

**Different voices for different roles:
How do consumer-reviewers relate to other market actors?**

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed new light on customers' participation to reviewing activity by providing a typology of online reviews and highlighting distinct roles played by consumer-reviewers in the online community.

Using structural narrative analysis and depth interviews, three complementary studies elicit the following: 1. Categorization of 'voices' extent in online reviews written by consumer-reviewers, 2. Typology of roles associated to these voices and 3. Motivations explaining the desired roles played by consumer-reviewers. The findings suggest that a review can either be expressed as "Telling my story voice"; "Talking about the object of consumption voice"; "Giving you advice voice". Consumers-reviewers choose a voice depending on the role played in the online community either of a '*Person-next-door*', a *Critic* or a *Coach*. Each role can finally be linked to a specific online strategy and relates differently to other market actors. The study contributes to literature on word-of-mouth, co-creation and consumer behavior by considering the impact of the online reviewing activity on consumers' stance in the marketplace.

Keywords

Online reviews; consumer behavior; structural narrative analysis; role theory, word of mouth; co-creation.

Introduction

Online reviews have long been recognized as a very influential source of information (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). The writing of online reviews involves an increasing number of consumers worldwide. If, in 2010, 24% of American consumers had posted a review online (Pew Research Centre, 2010), by 2013, over 6 million consumers had posted a review on Amazon alone (Leskovec, 2016). When posting comments online, customers become information sources alongside or even instead of traditionally consulted sources (i.e friends, relatives and acquaintances; salespeople; publications – see Price and Feick, 1984).

Previous research on word of mouth has created an impressive body of knowledge about the valence and amount of word of mouth (East, Hammond and Wright, 2007), how it spreads, and how it is influenced by the characteristics of the source and receiver. However, maybe because it is more difficult to measure, there has been very little empirical research on the content of word of mouth - i.e., what is being said and how – (Schellekens et al., 2010). Despite the acknowledged importance of online user-generated content and of a growing body of literature on word-of-mouth, surprisingly few studies have focused on the impact which the review-writing process may have on consumers who write reviews. The manner in which the consumers who write reviews communicate their experiences and the potential impact on their perceived role in the market ecosystem, have not been considered.

In an era when user-generated content is ubiquitous, a new complex set of communal relationships emerge, where consumers can be readers as well as active co-producers of value and meaning exchanged among members of an entire ecosystem (Kozinets, 2010). Customer who post online reviews have gained authority in the marketplace, as evidenced by the fact that many websites professionalize their reviewers' roles, giving them titles (e.g. Senior reviewer/ Expert) and visibility.

Consumer-writers constitute a growing proportion of marketers' target population. In some sectors (e.g. bookselling, tourism, consumer electronics), consumers are often actively solicited for reviews, hence consumer-reviewers are becoming an integral part of the market ecosystem. Hence, understanding how reviewing may be linked to the perception of a role and may influence behaviors in the marketplace, is of critical importance to marketers. Indeed, marketers need a full grasp of how and why consumers write reviews if they want to use these new market actors optimally. This study addresses a research need by providing an in-depth understanding of the online review writing process when sharing consumption experiences. Through three complementary studies, we clarify how and why the reviewing process take place. In study 1, a structural narrative analysis of online reviews highlights the complexity of the process as consumer-reviewers resort to three different voices to present information on an online platform, to potential consumer-readers. In study 2, an analysis of a selection of several reviews written by Amazon.com reviewers demonstrates that choosing a particular voice can be associated to a role that a consumer-reviewer adopts. In study 3, interviews of consumer-reviewers permits the surfacing of distinct strategies towards other actors in the market ecosystem, visible via a chosen role and manifested in a particular voice.

Research question

This article's contribution is based on empirical inquiry that attempts to further develop the understanding of online user generated content and more particularly to answer the following four questions: *How can the online review writing process be characterized? What roles can be identified among consumer-reviewers? Why might consumer-reviewers develop these roles in the marketplace?*

Literature review

Word-of-mouth marketing

User-generated content has drawn strong interest from researchers (Ludwig *et al.*, 2013). However, no study has considered the consumers who write online reviews as information sources who can be categorized and analyzed in terms of authorship. Past studies were limited to the persuasion effect of reviews on the reader (Hamby *et al.*, 2015; Tang *et al.*, 2014) in comparison to branded messages (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010) or motivations to contribute online (Mathwick *et al.*, 2008). A more recent survey analyzed the effect of linguistic style but more in terms of a specific norms to be used inside a community (Ludwig, *et al.*, 2013) rather than in terms of authorship and style. Yet, until marketers have a full grasp of what is being written, they will not have the full picture (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010; Woodside *et al.*, 2008).

