Helpful Reviewers in TripAdvisor, an Online Travel Community

Hee “Andy” Lee a, Rob Law a & Jamie Murphy b

a School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, TST East, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China
b Murdoch Business School, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia

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HELPFUL REVIEWERS IN TRIPADVISOR, AN ONLINE TRAVEL COMMUNITY

Hee “Andy” Lee
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ABSTRACT. Online communities need a critical mass for communication, information, and entertainment and should provide useful information for their members in order to obtain this critical mass. The abundance of online travel reviews increases cognitive costs of travelers, and travelers use extrinsic cues to judge the quality of online reviews to eliminate costs associated with the information process. Of various cues used in online environments, this study examined an online reputation system in TripAdvisor.com and profiled the reviewers who post helpful reviews in the online travel community. The key findings include that helpful reviewers are those who travel more, actively post reviews, belong to any age and gender groups, and give lower hotel ratings. This study adds to research of online travel reviewers by characterizing helpful information creators among online content creators.

KEYWORDS. Online reviewer, reputation, eWOM, source credibility, profile

INTRODUCTION

Potential travelers have difficulties in assessing quality of tourism products prior to experiencing them (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). One way to gain confidence in a tourism product is to search information about the product prior to purchase (Urbany, Dickson, & Wilkie, 1989). The information process of potential travelers is initiated from searching internal sources such as their experiences (Fodness & Murray, 1997). When internal information is insufficient, searching will move to external sources. Today, travelers use various types and amounts of information—online and offline (Murphy & Olaru, 2009).

Among various online information sources, community websites are becoming increasingly important. These global platforms enable travelers to share their experiences—posting reviews—with like-minded others (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Gretzel, Lee, Tussyadiah, &
Tens of millions of travelers share travel experiences through online communities such as TripAdvisor, Yahoo! Travel, Igougo, and Lonelyplanet. Founded in 2000, TripAdvisor is the most popular travel community with over 47 million monthly visits (Yoo & Gretzel, 2009), 20 million members, and over 35 million travel reviews in August, 2010 (TripAdvisor, 2010a). The abundance of travel reviews in TripAdvisor and similar online communities makes information easy to find, but difficult to process and judge. The result is a decrease in search costs and an increase in cognitive costs (Bellman, Johnson, Lohse, & Mandel, 2006). For the best selection among overflowing reviews, travelers need to put more cognitive efforts by remembering one review and comparing it with others (Bellman et al., 2006; Shugan, 1980). Thus, too much information increases cognitive costs such as anxiety about uncertain preferences, lack of expertise, and incorrect decision (Reutskaja & Hogarth, 2009). As it is cognitively cumbersome for potential travelers to evaluate the quality of each review available in online communities, they may use extrinsic cues to judge quality (Chaiken, 1980; Mitra, 1995; O’Reilly, 1982). In addition to price, brand, and country of origin that indicate product quality (Miyazaki, Grewal, & Goodstein, 2005; Rao & Monroe, 1989; Rao, 2005), reputation is another extrinsic cue indicating the quality of online merchants and online information creators (Dellarocas, 2003; Jin, Bloch, & Cameron, 2002; Li & Hitt, 2008; Purohit & Srivastava, 2001; Resnick, Zeckhauser, Friedman, & Kuwabara, 2000).

Reputation is the extent to which receivers believe a communicator is honest and concerned about others and unalterable in the short-time (Helm & Mark, 2007; Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, & Vitale, 2000). Online reputation systems help users identify reputation of others by collecting, distributing, and aggregating feedback about participants’ past behavior (Resnick et al., 2000). For example, Amazon and TripAdvisor allow voting on the “helpfulness” of posted reviews (Jin et al., 2002). Such reputation mechanisms reduce uncertainties regarding tourism product quality and performance because they help travelers identify whom to trust for their decision making (Helm & Mark, 2007; Resnick et al., 2000).

Yet so far, scant research has investigated reputable information creators. Research on online travel reviews has focused on profiling members who contribute to the communities, often ignoring that members differ in persuasiveness (Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). Many travel community studies fail to profile opinion leaders who influence other members’ decision making (Kim et al., 2007; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003; Yoo & Gretzel, 2009). Similarly, the information source and its credibility in online travel communities seem underresearched.

