Whose Opinions do We Listen to? The Influence of Online Product Ratings and Price on Consumers

David Ackerman
*California State University, Northridge, david.s.ackerman@csun.edu*

Jing Hu
*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, hu@cpp.edu*

Barbara L. Gross
*California State University, Northridge, barbara.gross@csun.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/jamt

Part of the Marketing Commons

**Recommended Citation**

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Georgia Southern Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Applied Marketing Theory* by an authorized administrator of Georgia Southern Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.
Whose Opinions do We Listen to? The Influence of Online Product Ratings and Price on Consumers

David S. Ackerman
Jing Hu
Barbara L. Gross

AUTHOR INFORMATION

David S. Ackerman, Ph.D.
California State University, Northridge
david.s.ackerman@csun.edu

Jing Hu, Ph.D.
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
hu@cpp.edu

Barbara L. Gross, Ph.D.
California State University, Northridge
barbara.gross@csun.edu

ABSTRACT

User-generated reviews have become important to consumers in evaluating market offerings and making purchase decisions. This study takes an overall look at the evolving sources of information from which consumers draw to get information about products and services and focuses specifically on an electronics product, a smart phone. We examine the influence of online product ratings and reviews on consumers. Results from data analysis found that online consumer ratings may have more of an impact on consumers than do the ratings of experts. Consumers were more likely to purchase products receiving high ratings from consumers despite receiving low ratings from experts, compared to products receiving high ratings from experts but low ratings from consumers. This suggests that consumers may trust other consumers more than they trust experts to rate products and services. In addition, results suggest that online ratings have more of an impact on high-priced products than they do on low-priced products. Unique patterns in search behavior are also found for inexpensive products. Implications are discussed for both theory development and practice.

Keywords: Online reviews, Expert ratings, Consumer ratings, Information search, Purchase intention, Price, Trust

INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on online consumer reviews and ratings. Online product ratings are now an important factor in consumer decision making. Such ratings aggregate consumers’ knowledge and firsthand experiences to provide valuable information about products. Research has found that consumers rely heavily on such ratings in purchase decisions (Kucher & Kucher, 2018; Watson et al., 2018). On the other hand, reviews and ratings from traditionally recognized experts are also favored by many because of the experts’ education, training, credentials, or other markers of expertise (Flanagin & Metzger, 2013; Naujoks & Benkenstein, 2020). Substantial prior research has focused on the perceived credibility and helpfulness of consumer and expert reviews (Majali et al., 2022) but has rarely compared how such reviews are used or impact differently on consumers’ decision making.
This study looks at information sources for consumers evaluating an electronics product. Smart phones were chosen because of their widespread adoption and use as well as their variability in quality and features. Previously, consumers sought out information about products primarily from friends and family and perhaps a published review. Gradually, expert reviews provided by those who claim to have or are publicly identified as having specialized knowledge (such as product or gear reviewers for organizations or publications or who have expensive equipment to test new products) have become more readily accessible online. At the same time, the proliferation of consumer-generated reviews and other consumer-provided information has led to customer reviews becoming prevalent as an information source for consumers.

Research has not yet shown conclusively whether consumers will turn primarily to experts or to other consumers for information, or what happens when expert reviewers and consumer reviewers offer contradicting opinions. It is the goal of this study to fill the gap, by examining whether expert or consumer sources of information about products are more influential on consumers’ opinions. Among other results, this study finds that there may be more wisdom in the crowd; the reviews of the common consumer may be of more value to other consumers than are those of a handful of rarefied experts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sources of Product Information for Consumers

This section looks at the sources of product information for consumers, first considering consumers’ physical experiences with products as well as friends and family as sources of information. Previously, consumers shopped at physical stores where they examined, tried, and tested products in person as the primary means of reaching a purchase decision. For some major purchases, such as automobiles, appliances, and sporting equipment, the opinions of product-category experts (e.g., through review articles in specialty magazines) or independent ratings organizations (most notably Consumer Reports) provided highly useful product comparisons based on laboratory and field testing and through expert trials using the product. Such reviews continue to be especially helpful for services and experiences (Loda et al., 2010). However, consumers often had only the opinions of a few friends, family members, and salespeople to supplement their own in-store physical inspection. For many purchases, there was little or no additional information until the consumer brought the product home, took it out of the box, and used it. This was particularly true when early adopting consumers sought out products not yet used by referent others. Although word-of-mouth and opinion leadership could be highly influential, they were often unavailable.

