews within the sector.

Theoretical Implications: This research paper is constructed upon studying elements that enhance customer reliance on online customer reviews in the business-to-consumer and investigating their potential importance in a business-to-business environment. Interview findings have aided in revealing both overlapping and new elements that could enhance customer reliance on online reviews within the business-to-business sector.

Managerial Implications: The findings from this research can assist decision-makers in a business-to-business setting to better understand and navigate through online channels. It will assist business entities in better gauging what customers look for when they research online channels before arriving at their decision to buy or not to buy.

Methodology: A qualitative research design has been employed in writing this research paper. The primary material has been collected from two interviews with business-to-business company representatives. Primary data combined with secondary research and theoretical frameworks are the basis of analysis and conclusions drawn in this research.

Findings: Overlapping elements influencing customers reliance on online customer reviews in both business-to-business and business-to-consumer sectors are outlined, such as: customer characteristics, valence, number of reviews, and reviewer credibility. Elements only relevant in the business-to-business context are also highlighted, which are: the online customer reviews appeal to customer needs; and amount of information in the review

Research Limitations: Lack of prior research in the area of business-to-business with a focus on online customer reviews served as a limitation. Moreover, the limited number of interviews conducted is another limitation.

Originality/Value: Research based on business-to-business relating to online customer reviews has been lacking. The overlapping influencing elements of business-to-consumer and business-to-business areas as well as new findings from the interviews can facilitate further research in this field.

Paper Type: Exploratory study

Keywords: Online Customer Reviews, Business-to-Business, Decision-Making, Electronic Commerce

Introduction

Electronic commerce is growing. Electronic retail revenues are forecasted to grow to \$6.54 trillion in 2020 (Statista, 2019). Purchasing things online has become a more common practice around the world (Statista, 2017). The number of different

channels that are offered has changed and increased rapidly, which presents customers with choices in terms of channel usage (Grensler, Verhoef & Böhm, 2012). Hence, it is becoming increasingly important for companies, who are facing new types of challenges, to take advantage of methods such as electronic commerce not only to

improve business, but to avoid lagging behind competitors (Lorca, de Andres & Garcia-Diez, 2019).

Business-to-business electronic commerce consists of internet-based technologies that facilitate transactions between companies (Sila, cited in Alsaad, Mohamad & Ismail, 2017). When a company can receive orders online, they are considered to carry out electronic commerce (Lorca, de Andres & Garcia-Diez, 2019). Electronic commerce provides companies with additional distribution channels (Lorca, de Andres & Garcia-Diez, 2019). Kapferer (2012) states that one of the key dimensions in business-to-business is that buyers engage in relationships and not simply in transactions.

Electronic commerce provides the customer with several benefits, for example, it makes it easy for the customer to compare prices and offerings (Swaminathan, Anderson & Song, 2018). Thus, it is of great importance as a selling company to provide customers with qualitative information (Ziaullah et al, 2014). Customers often seek information when purchasing new products, a process where online customer reviews have become an increasingly important resource for customers seeking to discover the quality of products (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). As there is no physical interaction with the company, customers search not only company-provided information but also customer-provided information in the form of online customer reviews (Moro, Rita & Joana, 2017). Increased number of customers both trust and use online customer reviews to assess the quality and performance of the products prior to its purchase (Filiberti et al, 2018).

The increasing number of online customer reviews has resulted in a great amount of academic research on the topic where online customer reviews have proven to increase purchase intention within business-to-consumer (Liu et al, 2008; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Jia & Liu, 2018). Existing research on reviews is mainly focused on determining

the effectiveness of online customer reviews within the business-to-consumer sector. Although there is a lack of research regarding online customer reviews helpfulness within business-to-business. Therefore this paper's purpose is to explore online customer reviews within the sector to contribute with knowledge.

Literature Review

Elements Influencing the Relevance of Online Customer Reviews

With the advent of Web 2.0 that feeds on user participation, posting online customer reviews has become an increasingly popular way for people to share their sentiments and opinions about products and services (Yu et al, 2012). As the usage of the internet is growing, online customer reviews have become a more important source of information for customers than ever before (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Based on the “wisdom of the crowd” effect, online customer reviews could help customers evaluate products (Liu & Karahanna, 2017). Recent research also suggests that online customer reviews have become increasingly important in the customers’ decision-making process and consequently have an effect on the sale of products and services (Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Several elements could influence the effectiveness of online customer reviews. Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) reason that the effect of customer reviews could differ depending on product category or product characteristics. Furthermore, the customer characteristics in terms of internet experience and product knowledge can determine the perceived usefulness of online customer reviews (Hu, Liu & Zhang, 2008; Cui, Lui & Guo, 2012; Cheema & Papatla, 2010). Zhu and Zhang (2010) and Anand, Nagendra and Manish (2020) argue that product popularity could affect the impact of online customer reviews. Another element that could potentially influence the experienced usefulness

of online customer reviews is valence (Jia & Liu, 2018). Reviewer credibility and expertise could also affect the extent to which customers trust the review (Liu et al, 2008) and the type of information presented could affect different types of customers' perceived usefulness of online customer reviews (Chen & Xie, 2008). Lastly, the number of reviews has shown to have a positive correlation with product sales (Kunlin, Yuhuan & Liyi, 2020).

