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Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM):

**The relationship between anonymous and
semi-anonymous eWOM and consumer attitudes**

Master's thesis within International Marketing

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Abstract

Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is based on personal recommendations where the sender is known by the consumer, thus, the persuasive nature of WOM is attributed to trust between the sender and the receiver of a message. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) however, eliminates the consumer's ability to judge the credibility of sender and message. Nevertheless, a high amount of people read online reviews about products and therefore make use of eWOM. Online reviews can be anonymous or can offer additional personal details of the sender and can have an influence on the credibility of the message, which in turn, can induce different attitudes towards specific products.

Purpose

This study aims to identify as well as understand the relationship between anonymous and semi anonymous eWOM and its corresponding characteristics in regards to the attitudes of consumers towards a laptop computer.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was conducted with the intention to understand the relationship between anonymous and semi anonymous eWOM towards consumers attitude. Primary data was collected, as the authors of this study were not able to locate research studies concerning the difference between anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM and its relationship towards consumer's attitudes. For this reason, four focus groups were carried out with students from the Jönköping University. During a pilot study, differences between male and female participants became visible therefore the focus groups were separated between men and women with the intention of collecting significant data.

Conclusion

The research was successful as it led to identify a relationship between the personal attributes of an online reviewer and the consumer attitudes towards a laptop. By reading online reviews and thus, observing the opinion of other people as well as using comparisons of different laptops, consumers form attitudes towards laptops. Moreover, it appears that consumers' attitudes are more likely to be influenced by the message if it is perceived as credible. Several personal attributes of a reviewer such as name, photograph of a person, pseudonym, age, gender, country of residence and profession were identified to have an influence on the credibility of a message, whether they might increase or decrease the credibility. Additionally, it became visible, that women are relatively more likely to be influenced by personal attributes of a reviewer than men.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

It is necessary to understand the history as well as the development of Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) and electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) in order to get a deeper insight into this topic. This part provides the needed background information as well as the purpose of this study.

1.1. Background information

Nowadays, a decrease of trust in organizations, advertising and television advertising can be seen in regards to consumers. In order to overcome this, organizations are trying to foster WOM which can lead to a competitive advantage (Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol, 2008). Word-Of-Mouth can be defined as “informal person-to-person communication between a perceived non-advertising communicator and a consumer about ownership, or characteristics of a brand, a product, a service, an organization or a seller” (Ladhari, 2007, p. 1093). It has been shown, that information about a product or a service received from friends, family members or neighbors, therefore, people known to each other, has more influence than information provided by marketers through advertising or other promotional activities (Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Gruen Osmonbekov & Czaplewski, 2006). Especially in regards to high-involvement products, consumers lean on other people while making decisions (Gershoff & Johar, 2006). Furthermore, studies have revealed, that WOM, as opposed to conventional media channels, is more convincing (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991). In addition to this, Godes and Mayzkin (2005) demonstrate that, not only due to lower trust of conventional media, but also due to an enhancement in product complexity as well as an easier accessibility of information, WOM is becoming more significant nowadays. According to recent researchers, the most significant source of information as well as the most credible source in regards to customers and purchase decision can be found in WOM communications (Tiwari & Abraham, 2010). It is known that WOM communications have a strong impact on customer opinions toward specific products (Herr et al., 1991). The reason for this convincing effectiveness of personal recommendations lies in a feeling of trust, security and reduction of confusion from commercialism. Additionally, recommendations are used in order to decrease the quantity of information to be processed (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox & Harrell, 1997) as well as to reduce anxiety (Hung & Li, 2007) in the process of decision making. The most effective source of WOM therefore, comes from post-purchase advocates that have personal experience with a product and the listeners feel they can trust them (Dichter, 1966).

Due to the internet, WOM can travel faster as well as reach more consumers (Strutton, Taylor & Thompson, 2011). In the past ten years, the Internet usage has increased by approximately 450 per cent (Internet world stats, 2012). This demonstrates the importance of the Internet as a tool within marketing and communications. The Internet has changed the usage of mass media; the Internet is overtaking watching television, particularly among young people (Moran, 2008). Consumers are likely to search for information about products or services online with the intention of diminishing risk and uncertainty (Peterson & Merino, 2003). Reviews and comments in regards to products can be found in online forums, online stores as well as review sites or other websites that leads people to express their opinions. As opposed to the traditional WOM, which

was aimed for one or more personal contacts, online product reviews, opinions or comments are targeted and visible to every consumer who uses the Internet. Recent research showed an increased attention towards online product reviews and demonstrated a strong impact prior to choosing a product (Edelman, 2010).

Many Internet users are believed to participate in one or more online communities either directly or indirectly and this brought a relatively new and increasingly important form of global networked electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) (Chan & Ngai, 2011). Communication of eWOM has been defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39).

The most significant differences between WOM and eWOM were distinguished by Steffes and Burgee (2008). First, they mention, while WOM is an immediate intimate conversation, eWOM is most frequently an asynchronous process whereby sender and receiver of information are separated by both space and time. Second, while WOM is generally a process of sharing information between small groups of two or more interested parties, eWOM uses the bidirectional communication properties and unlimited reach of the Internet to share opinions and experiences to a multitude rather than to only one person. Third, in the case of traditional WOM, the sender is known by the receiver, thereby the credibility of the sender and the message contents are known to the receiver. However, the nature of eWOM eliminates the receiver’s ability to judge the credibility of the sender and the message. Much of the persuasive nature of WOM is attributed to the fact that many consumers trust communications from people they know more than communications from marketers, as the traditional framework for WOM communication is without a profit motivation. However, the nature of eWOM highlights the important theoretical issues of source credibility and user trust: the unknown anonymous source of information in eWOM has the possibility of non-altruistic or profit-motivated communication exists.

As a result of the emergence of eWOM, four important changes have occurred in the buying environment: access to price and non-price product attributes, alternative comparisons and evaluations based on buyers’ considerations, improved quality of information and organized and structured information (Varadarajan & Yadav, 2002). Therefore, it is not very surprising, that researchers discovered that consumer shopping behaviors within internet channels are influenced by eWOM (Xia & Bechwati, 2008). Additionally, further studies have shown that people may use eWOM to search for heuristic information (Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005; Lee, Park & Han, 2008). It became visible that consumers’ need for social interaction, for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers as well as the potential to enhance their own self-worth, are the primary factors that lead to eWOM behavior (Chan & Ngai, 2011). It was observed that if online reviews are logical as well as persuasive and with sufficient reasons based on specific facts concerning the product, they are likely to have a positive impact on consumers’ purchase intention. Additionally, the quantity of online reviews shows a positive relationship with customers’ intention to purchase (Chan & Ngai, 2011).

There are different factors and aspects that can influence consumers’ perceptions of eWOM. From the point of view of consumers, different expertise and knowledge in

regards to goods can influence the perception of eWOM (Chan & Ngai, 2011). The characteristics of products, such as low and high involvement or search and experiential goods, also changes the way customers evaluate and perceive reviews (Park, Lee & Han, 2007). Furthermore, the source of eWOM has an effect on its credibility. Different sources such as web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums or boycott web sites, influences the trust of a message, and the same message can be perceived differently according to the source (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Park et al., 2007). Additionally, technical mechanisms of eWOM, such as recommendation systems and search agents, need to be taken into account when understanding the influence of eWOM (Chan & Ngai, 2011). The message itself can be evaluated from different perspectives. Some studies measured the different factors of messages, such as valence (positive, negative or neutral), volume, content quality, style, usefulness, credibility, the rating of the review and accuracy (Chan & Ngai, 2011; Dellarocas, Zhang & Awad, 2007; Park et al., 2007). In addition, attitudes towards products can be influenced not only by quality but also by quantity of online consumer reviews (Park et al., 2007).

This research will focus on eWOM, since there are many interesting aspects to be considered, such as the fact that most consumers do not know the people they are referring to or looking for advice. As mentioned before, the Internet made it possible to share information easily and fast, however, which factors play a vital role in the approach of eWOM? A more specific view of the main purpose of the study will be shown in the purpose discussion.

1.2. Purpose development and thesis structure

After conducting an empirical literature review, the researchers could not find literature which focuses on personal information of review writers online as well as separating anonymous from semi-anonymous eWOM. Scholars (Chan & Ngai, 2011) believe that journals represent the highest level of research and it helps academics and practitioners attain information and distribute new findings. Therefore, the researchers of this paper focused on journals and used different keywords in order to find all reachable articles about eWOM. The articles were mainly gathered through the web search engine Google Scholar. Keywords such as: “electronic word of mouth”, “eWOM”, “Internet word of mouth”, “online customer review”, “online word of mouth” and “Internet recommendations” were used with the intention of finding relevant articles. Google Scholar helps to find relevant articles across the world of scholar research (Google Scholar, 2012). In addition to this, the article of Chan and Nagai (2011) was used. Their research analyzes and categorizes 94 different articles written between 2000 and 2009 in regards to eWOM.

It was described before, that the nature of eWOM eliminates consumer’s ability to judge the credibility of the sender and message, while WOM is based on personal recommendations where the sender is known by the consumer and the credibility of the sender and message itself can be known (Steffes & Burgee, 2008). However, online reviews can be anonymous or with additional personal details of the sender (e.g. name, photo of reviewer) and can have different effects on the credibility of the message, which can induce the different influences on product attitudes as well. *The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the relationship between anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM and consumer attitude towards a specific product.* This topic is remarkable and useful since it will give different insights into eWOM, analyze it in

more detail and lead to a deeper understanding of which factors influence review credibility and consumers' attitudes towards high involvement products, in this case – laptop computers. From the point of view of the business world, this knowledge and understanding about anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM is useful to predict the influence of reviews on product attitudes as well as to conduct the reviews in their own virtual space. For the academic world, this research could bring new insights into eWOM, its different characteristics and reveal additional aspects of eWOM that could influence consumer attitudes. This research could also increasing consumers' protection against companies advertising their products with misleading reviews.