Information from Product Ratings and Reviews: Proliferation and Importance

Among the important consequences of the growth of online marketing and e-commerce is the fostering of an online environment where consumers can readily access product ratings and reviews provided by others who have already used and experienced just about any product which they might intend to purchase. Online product ratings and reviews contributed by both consumer users and product category experts have proliferated over the past three decades and continue to do so (Alzate et al., 2022; Park, 2021; Zhang et al., 2010). Such reviews have grown in numbers and in importance among potential buyers evaluating market offerings and making purchase decisions. It is not just expert and professional information sources that have proliferated. Today the Internet and information technologies provide extensive opportunities for consumers to share their evaluations of any type of product online, as well as for other consumers to readily access these evaluations. Prior purchasers are empowered to share their experiences for purposes of informing, persuading, and demonstrating their product knowledge and experience. Potential buyers can glean extensive and rich information by perusing such reviews. Further, consumer reviews are important to marketers as a means of building product credibility among potential customers and learning about consumer preferences and perceptions (Li et al., 2020).

Information from Consumer Product Ratings and Reviews in Purchase Decisions

With the growth of product ratings and reviews, and increasing reliance on such ratings and reviews in the marketplace, considerable research has been devoted to investigating the factors that lead to their perceived value to consumers. Academic and industry research has shown that, in general, online consumer reviews can shape consumer
attitudes and influence purchase decisions (Carter, 2022; Chen & Xie, 2008; Fernandes et al., 2022; Flanigan & Metzger, 2013; Zhang et al., 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Researchers have examined the believability and helpfulness of product reviews, testing factors such as argument quality, source credibility, review consistency, sidedness, emotion expression, product characteristics, consumer ratings of helpfulness, review valence, review length, and other contextual variables (Chen & Xie, 2008; Cheung et al., 2012; De Maeyer & Estelami, 2011; Weathers et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2023; Zhou & Guo, 2017). There is even evidence that suggests the use of a mobile device in creating the review can enhance its credibility since the extra effort required when writing reviews from mobile devices leads consumers to believe that the review is more reflective of the reviewer’s true consumption experience (Stephen & Grewal, 2015).

Park and Nicolau (2015) found that star ratings in online reviews are a critical heuristic to consumers facing the typical overload of information in the form of numerous online reviews. Consumers view the valence of online reviews as a proxy for product quality, and the number of stars as a shortcut cue to signal that quality. These researchers found that consumers perceive extreme ratings, both positive and negative, as both more useful and more enjoyable than moderate ratings. They further found that negative reviews are generally perceived to be more useful than positive reviews, while positive reviews are associated with higher enjoyment but less usefulness for decision making. Similarly, Xu et al. (2023) found that expressions of two negative emotions, anger and anxiety, embedded in online reviews led consumers to perceive the reviews as more helpful. These effects, however, were moderated by product price. The positive effects of both expressed anger and expressed anxiety on perceived review helpfulness lessened as product price was increased.

Complicating consumer reliance on product reviews is the growing problem of faked online reviews (Wu et al., 2020). Karabas et al. (2021) examined consumer awareness of deceptive practices such as when retailers and manufacturers fabricate product reviews. They found that, while positive review valence positively influences the attitudes and purchase intentions of potential customers, these outcomes are significantly affected when consumers are aware of potentially deceptive online review practices.

Guan and Lam (2019) focused on product rating statistics, such as average product ratings and frequency distributions of ratings, as consumer search aids. These researchers found that the practice of summarizing average ratings and providing rating dispersions such as histograms affects customer behavior in terms of the number of reviews read and reading time, largely influenced by whether the summary statistics confirm or disconfirm the consumer’s prior expectations about the product.

