



Modeling consumer distrust of online hotel reviews[☆]

Wasim Ahmad*, Jin Sun

Department of Marketing, School of Business, University of International Business and Economics, Beijing, 100029 PR China



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Distrust
Hotel reviews
Travel websites
Hospitality
Service failure
Attribution
Word-of-mouth

ABSTRACT

The online reviews literature has tended to focus on exploring perspectives such as the recipient's attitude, reviews' message-based factors, reviews' trustworthiness, and hotel sales. But research fails to address the underlying processes of consumer distrust of online hotel reviews. Based on a rich stream of literature, this study offers a hierarchical-influence model of consumer distrust of online hotel reviews after a hotel service failure. The research model considers how consumers are influenced by two particular attributes of reviewers, how reviewers make attributions following a service failure, and the relational outcomes of distrust. After applying the model to hospitality consumers in China, we find that the reviewer attributes of fake identity and ulterior motivation directly influence distrust, which further leads to consumers' psychological discomfort and engagement in negative electronic word-of-mouth. Surprisingly, psychological discomfort positively affects repeat purchase intentions. Service failure attribution positively moderates the relationship between reviewer attributes and distrust. We discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of our study and close by acknowledging the research limitations. Future research directions to tourism and hospitality scholars are also provided.

1. Introduction

Online hotel reviews have a high degree of anonymity and therefore are an easy way to disseminate deceptive information (Zhang et al., 2016). Hotel managers and hired individuals are involved in the socially undesirable practice of review manipulation (Filieri, 2016; Ma and Lee, 2014). For example, the general manager of communications in the Asia-Pacific region for the French hotel chain Accor Group was caught posting more than 100 positive reviews for its hotels around the world (The Queensland Times, 2013). And in the U.S., 19 companies were heavily fined by the New York Attorney General for flooding the internet with fake online reviews on websites such as Yelp, Google Local, and CitySearch (Press Release of Attorney General Office, 2013). In response to such unethical practices, there is a greater likelihood that hotel consumers will develop a higher level of distrust (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). A research report based on a survey of 2900 consumers from by digital hotel marketing firm Fuel revealed that consumer distrust of online reviews on travel websites has risen 50% in the past year (Leggatt, 2016).

Given that hotel consumers are highly subject to online reviews deception, it is important that researchers further investigate the question of what causes distrust among online travelers, how to overcome this distrust, and how to market hotel services to suspicious and dissatisfied consumers. Moreover, hotel firms and online travel websites

have an interest in understanding what causes consumers to develop greater distrust when using online reviews in hotel bookings so that they can develop relevant strategies to reduce distrust and increase hotel purchase probabilities. In this regard, previous research does not systematically investigate the critical role of consumer distrust in the context of fake hotel reviews. With this in mind, the present study reviews literature on online hotel reviews, consumer distrust, and hospitality and offers a hierarchical-influence model of consumer distrust for online hotel reviews. We specifically examine: (1) consumer perceptions regarding the role of two reviewer attributes (i.e. fake identity and ulterior motivation) in forming distrust; (2) the effect of distrust on consumer psychological discomfort; (3) the associated negative outcomes in the form of negative electronic word-of-mouth and fewer repeat purchase intentions; and (4) in post-purchase scenarios, the moderating role of service failure attribution as a contextual factor between reviewer attributes and distrust.

The present study contributes to the literature in following ways. First, based on distrust literature, this study presents and validates a hierarchical-influence-model of consumer distrust and describes its antecedents and relational outcomes. Second, it extends the prior literature on consumer distrust and examines it in the context of fake hotel reviews with two particular reviewer attributes. Third, based on theoretical conceptualizations, we investigate the first-stage outcome of consumer distrust in the form of psychological discomfort that further

[☆] This article is based on a doctoral dissertation by the first author, under the guidance of the second author.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ahmad.uibe@hotmail.com (W. Ahmad), sunjin@uibe.edu.cn (J. Sun).

leads to behavioral responses. Fourth, this study widens current knowledge by examining two opposite ends of consumer behavior (i.e. negative electronic word-of-mouth and repeat purchase intentions), as the self-brand connection elements have not previously been given fair consideration. Fifth, in response to research calls, the present study aims to validate the moderating role of service failure attributions as a contextual factor between reviewer attributes and distrust (Sen and Lerman, 2007; Weber and Sparks, 2010). Last, understanding consumer behavior in the fastest growing hotel industry market (i.e. China) is valuable to local as well as international tourism and hospitality businesses. Practically, the study's findings can assist online travel websites and hotel firms that encounter unethical practices of reviews manipulation to develop effective strategies to produce higher trust and regain dissatisfied customers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Theory foundation

The present study uses a notion of distrust derived from the seminal study of Kramer (1998). That study assumes that normal individuals hold paranoid social cognitions, referred to as exaggerated distrust, which creates anxiety and stress, and leads to severe behavioral responses. Empirical evidence suggest that after experiencing fraud, consumers tend to protect themselves by developing an overly distrustful view of online firms (Darke and Ritchie, 2007). Because marketing communications rely on norms of honesty and trustworthiness, breaking such values motivates consumers to develop higher distrust and personal construal of others (Posey et al., 2010). Other studies conclude that the induced distrust creates conditions of consumer ambivalence including insecurity and anxiety that converts consumers from being active to passive and negatively affects the consumer behavior (Elbeltagi and Agag, 2016; Moody, Galletta, and Lowry, 2014).