This paper will explore the potential importance of online customer reviews within business-to-business and identify the significant elements of online customer reviews

which assist in the decision-making process. The above-stated elements mentioned in previous research within the business-to-consumer sector by Hu, Liu and Zhang (2008), Cui, Lui & Guo (2012), Cheema and Papatla (2010), Zhu and Zhang (2010), Anand, Nagendra and Manish (2020), Jia & Liu (2018), Liu et al (2008), Chen and Xie (2008) and Kunlin, Yuhuan and Liyi (2020) will work as a guiding framework in understanding which elements could influence the customer reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-business. The guiding framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

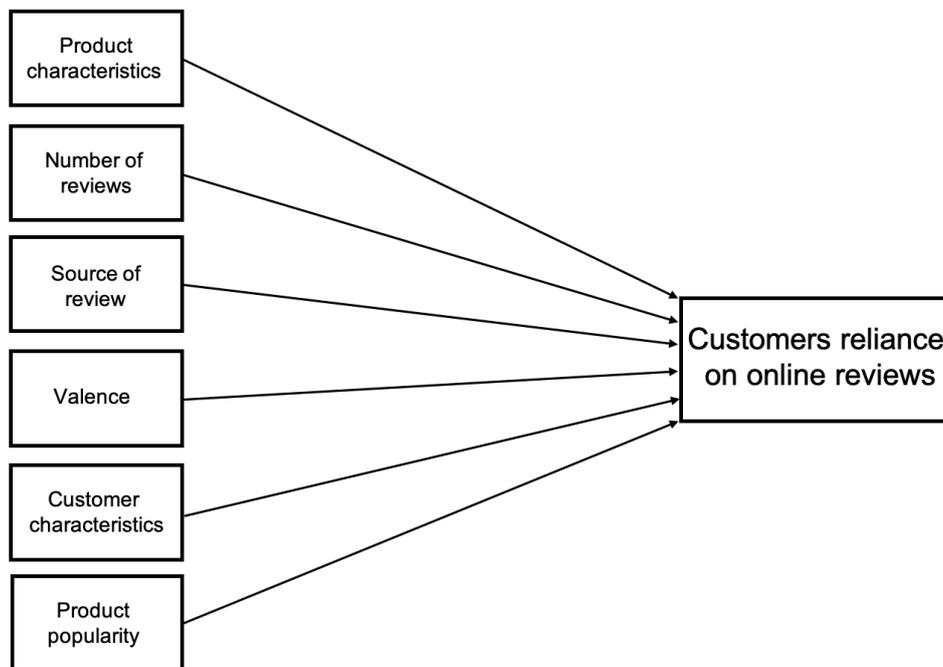


Figure 1: Elements influencing customers reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-consumer.

Product Characteristics

Online customer reviews might not have the same effect on all types of products (Cui, Lui & Guo, 2012). Products can be classified as either search products or experience products (Nelson, 1970). Weathers, Sharma and Wood (2007) state that the difference between a search and an experience product is the extent to which the customers feel that

they need to experience the product in order to evaluate its quality.

A search product is a product where the customer can easily find information about elements such as quality before being able to touch the physical product. Search products do not require high customer involvement to evaluate (Singh et al, 2016). For search products, the customers trust online customer reviews to a higher extent if the

reviews contain much information (Jiménes & Mendoza, 2013). Furthermore, Luan et al (2016) state that customers of search products seek attribute-based information. Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) stress that online customer reviews of search products should be prominently displayed so customers can easily access the information. Thus, elements such as the valence of the reviews greatly affect customers' evaluation (Cui, Lui & Guo, 2012).

An experience product is a product that the customers need to interact with to determine its quality, and where a high degree of customer involvement is required to evaluate elements such as quality (Singh et al, 2016). For experience products, the customer relies on the review based on their level of agreement with the review (Jiménes & Mendoza, 2013). Luan et al (2016) describe that while customers of experience products search for experience-based information, Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) argue that elements, such as the volume of reviews, tend to be important for customers of an experience product as it indicates product popularity.

Customer Characteristics

The consumer's internet experience is one of the elements that Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) highlight could have an impact on the effectiveness of online customer reviews, and suggest that consumers with greater internet experience are more likely to use online customer reviews. Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) reason that high internet experience and confidence lead to higher influence and trust in online customer reviews. On the contrary, Cheema and Papatla (2010) argue that more internet experience can decrease the trust in online customer reviews, as experienced internet users are more likely to have had a negative experience related to internet usage.