By contrast, other researchers have focused on the number or volume of online reviews available as a factor affecting the influence and credibility of online reviews (Han et al., 2021; Hoffart et al., 2019). Review volume often pairs with rating valence to influence the conclusions consumers draw from online reviews. Zhou and Guo (2017) examined the questions of how and why the order of a review affects perceived helpfulness. Positing that a review’s position in a sequence of reviews signals the number of prior reviews which exert influence on the focal review, they found review order to be negatively related to helpfulness, especially when the review is more negative in content. Alzate et al. (2024) drew similar conclusions when focusing on review visibility. The most visible reviews, including the most recent reviews and reviews already rated as helpful, as well as reviews providing specific physical information, were found to be most read and to be regarded as most helpful. Other researchers such as Al-Natour and Turetken (2020), have focused on the general tone and polarity of reviews, and Fernandes et al. (2022) developed a scale to measure the impact of online reviews on purchase decisions, including source credibility of reviewers; volume of reviews; use of unbiased, simple, and unambiguous language; and relevance.

Information from Experts and Consumers: The Role of Expertise

As important a source of information as online expert reviews have become, there have been burgeoning numbers of consumer reviews for a wide array of products and services. A question of interest to marketers and researchers alike is how consumers perceive information from other consumers versus that from more traditional expert sources.

The evidence for the role of expertise is mixed. Reviews from experts provide specialist knowledge, more precise testing, often with data, and wider exposure to the product category to substantiate the reviewer’s evaluation of a product. Thus, it is expected that such reviews would be highly trusted. On the other hand, ratings and reviews from
other consumers represent the views of lay people, likely more similarly situated to the recipients reading the reviews, who have purchased or used a product and want to share firsthand experiences and evaluations with others. Perhaps such reviews might in some ways be expected to resonate with consumers more than expert reviews.

A common example is the movie review, within which so-called experts or film critics often have quite a different assessment of a film than does the movie-watching public (Aguiar, 2023). Critics’ reviews are often poor predictors of box office sales or consumer popularity as evidenced by review sites such as IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes. Flanagan and Metzger (2013) studied expert- versus user-generated ratings online in just this context. In an experimental design, they manipulated source, valence, and volume of online movie ratings. Their results found that the volume of ratings was positively associated with trust of, reliance on, and confidence in everyday consumer ratings content. They further found that consumers tend to favor expert ratings when there is a low volume of ratings online but favor user-generated ratings under conditions of higher volume. In both cases, consumers’ opinions and behavioral intentions tended to converge with online ratings information.

More generally, de Langhe et al. (2016) analyzed reviews of 1,271 products over 120 product categories and found that consumer ratings often diverged with Consumer Reports scores, which involve scientific tests conducted by experts and are the most commonly used measure of objective product quality. Further, consumer ratings did not predict resale prices in the used-product marketplace, and were higher for more expensive products and premium brands while controlling for Consumer Reports scores. Still, consumers tended to weigh consumer ratings and reviews heavily when forming product evaluations, even when the number of reviews available was limited.

Keh and Sun (2018) found that consumers tend to rely more on peer consumer reviews for experiential services with which they are more familiar and feel they can confidently evaluate (e.g., movies, restaurants, haircuts) than for so-called credence services for which most consumers tend to have less exposure and be less familiar and knowledgeable (e.g., medical and dental treatment, financial advice). Similarly, Ladhari et al. (2020) found that consumers regarded expertise as less important for social media influencers for cosmetics than did AlFarraj et al. (2021) for social media influencers for aesthetic dermatology. On the other hand, when consumers saw mixed reviews, negative expert reviews had a greater influence than negative consumer reviews in lowering consumer confidence as well as consumers’ own evaluations of both experience and credence services (Keh & Sun, 2018). Investigating student evaluations of a book, Lim and Steffel (2015) specifically examined perceptions of credibility. They found that consumer ratings did not significantly influence the credibility of a nonfiction book on healthy eating (either for purposes of writing a term paper or for reading in one’s spare time) while expert ratings did. Further, when expert ratings were high, students viewed higher user ratings as more credible than lower user ratings, and when expert ratings were low, students perceived lower consumer ratings as more credible than higher ones.