Co-creation

Academics and practitioners have largely analyzed value co-creation which can be described as the collaboration between multiple stakeholders (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000). This perspective changes the traditional supplier-client view to a more customer-centric value creation where customers interact with the company and co-create value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004, Roberts *et al.* 2005, Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008). Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) have recognized the central role of co-creation of value for the service dominant (S-D) logic in marketing. According to recent service-oriented research, customers and suppliers co-create value as a result of a shift from a firm and product-centric view of value creation to one that focuses on personalized experiences (Tynan, McKechnie and Chhuon, 2010).

Social role theory

The advent of the internet enables customers to play new roles in a co-creation process as customers represent an influential information source. A co-creation of value is taking place (Zwass, 2010) through user-generated-content (as opposed to market-oriented producers), sometimes in conjunction with a platform providers (e.g., Amazon, Facebook, TripAdvisor).

Social Role Theory (Sarbin and Allen, 1954; Solomon *et al.*, 1985) is a perspective in sociology and in social psychology that predominantly concerns characterizing behavior patterns or roles and explains roles by presuming that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviors and those of other persons. Each person is a social actor, who acts according to some characterizing behavior patterns or social roles. Each social role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviors that a person has to face and fulfill. Social actors can interact or collaborate with each other in a process called social interaction, which may influence involved users. The study of a role – a cluster of social cues

that guide and direct an individual's behavior in a given setting – is the study of the conduct associated with certain socially defined positions rather than of the particular individuals who occupy these positions. Role theory has mainly been used in marketing to characterize service interactions.

We extend it here to consider the interactions which consumers may have with other actors of the market ecosystem, depending on their perceived role within that ecosystem. We follow McAlexander *et al's* (2002) perspective use in their customer-centric model of brand community by placing the consumer-reviewer at the center of a web of connections that includes the consumer-readers of their reviews, the marketers whose products are reviewed, the online platform and the online community as a whole (see Figure 1).

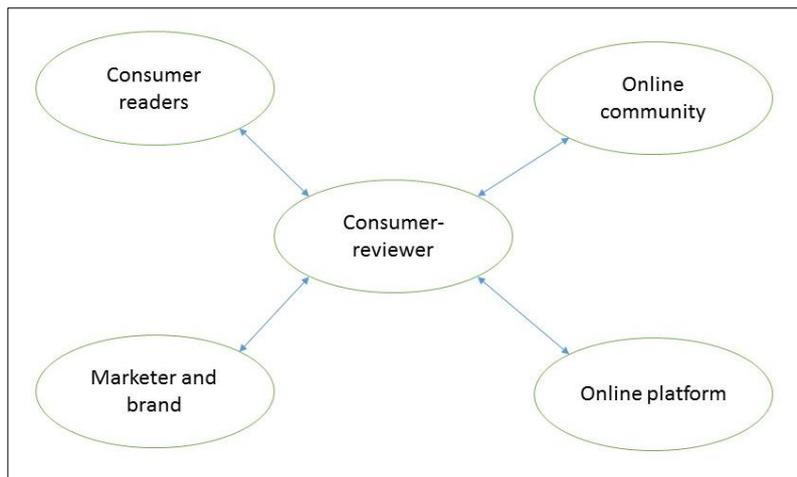


Figure 1: Consumer-reviewers and their connections to the market ecosystem

Method and findings

STUDY 1

The first study had a clear objective of eliciting a segmentation of styles or “voices” used in online reviews. The focus here was on better understanding the different forms of expression which could be found and to structure them around a few main voices.

To achieve this goal, study 1 focuses on characterization of different voices used in reviews of tourist places.

Methodology. We explored reviews about place visits because destination experiences provide a range of emotional and cognitive dimensions offering various perspectives to be shared online. The data consisted of the verbatims from 435 posts on www.tripadvisor.com about three tourist places in the central French region of Burgundy: the Solutré Rock (a scenic attraction consisting of a cliff offering a panorama climbed by about 200,000 visitors every year), the Cluny Abbey (a cultural site consisting of a partly-destroyed Romanesque abbey, which attracts more than 100,000 visitors a year) and Olivier Leflaive (an entertainment site, consisting of famous winery which also serves meals showcasing the wines). At a set date, all reviews about the three places and associated data were downloaded from the Trip Advisor web site (www.tripadvisor.com) and pasted onto a Word document. The 77 reviews which were written in a language other than English or French (the two languages spoken fluently by the authors)

were removed. The verbatims from the remaining reviews – approximately 30,000 words, constitute the data which was analyzed.