Hu, Liu and Zhang (2008) reason that customers with little prior knowledge of the product or lack previous experience in doing business online could experience both a

financial and psychological uncertainty associated with buying the product online. In the article, Hu, Liu and Zhang (2008) refer to the uncertainty reduction theory. The uncertainty reduction theory assumes that there is a human drive to reduce uncertainty (Bradac, 2001). In line with the theory of social proof, humans tend to rely on the actions and guidance from others in situations with high uncertainty or in situations that are hard to interpret (Cialdini, 2005). To reduce uncertainty, consumers will hence seek information such as online customer reviews (Hu, Liu & Zhang, 2008).

Product Popularity

Online customer reviews could have a stronger impact on the sales of products that are popular (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Popular products tend to receive more reviews, because reviews of popular products reflect product quality more accurately for several reasons (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). First, popular products tend to receive a large number of reviews that signal trustworthiness (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Second, customers are more confident that they will find reviews concerning a popular product online (versus less popular) and hence they more actively search for reviews regarding popular products, the influence of these reviews thus increases (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Furthermore, it can be said that customers are exposed to reviews of popular products more often and therefore they might affect the customer decisions to buy more significantly (Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

Zhu & Zhang (2010) also discuss that popular products are associated with high quality and therefore the customer does not need to research reviews to make sure they are making a good choice. Using this argument, Zhu & Zhang (2010) continue with the reasoning that less popular products are more dependent on reviews to be chosen by the customers.

Anand, Nagendra and Manish (2020) have concluded that popular products have a

higher number of reviews compared to less popular products, and that reviews for popular products are longer compared to those for less popular products. Anand, Nagendra and Manish (2020) suggest that the reason for this varying length of reviews is that customers are more interested in popular products and that they tend to talk more about their good experiences with the product. Shihab and Putri (2018) showed that popular products with negative online customer reviews do not tend to affect the customers' judgement of the product.

Valence

Valence in this study is being referred to as the positive and negative orientation of information (Frijda, 1986 cited in Lo & Yao, 2019). Review valence is becoming increasingly important (Zhao et al, 2020). Such information plays an integral role in eliminating the uncertainty that customers face prior to the actual purchase (Shi et al, 2016). The quality of reviews and the information contained in these reviews affect customer purchase decisions significantly (Zhao et al, 2020). Jia and Liu (2018) present the idea that customers first consider review valence, either positive or negative, rather than review usefulness when deciding whether to follow the review's advice.

Drawing on the loss aversion theory presented by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), stating that the pain caused by potential losses is felt more than the happiness brought by the gain of an equivalent amount, Jia and Liu (2018) discuss the gate-keeping role of review valence in the overall decision-making process. That is, given that review valence serves as being one of the most direct signals of potential loss (Hodac, Carson & Moore, 2013), customers place greater weight on it than on review usefulness. Keeping this under consideration, to avoid any potential loss, customers might draw a quick conclusion not to purchase a product if they see a negative review, regardless of its review usefulness (Jia & Liu, 2018). Jia and Liu (2018), build

on this by asserting that if customers come across a positive review, they would go on to evaluate its usefulness, because positive valence alone is not sufficient and it cannot secure a positive purchase outcome. Thus, Jia and Liu (2018) conclude that a positive review would generate a stronger intention to purchase when it is rated high in usefulness, whereas a negative review would harm the purchase intention regardless of the review utility.

Source of Review

Banerjee (2018) states that the credibility of a vast array of online customer reviews, can hardly be taken for granted. Product reviews are often subjective and involve personal experience, thoughts, and concerns (Banerjee, 2018). Therefore, it is common for individuals to review products or services that they are familiar with (Liu et al, 2008). Chen and Xie (2008) states that the usefulness of online customer reviews could depend on customers' expertise. Customers process product information in different ways depending on experience, increased product familiarity, often leading to higher expertise regarding the product (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987).

Reich and Maglio (2020) present two types of reviewers: mistaken reviewer and successful reviewer. According to Reich and Maglio (2020), a mistaken reviewer is one who has made a mistake in prior purchases, while a successful reviewer is one who has had no issues with the product. Purchase mistake is defined as a self-identified suboptimal decision whereby people purchase a product that fails to meet the level of expected performance (Reich & Maglio, 2020). It is inferred in the said study that customers believe a reviewer has more expertise about a specific product if she/he admits to previously making a mistake in purchasing it than if the reviewer does not. The results also unveiled that a larger number of potential customers opt for a product recommended by a mistaken reviewer (Reich & Maglio, 2020). Given that lack of

knowledge is fixable and, thus, temporary, Reich and Maglio (2020) further propose that reviewers who admit to having made a mistake will be seen as more credible because the lack of knowledge has been rectified, that is, they have gained expertise since the purchase mistake. Expertise here is being conceptualized as a subcomponent of the broader construct of consumer knowledge (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987).

In another study conducted by Steward et al (2020), the authors examined the effects of reviewer affiliation and source-credibility. Steward et al (2020) conclude that expertise alone is not enough, rather it is the disclosure of a material connection between the product and reviewer to reveal the level of expertise that the reviewer has with the product and/or company.