Some have suggested that the degree of influence exerted by expert reviews on consumer attitudes may vary by the valence of the expert review. Kang and Park (2016) examined expert reviews through text mining. The degree of detail provided and the confidence expressed by expert reviewers were found to have a positive effect on consumer product evaluations. However, the degree of positivity expressed in the expert’s evaluation had an insignificant effect whereas the degree of negativity expressed had a negative effect on consumers’ product evaluations. It appears that negative reviews by experts may be more damaging to consumer product evaluations than are positive reviews by experts helpful. Similarly, Keh and Sun (2018) found that negative expert reviews had a greater influence in lowering consumer confidence and evaluations than did negative consumer reviews. This was found to be true for both experience and credence services. Further, when reviews were mixed, negative expert opinion was more influential than positive consumer reviews.

Naujoks and Benkenstein (2020) found in an experience service context that the perceived expertise of a review writer can sway consumer opinion and nullify the influence of conflicting aggregated ratings. In two experiments, one involving a restaurant and one involving a hotel, a single review consisting of a star rating and textual explanation by a reviewer identified as an expert (labeled as a “top reviewer” for providing a high number of useful reviews) and contradicting the aggregated rating of users, held the most persuasive power over consumers. That research suggested that expert reviews may be favored by consumers in influencing attitudes and purchase decisions and play an important role for marketers and customers alike.
Research Questions

The examples cited above were largely done within the context of services. This study extends this research to consumer goods. Specifically, it looks at the differences in the roles of consumer and expert online reviews on the stages of consumer decision making. Has the steadily increasing amount of misinformation online and in social media in recent years (Allcott et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2020) impacted the weight consumers give to expert and consumer reviews in their decisions? How does the valence of the reviews influence their impact? Aside from the valence of the reviews, what are other factors such as price of the consumer product that might alter the influence of consumer and expert reviews? We propose to examine the impact of consumer and expert online reviews in the following directions:

RQ1: Do reviews influence high-priced and low-priced products the same way?

RQ2: Is there a difference in the way high and low review ratings influence the consumer decision making process?

RQ3: How is the impact on the consumer decision making process (including information search, product evaluation, and purchase intention) different for a consumer review than for an expert review?

METHODOLOGY

To address these research questions, the study used a between-subjects experimental design (n = 450), with 2 rating levels (low overall ratings versus high overall ratings) x 2 price levels (low price versus high price), plus a separate holdout sample. Data were collected from a broad range of business students in marketing course sections at two large public universities in the southwestern United States. Students were informed that the study would help the instructors better understand online ratings. Data were collected toward the end of the semester via an online survey. Participants in the study were randomly assigned to each of the conditions on Qualtrics. Instructors offered students extra credit for participation.

Students were asked to think about buying a smart phone and were given information that they were told was from a trusted ratings website. The information students received depended on which treatment they were assigned for the ratings level, smart phone price, and in the holdout condition whether they were in the “low expert / high consumer ratings” condition or the “high expert / low consumer ratings” condition.

The manipulations were done as follows. For the ratings manipulation, students were provided with an image of star rating and text showing either that the smart phone was given an overall rating of 4 out of 10 (“low rating” condition) or an overall rating of 9 out of 10 (“high rating” condition). The price manipulation was done by informing students the smart phone was either $50 for the “low price” condition or $400 for the “high price” condition. Both of these manipulations were developed from pretesting. Students were asked in a pre-study survey of 48 students how much they would expect to pay both for a “high priced” smart phone and for a “low-priced” smart phone. The average response was $50 for a low-priced phone and $400 for a high-priced phone, keeping in mind that these amounts are what students were expected to pay out of pocket for the phone. Lastly, expertise was manipulated by informing students that the ratings were done by either other consumers or by experts. The measurements used are summarized in the Appendix. The type of manipulations used in the study are illustrated in Figure 1.
RESULTS

A MANOVA of prior ratings (“low rating” and “high rating”) and price (“low price” and “high price”) on the dependent variables was done to determine the reactions of respondents. The analysis found main effects for both manipulations as well as an interaction effect ($F(2, 450) = 25.42, p = .00$, Wilkes Lambda = .49, Partial eta-squared = .36).