It is important to define what characterizes anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM, in order to fulfill the purpose of this study. Since there is no clear implication of these different perspectives of eWOM, the authors of this study are going to label anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM themselves. This study will investigate *how personal attributes, used within reviews, influence consumer attitudes towards a laptop computer*. Furthermore, it will be investigated, *which personal attributes might change the credibility of the review*. In the end, the study will try to conceive *the relationship between the gender of consumers and the perception of personal attributes*. Summing up, the questions of this research are as followed:

- How do personal attributes of a reviewer influence attitudes of consumers towards a laptop?
- Which personal attributes can change the credibility of a review?
- What is the relationship between the gender of consumers and the perception of personal attributes?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative study will be conducted. Students of the Jönköping University will be recruited for focus groups in regards to this qualitative research study. Additional information about how the research will be conducted will be seen in the method chapter. A laptop computer was chosen in this study as it is a very common and significant product for students and therefore, it belongs to high involvement products. Thus, students are willing to spend more time on finding information about the product before purchasing it. In addition to this, Park and Kim (2008) explain, since electronic products are usually complicated in use and new versions are frequently released, that there is a constant need for searching updated information; consumers tend to rely on comments from previous users. In the end, the results of these groups will be compared and analyzed in order to fulfill the purpose (see Figure 1.1).

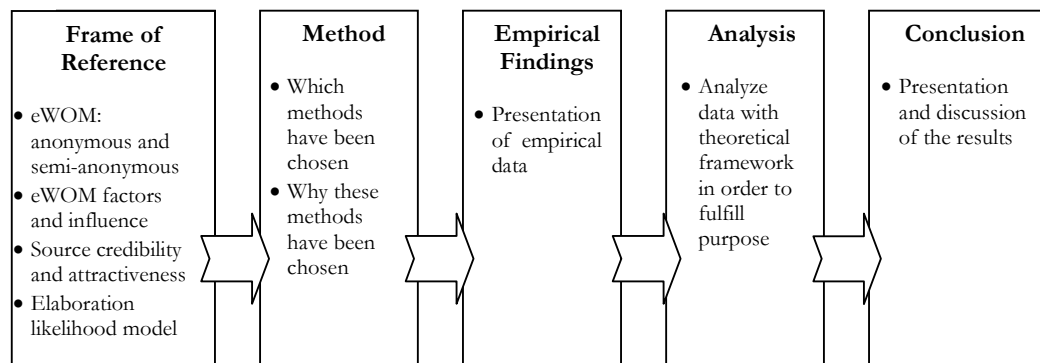


Figure 1.1 Structure of the thesis.

2 Theoretical Background / literature review

This part of the study will discuss the theoretical background which guides the design as well as the analysis of this study. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated what has already been researched in regards to this topic and how this study can help to provide more information concerning eWOM and its personal attributes.

2.1. eWOM: anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM

Previous studies found that WOM has a strong impact on judgments of products (Herr et al., 1991). In most cases, the motive behind a purchase is a friend, expert or relative who gives advice or recommendation to do so. The reason for this convincing effectiveness of personal recommendations lies in a feeling of trust, security and reduction of confusion from commercialism (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). The fast development of Internet and social network sites have rapidly changed the way information is shared between customers and reduced the traditional limitations of WOM (Laroche, Yang, McDougall, & Bergeron, 2005). WOM, which was targeted to one or a few friends, now becomes a permanent message, visible to the whole wide world. As a result, eWOM plays an increasingly significant role in consumer purchase decisions.

In this study, the authors focus on anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM. *Anonymous eWOM* is considered to have no information about the person writing an online review available. *Semi-anonymous eWOM* however, means some amount of information (e.g. name, age or picture) about the person is available (see Figure 2.1.). There is a spectrum of anonymity where at one end is no information about the reviewer and at the other end there is a name, picture, age, location and/or other information, available. Information about the person, who is posting the review online, will be called personal attributes from now on. If at least one personal attribute of the reviewer is visible, the authors will use the definition of *semi-anonymous eWOM*. In case of no information about the reviewer, anonymous eWOM will be accurate. It is important to mention, this study does not focus on when semi-anonymous eWOM ends, as this would indicate some type of relationship between the review writer and the reader.

As it was mentioned before, there were no previous studies found by the authors which would see eWOM from the perspective as it was explained before. Chatterjee (2001) mentioned that recommendations of eWOM are typically from unknown individuals and consumers have difficulties to determine the credibility of the given information. Huang, Cai, Tsang & Zhou (2011) assume that the senders' individual characteristics are not available. However, the situation in the world of the Internet could be seen differently. One example could be the Amazon.com online shop where eWOM messages are widely used. On this website, all reviewers can choose how much personal information they wish to reveal as well as which personal attributes. Amazon.com is just one of many examples from the wide range of websites which offers the same possibilities for reviewers to create their own profile.

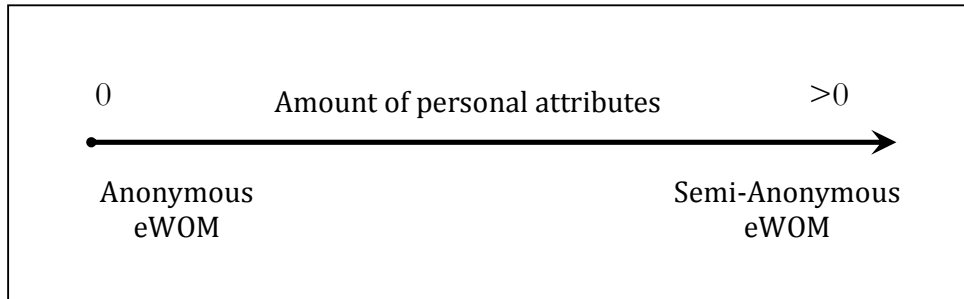


Figure 2.1 Anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM.

2.2. Factors of eWOM

In order to evaluate the impact of a message, three components need to be taken into account: *source*, *message* and *receiver* (Hovland, 1948). Furthermore, the insights of O'Reilly and Marx (2011) concerning eWOM will be incorporated with the purpose of getting a more sufficient view. They state that an assessment of the credibility of eWOM is based on four factors: the polarity and quantity of posts, the logic and articulation of posts, the ability to find corroborating sources, and the previous experience of participants with particular sellers.

Source

Studies in the past have shown that different sources of eWOM have a different influence on its credibility and how consumers perceive it. Different sources such as web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, and boycott web sites influence the trust of messages, and the same message can be perceived differently according to the source (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Park et al., 2007). Sussan, Gould and Weisfeld-Spolter (2006) discovered an interaction effect between the website location and the eWOM message: eWOM added to advertising in a third-party website has a larger additive effect on consumers' involvement and likelihood to adopt a new product than in a firm-sponsored website. Additionally, some studies demonstrated that in different situations, online forums, in comparison to a brand's website, have a stronger influence on brand attitudes (Yun-Chen & Wang, 2011; Xue & Phelps, 2004). In general, barriers to enter the web are low and it lacks gatekeepers that forms the environment where well established and reputable websites have been more readily accepted by consumers than the unknown ones (Shamdasani, Stanaland & Tan, 2001). Therefore, when trying to evaluate the specific factors of eWOM which influences consumer's attitudes, the source needs to be taken in consideration. In this study, one website will be used in order to decrease the influence on attitudes. The well-known and established online shop – Amazon.com will be used as an example of the source in this research (more details are given in the methodology part).

Message

The message eWOM itself is carrying, can be evaluated from different perspectives and each factor has a specific influence towards the consumers attitude. Some studies measured the different factors of messages, such as valence (positive, negative or neutral), volume, content quality, style, usefulness, the rating of the review and accuracy (Chan & Ngai, 2011; Dellarocas et al., 2007, Park et al., 2007; Sussan et al., 2006). Studies have been concentrating on negative and positive eWOM in order to

understand and measure which one has a stronger effect on attitudes. It is known that negative eWOM is more powerful (Park et al., 2007; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Specifically, the negative effect appears to be more significant when eWOM is for experienced goods (Park et al., 2007) or when an unfamiliar retailer is chosen (Chatterjee, 2001). Attitude towards products can be influenced not only by quality but also by the quantity of online consumer reviews (Park et al., 2007). The volume of eWOM also has a meaning, it creates an awareness effect and can significantly influence sales (Duan, Gu & Whinston, 2008).

Receiver

Prior studies have shown that consumer characteristics, for example, consumer experience or involvement, affect the way the consumer processes a message. After reviewing prior literature it can be said that there are three most commonly examined factors that determine the impact of eWOM: *consumer involvement*, *consumer expertise* and *gender*. The research done by Awad and Ragowsky (2008) shows that the effect of eWOM is stronger on women than on men when it comes to online shopping and that men and women value different factors of eWOM and its intentions. Consumer expertise has an impact on how eWOM is perceived: experts will be more influenced by quality, while novices will be more affected by the number of reviews written (Yun-Chen & Wang, 2011; Park & Lee, 2008). It became visible, that as involvement increases, the effect of negative eWOM is greater when eWOM is of high quality as opposed to of low quality (Lee, Park & Han, 2008).