Moreover, there are two types of information sources provided for customers: seller-created product information and customer-review information, where the seller could choose the amount of information provided (Chen & Xie, 2008). The information presented by the company is often focused on product attributes and technical information, while information created by customers is more user-oriented (Chen & Xie, 2008). Furthermore, Chen and Xie (2008) reason that customers with higher expertise are more likely to find seller-created material useful, while less experienced customers are more likely to rely on customer-created information.

Number of Reviews

Within online customer reviewers, 46% pay attention to the number of reviews (Watson, Ghosh & Trusov, 2018). The number of reviews has also been shown to have the most positive correlation with product sales (Kunlin, Yuhan & Liyi, 2020). Liu et al (2018; Kunlin, Yuhan & Liyi, 2020) confirmed that the number of reviews affects especially lesser-ranked product sales positively. Another research has shown that when the number of reviews is sufficient,

and the reviews have similar opinions, those reviews are considered very credible (Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

When making a buying decision there is always a fear of making an incorrect choice that will lead to regret about the decision (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007; Watson, Ghosh & Trusov, 2018). Therefore the interest in doing assessments before the decision is important to reduce this risk (Bockenholts et al, 1991; Watson, Ghosh & Trusov, 2018). Customers tend to focus more on the negative information when doing assessments and therefore the value of the number of reviews will increase when there is a significant number of reviews containing negative information (Watson, Ghosh & Trusov, 2018).

Methodology

The study is an exploratory study conducted by using a combination of an inductive and deductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2017). According to Bryman & Bell (2017), using a combination of inductive and deductive approach is called an abductive approach. Hence, the study has employed an abductive approach for data collection and representation. Several theories about online customer reviews within business-to-consumers were studied to establish a framework of elements that could affect customers' reliance on online customer reviews. In addition, semi-structured interviews with business-to-business companies were conducted to explore what elements influence their reliance on online customer reviews. A new framework was created consisting of elements found overlapping between business-to-consumer and business-to-business, and elements identified through interviews to be of importance within business-to-business.

Data Collection Method

The qualitative methods employed in the paper are twofold, primary data collection and secondary data collection. Firstly,

elements influencing customers' reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-consumer were studied using prior research. To identify these elements, secondary sources were examined. Another approach that is incorporated in data collection is the use of primary sources. This consisted of two semi-structured interviews with company representatives of business-to-business companies. Semi-structured interviews refer to interviews following a structured interview guide (Drever, 2003). The interviews were conducted online over Skype and Teams, and it was recorded with the permission of respondents. The interviews were structured to gain an understanding of the company's background information, its use of online channels for selling products, and also to investigate the respondents' view on how online customer reviews could be structured for business-to-business customers to rely on when arriving at a purchase decision. Comparative questions regarding the respondents' views on the differences between business-to-business and business-to-consumer were also asked to gain deeper insights into the differences between the two sectors.

Presentation of Results

The results of the study are presented using the same conceptual framework as for business-to-consumer, but where the elements reflect the behaviour of business-to-business customers instead of business-to-consumer. Two business-to-business company respondents were interviewed to identify what elements influence the reliance on online customer reviews within their sector.

Respondent 1	Respondent 2
Alfa Laval	Ecolean

Case Study Alfa Laval

Alfa Laval is a global business-to-business company founded in 1883 (Alfa Laval, n.d). The company is the world leader within heat

transfer, separation, and fluid handling (Alfa Laval, n.d). Alfa Laval's mission is "to optimize the performance of our customers' processes. Time and time again." which the company describes as a customer-focused approach that provides solutions that respond to the market's needs and addresses challenges (Alfa Laval, n.d). In 2019, the company stated that they are working to simplify customer collaboration and trying to shorten the decision-making paths of customers, where one aspect relates to developing the company's digital platforms including e-commerce (Alfa Laval, 2019).

Alfa Laval sells products through several digital channels. The company's products are also sold in webshops while some business units within Alfa Laval also sell their products through sites such as Amazon and Alibaba, although respondent 1 from the firm states that sales through Amazon have not contributed well. Furthermore, respondent 1 reasons that Alibaba is a great distribution channel for sales in China where the site is seen as the main channel for both business-to-consumer and business-to-business.

Respondent 1 emphasises the importance of selling through digital channels, and that the digital journey will become more and more important.

"Within business-to-business, when it comes to somewhat not-so-difficult products, I think it is really vital that we have them online and offer additional service offerings like spare parts." (Respondent 1)

Furthermore, respondent 1 reasons that most business-to-business purchases start with a Google search, a consequence of humans getting more digital experience and their private life getting more interlinked with work life.

For the products sold through Alfa Laval's own channel, such as sales company webshops, it is not possible for the customers to

review products in detail today, although, some of the webshops have a few buttons where the customers can rate their experience. However, on sites like Amazon and Alibaba, Alfa Laval customers can review products in detail. Regarding online customer reviews within business-to-business respondent 1 states that:

“We are not in that behaviour yet when it comes to business-to-business.” (Respondent 1)

Most of the sales from online channels at Alfa Laval today are replacement orders. Either customers' units are broken, or the customers need spare parts. Respondent 1 emphasises the importance of customer experience, and that the customer should feel a connection to the company even if the purchase is made through digital channels.