Our chosen approach to interpret our data is structural analysis, where the primary focus is on *the way* the story is told (Riessman, 2005), which is in line with our research goals. The analysis of reviews is interpretive in nature (Padgett and Allen, 1997). There are several approaches to the study of narratives and no commonly-accepted coding systems to analyze narrative (Smith, 2000). However, three main areas are typically considered (see e.g., Pentland, 1999; Riessman, 2005; Smith, 2000): the perspective of the author, the focal actor(s) of the review, and the textual devices used. Drawing from texts on narrative analysis (Riessman, 2005; Smith, 2000) and online reviews (Berger, 2014; Berger and Schwartz, 2011; Yoo and Gretzel, 2008); we developed a coding system that suited the research questions and the data, including: author's perspective; focal actor of the review; and textual devices (type of content, cues mentioned, rhetorical mode, tense, and main person). The coding system was used to analyze each of the reviews, and to eventually seek to identify the different voices present in the data.

Findings. The analysis of reviews suggests the existence of three distinct voices, which we named: 'Telling my story', 'Telling about the place', and 'Giving you advice'.

Voice 1: *Telling my story.* The 'Telling my story' voice focuses on describing the experience, without giving a particular judgment or comparing with previous expectations. The perspective is that of an explorer; the review is often organized as a step-by-step story. In terms of textual devices, the main cues reported are experiences, sensorial descriptions and emotions; the type of content is mostly within the emotional, sensory, sense-making and reflective registers. The reviews are usually written in the past tense and the first person. An exemplar verbatim (Rock of Solutré) is: *"This was a great surprise! We walked to the top on a very hot day. The views from the top absolutely amazing. So many people sat at the summit admiring the vista in the sunshine. Well worth the trek. We planned to go to the teashop also the museum at the bottom, but alas there was a huge down pour and thunder and lightning with hailstones. We had no umbrella and got absolutely drenched. Returned to our hotel which was not too far away. Also found a wine cooperative which we returned to for a little degustation and a few purchases."*[Reviewed 18 September 2014].

Voice 2: *Telling about the place.* This voice focuses on a description and/or evaluation of the place, sometimes accompanied by a comparison to some expectations. The perspective is that of a service user, who communicates or assesses the main features or attributes. The focal actor of such reviews is the place itself, which is perceived as a service-scape. In terms of textual devices, the main cues mentioned pertain to the place or the service elements (e.g. ticketing office, toilets, audio guides, etc.). The type of content is mainly in the descriptive or evaluative registers. The review can be written in the present or the past, and in the third person, representing the place. The rhetoric mode is argumentation, in justifying the evaluations made. Overall, the text offers a coherent description or evaluation of the place. An exemplar verbatim (Olivier Leflaive) is: *"The tasting lunch (we went for the 7-wine option) is just a fantastic and wonderful experience. Yet again, just a few front-of-house staff, manage a busy restaurant with grace, style and charm. Superb quality right through the whole experience. This is a place for a long, lazy and very relaxed lunch."* [Reviewed 16 June 2014].

Voice 3: *Giving you advice.* The third narrative voice focuses on providing advice to potential readers. The perspective is that of an advisor or coach. The focal actor of the review is the reader. In terms of textual devices, advice and useful tips for future visitors are provided. The

content type is in the prescriptive register. The reviews refer to ‘you’, and often use the imperative mode. Here, rather than describing the place or their experience, the focus is on the reader’s future visit, using the imperative “pay the small fee” and indicating that the gift shop is worth a visit. An exemplar verbatim (Cluny Abbey) is: *“The Abbey at Cluny is an extraordinary place! Pay the small fee and rent the tablets to enhance you understanding of the Abbey and town. Great gift shop at the Museum and Abbey.”* [Reviewed 25 October, 2013]

Further, the analysis reveals that one voice usually dominates each review, although some reviews were written in two voices, or, more rarely, all three voices in succession.