There are significant main effect differences between the “low rating” and “high rating” conditions for respondents’ product rating ($\bar{x}$ low rating = 4.06, $\bar{x}$ high rating = 6.12), whether respondents would buy the smart phone ($\bar{x}$ low rating = 3.84, $\bar{x}$ high rating = 6.62), respondents’ satisfaction with the smart phone ($\bar{x}$ low rating = 2.95, $\bar{x}$ high rating = 5.10), respondents’ desire for more information ($\bar{x}$ low rating = 5.48, $\bar{x}$ high rating = 5.92), and perceived price value of the smart phone ($\bar{x}$ low rating = 174.38, $\bar{x}$ high rating = 269.83). These main effects for prior ratings on the dependent variable measures are displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean for Low Rating</th>
<th>Mean for High Rating</th>
<th>Partial $e^2$</th>
<th>$F$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product rating</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>456.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would buy it</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>147.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>244.73**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire more information</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>9.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price value</td>
<td>174.38</td>
<td>269.83</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>43.75**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$  
** $p < .01$

There are also significant main effect differences, though fewer, between the “low price” and “high price” conditions for two of the dependent variables. For both satisfaction with the smart phone ($\bar{x}$ low price = 3.84, $\bar{x}$ high price = 4.25) and
perceived price value of the smart phone ($\bar{x}_{\text{low price}} = 146.09, \bar{x}_{\text{high price}} = 298.31$), means were higher in the “high price” condition than in the “low price” condition. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Means on Measures, Low and High Price (N = 450)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean for Low Price</th>
<th>Mean for High Price</th>
<th>Partial $\epsilon^2$</th>
<th>F-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product rating</td>
<td>5.96</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would buy it</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>6.89**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire more information</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>5.77</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price value</td>
<td>146.09</td>
<td>298.31</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>111.16**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05  
**p < .01

There are significant interaction effects of prior ratings and price for three of the dependent variables. In the “high price” condition, the gap in satisfaction is wider between the “low rating” and “high rating” manipulation ($\bar{x}_{\text{low rating}} = 2.97, \bar{x}_{\text{high rating}} = 5.44$) than in the “low price” condition ($\bar{x}_{\text{low rating}} = 2.93, \bar{x}_{\text{high rating}} = 4.76$). The same pattern can be seen for perceptions of the price value of the smart phone. In the “high price” condition, the gap in perceived value is wider between the “low rating” and “high rating” manipulation ($\bar{x}_{\text{low rating}} = 225.60, \bar{x}_{\text{high rating}} = 370.24$) than in the “low price” condition ($\bar{x}_{\text{low rating}} = 123.16, \bar{x}_{\text{high rating}} = 169.02$). On the other hand, there was a significant gap between “low rating” and “high rating” for desire for more information in the “low price” condition ($\bar{x}_{\text{low rating}} = 5.73, \bar{x}_{\text{high rating}} = 5.76$) but no significant differences in the “high price” condition ($\bar{x}_{\text{low rating}} = 5.73, \bar{x}_{\text{high rating}} = 5.76$). These interaction results are displayed in Table 3 and Figure 2.

Table 3. Means on Measures for Prior Ratings and Price, and Interaction Effects (N = 450)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean for Low Rating</th>
<th>Mean for High Rating</th>
<th>Mean for Low Rating</th>
<th>Mean for High Rating</th>
<th>Partial $\epsilon^2$</th>
<th>F-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product rating</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>8.31</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would buy it</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>2.93\textsuperscript{1}</td>
<td>4.76\textsuperscript{2}</td>
<td>2.97\textsuperscript{1}</td>
<td>5.44\textsuperscript{2}</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>5.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire more information</td>
<td>5.24\textsuperscript{1}</td>
<td>6.07\textsuperscript{2}</td>
<td>5.73\textsuperscript{3}</td>
<td>5.76\textsuperscript{3}</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>7.77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price value</td>
<td>123.16\textsuperscript{1}</td>
<td>169.02\textsuperscript{2}</td>
<td>225.60\textsuperscript{3}</td>
<td>370.24\textsuperscript{4}</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>11.76**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{1,2,3}Means with completely different superscripts are significantly different from each other.  
*p < .05  
**p < .01