Reputable members in online communities might have distinctive characteristics because prior research suggests that attributes of an information source are significant influential factors on different responses among recipients (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Forman, Ghose & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Kelman, 1961). For example, gender has shown a significant impact on information credibility in face-to-face communications (Burkhart, 1989; Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). In an online environment, reviewer identity yields favorable evaluation of product reviews (Forman et al., 2008). Accuracy, which relates to memory, is another determinant of information quality (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). The closer an event recall is, the more accurate the memory becomes, and the higher its quality is perceived (Kahana, Howard, Zaromb, & Wingfield, 2002). Valence of word-of-mouth (WOM) also has a strong impact on product evaluation and purchase decisions (Dellarocas, 2003; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Studies investigate the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on travel decision making (Cheng, Lam, & Hsu, 2006; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008).

A close look at the literature on the attributes of information sources reveals that a different approach to the topic is eminent. First, prior research stems from face-to-face communication and commercial contexts (Burkhart, 1989; Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). This approach may be inappropriate for
online travel communities, which are computer-mediated communication (O’Connor, 2008). Furthermore, prior online reputation studies are usually about online merchants in commercial contexts (Resnick et al., 2000; Zacharia, Moukas, & Maes, 2000) rather than information generators in non-commercial contexts.

In view of the absence of published articles in the existing tourism and hospitality literature that examined the reputable information creators, this study makes an initial attempt to profile reputable members in an online travel community by examining their sociodemographic and behavioral attributes. Since eWOM in online travel communities has a strong impact on decision making (Litvin et al., 2008; Shanteau, Weiss, Thomas, & Pounds, 2002), hospitality and tourism operators and academics would benefit from understanding characteristics of reputable information creators. The primary objective of this study is thus to answer the research question of “who are the reviewers generating helpful reviews?” This article helps address the research gap and adds to research of online travel reviewers by identifying “helpful” information creators from information creators.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Information Search**

Consumer awareness, selection, and choice of tourism products depend on available information (Fodness & Murray, 1997; McIntosh & Goeldner, 1990). Tourism products are often a confidence product built on experience quality, which is difficult to determine prior to purchase (Nelson, 1970). Due to uncertainties associated with the purchase decision, potential travelers seek information to reduce uncertainty (Berlyne, 1966).

Information search has two forms, internal and external (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Murphy & Olaru, 2009). Internal information search initiates in memory and then external information search involves everything except memory (Peterson & Merino, 2003). The Internet has become a prevailing external information source (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Kim et al., 2007), complementing face-to-face communication with acquaintances, friends, family members, and experts (Peterson & Merino, 2003). As the Internet enables potential travelers to interact with each other and share information at any time, it becomes important to identify, retrieve, and organize the online information in travel purchase decisions.

Information search comprises search costs and cognitive costs (Bellman et al., 2006; Ratchford, Lee, & Talukdar, 2003). Search costs (i.e., monetary costs and time to search) normally decrease in the online environment, which allows consumers to seek more options to make satisfactory decisions. Yet this abundant information can lead to information overload, which increases cognitive costs (Smith, Venkatraman, & Dholakia, 1999). Cognitive costs become significant when customers have time constraints in their information search (Bellman et al., 2006). Thus, customers under information overload tend to adopt heuristic processing to reduce the cognitive strain (Malhotra, 1984) and use extrinsic cues such as reputation to form judgments (Mitra, 1995). However, little research has examined reputable travel information creators.

**Opinion Leaders and Reputation**

WOM is informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver about a product, service, or organization (Cheng et al., 2006). As travelers often refer to the opinions and evaluations of others (Lewis & Chambers, 1989), WOM recommendations play a major role in tourism purchase. In online and offline WOM, opinion leaders play a key role (Corey, 1971; Litvin et al., 2008). Opinion leaders, trusted and informed individuals, interpret meanings and influence opinion seekers.

While opinion seekers depend on opinion leaders in decision making, it is difficult for a newcomer or occasional visitor to an online community to gauge community members’ opinions (Zacharia & Maes, 2000). To reduce such difficulties, individuals commonly depend on the reputation of the information source
as an extrinsic cue to identify opinion leaders (Weimann, Tustin, Vuuren, & Joubert, 2007). Reputation, the trust in a particular person in a specific domain, usually stems from a collective view of others (Zacharia et al., 2000).