The knowledge of which factors of eWOM have an effect on consumers will be useful in choosing and building up the methods for the research. In order to understand the influence personal details of reviewers might have on the message credibility and how it affects consumers' attitude toward products, all other factors need to be eliminated or evaluated. In the next parts, the consumer's involvement, expertise and gender will be analyzed and discussed deeper in order to understand its influence towards the perception of eWOM.

2.3. High involvement

The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (ELM) (Figure 2.2.), shows how attitudes are formed and changed as well as there are two different routes to persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The model suggests that as soon as a consumer obtains a message, they start to evaluate it (Petty, Cacioppo & Schuhmann, 1983). In case of high involvement, the consumer takes the *central route* to persuasion, in case of low involvement, the *peripheral route* will be taken (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2010). Involvement can be defined as the relevance of a product based on interests, needs and values, as perceived by the consumer (Zaichkowsky, 1985). This study will focus on a laptop computer; the laptop will be dealt with as a high involvement product, as high involvement means personal relevance (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984).

It will be assumed by the authors, that a laptop has a high relevance to a student, therefore, it is a high involvement product. Not only are laptops indeed used by most students, but by agreeing to participate in the focus group, the students showed interest as well. Even if the students are normally not interested in the subject of laptops, by expressing interest in the focus group, they were certainly in the focus group settings as

they were asked to think about and discuss laptops. Therefore, even if a laptop has not a high relevance for all the students, a highly involved situation was created by asking them to join, as well as, they accepting the invitation to the focus group. The ELM illustrates, that high and low involvement conditions, in terms of persuasion differ from each other (Erdogan, 1999). According to Petty, Cacioppo & Goldman (1981), the quality of a message has a bigger effect on persuasion when the message deals with high involvement products. Involvement towards a product has an effect on the processing of information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Applying the ELM in this study, the central route would be chosen as this suggests a high involvement product (Solomon et al., 2010). If a student reads an online review and shows an interest in this message, they will probably intensely concentrate on the message content.

The arguments or opinions will be taken into consideration and cognitive responses will be made by the reader. According to Solomon et al. (2010), if counter-arguments towards a message are created, it is more probable that the person does not go further with this message. However, if the person generates arguments that support the message, the chances of compliance become higher (Solomon et al., 2010). Subsequently, beliefs are developed towards the message and thereby the attitude resulting from these beliefs is likely to change the behavior towards the product (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This route can be seen below in Figure 2.1 of the elaboration likelihood model. As mentioned before, the quality of a message has a bigger effect on persuasion when it refers to high involvement (Petty et al., 1981), however, do personal attributes of the review writer play a role in this?

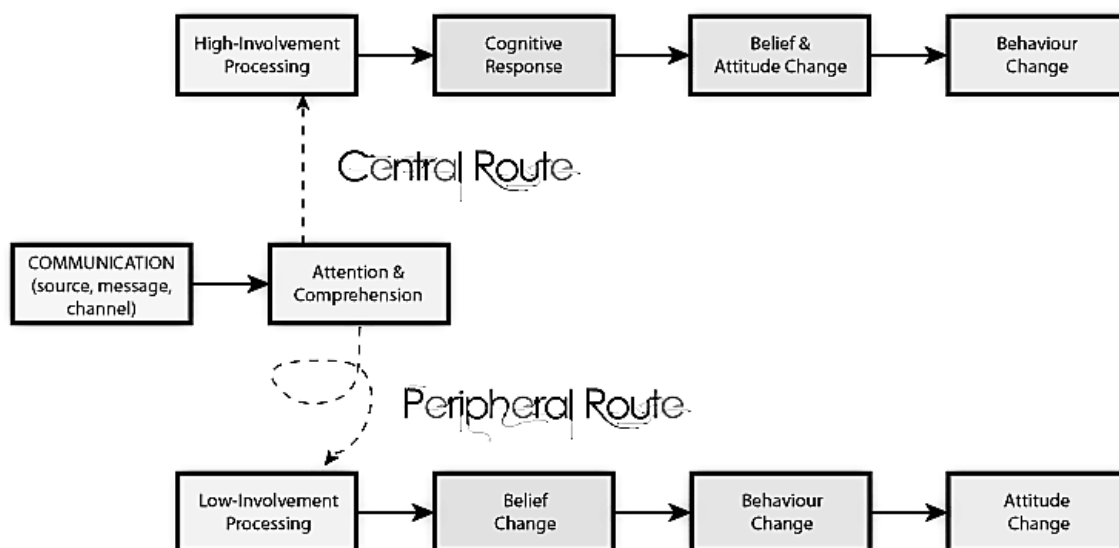


Figure 2.2 Elaboration likelihood model, Solomon, 9th edition, p. 290.

This study will also try to investigate which personal attributes are considered important in regards to online reviews. As this will be a qualitative study, the authors will focus on *why* and *how* in terms of decision making. Therefore, with the help of focus groups, the personal attributes important for this research will be defined. It will be examined, if information about an online review writer, such as a photo, age, gender etc. is seen as important attributes concerning the actual message delivered.

2.4. Expertise of consumers

Alba and Hutchinson (1987) emphasize that experiences related to products, such as advertising exposures, information search, interactions with salespersons, choice and decision making, purchasing, and product usage, build up consumer expertise various situations. They define the term of consumer expertise “that includes both the cognitive structures (e.g. beliefs about product attributes) and cognitive processes (e.g. decision rules for acting on those beliefs) required to perform product-related tasks successfully” (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987, p. 411).

Researchers discovered that people with different level of expertise tend to use different information processing routes to process persuasive information (Cheung, Xiao & Liu, 2012). Cowley (1994) explains that some consumers assign importance at encoding and others assign importance at retrieval. The difference between these consumers is the degree of product knowledge or expertise. The ability to attribute importance to encoding requires the consumer to have previous knowledge which will simplify learning. On the other hand, the ability to attribute importance to retrieval requires an elaborated schema which provides an orderly search for important information. Hence, the expert is skilled in distinguishing between important or unimportant, relevant or irrelevant information (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987) whereas the novice will focus on surface details (Cowley, 1994). In addition to this, Brucks (1985) sums up that a number of studies found a negative relationship between the amount of experience and the degree to which an individual conducts an external information search. For example, an expert would focus on complex technical attribute information, whereas novices would prefer simple benefit information when evaluating the computer (Maheswaran & Sternthal, 1990).

Park and Kim (2008) show in their research that consumer expertise plays an important moderating role in examining the impact of eWOM content on consumer purchase decision. Doh and Hwang (2009) found that prior knowledge partially moderated the relationship between the ratio of messages (ratio evaluates the level of negative or positive information) and the eWOM effect. Comparing the levels of consumer expertise could mean that more experienced consumers will be less likely to rely on peripheral cues such as personal attributes of reviewers and will concentrate on the actual content when looking for information. This study is going to eliminate the differences which are based on consumer expertise and survey respondents who do not see themselves as very experienced and with a high knowledge about laptop computers. The elimination of consumers with very high expertise will help the study to see a more realistic view as such consumers in general are less likely to look for additional information in reviews and even if they do, it is most likely that they will concentrate on the content of the message.

2.5. Gender

Since it was identified that gender can influence the perception or trust of eWOM (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008), it is important to have a focus on the possibility that gender would have an impact on understanding the relationship between anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM and attitude towards products. Sociolinguistic theory explains that women and men have different underlying social objectives when communicating. It states that, women’s communication objectives are usually based on network oriented collaboration (Kilbourne & Weeks, 1997) as well as cooperation (Yates, 2001). On the

other hand, men's communication objectives are typically focused on protecting and increasing their social standing (Tannen, 1994). Thus, men are more likely to try to control the conversation by speaking and sharing the information that they know, while women are more likely to develop a relationship through giving and receiving social support (Kilbourne & Weeks, 1997). The different objectives of communication can influence the perception of messages and, in this research case, eWOM.

The research of Awad and Ragowsky (2008) focuses on the cultural effect of gender on the relationship between eWOM and the trust in online shopping. It shows that men and women develop trust in an online retailer differently, and eWOM affects online shopping behavior differently across genders. According to the research of Awad and Ragowsky (2008), the effect of eWOM on intention to shop online is stronger for women than for men. Additionally, men see importance in their ability to post content online, while women value the responsive participation of other consumers to the content they have posted.

Taking all these facts into account, there is a possibility that the gender of consumers affects the perception of personal attributes of reviewers. In order to understand if there is a relation between these two factors, data will be collected from men and women separately during focus groups. This will help to compare the results as well as to identify possible differences.

2.6. Source credibility

In this case, the research question, how personal attributes (e.g. age, gender, photos) influence the attitude towards a laptop in regards to students, will be monitored. As mentioned before, this study focuses on eWOM, therefore, the reviewers' expertise is unknown. Source credibility refers to the consumers' beliefs that a reviewer is experienced and able to present useful information in order to assess and evaluate products (Solomon et al., 2010). Many online reviews use screen names, however, some reviewers use names which sound real, though the readers cannot be sure, that these are the real names of the individuals posting their comments online (Mackiewicz, 2010). How do readers make the decision if a source is credible?

According to Mackiewicz (2010), one way to perceive credibility is trustworthiness. Ohanian (1990) illustrates, if communicators are believed to be trustworthy, they make other people think that they aim to announce their arguments which are found to be most valid in their eyes. Furthermore, Ohanian (1990) demonstrates three factors that influences the credibility of a source, based on the studies made by Desarbo, Likewise and Harshmann (1985). As can be seen in Figure 2.3, the Ohanian model of source credibility, the three factors are *trustworthiness*, *attractiveness* and *expertise*. Above indicated, *trustworthiness* of a source refers to the degree to which the readers experience the message as valid (Hovland, Irving & Kelley, 1953).