Discussion. Three voices emerged from the analysis of online reviews about destination experiences across reviewers: experiential, evaluative or descriptive, and advisory. These voices are each clearly associated with a number of narrative features: a specific perspective (an explorer, a service user or a coach), a focal actor (the author, the place visited, or the reader), and particular textual devices. In the majority of cases, the same voice is used throughout the review, but there are also a few instances of several voices being combined. The finding that different perspectives are reflected in three voices suggests that when writing about a consumption experience, consumer-reviewers may take on a somewhat different role – sharing an experience (voice 1), describing or evaluating a place (voice 2), or guiding a reader (voice 3). In this respect, our results support Kozinets et al.’s (2010) argument that “narratives vary but there are distinct archetypal patterns of how people offer perspectives”.

STUDY 2

Study 1 analyzed reviews, across authors, of experiences of three places. Key questions raised from the findings of the first study were: 1) To what extent the three voices found from the analysis of Tripadvisor reviews can be generalized to other contexts? 2) To what extent not only reviews but also authors can be segmented?. Study 2 aimed at answering these questions.

To explore the relevance of the three voices, it appeared necessary to verify if they hold in a different context and to consider the extent to which consumers use the same voice or different ones from one review to another. Hence, we conducted a second study aiming for a clear categorization of reviewers’ roles. The aims of Study 2 are two-fold: (1) verify that similar voices could be identified in a different kind of consumption experience (books vs. places), and in a different online community (Amazon vs. TripAdvisor), and (2), understand whether reviewers tend to use the same voice(s) consistently and thus take on a specific role online across reviews.

Methodology. The data consisted of the verbatims from 96 different reviewers on Amazon. In two book categories (self-help books and cookbooks), the most helpful positive and the most helpful critical review of sub-categories were captured. For each review, the five most recent book reviews by the same reviewer were captured – if the author of the most helpful review had produced fewer than five book reviews, the next most helpful review was selected instead, and so on. The lowest most helpful review selected was the fourth most helpful review. In sum, the data set consists of 480 verbatims. While one review per reviewer was for a book belonging to one of the two categories initially selected, the other four reviews covered different types of books. All reviews were written in English. We used the same analysis strategy as for Study 1, using structural narrative analysis and the same coding system to consider author’s perspective,

focal actor of the narrative, and textual devices. Both authors analyzed the verbatims and conducted their own interpretation before meeting to discuss the findings in more detail.

Findings. The analysis led to the identification of the same three voices uncovered in Study 1. Additionally, the findings show a clear consistency in the pattern used by one reviewer across reviews, confirming the proposition that individual consumer-reviewers adopt a specific role when sharing consumption experiences online. In order to symbolize each voice, we rebranded them into names allowing to illustrate a role played and not only a voice used when writing.

The first consumer-reviewer's role identified is that of a "**Person-next-door**". Here, the consumer-reviewer consistently uses the '**Telling my story**' voice across reviews with the characteristics described in Study 1 to provide a personal account of their experience with the book. Reviewer A for instance, details how she interacted with the books rather than giving information about its content "*The best book I've read in a long time. Original, well written and exciting with characters I really cared about*" (Just One Damned Thing After Another). She shares her intimate feelings and emotions with the books as if she were talking to a friend "*If I had known that every few pages I would have to see passages underlined by Oprah I would not have bought this edition. Not only does it bump me out of the narrative, but it deprives me of experiencing the book on my own*" (Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail).

The second role identified is that of a "**Critic**". The consumer-reviewer adopts the service-user's voice "**Telling about the product**" to play the role of a judge. The reviewer describes the content of the book and gives a clear opinion on the quality of it. The focus is on the book or its writer rather than on the online reviewer. Reviewer B provides precise argumentation on her evaluations of the books she reads, explaining "*This is a short book with step by step process ...It is a down-to-earth, common-sense method ... Scott appropriately suggests that it is important to be thankful even for small successes, because the feeling of gratitude will help to attract or open up to more.*" (Words of knowledge made easy); "*Patricia writes about her spiritual journey. Each chapter is a lesson and yet it reads like a diary*" (Learning to pray so things change); "*In this booklet, the author makes a very good point, that people often talk about their problems, instead of confessing and affirming the solution.*" (Confession brings possession); Reviewer B's tone is objective and impersonal, and several elements are presented, which provide a more detailed sense of the content of the book, i.e. the product attributes.