Traditionally, opinion leader reputations stem from nominations (Weimann et al., 2007). As a way to utilize nomination, online reputation mechanisms rely upon ratings on individual reputations within a community (Li & Hitt, 2008; Zacharia et al., 2000). Subjective mechanisms stem from individual ratings of a product or a counterpart. For example, only buyers rate sellers in OnSale or both buyers and sellers rate each other on eBay using pre-determined scales such as from 1 being terrible to 5 being excellent. Some subjective ratings allow textual comments such as on Amazon, but others such as TripAdvisor do not. Systematic mechanisms calculate reputation based on algorithms that utilize objective information such as duration of the relationship or membership, frequency of participant activities, in addition to ratings by other members, to compute online reputation (Zacharia et al., 2000).

**Attributes of the Reputable Information Source**

By definition, reputable opinion leaders have the most credibility and how credible an information source is—source credibility—plays a vital role in persuasion of the delivered communication (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000; Patzer, 1983). Research suggests that expertise and trustworthiness influence source credibility, which consequently leads to more positive evaluation of reviews (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Hertzum, Andersen, Andersen, & Hansen, 2002; Kelman, 1961; Weimann et al., 2007).

Expertise is the ability to perform tasks successfully and closely relates to knowledge about the goods or services, which increases as related experiences increase (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). If someone shows a great experience (e.g., length and depth) in an area, the person may be an expert (Shanteau et al., 2002). People depend on an expert when they lack expertise in an area. Yet ironically, people are unable to verify whether the expert has expertise in the area unless they are experts in the area (Shanteau et al., 2002). While people commonly rely on experience to assess expertise, views on the correlation between experience and expertise are mixed (Shanteau et al., 2002).

Since reciprocal and longitudinal social relationships establish trust (Actman & Taylor, 1973), it is difficult to assess trustworthiness of a communication partner especially without an established long-term relationship (Povey, Conner, Sparks, James, & Shepherd, 2000). Although a long-term relationship is a key to establish trust, researchers suggest that there are other factors affecting trustworthiness of the reviewers and the positive evaluation of reviews. First, in an online community, honest and full disclosure of information creators can increase trust (Forman et al., 2008; Head & Hassanein, 2002). That is, a communication partner who discloses personal information is perceived to be more trustworthy than a communicator who does not disclose personal information. Trustworthiness increases because the reviews along with personal information of the creator conform to members’ expectations and reinforce the community norms, leading members to evaluate the reviewer and the review more positively (Forman et al., 2008).

Second, physical attractiveness of a communication partner influences perceived trustworthiness in face-to-face communication (Patzer, 1983). Communication partners perceive physically attractive communicators more trustworthy and of higher expertise. It is because physically attractive people are perceived to possess more favorable characteristics, so communicators of higher physical attractiveness are perceived more positively.

Gender is another predictor of perceived trustworthiness, but its relationship with source credibility varies. Burkhart (1989) found that women were better writers, more accurate, trustworthy, and intelligent; whereas Brownlow and Zebrowitz (1990) found men to be more knowledgeable in commercial communication. Gender difference in trustworthiness might be due to the topics (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003); women show more expertise and knowledge on female-related issues than male-related issues and vice versa. Similarly, a recent empirical
TABLE 1. Factors Influencing Source Credibility and Positive Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Researchers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Kelman, 1961; Weimann et al., 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related experience</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Shanteau et al., 2002; Weimann et al., 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity-descriptive information</td>
<td>Disclosure to higher credibility</td>
<td>Forman et al., 2008; Head &amp; Hassanain, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attractiveness</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Patzer, 1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Inconclusive; stereotyping</td>
<td>Brownlow &amp; Zebrowitz, 1990; Burkhart, 1989;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flanagin &amp; Metzger, 2003; Postmes &amp; Spears, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Kahana et al., 2002; Wathen &amp; Burkell, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>Inconclusive</td>
<td>Cheng et al., 2006; Duan et al., 2008; Gretzel et al., 2007; Lacziak et al., 2001; Lau &amp; Ng, 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

study showed that men were more autonomous when the topic was masculine; whereas women were more autonomous when the topic was feminine (Postmes & Spears, 2002). However, in an online environment, neither physical attractiveness nor gender is as evident as in a face-to-face environment and their correlations are uncertain.