Ohanian (1990) argues that there are several dependent variables, such as reliability, honesty and sincerity, which are linked to the perception of *trust*. In addition to this, Ohanian (1990) illustrates that in order of a source to be characterized with *expertise*, the source has to be perceived as experienced, qualified, as well as professional. Furthermore, the factor of source attractiveness is mentioned in the model seen below (Figure 2.3.). Source attractiveness is often referred to the physical appeal of the source itself, e.g. a celebrity within a commercial (Erdogon, 1999). However, it does not only mean physical attractiveness, characteristics that consumers perceive such as intellectual

skills, personality properties, lifestyles and athletic prowess, belong to source attractiveness as well (Erdogon, 1999).

According to Hunter (2009), ‘Emotional Involvement’ is a further factor of the model of source credibility of Ohanian (1990). The author (Hunter, 2009) argues that an endorser (in this case, a review writer) can have an influence on a consumer’s attitude if the consumer believes the endorser uses and/or likes the product and makes this obvious. Additionally, characteristics such as being passionate, being excited as well as show a thrill or dedication towards a product could have the same influence. Thus, if the review writer him- or herself is perceived of having an emotional involvement with a product (in this case, a laptop computer), consumers could be influenced by this and could lead to an attitude change. However, in order to possibly discover this, the content of the review itself plays a very significant role.

In addition to this, similarity between a source and its receiver, familiarity in regards to knowledge as well as sympathy felt for the source and its behavior, also belong to the characteristics of source attractiveness (Erdogan, 1999). The authors of this study will investigate how the personal attributes of a source, in this context the review writer, will influence the attitude (of the reader) towards a product (laptop). Consumers might try to ‘interpret’ the reviewer in terms of age, which some consumers might refer to expertise, or in terms of a photo, which in turn could refer to the source attractiveness. According to Mackiewicz (2010), readers of online reviews try to find signals that the reviewer is credible. However, are the personal attributes given by the review writer part of these signals, or do consumers only rate what is written within the review? Questions like these will be evaluated in this study.

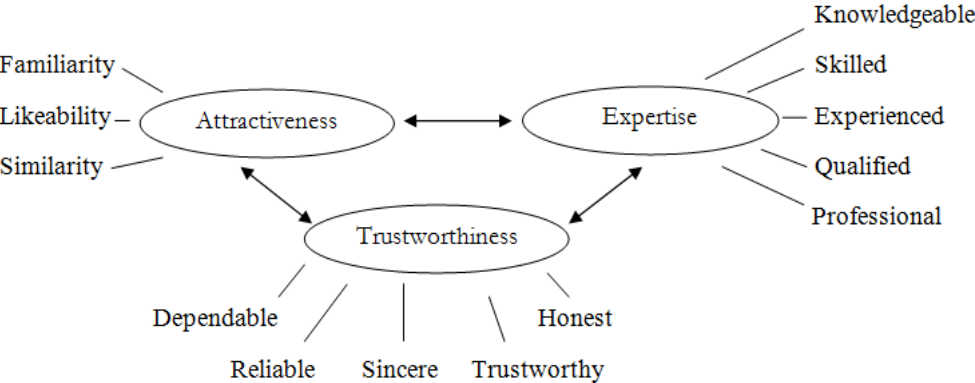


Figure 2.3 The Ohanian Model of Source Credibility, adapted from Ohanian (1990).

3 Methodology

This part of the paper will comprise how all the empirical work has been carried out. It will explain why a qualitative method has been used as well as why focus groups have been chosen to collect the data, in order to answer the research questions and how it has been analyzed. Additionally, the design of focus groups will be discussed. In the end, the strategy for limiting bias and improving the trustworthiness of the research will be presented.

3.1. Research Design

Malhotra and Birks (2007, p. 69), define exploratory research as “a research design characterized by a flexible and evolving approach to understand marketing phenomena that are inherently difficult to measure”. The main aim of exploratory research is to gain insight as well as to comprehend a certain marketing occurrence (Halman & Burger, 2002). Within exploratory research, the desired information could be “loosely” defined, therefore, the researchers have an idea of what they wish to observe or which topics to cover, but exact information is up to the participant of the research. Thus, the research procedure is adjustable and could develop and move on in a different direction than planned before (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). This thesis intends to evaluate attitudes as well as how and if attributes of reviewers have an impact on the credibility of an online review, if yes, which attributes were important for consumers. Therefore, an exploratory research format was suitable as the researchers could initiate ideas of what might influence the attitude or which attribute might have an impact. However, the participants might come up with different significant aspects and thus, lead the discussion in a different direction. Therefore, a qualitative research method was chosen in regards to this thesis; further description will be found below.

3.2. Qualitative Research

The aim of qualitative research is to enhance the comprehension of consumers’ thoughts and motivations in regards to specific products (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). It can be defined as “an unstructured, primarily exploratory design based on small samples, intended to provide insight and understanding” (Malhotra & Birks, 2007, p. 152). Qualitative research offers an additional viewpoint on the behavior of human beings (Mariampolski, 2001). It is used to make the participants of the research cogitate as well as communicate their opinions or views about certain products, services, brands etc. Furthermore, qualitative research concerns the behavior, feelings and experiences of the participants (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). According to Mariampolski (2001), qualitative research strives for unforeseen results and imaginative implications. Hancock, Ockleford and Windridge (2009) highlight some main points about the qualitative research that helps to understand why and when this method can be used and what results could be expected:

- tends to focus on how people or groups of people can have (somewhat) different ways of perceiving reality;
- takes account of complexity by incorporating the real-world context and can take different perspectives on board;
- focuses on reports of experience or on data which cannot be properly expressed numerically;

- focuses on description and interpretation and might lead to development of new concepts or theory, or to an evaluation of an organizational process;
- uses a flexible, emergent but systematic research process.

There are several reasons why qualitative research is more appropriate in certain situations. According to Malhotra and Birks (2007), preferences and/or experience of the researcher or of the participant, sensitive information, subconscious feelings, complex phenomena as well as the holistic dimensions are some of the reasons. Concerning this thesis, the researches focused on the topics of subconscious feeling as well as the holistic dimensions while choosing the research method. Participants in this research might not know why they were influenced by certain online reviews; therefore, their subconscious feelings and motivations are appealed to. The holistic dimension concerns the whole picture of a situation, where the researchers try to illustrate and understand as much as possible about the situation and not only the aspects related to it (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). This is very significant for this thesis, as the researchers might discover situational aspects relating to the research questions that were not thought of before.

3.3. Focus groups

Focus groups can be described as small group of participants, where a moderator initiates and leads a group discussion in a comfortable and unstructured manner (Litosseliti, 2003). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) the functional amount of participants in the group, is from four to eight participants. Hancock et al. (2009) recommends groups from six to ten people, since a lower amount of participants could limit the potential interaction, and a higher amount of participants could make it difficult for everyone to join in the discussion. Researchers attempt to ascertain feelings, motives, experiences, views etc. of the individuals by means of group interactions in order to generate data (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Focus groups are efficient research methods, used within qualitative research, where participants of a focus group help other participants to outline, examine and clarify their opinions and thoughts about specific topics (Milliken, 2001). Additionally, it is very significant that the participants feel comfortable in the situation, are relaxed and open to reveal their opinions and behaviors (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Participants of focus groups are influenced by others, as well as they also affect other participants (Litosseliti, 2003), therefore, participant might remember situations, experiences etc. after listening to other members of the focus group that are important in the context of this thesis. Furthermore, Litosseliti (2003) states that focus groups attempt to attain several views and attitudes towards a subject.

There are many advantages and reasons of why to use focus groups, according to Fern (1982), focus groups offer more information and insight into a specific topic in comparison to in-depth interviews held with individual participants, due to more spontaneity as well as objectivity of the participants. For the purpose of this thesis, focus groups show useful characteristics in order to answer the research questions. The attitudes towards online reviews and its corresponding aspects have to be revealed; hence, a natural atmosphere with participants of the target group is suitable. Participants might detect aspects which are very significant towards identifying attributes that could influence online review readers. According to Malhotra and Birks (2007), *serendipity* is a very significant advantage of focus groups. This means, that due to focus groups,

ideas can be discovered, issues developed as well as discussed, which the researchers have not thought of before. Additionally, the participants might ask questions or come up with topics, which the moderator would be too cautious to bring up in order to not influence the participants in their opinions. While in-depth interviews are a further method to obtain qualitative data, the authors of this thesis believed that it was not advisable in this context. Finding enough participants for in-depth interviews is a challenge; furthermore, the researchers believed that a more relaxed atmosphere and spontaneity would induce the participants to reveal more information than in an in-depth interview. Additionally, in-depth interviews cannot provide peer-interaction. Many researchers experienced, that the major benefit of focus groups is the dynamics of the discussion within a focus group, where other participants triggered off opinions and beliefs that were unknown or unconscious to individual participants and might not had been discovered in a personal interview (Greenbaum, 1998). A further description of how the data was collected will be discussed further on.