Figure 2. Ratings and Price Interaction Effects on Information Search and Price Value
Source of information: consumer versus expert. There is an effect of ratings on consumer perceptions that is clear and direct when the information consumers receive is unambiguous. Positive ratings in particular result in respondent evaluations that are correspondingly positive. The problem is that real life ratings are not always consistent. Consumers are not always able to get consistent and reliable information about products and services, and when they are able to obtain such information, will they trust information more when it comes from other consumers or when it comes from experts? There is some evidence that consumer perceptions of movies are more influenced by consumer reviews, but in general, research suggests that, in general, expert reviews have a greater role in product purchasing decisions (Guo et al., 2022). In order to determine how consumers react to such conflicting positive and negative product information, it is necessary to compare the impacts of each on consumer perceptions.

To address remaining research questions regarding information from experts versus consumers, two items measured what happens when consumers hear conflicting responses, a high rating from one source and a low rating from another source. One condition was a “low expert and high consumer” rating situation in which the expert rating was low and the consumer rating was high. The other situation addressed a “high expert and low consumer rating” in which the expert rating was high and the consumer rating was low.

Respondents then completed an online questionnaire (see Appendix). They were first asked how they would rate the product, measured by a Likert-type scale anchored by “awful” (1) and “outstanding” (10). They were then asked to consider that if they were to spend the amount of money reflecting the value of the smart phone in the manipulation, $50 in the low price conditions and $400 in the high price conditions, what would be the chance they would buy it, measured by a ten-point Likert-type scale anchored by “definitely not buy it” (1) and “definitely buy it” (10). Following this, respondents were asked to complete measures of “expected satisfaction” and “need for more information.” The measure for satisfaction (Oliver, 1992) contained the items, “I would be satisfied by it,” “I would be pleased by it,” and “I would be happy with it.” The measure of desire for more information (Phelps et al., 2001) was comprised of the items, “I would need to look up more information,” “I would need to spend more time researching this product,” and “I would need to know more about this product.” Cronbach’s alpha of satisfaction and desire for more information were 0.973 and 0.948, respectively, hence both scales had high reliability. Lastly, there was an open-ended measure of the perceived value of the smart phone (“Given the information, I feel that this cell phone is probably worth $____”).

ANOVA test of means between the “low expert / high consumer” ratings condition and the “high expert / low consumer” ratings condition, with price held constant at the “high price” level, found that respondents felt more strongly that they would buy the smart phone when consumers rated it highly but experts gave it a low rating as compared with the reverse ($consumer high rating / expert low rating = 5.69, $expert high rating / consumer low rating = 4.47). Results also found that respondents thought the smart phone was worth more when consumers rated it highly and experts gave it a low rating ($consumer high rating / expert low rating = 313.49, $expert high rating / consumer low rating = 284.39). The above findings are displayed in Table 4 and Figure 3.

**Table 4. Means on Measures for Source of Information for High Priced Product (N = 97)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Mean for Low Expert/ High Consumer Ratings</th>
<th>Mean for High Expert/ Low Consumer Ratings</th>
<th>Partial $e^2$</th>
<th>F-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would buy it</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>13.98**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price value</td>
<td>313.49</td>
<td>284.39</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>6.69**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

**p < .01
DISCUSSION

Results found that online consumer ratings may have more of an impact than the ratings of experts for consumers considering an electronics product. Purchase intention for a smart phone given low ratings by experts but high ratings by consumers was actually higher than for those that were given high ratings by experts but low ratings by consumers. This finding suggests that consumers may trust other consumers more than they trust experts to rate products and services, surprising given that the results from this study are for a cell phone, a product for which technical expertise would be important, rather than for a creative product (such as a movie) that satisfies individualistic hedonic needs.

Perhaps the recent proliferation of misinformation online has led to public mistrust of self-proclaimed expert sources for information, but there may be more to it than that. Consumer product ratings represent the experiences of consumers who those reading the reviews perceive as being similar to themselves, likely with similar experience levels. When information is conflicting, consumers may find a collection of consumer ratings based on usage experiences more useful and ultimately more reliable than one expert rating. Consumers are informed by these online ratings and reviews, and find them helpful. At the same time, online customer ratings and reviews have turned what was once one-way communication into a conversation. Consumers feel empowered that they can contribute directly to public opinion through the posting of their own reviews, and want to use such reviews as a way to inform and interact with others, voice concerns, and advocate products and services they like. This effect would be multiplied by the greater numbers of consumer ratings for some products and services, creating communities of brand users not unlike intentional brand communities (such as that for Peloton as an example).