Last, information accuracy is the other predictor of source credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Recency from an event affects human recall; the closer to an event a recall is, the more accurate the recall becomes (Kahana et al., 2002). Thus, it seems reasonable that the shorter the time from posting review and the travel experience, the more accurate and credible the review is. Thus, they would evaluate the reviews with a shorter interval from the travel experience more favorable, while potential travelers may not be able to measure objective accuracy.

Besides expertise and trustworthiness, valence of reviews influences evaluation of goods and services (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008), albeit the results are mixed. Gretzel, Yoo, and Purifoy (2007) identified that online travel reviews are most favorable when they maintain a balance of negative and positive views. However, Cheng et al. (2006) and Lacziak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami (2001) found that negative WOM has the strongest effect on consumer attitudes and evaluations. Similarly, Lau and Ng (2001) proposed that consumers place more weight on negative information when evaluating products, while Duan et al. (2008) found that positive WOM relates to the propensity of purchase. Likewise, how the valence of online reviews relates to people evaluating them seems inconclusive.

In summary, travelers go online for information about tourism products. Yet the Internet may overload travelers with abundant information and those under cognitive strain tend to adopt heuristics to cope with such information overload. Of various heuristics, online reputation is common among online travelers. Online reputation systems rate information creators based on their behaviors, identifying whom to rely on for tourism products. Studies suggest that reputable information creators have expertise in a topic and are trustworthy. While studies indicate that travel experience, gender, information accuracy, and valence of information relate to information source credibility, some of these relationships are indeterminate especially in online communication (see Table 1). Thus, this study examines these relationships in an online travel community.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in January 2010 among hotel reviews in TripAdvisor.com (URL: http://www.tripadvisor.com). TripAdvisor was chosen because it is the most popular travel community with over 35 million travel reviews (TripAdvisor, 2010a). TripAdvisor provides a map with 11 pre-determined regions:
Europe, the United States, Asia, South Pacific, Africa, South America, Canada, Mexico, Caribbean, Central America, and Middle East. Clicking a region on the map leads to a page listing the top-rated hotels in the region. The sample was the latest 100 reviews for each top-ranked hotel in all 11 TripAdvisor regions. TripAdvisor presents the top-ranked hotel in each region based on traveler ratings, albeit not a simple mathematical average of ratings (TripAdvisor, 2010b). The top-rated hotels tend to have more reviews than other hotels. Sampling the top hotel helps compare regions and generalize the results.

The study drew on reviewer information retrieved from the sample (see Table 2). Country of residence, age, gender, and number of destinations visited are disclosure-based while review date, member since, total reviews, and “Review Helpful” rating (RHR) are transaction-based. Disclosure-based information depends on members’ willingness to disclose while the transaction information stems from member activity. Hotel review rating was a 5-point scale from 1—terrible to 5—excellent. Member since indicates the month and the year when the reviewer registered as a member of TripAdvisor.com. TripAdvisor’s RHR represents how many registered readers answered yes to “was this review helpful?” at the end of a review. Selecting “Yes” increases the RHR by one. Voting on review helpfulness is a common reputation system to maintain online review quality (Jin et al., 2002). TripAdvisor provides a history of each reviewer’s RHR, which can signal reviewer quality and serve as a reputation proxy.

The data were up to the last 100 reviews for each top-ranked hotel in all 11 TripAdvisor destinations. There were 100 hotel reviews in seven regions, but only 84 African reviews, 75 Asian, 39 Caribbean, and 30 Middle Eastern—totaling 928 reviews and 928 unique reviewers. After excluding 353 (38%) of the 928 reviewers declining to reveal their age, 39% of the reviewers were from 35–49; 29% from 25–34; 26% from 50–64; 4% from 18–24; and 2% were over 64 years old. After excluding 452 reviewers who declined to give their gender, men (49%) and women (51%) were almost equally distributed. Reviewers who joined in 2009 comprised almost half (47%) the reviewers.