Product Popularity

Respondent 1 states that this element will probably not be as important within business-to-business as within business-to-consumer.

Customer Characteristics

Respondent 1 comments that it could probably affect in terms of the experience of the purchaser. The purchaser that is used to seeing online customer reviews would probably consider them.

Product Characteristics

Respondent 1 reasons that this element might not be of as great importance as the reviews within business-to-business reflect the buying experience rather than the product itself. Furthermore, respondent 1 reasons that from experience, customers within business-to-business have specific expectations to find a certain degree of information about the product on the website. He reasons that if the customer does not find that information, then they would probably not be interested to even read the reviews.

Number of Reviews

Respondent 1 outlines that this element probably will be of great importance within business-to-business too, in terms of getting reviews to be seen as credible. More reviews could signal credibility.

Valence

Respondent 1 explained that valence could be of importance, especially if it is related to one of the needs the customer has.

“If the customers have a defined need, they will probably avoid buying if there are negative comments about something that they prioritize.” (Respondent 1)

Source of Review

Furthermore, respondent 1 states that the source of review could play a large part in making the reviews seem more credible.

“Probably there will be a need to state company or industry, it could give an added value to a customer to see that another similar company, or a company within the same industry, is happy with the experience and the product.” (Respondent 1)

Investigation of Other Potentially Important Elements

Respondent 1 highlights the importance of reviews reflecting customer need. Hence, it could be important to consider what the customer values in the online experience. It is discussed in the interview that reviews should be relevant, and seen as a way to confirm needs. As a supporting argument, respondent 1 states that:

“If it is important for the customer to get everything delivered at one time, or to have smooth and safe transactions, then the customer would probably look for reviews that confirm or deny those needs.” (Respondent 1)

Furthermore, respondent 1 explains the potential problem of getting customers to write reviews. Respondent 1 discusses that it is not likely for a customer to write a review after receiving and installing the product, if there are no issues with the product. Customers writing reviews only when faced with adversity could cause a potential problem for the company. To get customers to review products, respondent 1 states that there is a need to make it convenient for the customer to rate and review, for an example:

“A good way of getting reviews is to make someone grade their experience before leaving the webpage.” (Respondent 1)

Finally, respondent 1 concludes that:

“Business-to-business is lagging behind a little bit, first we need to work to get the online experience right for the customer. Once we have that, we need to adapt and implement things like systems for online customer reviews. With reviews, we could get a lot of feedback that could help us improve our business.” (Respondent 1)

Case Study Ecolean

Ecolean is a business-to-business company founded in 1996 in Helsingborg, Sweden, where they have their head office today (Ecolean, n.d). Ecolean provides its customers with packaging and efficient filling systems (Ecolean, n.d). The firm is an innovative company that focuses on using a minimal amount of raw materials to produce a unique and flexible package that is lightweight (Ecolean, n.d). It also provides its customers with efficient filling lines that have been developed and established by people with industry knowledge and experience (Ecolean, n.d). The company is always developing ideas and innovations to be able to provide their customers with good-quality products which are meeting high standards (Ecolean, n.d). Ecolean is a fast-growing company and has commercial

activities in over 30 countries (Ecolean, n.d). It is one of five companies in the world within its business sector (respondent 2).

Ecolean’s vision is “to be the best packaging company in the world in the eyes of all our stakeholders” (Ecolean, n.d).

Ecolean’s mission is “to provide the world with safe and convenient packaging solutions for liquid food with minimal environmental impact” (Ecolean, n.d).

Ecolean does not sell its products on any digital platforms today, though the company is indirectly affected by online customer reviews:

“We sell material and machines to fill our customers' products, so many of the reviews that come are our customers' reviews that exist on their Facebook or other platforms that they are active on. If there is a good review about our customer, it is about the product, not the package in itself. Often the reviews are ‘what a good yogurt’ or ‘what a good milk’. But the reason maybe why our customers get better reviews is because of our package, then that is good for us because then our customer buys more of our product when their demand is increasing and they need to produce more. We are therefore influenced indirectly.” (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 states that Ecolean works in a very narrow business area and that most of the products are customized, and therefore there is not a lot of information and reviews online for customers to find, most information is traded in person. Despite this respondent 2 states that there is a trend to be seen where more and more products within business-to-business are being sold online and that online customer reviews may play a part in decision-making depending on the products and industry.

When Ecolean buys equipment it is a very long process, depending on the project.

Respondent 2 reveals that the buying process often starts with a Google search about the company, which could result in considering the online customer reviews, if there are any. There is often a lot of money involved within business-to-business, therefore it is important to research and get in contact with companies before deciding to move to the next step in the process. The next step consists of multiple in-person meetings, discussions, and tests to find the right supplier. Therefore, online customer reviews are important but not exclusively decisive.

Within Ecolean's business there is a lot of capital investment when buying products and services, it is an investment, therefore online customer reviews don't affect the buying decision significantly, according to respondent 2.