3.4. Target population and sampling method

The population is composed of all individuals of interest to the researcher (Cozby & Bates, 2012). According to Malhotra and Birks (2007), the target population refers to the assortment of possible participants, who have the desired information needed by the researchers. In this thesis, the target population is female and male students between the ages 18 to 30, from different countries. This thesis focuses on people who see laptop computers as an important purchase, have used online reviews for gathering information about products they were interested in (not necessary the laptop computer) and are not extremely experienced or knowledgeable about laptop computers. This age range refers to consumers who are believed to be able to make their own purchase decisions as well as possibly have the similar needs and understanding about technologies. Furthermore, the target population referred to students increasing their homogeneity in lifestyles which means similar needs, understanding and even knowledge and experience about laptop computers and the usage of online reviews. The fact that the target population aims to encompass different countries can be quite controversial, as cultural differences according to Harris and Moran (1979) could increase the possibility of misunderstandings significantly (both, during focus groups and data analysis). However, the researchers see this as a possibility to gain more different and unexpected opinions and believe that students from different countries, who have been living for some time in the same city, already have some level of cultural experiences and are more open to try to understand and communicate with different cultures. The sampling unit therefore is the Jönköping University, more specific, Jönköping International Business School. This school fitted great as it had been ranked as one of the most international universities in Europe. All students from all countries were considered, however, not all countries were included in the final sample due to the lack of time as well as resources.

Nonprobability sampling relies on the personal judgment of a researcher rather than on the chance to select sample elements (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). This helps to yield good estimates of the population characteristics, since for this thesis, is important to interview students who have been using reviews on the Internet for information search in regards to products they were interested in and people who own or owned a laptop computer. For this research the purposive sampling method was chosen. Purpose sampling is a nonprobability sampling form with the purpose to obtain a sample of people who meet

several predetermined criteria (Cozby & Bates, 2012). This sampling method helped the researchers to make sure to find participants that fit the criteria.

Participants:

- are students of the Jönköping International Business School;
- fit the age range (18-30);
- have used online reviews to gain information before purchase;
- do not have extremely good knowledge and/or experience in laptop computers;
- see laptop computers as an important purchase;
- are from different countries.

This sampling method was helpful since the target population is students with specific characteristics and the research is exploratory. The authors of this study are students themselves, therefore, it was easy to gather respondents with the needed characteristics for focus groups.

3.5. Data collection

For this study, primary data was collected, since it is an exploratory research and no other studies were found by the thesis authors, which had the purpose to identify and understand the relationship between anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM and attitudes towards products.

The first focus group was a pilot group, held in order to pretest a guidance sheet and see if any improvements were needed, if respondents understand the questions as well as if the researchers obtain the data they expect. The pilot focus group contained both, female and male students from the Jönköping University. After this first pilot focus group, improvements in the guidance sheet were made and the examples of the reviews were improved as well. According to Cozby and Bates (2012), it is preferable to conduct at least two or three discussion groups on a given topic to make sure, the information gathered is not unique to one group of people. In order to ensure this, two focus groups with women and two groups with men were conducted to collect the relevant data. The authors believed that two focus groups of each, female and male respondents, conducted were enough in order to gather the necessary data for the research. All research questions were answered during the focus groups and in comparison, the second focus groups of male and female participants, did not reveal significant different information.

Before inviting students to the focus groups, they were asked to evaluate (they had to choose one answer from: “no knowledge and experience”, “a little knowledge and experience”, “moderate knowledge and experience”, “a lot of knowledge and experience” to “expert” – students who answered to the last two options were not invited to the research) their knowledge and experience with laptop computers in order to avoid having people with very high knowledge and experience of the product (as it was mentioned before, consumer expertise influence their information processing routes to process persuasive information (Cheung, Xiao & Liu, 2012)). Furthermore, the authors of the research asked students if the laptop computer is seen as an important purchase and if they would spend some time to collect information about it before the purchase just to make sure that a laptop computer is high involvement product for all participants. In general 28 respondents were interviewed during the four focus groups (and 6 more during the pilot focus group). Each group had seven participants. Additionally, female and male respondents were grouped in separate groups. Therefore,

focus group 1 (FG1) and focus group 2 (FG2) had only male participants, whereas focus group 3 (FG3) and focus group 4 (FG4) consisted of female participants.

Table 3.1 demonstrates demographic information concerning the participants and the marking of focus groups that will be used in the data analysis part. All focus groups were recorded and lasted approximately 40 minutes each (excluding greetings and out of thesis topic conversations with participants after the recording was finished). All focus groups were held in the Jönköping University library in order to help the students feel comfortable as well as feel free in a familiar environment and could easily find the location. Coffee, tea and snacks were served to thank the participants for their time and to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

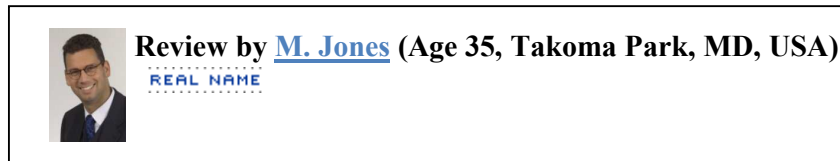
	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4
Gender	<i>Male</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Female</i>
Age range	19-27	19-27	22-28	19-25
Nationalities	Dutch Malagasy German Tajik Serbian Turkish French	Lithuanian Hong Konger Swedish (2) Polish German Hungarian	Romanian (2) Lithuanian (2) Bulgarian (2) German	Lithuanian Swedish Belgian German Polish Swiss Dutch

Table 3.1 Demographic information of participants.

In the beginning of the focus group meeting, the demographic information (age, nationality and name) was collected from the participants. For the issue development four different types of questions were used: introductory, transitional, key and probing questions (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Introductory questions were used in order to make participants feel comfortable, transition questions moves the discussion toward the key questions. Following this, the additional stimuli were given to the participants to encourage discussions (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). With the purpose of setting participants in a better discussion position and remind them of the possibilities of different reviews and its appearances, examples of reviews were handed out (Appendix 2).

Five identical positive opinions from five different reviewers with different personal attributes and five identical negative opinions from five different reviewers with different personal attributes were presented to the participants. Showing the negative and positive reviews reduces the impact of positivity/negativity factor towards the attitude. It was mention before, that negative eWOM can be more powerful in changing customers opinion (Park et al., 2007; Sen & Lerman, 2007), for this reason, the authors wanted the respondents to notice the possible differences. Furthermore, after conducting the pilot focus group, it was observed, that participants could appreciate one personal attribute when the review is negative and other attributes when the review is positive. The online reviews in the given examples were written by five different reviewers with a different amount of personal attributes (for the exact examples used in the focus groups, see appendix 2):

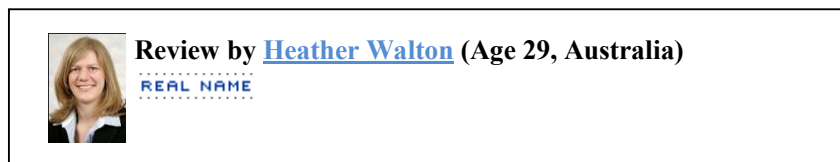
Example 1:



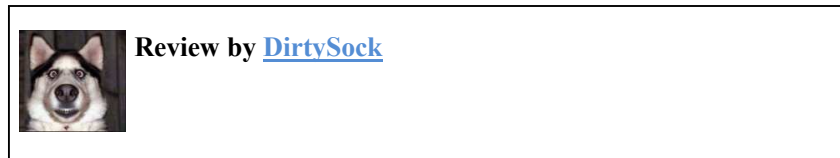
Example 2:



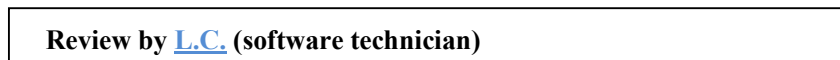
Example 3:



Example 4:



Example 5:



It was discussed earlier, that different sources such as web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, and boycott web sites influence the trust of messages, and the same message can be perceived differently according to the source (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Park et al., 2007). In order to decrease the impact of the review source the respondents have been told that all reviews were from the same source - the Amazon.com website. The respondents were encouraged to discuss which reviewer they might believe more, if any of the additional personal attributes change their attitudes towards the message and similar questions that helped to get the needed data for the research. Key questions were asked concerning the personal attributes, if they pay attention to the picture (“avatar”) or name, if they try to look for additional information such as how old the reviewer is, gender, nationality and similar questions. How do personal attributes change their trust of the review? These discussions and answers helped to understand how the personal attributes of reviewers influence attitudes of

consumers towards a laptop computer. Additionally, probing questions (e.g. “Tell me more about it.”, “What about the rest of you?” etc.) were used during the discussion in order to gather all the possible information as well as to encourage the whole group to talk. The guidance sheet can be seen in the appendix (Appendix 1) with the intention to help the readers of this thesis to understand the process of the focus groups.

3.6. Data analysis

According to Rabbie (2004) the process of qualitative analysis aims to give meaning to a situation rather than the search for truth, which is focused on in quantitative research. Additionally, Krueger and Casey (2000) believe that the purpose of the research should drive the analysis as well as that the analysis begins by going back to the intention of the study and accomplishments require a strong focus on the purpose of the study. Patton (2002) sees qualitative data analyses as a challenge, since there is no exact formula of how to transform data into findings. However, the author (Patton, 2002) agrees that guidance towards data analyses can be given. There are four main stages of qualitative data analysis: data assembly, data reduction, data display and data verification (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Saunders et al. (2009) believe qualitative data needs to be firstly comprehended, then related data drawn from different transcripts and notes need to be integrated, key themes or patterns for future exploration have to be identified, theories based on these apparent patterns or relationships need to be developed and/or tested and finally, conclusions can be drawn and verified. For this thesis, in order to analyze the qualitative data the guidance of Saunders et al. (2009) was chosen.