As Table 3 shows, 78% of the reviewers resided in the United States (48%) and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Attributes of the Collected Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of stay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel review rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member since</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of destinations visited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Review Helpful” rating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total reviews</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Europe (30%). European reviewers made major contributions to African and European reviews; whereas U.S. reviewers contributed to North America and Central America. Reviewers in South America and Canada made major contributions to South American and Canadian reviews, respectively. In general, reviewers posted reviews about one month after staying at the hotel ($M = .93$ month).

For data analysis, this study operationalized reputation as review helpfulness, measured as RHR in TripAdvisor. As the number of reviews could relate positively to RHR, this study used the average RHR, a reviewer’s total RHR divided by that reviewer’s total reviews. Table 4 summarizes the frequency of average RHRs. The highest average RHR was 73 and the number of reviews ranged from 1 to 91.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Sociodemographic Attributes**

First, the relationship between expertise and helpful reviews was examined with Spearman’s rho ($\rho$) correlation. This study operationalized expertise as the number of destinations visited. Previous studies have utilized experience as a proxy of expertise because expertise increases as experience increases (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Review helpfulness was operationalized as the average RHR. Expertise correlated positively with review helpfulness ($N = 547, \rho = .136, p = .002$), implying that reviewers who travel to many destinations tend to generate helpful reviews.

Second, ANOVA was conducted to examine the association of reviewer age with review helpfulness. Before conducting ANOVA, three outliers were identified based on Mahalanobis distance and then the data were log-transformed to satisfy the normality assumption. The result, summarized in Table 5, implies that reviewer age did not relate to helpful reviews, $F(4, 347) = .150, p = .963$.

Similar to the previous analysis, one outlier was identified based on Mahalanobis distance and then the data log-transformed to satisfy the normality assumption before conducting another ANOVA. There was no association of
TABLE 5. Average RHR by Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Mean of average RHR in the age group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–24 years old</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34 years old</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–49 years old</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–64 years old</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or more</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. RHR = “Review Helpful” rating. The average RHR presented in the Table was computed back to a natural number from log transformation.

Behavioral Attributes

After examining relationships of expertise, age, and gender with average RHR, the study investigated the relationship of review helpfulness with four behavioral factors: total reviews, identification disclosure, information accuracy, and review valence. Table 6 summarizes the frequency of total reviews per reviewer, with a range from 1 to 91. First, the correlation between total reviews and average RHR was examined using Spearman’s rho. The result was a positive correlation between the number of reviews and review helpfulness (N = 915, ρ = .303, p < .001). In other words, the more reviews generated, the higher average RHR the reviewer receives.

Moreover, the probability to continue posting increased as the number of reviews increased. That is, the probability to stay active after the first review was .45 and increased to .69 after the second review, to .75 after the third review, and increased afterward with a little fluctuation. This finding suggests that posting a second review is a tentative threshold to become an active reviewer. More than half of the reviewers stopped posting after the first review. After reviewers have posted their reviews twice, most of them will remain as active posters.

An ANOVA between review helpfulness and identity disclosure indicated marginal RHR differences between the age disclosure (N = 352, M = 1.07) and non-disclosure groups, N = 184, M = 1.23, F(1, 534) = 3.385, p = .066. Another ANOVA showed significant RHR differences between gender disclosure (N = 289) and non-disclosure group, N = 247, F(1, 534) = 23.715, p < .001. That is, posts by reviewers who did not disclose their gender received higher average RHR (M = 1.35) than those who did disclose (M = .95).

As information accuracy relates to the recall recency (Kahana et al., 2002) and accurate information tends to be credible (Wathen & Burkell, 2002), this study examined the relationship between review helpfulness and the lag time between the travel experience and review posting with Spearman’s rho. Since online reviews mainly consist of personal experience, accuracy of review contents was deduced from research suggesting the more recent a recalled memory is from the stimulus, the more accurate the memory is (Kahana et al., 2002). Review accuracy would decrease as the lag between staying in a hotel and reviewing a hotel increases. The Spearman’s rho result showed no significant correlation between lag time and review helpfulness (ρ = −.039, p = .248).