The third consumer-reviewer's role emerging is that of a "**Coach**" in which the consumer uses a "**Giving you advice**" voice. The consumer-reviewer gives clear guidance to the reader, providing tips on how to use the book and on who should read it. Reviewer C uses a prescriptive tone when talking to his audience "*If the book only serves to convince you of that key fact then it would have been worth many times its purchase price.*" (In Sheep's Clothing: Understanding and Dealing with Manipulative People); "*I would recommend it to people who enjoy literature and are interested in contemporary Ireland.*" (The Spinning Heart: A Novel); "*I don't doubt it can be helpful for some people, but it depends on what level you are at already in building your relationship skills. This book would be helpful to people whose relationships are extremely dysfunctional.*" (We Can Work It Out: How to Solve Conflicts, Save Your Marriage, and Strengthen Your Love for Each Other). The consumer-reviewer advises the reader as a salesperson, guiding the reader towards different options depending on their preferences.

Discussion. This second study suggests that consumer-reviewers adopt a particular role or stance when sharing a consumption experience online. This result is in line with the argument of Hu, et al. (2012, p 676) that "reviews by individual consumers often express a personal view of their experience about the products. Thus their writing style may be very different from each other. Such differences reflect the heterogeneity in their culture, education, occupation and so on."

Three different roles were identified linked to specific voice. Thus, consumer-reviewers can relate differently to other actors in the online community (the readers, the object of consumption, the platform) leading them to give priority to one voice when writing reviews. (1) Person-next-door role linked to "Telling my story" voice; (2) Critic role linked to "Telling about the object under review" voice; (3) Coach role associated to "Giving you advice" voice, which can be linked to different streams of literature. Role 1 can be linked to the experiential literature (e.g. Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and research on narcissism (Pulver, 1970) as the review is about consumer-reviewers' hedonic and sensorial dimensions during their experience. Role 2 can be linked to the service quality evaluation literature (e.g., Bitner, 1990; Cronin and Taylor, 1994; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990) as the focus is on the description or an evaluation of the product or service offered. It can also be linked to the literature on critics as professional sources of information (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Finally, Role 3 can be related to the concepts of opinion leader (Chan and Misra, 1990), early adopter (Seebauer, 2015) or task-oriented sales advisor (Williams and Spiro, 1985). Such position in relation to other consumers may lead opinion leaders, early adopters and market mavens to take on the role of advisors (in the case of market mavens: Feick and Price, 1987).

STUDY 3

The first two studies relied on observed available information written in the online platforms. However, no information was provided regarding the intentions or motivations of the authors. Following on from the earlier two studies, the goal of study 3 was to consider consumer-writers' perceived role within their market ecosystem and relate them to the roles identified in the review(s) they have posted. The aim is to understand how consumer-reviewers perceive their role within the community and the strategies used to perform this role.

Method We selected 12 consumer-reviewers based on their online reviews so as to have at least 4 respondents for each of the three roles identified in study 2. We conducted in-depth interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, during which consumer-reviewers were invited to explain their perceptions of online reviews, to detail their objectives when sharing their own experience, and to explain for whom, for what and how they write online reviews.

Findings First, it can be mentioned that the relevance of the typology found in study 2 was confirmed as it was easily possible to categorize each respondent in one of the three roles based on his or her online reviews. We thus were able to segment respondents either in the role of person next door, or Critic or Coach, on the basis of their written reviews prior to the interview. Then, the analysis of interviews revealed clear distinctions in terms of motivations and strategies pursued depending on the online role played.

Consumer-reviewers clearly identified via their reviews as **Person-next-door**, view their role with humility as being a little help for the community in general and allowing them

to be part of a network *“It creates proximity with future clients. I want to help out, make others discover places I like with useful information»* [Dubu]. They want to promote marketers who made an effort and are good at what they do. *“I write because these people deserve positive reviews. I want to compliment them and create awareness for the hotel owners »* [Phiso]. They want to provide a spontaneous piece of information to the reader, among others, which can be useful but should be taken cautiously as this is only their biased subjective and personal impression. *“I write to share knowledge with those who seek my personal opinion. A review is only one review, it is up to the reader to use it wisely”* [François].