Firstly, in order to analyze the data, transcripts of the focus groups’ audiotape recordings were made (Appendix 3). The researchers had to understand and comprehend the data, therefore, multiple readings were necessary and notes as well as memos were created. The next step referred to combining coherent data from all four transcripts as well as notes written during the focus groups. When the general impression of the data was formed, researcher categorized it into seven *codes*, namely “buying process”, “attitude towards reviews”, “attributes of the review”, “reading process”, “influence of reviewer information”, “consumer expertise” and “source” (male and female focus groups were coded separately in order to better compare the data later). The data was used in combination of summarizing as well as categorizing the meanings of the participants. It is important to mention, that the data coding was conducted by both thesis authors separately and afterwards compared and differences discussed as well as adjusted. This increases the quality of the data analysis and reduces different data interpretation (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). Furthermore, with the intention to interpret and understand the relationship between consumers and semi-anonymous eWOM, the data of female and male focus groups were firstly coded separately into categories, which combines the ideas of how respondents react to different personal attributes of the reviewer as well as the different meanings the respondents detect. Following this, the data was further recoded with the intention of gathering similar ideas together, compare female and male respondents’ insights and see if the theories discussed in the beginning of the paper apply to these results. Quotations of the participants will be seen in the data analysis part in order to analyze the data, therefore, the participants were referred to as P with a corresponding

number (e.g. P2) and the focus group as FG, as well with a corresponding number (e.g. FG1).

According to Saunders et al. (2009), there are two different approaches to reasoning, the inductive approach as well as the deductive approach. Inductive reasoning concerns the generalization of specific occurrences or experiences in order to attempt to create or build a new theory. In deductive reasoning however, theory is already established and the researchers wish to apply this theory to the data they collected. Therefore, in this study, the deductive approach was used, thus, the attempt of linking the theories mentioned in the theoretical framework with the collected data from the focus group were discussed in upcoming chapter.

3.7. Reliability and Validity

“Without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility” (Morse et al., 2002, p.14). Demonstrating that qualitative data analysis is rigorous is especially important since there is a common criticism that qualitative results are sketchy. In this part of the thesis, the issues of reliability and validity in the context of qualitative data analysis will be discussed.

Lacey and Luff (2009) state, that in terms of assessing qualitative research, the focus is on the reliability of the methods employed. It is important to display to the reader that the methods used are reproducible and consistent. In demonstrating the reliability of the qualitative analysis, the authors carefully described the approach to the data analysis and the procedures used in the method chapter. Furthermore, explanations and arguments were given why focus groups are appropriate within this context of the study (see chapter 3.3.). In addition to this, referring to external evidence, previous qualitative and quantitative studies were included to test whether the conclusions from the analysis as appropriate.

In case of validity, Lacey and Luff (2009) believe that validity should be judged by the extent to which an account seems to fairly and accurately represent the data collected. In terms of presenting the analysis and increasing validity the authors of this research focused on several aspects. Firstly, coding of the data as well as the data analysis were undertaken by both of the authors separately in the beginning and later discussed and compared. This increases the consistency of the research findings (Lancey & Luff, 2009; Morse, et al., 2002). In addition to this, in order to demonstrate adequate and systematic use of the original data, quotations of the respondents were used in parts of the data analysis, the names of the codes as well as all transcripts were added to this thesis.

4 Data Analysis

This part of the study deals with the analysis of the beforehand collected data. All data, used in this analysis, was collected from the transcripts of the recordings of the corresponding focus groups and can be found in the appendix (Appendix 3). The key themes and patterns from the collected data will be identified here, as well as the theories described in the beginning of the thesis will be tested on these apparent patterns and relationships. In the end, conclusions will be drawn and verified. Furthermore, propositions for future research will be composed.

4.1. Buying process and activities done with laptop

The process of making the decision to buy a laptop is very significant for this study as it indicates how important the product for the student really is. The theoretical framework of this study alluded to the high involvement and the central route to persuasion, however, it was only assumed that a laptop belongs to this category in the minds of students. Involvement towards a product has an effect on the processing of information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Therefore, in order to demonstrate how the students are influenced by reviews and its corresponding attributes, it is necessary to prove that it is indeed a high involvement product. For this reason, the participants of the focus groups were asked about their buying process when purchasing their laptop, how important the laptop in general is for them, how and where they searched for information etc. The focus groups revealed important information and differences between male and female participants. Thus, the data will be discussed and compared between male and female.

Participants of all four focus groups mentioned that their laptops are very significant to them and their daily life activities, this can be demonstrated in quotes such as,

“...the computer is the thing that is most integrated in our daily lives..” (P5, FG2, 2012-04-16),

“...yeah, my (laptop) is always on. I use it for everything, I mean like basic stuff. If you put away the things we have to do for school, then it is music, broadcast, series, Skype, yeah actually it replaced probably the TV” (P7, FG1, 2012-04-16),

“I spend a lot of time with it, it is the first thing I take in the morning. I check all my mails and so on, and it’s the last thing that I put down before going to sleep.” (P1, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“I cannot live without my laptop, yeah, mostly I use it for school, but also for social media, things, like facebook and stuff, and my computer is on always.” (P1, FG4, 2012-04-17).

These are just a few of the examples, it can be said, that all participants agreed on the fact that their laptops are one of the most important objects in their daily life routine.

According to Zaichkowsky (1985), involvement refers to how relevant or important a product is for the consumer, based on needs, values and interests. Thus, consumers spending a high amount of time reading about, searching for as well as including family members or friends in their research, can be seen as highly involved with a specific

product. Participants were asked if they read online reviews before purchasing a laptop and what they include in this process. It became visible, that male participants are very eager to explore the products before making a decision, for example,

“[I read online reviews] especially for electronic products, basically everything technological” (P6, FG1, 2012-04-16),

“...especially when it comes to products which are very technological, then I feel for myself that I need to use the “expert” knowledge and read reviews. When it is just normal consumer stuff, like clothes, I don’t do that and I think it is not necessary then.” (P6, FG2, 2012-04-16).

The female participants however, went through a different process. Most of the women mentioned, that they talk to friends and family members first, in order to narrow down their choices, to which laptops fit to their needs etc. and only after this, these participants would go online and read reviews,

“For me... It’s actually, I always go to my brother and he gives me choices that I can look up then.” (P7, FG4, 2012-04-17),

“...it was suppose to be a gift from my dad. He works in IT services, people from his work told me not to look at this one but on this one and so on, this computer is more for people who work with Photoshop and stuff like this. After choosing a few brands, I went online to read some reviews and see some more pictures.” (P1, FG3, 2012-04-17).

It became visible, that female participants, in case of a laptop, rely on personal WOM first and after having only a small amount of products to choose from, they take online reviews into account. However, this might occur due to uncertainty of consumer expertise and might be completely different for other products. Participants mentioned, they would take a look at laptops in stores, try them out and only after this, would start to search for more information online,

“You go to the store you try it out, if it is possible, and then you go home again, and when you go home you start read the reviews. With reviews you start learning like how other people think about the product, do they like it or they have complains about it, is everything working properly, or there any mistakes” (P6, FG1, 2012-04-16).

This refers to the central route to persuasion as cognitive responses are made while trying out the product in the store. Following this, reviews are read and therefore, beliefs and attitude changes about the laptop might occur due to the new gained information. This could result into a behavior change in regards to the product as well as to other factors involved, such as the salesperson of the store or the review writer. However, female participants rely more on familiar people such as family and friends, therefore, the process of cognitive response, belief and attitude change and behavior change are interrelated with the thoughts of familiar people. The actual high involvement process only starts after the decision of potential laptops was made by relatives or peers,

“When I usually buy a laptop, I first ask some people who are good with computers to help me narrow down my choice. Then they tell me which brands

would fit what I want or what to choose from. Only after this, I just “googled” reviews online, what other people said about this laptop” (P4, FG3, 2012-04-17).

4.2. Attitude towards online reviews

The authors consider the general attitude of consumers towards online reviews to be very significant, as this indicates on how much they believe online reviews and thus, how involved they are with these messages. This study will present more detailed information of which factors influence the attitude of consumers as well as how they are influenced by these factors. However, first, the general attitude towards online reviews has to be explored. It was mentioned before, that the research done by Awad and Ragowasky (2008), signify a stronger effect of eWOM towards women than towards men as well as that women and men value different factors of eWOM. The effect of eWOM between men and women has not been measured here, however, differences in attitude towards online reviews between female and male participants were observed.

Men expressed more critical views and opinions towards online reviews, they seem more doubtful and uncertain about information that reviewers publish. It became visible, that the male participants show more resentment towards the reviews as they are unsure whether it really was written by a real person or if it was written by company employees,

“I’m afraid that people online are also just trying to pull the product, like mentioned before. Or some agencies making up people and pay them to create positive reviews. The same might be happening with negative reviews in regards to their competitors” (P3, FG2, 2012-04-16).

A further example of this can be seen here:

“This person shows it is a man, and it could be an automated system that writes these types of things, or just... It can look like a man but can be a lady writing this for company, that represents the company, could be used to influence the customers” (P2, FG1, 2012-04-16).

In comparison to men, women seem to have a more trustful way of thinking, whether it regards company websites or online reviews. The female participants revealed, that most of them visit company websites first, in order to get a first glimpse of the product and only after this, they consider the reviews written by other consumers. One example for this can be seen here:

“Well, I check the website of the products first, to see how it looks and after that I read reviews of other customers. I just want to make my own picture first and build my own opinion of the product and then see what negative aspects other people found” (P6, FG3, 2012-04-17).