Kramer's (1998) distrust model basically has three key elements, namely history dependent processes, priori expectations, and posteriori attributions. The "history dependent (interaction-based) processes" assumes that an individual's trust increases or decreases as a function of the cumulative history of interaction between two actors (i.e., reviewer and recipient of online reviews). In interpersonal interactions between a reviewer and a recipient using online reviews, the recipient faces a subsequent deception, which creates distrust for online hotel reviews. In "priori expectations," an individual's judgement about untrustworthiness depends on priori expectations about the others' behavior and the extent to which subsequent experience affirms or discredits those expectations. In case of online hotel reviews, consumers have a priori expectations that review information is trustworthy and they will receive good hotel service by relying on a particular hotel review. Afterwards, if that particular review has been proved deceitful in that the identity and motives of review writer were not genuine, the recipient develops heightened distrust. 'Posteriori attributions' influence his or her inferences about the others' motives and intentions. When consumers rely on online reviews in purchasing a hotel service that subsequently proves a failure, they attribute this service failure to online hotel reviews, which can further build distrust. This argument lends support to employing service failure attribution as a moderating factor in our research model.

Kramer's psychological model of distrust was mainly used in examining distrust in interpersonal communications among employees within their social groups (Kramer, 2001). His main distrust model was developed on data collected from MBA students in a U.S. university. Despite its suitability, research has overlooked application of Kramer's concept of distrust as a measure of consumer distrust in online settings. Scholars in the online marketing field have suggested application. They argue that Kramer's social cognition groundings can be useful in providing a richer understanding of online shoppers' distrust in electronic word-of-mouth situations (Zhang et al., 2016). Therefore, based on

empirical findings of consumers' overly suspicious attitudes (Dark and Ritchie, 2007; Moody et al., 2014) and relevance of the basic elements of Kramer's distrust model to the present context, we argue that Kramer's (1998) distrust model supports our study.

2.2. Consumer distrust

Classical approaches defined distrust as "a lack of confidence in others, a concern that the other may act so as to harm one that he does not care about one's welfare or intends to act harmfully, or is hostile" (Govier, 1993). Simply put, distrust is a negative feeling about the conduct of another person. Distrust blocks business exchanges, especially in online businesses where transactions are not interpersonal. Due to its destructive impact on businesses, consumer distrust has received much attention from scholars in recent years. A review of the literature on consumer distrust in online settings indicates the role of several predictors in explaining distrust and outlines various behavioral outcomes of consumers. For instance, research studies on personalized services have found that the key predictors of trust are the consumers' unknown interpretations and expectation evaluation (Komiak and Benbasat, 2008) and agents' irrelevant and biased recommendations (Chau et al., 2013). In turn, distrust negatively influences consumers' interaction with personalization agents. Moody et al. (2014) attempts to conceptualize consumer psychographic traits, consumers' suspicions, situational abnormalities, and disposition to distrust. Riquelme and Roman (2014) consider cognitive traits such as internet-based information searches, perceived internet usefulness, and risk aversion as major factors of distrust. On the other hand, many attempts have been made to examine the influence of website-based factors (Ou and Sia, 2010) and website features on consumer distrust during users' evaluation of website experience (Seckler et al., 2015). Moreover, in business-to-business (B2B) information exchanges, McKnight et al. (2017) find that service outcome quality (i.e. the hygiene factor) strongly influences distrusting beliefs, which further enhances risk perceptions. A growing body of literature examines distrust in terms of its outcomes. Consumer distrust increases negative word-of-mouth and decreases customer satisfaction and loyalty in e-retailing and online shopping contexts (Roman, 2010; Riquelme et al., 2016). It triggers negative brand attitude and lowers the purchase intention in response to deceptive advertising (Xie et al., 2015). Moreover, Lee et al. (2015) conclude that customer distrust increases or decreases as a function of variation in the level of capability-based (i.e. customer involvement, web fraud) and relationship-affecting elements (content truthfulness, customer responsiveness) (See Table 1 for details).

The previous e-commerce research largely compares and contrasts the constructs of trust and distrust, whereas the scientific basis of consumer distrust is less understood (Moody et al., 2014). Much work on the potential for consumer distrust has been carried out, yet there are still areas that need further research. In particular, consumer distrust has appeared as an emerging research area in online tourism and hospitality (Cantalops and Salvi, 2014). A number of researchers note a research gap and argue that mechanisms of consumer distrust in online reviews have not been considered in depth (Hu et al., 2011; Ma and Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Ou and Sia, 2010). Toward this end, little research has been devoted to examining the causes and effects of distrust. For example, a study conducted by Liu et al. (2017) finds that two online reviews factors, namely numerical ratings and opinionated reviews, influence distrust, which decreases users' perceived usefulness, ease of use, and adoption intentions of online reviews. The online reviews are often posted anonymously, which makes it difficult for consumers to discern the review source identity and intention in posting a review. To this point, this particular area of consumer distrust has been completely overlooked by online reviews literature that examines consumer evaluation of reviewer attributes and its effects on behavioral responses. In light of this viewpoint, scholars have suggested examining the impact of two reviewer attributes, namely, fake identity and ulterior

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