Consumer-reviewers identified through their reviews as playing the role of the **Critic**, perceive themselves very differently. They are skeptical about online messages in general, as they can be controlled by brands, and want to redress wrongs when prevailing online information seems incorrect or biased. *“I want to complement existing reviews and give another point of view »* [Isabelle]. They take their role seriously and want to do things professionally, constructing their reviews carefully and objectively: *“My reviews are serious enough to be considered with professionalism”* [Eleonore]. *“I try to find, in a few words, the best possible description – I do not want to be subjective – you have to find the right words which requires time – I try to be sober, professional and impartial* [Carol]. They consider it as a duty to systematically write reviews. *- I have the feeling of having accomplished my duty towards the provider, the readers and the platform »* [Carol]. They believe that they play an important role, assisting readers in their decision-making and prompting rapid changes from providers when the service is not satisfactory. *“I have the impression to accomplish a useful act for society. I write to warn future users and to trigger a reaction from owners so that they can improve their service”* [Come].

Finally, consumer-reviewers identified through their reviews as playing the role of a **Coach**, see themselves as absolute experts in the domain and consider that their reviews have a large impact on readers’ opinions and behaviors. They believe that a positive review from them is like an advertising campaign for the provider *« My contribution allows sites to be known and promoted. I like sharing my experiences because I do like an advertising »* [Jean MarcS]. *« I write to reward people by promoting those who were good and do some advertising. ”* [Anne]. It seems obvious to them that readers are similar to them and follow their advice as if it was from a professional guide *“I write to people like me who likes to collect information before going. Sometimes I attach a road trip program”* [Claudonp]. They are ready to confront other players in the community, be it other readers or service providers, as they do not accept any questioning of their reviews *“Once I got into a row with a diving agency because I was telling to boycott him”* [Claudonp].

Discussion The analysis of the interviews confirmed the relevance of the three different roles identified in the first two studies which were based on observations of written reviews. Indeed, the last study clearly shows that consumer-reviewers are aware of their style or voice, which they deliberately choose, in line with their perceived role within the community, as a strategy to reach their goals.

Conclusion

While past research has focused on the factors affecting online reviews effectiveness, our research provides a better understanding of the production process of these reviews. Our paper offers a classification of reviews and authors, which allow to better understand how the

experiences are shared differently depending on various customer-reviewers perspectives and why. Taken together, the three studies contribute to the literature on user-generated content by providing a categorization of online content into three main voices: “Telling my story”; “Telling about the object of consumption”; “Giving you advice”. It also extends research on customers’ participation by demonstrating that each voice can be linked to a particular role played by consumer-reviewers when they post online reviews about their consumption experiences: Person next door; Critic; Coach. This work finally contributes to existing research on online word of mouth by probing the underlying distinct strategies of consumer-reviewers depending on their perceived role and how they relate to other market actors. Consumer-reviewers can see themselves as providing just another piece of information to the readers (Person next door); as helping readers and providers by producing objective evaluations (Critic); or as guiding other consumers who might be misled by providers (Coach).

Managerially, the studies provide marketers with a starting point to understand online word of mouth communication through reviews by a structured approach to what is being said, how and why. We offer a categorization of reviews allowing distinctions between three particular voices used in customers’ reviews which informs marketers on how the messages are passed from customers to other customers. We also bring an insight into consumers’ mind, and particular consumer roles among consumers. When featuring such reviews in their own communication (website, brochures, direct mail etc.), they may select accounts written in different voices. When reacting to reviews, they may engage differently with individuals using different voices, by highlighting experiential elements to Persons-next-door, objective attributes of the consumption object to Critics, and suggesting action-focused solutions to Coaches. These voices are a manifestation of different goals and strategies pursued by consumer-reviewers. The three roles can be classified in terms of perceived power of influence on readers and providers. Persons-next-door see their role as a humble participation to an online exchange of information which may or may not be useful for the decision making process of the reader or for the provider; Critics aim to provide professional and objective information which helps consumer-readers in their decision making process and to improve the performance of marketers; Coaches consider that they have an essential role: they act as a reference in their field of consumption, aim to influence consumer-reviewers’ decisions and may promote or demote marketers.

The main limitation of these three qualitative studies are associated with the methodological choices and non-random sampling strategies, which invite caution when considering their generalizability. Yet, the variation of consumption contexts, platforms and methods across the three studies, and the triangulating of the results from Study 2 with those from Study 3, provide initial validation to the findings. The studies constitute a first step towards an understanding of ‘how’ consumer-reviewers write about their consumption experiences, and ‘why’ they may adopt a particular role. Further research is needed, to relate consumer-writers’ roles to their personal traits, the depth of their experience and their engagement with different members of the market ecosystem they are connected with.

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