A second major finding is that online ratings had more of an impact on the high-priced product than they did on the low-priced product. Perceptions of price value and satisfaction with the high-priced product were influenced more by online ratings than were perceptions of the low-priced product. This may be because for purchases of higher priced products the cost of a mistake is higher. This is consistent with the finding of Askalidis and Malthouse (2016) that online customer reviews have a larger impact on the purchase likelihood of high-priced items than on the purchase likelihood of low-priced items. There may be more consumer involvement with high-priced products that heightens the impact of what others say and write about them. The stakes for consumers are higher, so ratings and reviews may be more valuable. This finding also suggests that online ratings are less important for low-involvement products or at least that consumers may utilize other ways to seek out information such as direct trial or personal word-of-mouth.

A third finding to emerge from the data is that consumers associate more expensive products with higher ratings. It is not surprising that, in the absence of other information, consumers will use price as a cue for quality. This may be especially salient information on online rating boards where ratings may be separated quite a bit by time and space from the actual physical products. When consumers do not have the expertise to judge technical products such as the cell phones used in this study (or similarly, computers, camera equipment, and the like) they may be more likely to rely on price as a decision-making heuristic.
In addition, the results of this study reveal that for inexpensive products, consumers want to search for information more on highly-rated than on low-rated products. These differences do not occur for products that are expensive, which makes sense. A product that is low in price and rated poorly would be of little interest to potential consumers. Why care about a cheap product that is likely not good quality? By contrast, an inexpensive product that is given high ratings might evoke a lot of interest among consumers, representing a perceived bargain. Perhaps the expectation of consumers is that low-priced products are low quality, and when these expectations are challenged, consumers want to find out why. In contrast, ratings might not make as much of a difference for products that are costly since more information than a couple of online ratings would be needed, regardless of whether those ratings were good or bad.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

How product review and rating information is received and used by consumers is not the same across all consumers in all situations. Much depends on the source of the information, as well as the context. Price and rating of the products being evaluated can lead consumers to react in unexpected ways. Consumers provide information to other consumers from a very different perspective than expert reviews. As a result, they evoke very different reactions, with consumers often trusting more in fellow consumers.

This research finds that in assessing online information about products, in many contexts consumers perhaps do find the wisdom of crowds more compelling than the opinions of experts, and they may be right. Multiple and independent judgments by consumers are likely to be more accurate than the assessment of an expert or two (DeWees & Minson, 2018). Consumers believe accurately that reading independent consumer reviews from those who have used the product may be the best source of information prior to purchase. This suggests that accuracy and independence in consumer reviews for products and services are important since they are a critical resource and source of unbiased information. This notion becomes even more intriguing in that it can also be applied to the various social and economic issues debated across online platforms.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

These results suggest that a company managing brands or services will need to concern itself with the overall impression of its products over the community of consumers and influencers, not just earning the accolades of one or two leading experts or communication outlets. Online platforms have enabled and empowered consumers to form their own intentional brand and product communities for many different products and services. This research suggests that such communities may be of utmost importance if not the most important focus for marketing and promotion. Brands will need to concern themselves as much with online influencers, outlets, and trends as with earning the accolades of expert sources. They will need to switch roles to become active participants, guiding a community of consumers as well as others heavily involved in the product category to shape public perception. This changing role means that brands will need to monitor the external environment to listen to what is being said about their products. Management of a brand’s presence online is already becoming an essential part of a company’s brand management in the marketplace (Hudders et al., 2021).

From the company’s perspective, they should do what they can to empower customers and encourage them to post reviews and voice their opinions going beyond blogging to positive consumption experiences, perhaps even actively setting up consumption experiential communities around brands and products. When customers inform others of the pros and cons of a product or service, this also becomes a source of information to the company. Customers’ voices can be an encouragement to improve in weak areas and help the company grow in much-needed directions.