Furthermore, it was noticeable, that women appear to be more interested in *opinions* of other people than the specific technical details of a product for example,

“I wouldn’t look too much at the hardware specifications and the technological things. More the design and how heavy it is and stuff like this.” (P3, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“It is interesting to hear different opinions from different people, different countries, how they react” (P6, FG4, 2020-04-17),

as well as,

“I mean, companies of course only say good things, but people give their honest opinion in these reviews.” (P1, FG3, 2012-04-17).

The theoretical framework revealed that gender can influence the perception or trust of eWOM (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008), this can be agreed upon in this situation in regards to online reviews. Men seemed to be much more critical concerning reviews as they are disturbed by companies attempting to *pull* their product by paying people to write positive reviews whereas women appeared to believe that the reviewers are writing their own personal opinion and therefore appreciate them.

A further very interesting factor, which had not been considered significant before the focus groups were held, regards video reviews. The majority of the participants were familiar with video reviews of products, for example on the website YouTube.com. All male participants had very favorable attitudes towards these video reviews,

“It’s good. I bought a new cell-phone not too long ago. I went to YouTube and watched videos where people compared it to other phones, for example iPhones and so on. By normal people but also by experts. You get to see the product in action.” (P5, FG2, 2012-04-16),

“For me these video reviews are also more convenient. You can lay back and just watch what others are doing” (P5, FG3, 2012-04-17).

It was observed, that video reviews are perceived as more honest in comparison to written online reviews. The reason for this might be found in the trustworthiness of the source, which refers to the degree to which the readers experience the message as valid (Hovland et al., 1953). The source credibility model of Ohanian (1990) (explained in the theoretical framework), linked variables such as reliability, honesty and sincerity to the trustworthiness of a source. When asked (the male participants) if they believe what has been said in video reviews more than what has been written in online reviews, all participants answered with “yes, for sure”. Male participants accept and consider more what has been said in video reviews,

“I saw it on YouTube, the video review, because the person can’t lie, it is based on visuals, so they really went through and showed you. The camera was there and they showed you how they did it “(P2, FG1, 2012-04-16),

“I mean, you still don’t know the person, but it takes more time to shoot a video you know?” (P2, FG2, 2012-04-16).

Furthermore, it seems significant to men, that they can relate to the people who shoot these videos,

“I only watch the videos where I think it’s a random guy, like me. Like where they say ‘okay, I’m unboxing it now, now I put the battery in’ and things like that. I feel like this is real.” (P1, FG2, 2012-04-16).

In comparison, although interest in video reviews was visible, women did not seem to be as enthusiastic about video reviews as men,

“But I also think you must have an interest in a specific product already. The video reviews for me are more to confirm the opinion I made through the written reviews.” (P1, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“I watched something, a video how to use camera, and then they showed the price and it was actually nice.” (P7, FG4, 2012-04-17).

This however, could refer to the consumer expertise again, since, as mentioned before, women seemed to be not that much interested in the technical specifications of products. Video reviews provide a high amount of information as well as comparisons between products,

“You can usually get more info, not just negative things or positive, it’s more a comparison but you actually see the results.” (P4, FG2, 2012-04-16).

4.3. Characteristics of online reviews

Characteristics of online reviews refer to the personal information of the review writer as well as to the characteristics of the review itself. This part of the study will deal with which characteristics of the reviewer and the review appear to be significant to the research participants. These characteristics relate to the grading, the content or the length of a review, as well as personal attributes of the reviewer. It has been explained before, that eWOM will be divided into anonymous and semi-anonymous. This means, if no information about the personal attributes of the reviewer is available, it refers to anonymous eWOM, if at least one attribute is available, it refers to semi-anonymous eWOM. Therefore, if a reviewer gives information about himself or herself by showing age, gender, a photograph or a screen name, it is considered as a semi-anonymous review. Therefore, the following paragraphs will give a more detailed view into the participant’s opinion about anonymous as well as semi-anonymous attributes.

The participants of the focus groups mentioned and discussed many characteristics and personal attributes, hence, the outcomes will be subdivided into separate paragraphs in order to create a clear overview of the outcomes. It is important to mention, that the influence of these personal attributes towards a reviewer will be discussed in a later paragraph. Thus, indications might be given here but may or may not be significant in regards to how the reviewer’s information influences consumers.

Photograph

The majority of female participants mentioned the photograph of the reviewer as a helpful characteristic of a review, for example,

“I would trust the people with pictures the most.” (P3, FG3, 2012-04-17).

However, it is important to mention, that this refers to real photographs of people and not photographs of animals, avatars (further explained below) or nature,

“I would really focus on reviews with a real picture of a person.” (P5, FG3, 2012-04-17).

Male participants talked about a photograph only in combination with other attributes for instance, in combination with the profession,

“I probably trust a guy more in regards to technological things, with a picture or so...” (P3, FG2, 2012-04-16).

Age

The personal attribute “age” is one of the attributes which has been mentioned by many participants, however, primarily from female participants. Women alluded that they could relate better to a person from whom they know the age, thus, if they are the same age as the participant herself, for example,

“If someone writes a comment and it says that he/she is 20 years old, same as me, and he/she had problems with the product, than I would feel like, oh maybe then I’m going to have it too.” (P3, FG4, 2012-04-17).

Men however, mentioned the same aspect of relating to someone through age (when it concerns a laptop),

“For a computer for example, I would like the person to be between 20 and 40, so that I can relate to the problems they might have. Instead of being 65 or something.” (P6, FG2, 2012-04-16).

Gender

It was mentioned by several participants that they would focus on the gender, however, usually in combination with age. One male participant however said “I make sure it is a man who wrote it” (P5, FG1, 2012-04-16). In addition to this, it became visible that the majority of the participants used the personal pronoun “he” as well as the possessive pronoun “his”, when referring to review writers, for instance,

“Maybe I can even look him up, on Facebook or something like that. If I know his name, I could search for him on Facebook and see if he really exists or not.” (P3, FG2, 2012-04-16) or,

“It is written the software technician so yeah, if it is about the computer, probably you gonna go for that one because you think he knows more, than just someone without the picture or just this girl.” (P1, FG4, 2012-04-17).

However, it was not explored in this context, if writing of reviews is associated with activities concerning men only or male behavior in general.

Country

The country of review writers was identified as a further significant personal attribute. Primarily female participants talked about how the country of the reviewer is relevant to their perception of the review, for instance,

“I think I would first take the country of the reviewer into consideration. It doesn’t help me when they have problems in America or Australia with this product, they might have different characteristics or something like that. For me it is important that the reviewer is close to where I live.” (P4, FG3, 2012-04-17).

A further example of this can be seen in this statement,

“For me it is the country (which is important), I don’t know why, I don’t have attitudes or stereotypes, but it shows maybe in which countries this product was used, and it is important.” (P5, FG4, 2012-04-17).

Profession

One of the reviews presented to the participants included the profession of the reviewer, the example profession was a software technician. Several participants, male as well as female, mentioned the profession of the reviewer as relevant,

“Especially like profession, for instance, like software technician I would think like, oh, this guy knows probably more than I do.” (P5, FG1, 2012-04-16),

“I would trust the software technician more than any other. Just because he would know what he is talking about.” (P2, FG3, 2012-04-17).

However, it was not taken into consideration if this applies only to matching interest of product and profession, for example in this context, the product is a laptop and the profession mentioned a software technician. It is likely of different relevance if the profession and product do not match in terms of interest.

Avatar/ Pseudonym

An avatar refers to an icon or pictures often used for internet profiles or forums, it can be a cartoon image, nature or animals pictures (Gunkel, 2010). Pseudonyms refer to false names, which are used instead of own, real names (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English). These pseudonyms can be created by users themselves and can be made up of initials (e.g. L.C.) as well as fantasy or funny names (e.g. Pantera or DirtySock). As some people do not want to reveal personal information on the internet, a review with an avatar as well as a screen name was created. Different views from participants became visible. A number of participants perceived it as funny and not sincere, for instance,

“It’s a funny name, it doesn’t sound very serious and the picture well, it’s a picture of a dog. I just wouldn’t take this person seriously.” (P5, FG3, 2012-04-17) or,

“Pictures make it more appealing, however a real photo, not of a dog or something. That’s just silly.” (P1, FG2, 2012-04-16).

In comparison, other participants mentioned that pseudonyms and avatars could refer to people who are very familiar with computers and have experience in handling these. A few examples can be seen here,

“I would think DirtySock is kind of a geek and therefore might know a lot about computers. Maybe a game player or hacker or some person like that. I would think this is a person who understands a lot about computers and their characteristics.” (P6, FG3, 2012-04-17) as well as,

“Yeah, I think the DirtySock too. Because normal people, don’t spend so much time writing like or uploading proper pictures and stuff like that. This one seems

more realistic, that here he chooses just a dog. Or just a random name, just to get his opinion out.” (P3, FG4, 2012-04-17).

Name/ “Real Name”

There are very different views concerning the name attribute in regards to online reviewers. The “real name” attribute is an example from Amazon, where reviewers have the option to display their name with a “real name” tag (an example can be seen in the reviews in Appendix 2). Participants showed positive reaction to names, for instance,

“If I know his name, I could search for him on facebook and see if he really exists or not. So, if that person would write he is satisfied, I would believe it the same way as when he would say its total bullshit. I kind of trust more people that I think really exists than the DirtySock guy.” (P3, FG2, 2012-04-16).

In comparison to this, it was also mentioned that it might be too much effort put in, for example,

“I also think it is kind of obvious, so, this ‘real name’ thing is from Amazon, but for me it looks a bit suspicious. “ (P7, FG4, 2012-04-17) as well as “It looks just too perfect...” (P2, FG4, 2012-04-17).