A final Spearman’s rho correlation examined the association of review valence with RHR. Review valence was the destination hotel rating on a 5-point scale (1: terrible, 2: poor, 3: average, 4: very good, 5: excellent); the higher a review rating, the more positive its valence. The result, a negative correlation between average review rating and average RHR (ρ = −.239, p < .001), suggests readers tend to perceive reviews with a low hotel rating as more helpful than reviews with a high hotel rating. This finding supports for a stronger effect of negative
TABLE 7. Findings Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship with RHR</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>Result</th>
<th>Detail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Spearman's rho</td>
<td>Significant ($\rho = .136$, $p = .002$)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Insignificant, $F(4, 347) = .150$, $p = .963$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Insignificant, $F(4, 287) = .453$, $p = .502$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total reviews</td>
<td>Spearman's rho</td>
<td>Significant ($\rho = .303$, $p &lt; .001$)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age disclosure</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Marginally sig., $F(1, 534) = 3.385$, $p = .066$</td>
<td>Higher RHR for nondisclosers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender disclosure</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td>Significant, $F(1, 534) = 23.715$, $p &lt; .001$</td>
<td>Higher RHR for nondisclosers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lag time</td>
<td>Spearman's rho</td>
<td>Significant ($\rho = -.039$, $p = .248$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valence</td>
<td>Spearman's rho</td>
<td>Significant ($\rho = -.239$, $p &lt; .001$)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. RHR = “Review Helpful” rating.

WOM having a stronger relationship with RHR than positive WOM does (Laczniak et al., 2001; Lau & Ng, 2001). The findings are summarized in Table 7.

**CONCLUSION**

While travel community research has focused on reviewer characteristics, little is known about helpful reviewers. Of 928 reviewers of the top-ranked TripAdvisor hotels in 11 destinations, 547 reviewers received at least one “Review Helpful” rate (RHR). This study operationalized opinion leaders, average RHR, based on TripAdvisor’s online reputation system. Based on average RHR, this study explored and examined the relationships of various factors with reputation. The existing literature suggests associations of expertise and trustworthiness with information source credibility and this study empirically examined the associations with review helpfulness. Moreover, this study explored the tenable relationship of social and behavioral characteristics with RHR and profiled the reputable reviewers. Based on this study’s findings, summarized in Table 7, helpful reviewers tend to:

1. travel to many destinations;
2. be indistinguishable from other reviewers in age and gender;
3. actively post reviews;
4. disclose their age and gender information less than other reviewers; and
5. give destination hotels a lower review rating than other reviewers.

**Academic Contributions**

This article examined content creators based on their reputation in an online community. While many studies differentiate online content creators from non-creators, this study separated opinion leaders from the creator group. Opinion leaders influence others’ decision making and are distinctive in various ways, but very few prior studies examined opinion leaders—helpful reviewers—in online travel communities. Thus, this study sheds light on online travel reviewers with a different approach.

The findings indicate that helpful reviewers differ, demographically and behaviorally, from general reviewers. This study extends two source credibility factors (i.e., expertise and trustworthiness) to number of destinations visited and disclosing personal information, respectively. Furthermore, this study suggests that online reputation systems identify helpful reviewers.

This study found that reviews not providing personal information received higher RHR than reviews providing personal information. This finding differs from previous studies. A recent research found that community members rated reviews containing identity-descriptive information as more helpful than anonymous reviews (Forman et al., 2008). Such online identity disclosure behavior may facilitate forming the relationships, common bonds, and social attraction that online community members value (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). However, this study found that reviews without gender information were more helpful than reviews with gender identity information. Reviewers who disclose...
gender information may express their opinions about the topics to match subjective norms about gender roles (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). Similarly, reviewers who do not disclose personal information may feel to have more freedom or privacy so that they may post personal feelings about travel experiences (Margulis, 1977). Perhaps readers may evaluate reviews from those who do not reveal gender information helpful because of their honest and sincere contents.