We are starting to see this happen in some sectors. In digital cameras, for example, OM company (formerly Olympus), renowned for its micro four thirds camera format, is not one of the top three brands and has thus been aggressively promoting its brand among certain segments online, particularly among wildlife and nature photographers. The company has created “brand ambassadors,” avid photographers who promote the brand and lead others on photo expeditions as part of a vibrant brand community. A related development is “influencer marketing” in which certain individuals have large followings online and can heavily influence sales of a product. They may or may not have technical knowledge about the product, but they know how to use it and. more importantly, others think they know how to use it.
In practice, it matters about the product and service category and the existence or absence of clear and measurable quality standards. Film and television show reviews can be thought of as an extreme example since they are services that fulfill hedonic needs where there is no real objective standard for quality rating. As an example, online ratings for the television show The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power (2022) reveal a stark contrast – the show received an 85% score from film and television critics (experts) on Rotten Tomatoes (https://www.rottentomatoes.com), while the average consumer rating was only 39%. Notably, this show holds the distinction of being the most expensive television production ever made (Gama, 2024). Regardless of the validity of each party’s perspective on the technical aspects of the production, clearly consumer views differ markedly from those of experts. Understanding the factors influencing audience opinion could potentially yield substantial financial implications for performance outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations of the current research. Firstly, our study solely focused on one product category, potentially limiting the extent to which our findings can be generalized across different product categories. Smart phones are just one product and have specific features that are not shared with other product categories. There may be differences in the way consumers will search for information about smart phones as opposed to how they look for information about, say, camping equipment or clothing where there are fewer clear metrics of quality. Perhaps the experiences of other consumers, the wisdom of the crowd, are even more important when there are fewer objective measures to examine.

Another limitation is that the sample was comprised of business students, raising concerns about the broader applicability of our findings to diverse consumer populations. Perhaps the reactions and views would differ among a broader age range or a non-student population. Lastly, while efforts were made to exclude exogenous measures in our research, there may be additional variables that could have impacted the observations.

We recommend that future research should focus more on external validity, testing the results of this study in different contexts, with different products or even services, and on a broader consumer population. Scanner data could provide an even better test by determining the effect on real aggregate data. A controlled experiment could determine the specific factors impacting consumer decision making when consumers are faced with differing and sometimes contradictory expert and consumer voices.

REFERENCES


Cheung, C. M., Sia, C., & Kuan, K. K. Y. (2012). Is this review believable? A study of factors affecting the credibility of online consumer reviews from an ELM perspective. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems, 13*(8), 618-635. https://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00305


APPENDIX: SCALES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items measured</th>
<th>Scales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product rating</td>
<td>I would rate this smart phone as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awful (1) ... ...Outstanding (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would buy it</td>
<td>If I were to spend $50 on this smart phone I would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitely not buy it (1) ... ... Definitely buy it (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>Regarding this smart phone, I think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. I would be satisfied with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. I would be pleased by it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. I would be happy with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree (1) ... ... Strongly Agree (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire more information</td>
<td>Regarding this smart phone, I think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. I would need to look up more information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. I would need to spend more time researching this product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. I would need to know more about this product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree (1) ... ... Strongly Agree (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price value</td>
<td>Given the information, I feel that this cell phone is probably worth $__ (how much?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David S. Ackerman (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is a professor of marketing at California State University, Northridge. His research interests are primarily in consumer behavior, international marketing and marketing education. He has published in the *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Marketing Education, Marketing Education Review*, and other journals.

Jing Hu (Ph.D., New Mexico State University) is a professor of marketing at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Her research interests are primarily in consumer decision making, branding and social media brand communications. She regularly presents research at conferences and has published in journals such as *Psychology and Marketing, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Product and Brand Management, Consumption Markets and Culture, and Journal of Marketing Education*, among others.

Barbara L. Gross (Ph.D., University of Southern California) is a professor emerita of marketing at California State University, Northridge. Her research interests are primarily in consumer behavior and marketing education. She has published in the *Journal of Marketing, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Interactive Marketing, Journal of Marketing Education, Marketing Education Review*, and other journals.