Product Popularity

Respondent 2 states that this element is imperative within business-to-business when looking at reviews because product popularity could signal high quality and that the company is trustworthy.

Customer Characteristics

Respondents 2 states that it is not likely that experts of an industry write online customer reviews, therefore this element is not important.

"Experts within an area often publish their reviews and opinions in a more sophisticated setting, like in a business magazine." (Respondent 2)

Product Characteristics

This element is not of great importance according to respondent 2, because although the customers are looking for products, elements such as performance and trustworthiness regarding the company are in focus rather than the products.

Number of Reviews

Respondent 2 states that it is important to get a width of reviews to be able to conduct an analysis, the number of reviews is therefore integral.

"1 or 2 is better than nothing." (Respondent 2)

Valence

Respondent 2 addresses this element by denoting that it is easier to complain than to compliment, therefore the compliments weigh more. Respondent 2 also highlights a problem regarding this element:

"If there are bad reviews you just delete them. Many companies show the good reviews and delete the bad ones." (Respondent 2)

Source of Review

Trustworthiness, when it comes to reviews, is the most important aspect, and therefore the review must come from a trustworthy source, according to respondent 2.

"When I look at reviews I look to see if it is a serious comment, that it feels like it is a customer who writes it and not an employee, but it is hard." (Respondent 2)

Investigation of Other Potentially Important Elements

Respondent 2 highlights performance when looking at reviews. The first thing respondent 2 looks at when researching a company and reviews are the facts regarding its performance. It is stated in the interview that the individual deciding on the company's behalf wants to be able to find out that the seller produces the products that the business is looking for, that they are good at what they do, and that they are trustworthy.

When comparing online customer reviews within business-to-business to business-to-consumer respondent 2 declares that an

online customer review has more effect in business-to-consumer. The reason for this is the amount of money and risk involved in different decisions as well as the length and process of the buying decision chain. It is also highlighted by respondent 2 that there are more customers within business-to-consumer, therefore an online customer review affects a lot more customers within that industry.

Respondent 2 affirms that most individuals within the industry are occupied with other tasks and they are not likely to take an initiative to write a review on their own after making the purchase. It is suggested during that interview that the company must actively remind their customers and also offer them a token of appreciation for leaving a review.

Lastly, respondent 2 reasons that the amount of information in the review can be important to consider. A one-word response like “good” is not enough as a review. Respondent 2 then goes on to highlight that the reason behind a one-word review must be revealed. Therefore online customer reviews need to contain a sufficient level of information.

Discussion

This study has aimed to explore online customer reviews within business-to-business. A framework of elements that can enhance customers reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-consumer was conducted as a tool to gain an understanding of what elements could potentially affect customers reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-business. Semi-structured interviews with company representatives from the business-to-business sector served as a way of investigating the potential relationship between online customer reviews and business-to-business entities. The interviews also served the purpose of investigating if the same elements could influence customer reliance on online

customer reviews within business-to-business as within business-to-consumer.

Zhu & Zhang (2010) reason that as the use of the internet is growing, online customer reviews are becoming a more important source of information for customers. As found in the interviews, both respondent 1 and respondent 2 discuss that most buying processes within business-to-business probably start with a search on Google today. Respondent 1, who works at Alfa Laval, a company that sells products both through its own webshops and through online channels such as Amazon and Alibaba, reasons that as private life and work life gets more inter-linked, it is getting more important to offer products online. This is confirmed by Lorca, de Andres and Garcia-Diez (2019) who reason that it is getting increasingly important for companies to use electronic commerce, both to improve business and to avoid lagging behind competitors.

Kapferer (2012) discusses that one of the key dimensions in business-to-business is that buyers engage in relationships and not simply in transactions. Respondent 2 mentions that there are several meetings before a purchase decision is made as to the products that Ecolean sells are customized. Furthermore, respondent 1 reasons that most of Alfa Laval sales through online channels are replacement orders, and that the products sold online are products that are not difficult and that could be standardized. Hence, it could be discussed whether some business-to-business products are too complex and involve too much relationship-building to be sold through digital channels. At the same time, both respondent 1 and respondent 2 agree that they see a trend of more business-to-business products being sold online, the two also agree that the development makes online customer reviews an important element to consider when developing online channels.

Zhu and Zhang (2010) reason that product popularity could be a element that

influences customer reliance on online customer reviews. Zhu and Zhang (2010) discuss that popular products usually receive a larger number of reviews which increases the usefulness of online customer reviews, but they also reason that popular products are usually related to high quality, and hence the customer will not look at online customer reviews to the same extent as with less popular products. Respondent 1 and 2 do not agree on the element's potential importance within business-to-business. Respondent 1 concludes that product popularity will probably not be as important within business-to-business as within business-to-consumer, while respondent 2 proposes that product popularity is an important element that influences how the customer perceives the company and quality of the product.