Finally, this study examined information disclosure in association with information quality in a non-commercial context. Reviewers who did not disclose their age or gender garnered higher average RHRs than those who disclosed this information. Information privacy studies suggest that some types of identification (e.g., credit card number) are more sensitive than other types (e.g., home phone number; Cranor, Reagle, & Ackerman, 1999; Malhotra, Kim, & Agarwal, 2004; Tourangeau & Smith, 1998). This study found that 49% of the reviewers shared their gender and 62% shared their age. This finding implies that in a non-commercial context with voluntary information disclosure, people perceive gender more sensitive than age.

Managerial Contributions

Online communities need a critical member mass for communication, information, and entertainment (Kim et al., 2004; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004). In order to obtain this critical mass, online communities should provide helpful information for their members. The findings in this study suggest various managerial implications to retain helpful reviewers in online travel communities. Successful retention of helpful reviewers would benefit online communities from maintaining the critical member mass and even increasing it, which will result in increasing their bottom lines.

First, online communities should encourage members to post reviews. One finding is that helpful reviewers tend to post frequently and give destination hotels a lower review rating than other reviewers. Moreover, this study suggests that a second review is a threshold to an active reviewer, and perhaps a helpful reviewer. Although this study did not examine why helpful reviewers post often (e.g., they write well, like to help others, or received high ratings on previous reviews), online communities can reward members. For example, an online community can compliment reviewer contributions explicitly and exclusively in a way to provoke intrinsic motivations such as the altruism in Gretzel et al.’s (2007) study.

Second, a sense of privacy protection could spur helpful reviews. Internet protocols such as secure socket layer would technically protect reviewers from online identity theft. As some types of information are sensitive while others are not, online communities could provide functions that give members perceived privacy such as opt-in/out options (Margulis, 1977).

Helpful reviewers tend to post reviews about nearby destinations (see Table 3). Thus, online travel communities need to implement strategies to promote reviewers from various destination countries to nurture content diversity. Strategies reflecting cultural impact on posting behavior and self-disclosure should proliferate reviews from members in faraway countries. For example, providing translation tools would reduce language barriers for reviewers and readers who have difficulties in English.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has a limitation on the generalizability of the findings. Although 928 reviews were collected from the world’s largest online travel communities, data collection was limited to the top-rated TripAdvisor hotels. Review ratings on the sample hotels used would be higher than the ratings from low-rated hotels. In this study, reviews with a low hotel review rating were more helpful than reviews with a high rating. The low ratings may get more attention among mostly excellent ratings; this attention may increase the possibility to receive a RHR vote. Samples from different hotel groups might yield different results. Also, this study took a novel approach to profile reputable reviewers...
Qualitative approaches such as content analysis of textual review comments should provide additional insights about source credibility and helpful reviewers. Content analysis is widely used in social sciences to analyze texts, from open-ended responses to mass media such as newspapers, television, and the Internet. Content analysis is unobtrusive, accepts unstructured material, and has context sensitivity and the capacity for handling large volumes of data (Krippendorff, 2004). The ability to handle large volumes of data is an advantage in web-based content analysis (McMillan, 2000) and hospitality researchers often use this technique to study websites (Baloglu & Pekcan, 2006; Hashim, Murphy, Purchase & O’Connor, 2010; Murphy, Olaru, Schegg & Frey, 2003). Content analysis of textual information in reviews could examine helpful reviewers. For example, future research could examine numeric hotel reviews and the textual content.

Future research may include more online travel communities as well as blogs to redress generalizability. Based on the findings in this study, future research can be developed in a way to construct a framework about opinion leaders in online travel communities. Also, including travel communities from countries whose members have diverse cultural backgrounds would help examine cultural differences in review posting behavior. Reviewer residence in TripAdvisor did not disperse, rather it reflects mainly European and U.S. regions. Hofstede’s (1997) cultural dimension can help understand such cultural differences in online communication. Of his dimensions, individualism is “societies in which the ties between individuals are loose” whereas collectivism is “societies in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive groups that protect individuals in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 51). Individualism values direct verbal interaction and individualistic nonverbal style while collectivism values indirect verbal interaction and contextual nonverbal style (Chen, 1995). Research on the cultural impact of communication suggests that individualists tend to self-disclose more than do collectivists (Chen, 1995; Yum & Hara, 2005) while perceived collectivism in an online community increases self-disclosure (Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010). Thus, this finding suggests future research examining with respect to cultural issues.

REFERENCES