Product characteristics could, according to Cui, Lui and Guo (2012), affect what type of online customer reviews the customer looks for and their perceived helpfulness in the decision-making within business-to-consumer. Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) divide products into two categories: search and experience products. An experience product is a product where a high degree of customer involvement is required to evaluate elements such as quality (Singh et al, 2016). Luan et al (2016) describe that customers of experience products search for experience-based information. Kapferer (2012) states that one of the key dimensions in business-to-business is that buyers engage in relationships and not simply in the transaction of products. Hence, business-to-business products could be viewed as experience products. Both respondents 1 and 2 agree that product characteristics are not the most important element for online customer reviews to be seen as useful within business-to-business. They both reason that online customer reviews that include customers' experience regarding the company and the buying experience are probably seen as more useful than online customer reviews that only contain information about the product itself.

The customer's internet experience is one of the elements that Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) highlight could have an impact on the effectiveness of online customer reviews within business-to-consumer. According to respondent 1, purchasers within business-to-business that have previously bought products online could rely more on online customer reviews than a person that has never bought products online. Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) assert that high experience and confidence lead to higher influence and trust in online customer reviews, thus reiterating the point presented by respondent 1. Furthermore, respondent 2 highlights that customer characteristics, such as if the person is an expert within the area or not could affect how useful they find online customer reviews. Respondent 2 reasons that it is more likely that an expert would use a more sophisticated setting to publish reviews in. Hence, experts may look for information on other platforms than through online customer reviews. This confirms Chen and Xie (2008) conclusion that customers with higher expertise are more likely to find other material, such as seller-created material, more useful than customer-created information.

Valence is another element that could influence the perceived usefulness of online customer reviews within business-to-consumer (Jia & Liu, 2018). Respondent 1 states that valence could be of importance within business-to-business, especially if there is a positive or negative comment about something that relates to their needs. This confirms the argument presented by Jia and Liu (2018), who conclude that a positive review would generate a stronger intention to purchase. Furthermore, both respondents reason that this element could be misleading as it is more likely that a customer who is not satisfied would take the time to write a review. Respondent 1 reflects upon that online customer reviews could help improve business. Hence, negative reviews could be seen as a possibility to improve customers' buying

intention. Reich and Maglio (2020) discuss that potential customers are more likely to opt for products recommended by mistaken reviewers who admit to previously making a mistake in purchasing the reviewed product. Turning a negative customer experience into a positive one, and making the customer reflect upon it in another review, could therefore increase other potential customers' purchase intentions.

Reviewer credibility and expertise could affect the perceived usefulness of online customer reviews within business-to-consumer (Reich & Maglio, 2020). Both respondents highlight that source of review is an important element within business-to-business as well. They reason that it is important that the source of the review is trustworthy and relatable. For example, respondents reason that this could be achieved through the source of the review having to state the company or industry which they are working within. This confirms Steward et al (2020) that a material connection between the product and reviewer reveals the level of expertise that the reviewer has with the product and/or company could enhance the reliance on the review.

The number of reviews has also been shown to have a positive correlation with product sales within business-to-consumer (Kunlin, Yuhan & Liyi, 2020). Both respondents highlighted that the number of reviews would probably be important within business-to-business as well and respondent 1 resonated that more reviews could signal more credibility.

Other element that were discussed as important within business-to-business were that the online customer review would have to appeal to the potential customers' needs and what they are looking for. Respondent 1 reasoned that the customer needs would have to be either confirmed or denied in the online customer review in order for the customer to find it useful. Furthermore, respondent 1 emphasised that a large

difference between business-to-business and business-to-consumer is that customers within business-to-business probably look for online customer reviews regarding buying experience and the company rather than regarding the product.

Respondent 2 also put forth the idea that the amount of information in the customer online customer reviews would probably be an important element to consider within business-to-business.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to explore online customer reviews within business-to-business. By analysing elements that enhance customer reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-consumer, this study has outlined certain elements that determine the customer's reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-business.

It can be concluded that as electronic commerce and its integration with business-to-business is becoming more common, the importance of online customer review is growing even if the business-to-business sector's digital transformation is lagging behind that of the business-to-consumer sector. Furthermore, it can be drawn from the research conducted that many of the elements that could determine the customer's reliance on online customer reviews could be considered important elements within business-to-business as well. Customer characteristics in terms of expertise and internet experience, valence, number of reviews, and source of review seem to be elements that could be of importance both within business-to-business and business-to-consumer. The importance of elements such as product popularity can not be determined. Product characteristics as a element relating to online customer reviews seem to be less important within business-to-business than within business-to-consumer as both respondents reasoned that customer experience regarding the company and

buying experience would probably be more valuable than information about the product itself within business-to-business.

Furthermore, elements that were not significantly important within business-to-consumer, such as the level at which the online customer review appeals to customer's

needs and amount of information in the online customer review, were found to be of importance within business-to-business.

Figure 2 shows a summary of the elements concluded to be important within the business-to-business sector.

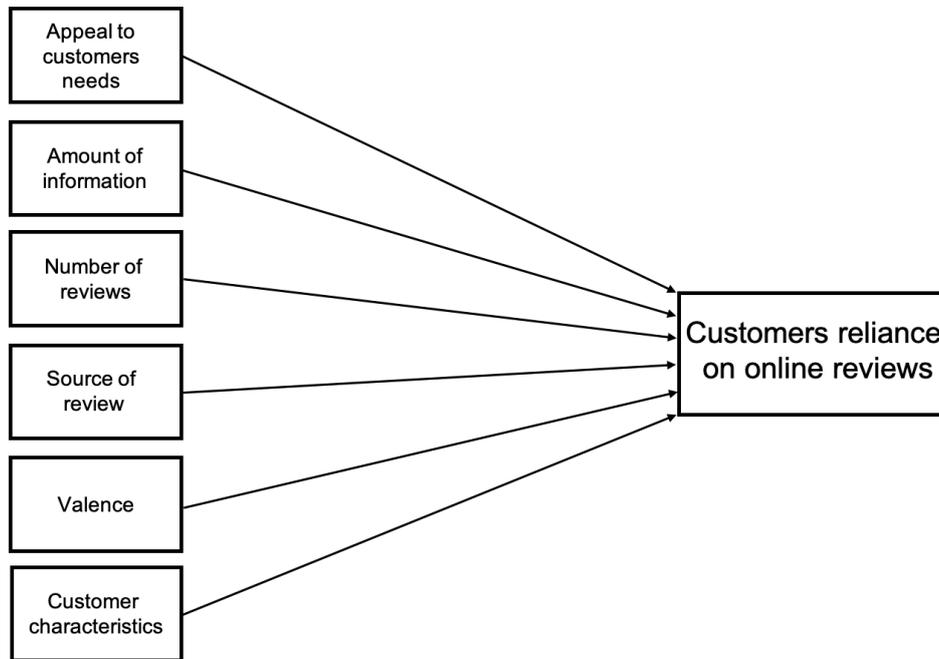


Figure 2: Elements influencing customers reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-business.

Theoretical & Managerial Implications

This study has outlined certain elements that determine the customer's reliance on online customer reviews. The initial review of the literature outlined a total of six elements that play an integral role in swaying customer's purchase intention. However, those elements, according to prior research, stem from the business-to-consumer sector. This paper has explored the relevance of the same elements but in the business-to-business context. Through the interviews conducted, it became evident that most elements overlap as, ultimately, customers are looking for a product to satisfy their needs and online channels serve the purpose of research before making a purchase decision.

It can be inferred that a business customer and an individual customer are looking for similar elements in an online customer review, for the most part. However, in a business-to-business environment, as outlined by the respondents, it can be a challenge to get the customer to review a product or service.

As for managerial implications, the findings from this research can assist decision-makers in a business-to-business setting to better understand and navigate through the online channels. It will assist business entities in better gauging what customers look for when they research online channels before arriving at their decision to buy or not to buy. These findings can aid businesses when they set up their online channels. Moreover, as this study has unveiled,

getting business-to-business customers to produce a review can be a daunting task, business managers can design deep-rooted strategies which make giving feedback a part of the buying process.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without its limitations. Due to the limited research done in the business-to-business sector relating to online customer reviews, primary sources had to be relied on. Therefore, an analogy between business-to-business and business-to-consumer is created to gauge how the two can relate in the context of online customer reviews. Moreover, as the research is conducted for academic purposes, in a limited time, the number of interviews conducted with industry representatives is also limited. The business-to-business sector covers a vast array of companies and industries, however, due to lack of resources only two companies could be consulted to conduct our primary research.

For future research, it can be suggested that researchers explore the area of online channels within business-to-business as there is a vacuum. With the internet becoming more relevant by the day, business-to-business organizations are delving into the area of online channels and reviews are an integral part of it, therefore, much research is needed for organizations to adapt their respective online strategies.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Introduction

We are currently writing a paper that aims to explore online customer reviews within business-to-business. We developed a framework of elements that could affect customers' reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-consumer goods. The objective of the paper is to explore what elements could affect customers' reliance on online customer reviews within business-to-business.

1. Tell us about your position and your relation to selling products online.
2. Tell us about your company's online presence. Does your company sell products online, if yes, what products and through what channels? If no, why?
3. If you sell your products online, is it possible for customers to give their reviews on the products after purchase?
4. What potential positive/negative effects could online customer reviews cause for your company?
5. Tell us about how you personally see the business-to-business buying process. What is the role of online channels in the decision-making process? (Is it significant, if so, how much?). Do you think that business-to-business online purchasing behavior differs from business-to-consumer? If yes, how? If no, why?
6. How would you arrive at the decision to buy a product/service? What elements would you look at and what information would you search for?
7. How important do you think online customer review is for business-to-business customers?
8. What elements do you think are important for an online customer review to be seen as credible, insightful and useful for a decision? Do you think it differs from the elements within business-to-consumer? If so, how?
9. What do you think of these elements' role in making the online customer review be seen as credible, insightful and useful for a decision?
 - Product popularity
 - Customer characteristics
 - Product characteristics
 - Number of reviews
 - Valence (positive or negative information)
 - Source of the review
10. Do you think customers within business-to-business would rate products after a purchase?