Anonymous

As mentioned before, anonymous refers to no given information of the review writer and can often be seen as “written by *Anonymous*”. The participants of this research had a more negative view towards the presented anonymous review (see appendix 2),

“I wouldn’t even once look at the anonymous reviewer. It’s just, well, boring and not informative when you see the other reviewers here.” (P7, FG3, 2012-04-17).

It was mentioned that if information is available, the participants would prefer this information to the anonymous reviewer,

“I think that if I can find the information of real persons instead of anonymous that would be my preference.” (P5, FG1, 2012-04-16),

“After reading the content, you probably would make a choice that the reviewer with a photo and age is more reliable than the review of anonymous.” (P2, FG1, 2012-04-16).

Rating

Rating of the reviewer was mentioned by several participants, mostly male participants however. Consumer can rate a review writer based on how helpful that specific review was. It seems as this is a significant attribute for a credible review, for example,

“Well, on some websites they have like grading or whatever it’s called, on people who review stuff, and if the person has a five stars or four stars, than you think alright, I mean at least I trust them.” (P5, FG1, 2012-04-16).

Additionally, information on how many reviews a reviewer has written as well as other statistical information referring to the review, was mentioned as a positive attribute by several participants,

“And maybe you can also have statistics of the person, like how many reviews this person has done and how long the person has been on Amazon or a different forum.” (P1, FG2, 2012-04-16) as well as,

“If you go to Amazon, you can choose, I think they have two options, one is the most read one (review) and the other the most critical one [review].“ (P2, FG1, 2012-04-16).

Content

One of the main characteristics of reviews, mentioned by most of the participants, was the content of the review itself. Participants explained, that how a review written is very significant, the structure was mentioned as very important, however, reviews written in colloquial language is not perceived as convincing,

“The way they write, the structure, you see how many paragraphs, the person uses ‘u’ or ‘damn’ or stuff like that, I don’t read it, it’s worthless. If the guy is not capable expressing something correctly, I mean, it is up to the product but usually if you have a certain structure I think is more pleasant to read.” (P6, FG1, 2012-04-16), or,

“I don’t care about what information I can see. It’s about how professional the review is written.” (P7, FG2, 2012-04-16).

Additionally, participants explained, that spelling mistakes could be a reason for not taking a review seriously,

“...this is more about the content again, but if I see typing or spelling mistakes, I also don’t take the review too serious. I just think the person didn’t put any effort in writing this review so it couldn’t be too important for him.” (P6, FG3, 2012-04-17).

Primarily male participants want more information than just if people are satisfied with the product or not, they wish to receive specific information,

“No, I think for me, it varies, from review to review. It depends what they wrote, if they go into details, not just, if it’s good or of it is bad, they give like reasoning, like that. Sometimes I don’t really care that much about the other information.” (P1, FG1, 2012-04-16).

Length

An additional characteristic of a review is the length of it. Participants brought up this characteristic and referred to it as one significant aspect *before* starting to read a review. A longer post seemed to be considered more positive than a shorter one. One example for this can be seen here:

“...the content (is important), or let’s say HOW it is written. I like to read about real problems and for that they use this laptop. Furthermore a longer post is more reliable in my opinion.” (P3, FG2, 2012-04-16) or,

“...if they go into details, not just, if it’s good or if it is bad, they give like reasoning, like that. I don’t really read short reviews because I think the reasoning must be missing.” (P1, FG1, 2012-04-16).

4.4. Consumer expertise

As it was discussed before, consumer expertise could influence the way of how respondents look for, read, evaluate and understand the information, since they use different information processing routes to process persuasive information (Cheung, Xiao & Liu, 2012). Hence, this research tried to reduce the influence by consumer expertise and choose respondents with as much as possible similar knowledge and experience of laptop computers. In order to do so, respondents had to evaluate themselves and answer how much they believe they are acquainted with computers. Participants were then chosen from the “lower than excellent” knowledge and experience level.

Additionally, it was mentioned, that the personal knowledge of a product could influence the attitude towards a message. If the knowledge is low, or non existing (in the eye of the consumer), the person believe more in reviews as there is no possibility to label statements as right or wrong.

“If you don’t know anything, you don’t know right from wrong. You are more dependent on what the reviewers say. If you have a broad idea of computers, it is easier for you to decide what is reliable and what you cannot trust.” (P7, FG2, 2012-04-16)

4.5. Review choosing process

In order to understand if there is a relationship between personal attributes of reviewers and the influence in attitudes towards laptop computers, it is important to know how consumers are searching for reviews as well as which reading processes are conducted. It can be argued that different methods (such as experiments) could be used to analyze this aspect, however, valuable information was discovered during the focus groups. Additionally, it will also help researchers to understand better the habits of the respondents.

Female focus groups mentioned, when having the need for reviews about a certain item, they just use a web search engine, for instance, Google Search, with the purpose of finding forums, discussions as well as reviews. A very important fact stated by female respondents is, that they are more likely to read the reviews with photos than reviews without photos:

“When you first see the page you follow those comments that have photos or something.” (P5, FG4, 2012-04-17),

“With any doubt I would first read the ones with the pictures.” (P5, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“...there are things that just pop up in your eyes first, so for me pictures are important...” (P1, FG3, 2012-04-17).

Furthermore, if the picture seems to be of a real person, there is the possibility that consumers will focus on these reviews more than on others. On the other hand, it was observed, that if respondents have more time at hand, it is likely that they read reviews without any personal information. However, names or pseudonyms are also indicators for how reviews are chosen to read. Respondents stated that they have certain opinions and experiences about real names and pseudonyms of reviewers and it even influences their choice to read or not to read the review,

“...if you want to have the reliable information you search... if it’s Barbara or just DirtySock. Of course, Barbara and Mr. Jones for me is more reliable.” (P5, FG4, 2012-04-17), while:

“I would not even take a glance at the anonymous review...” (P3, FG3, 2012-04-17).

The age of reviewers was mentioned as an additional factor that could determine if a review is worth reading. Some women agreed that for them the content is more important and they look through reviews searching for information about negative aspects of the product or how reviewers were using it.

The data collected during the focus groups with male respondents showed that men could have a different process of looking for and reading reviews than women. Male respondents mentioned quite a few ways on how they choose to read reviews. Several participants read the reviews which are written last, furthermore, they use review rating systems if the website offers this. For instance, reviews which have been rated as the most read, the most critical, or reviews with stars which are given by the readers to evaluate the usefulness of the reviews. However, the majority of the respondents agreed that the content is the most important factor they pay attention to. They believe, long as well as nicely structured reviews are worth reading. In addition to this, the focus is on finding reviews with negative aspects of the product they are interested in:

“...you know, the product is good, but you want to know the drawbacks.” (P4, FG1, 2012-04-16).

A further aspect of choice, mentioned by men, was the source of reviews, thus, men concentrate on finding a trustful website firstly and only then read reviews:

“...it is trustworthy website, then I don’t really specifically go to search for authors.” (P6, FG1, 2012-04-16).

As it can be seen from the data of the focus groups, the main difference between the process of how female and male consumers are choosing to read reviews as well as which reviews women choose, can be affected by some personal attributes of reviewers such as picture, name or pseudonym or age. Meanwhile, men did not mention personal attributes as a factor of choosing reviews.

4.6. Relationship between consumers and semi-anonymous eWOM

Source attractiveness

As it was discussed before, female respondents of this research mentioned that they are paying attention towards personal attributes while making the decision of which reviews to read. There are several reasons why female consumers pay attention to personal attributes, which influence their attitude and credibility towards eWOM. Women said,

in the case of choosing a laptop, it is important to know the gender and age of the review writer, as they want to relate to the reviewer and their lifestyle,

“The woman in these reviews is 29, so I can relate to her more than to the man who is 34. I believe that she would have the same problems... I’m more interested in people around my age.” (P5, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“...she is almost my age, so I could relate to her. ...the 34 year old man, he might not be up to date, he might have other problems.” (P2, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“If someone writes a comment and it says that he is 20 years old, same as me, and he had problems with the product, than I would feel like, oh maybe then I’m going to have it too.” (P3, FG4, 2012-04-17).

Moreover, if a reviewer is much younger or older than the consumer, respondents believed that he or she would have a different background, experience or knowledge, and could even have different problems with the same product. According to the research participants, it is harder to relate to a person, when the age difference is high and thus, those reviews can be not useful for them.

A further personal attribute of reviewers, which was mentioned as an important and helpful aspect for the respondents, was the country where the reviewer lives. Some of the female respondents believe that cultural differences can influence the perception of product and problems,

“...if you read the comment from China, so maybe you are not interested, and you do not want to have the same attitude...” (P5, FG4, 2012-04-17).

In addition to this, the opinion was expressed that products can differ on different continents, therefore, the country where the review was written needs to be taken in consideration,

“I would first take the country of the reviewer into consideration. It doesn’t help me when they have problems in America or Australia, they might have different characteristics... For me it is important that the reviewer is close to where I live.” (P4, FG3, 2012-04-17).

Pictures or real names, as personal attributes, were mentioned as factors that can influence the attractiveness of a source and can help to form the opinion about a reviewer. Respondents mentioned several times that if the reviewer uses a photo which is very serious and professional looking or/and uses the real name, it can influence the credibility of the review itself and attract the consumer more. For example, the participant (P1, FC4, 2012-04-17) stated that “This guy wearing a suit seems more reliable”.

Female respondents seem to have a need to relate to reviewers and use the additional information of the reviewer as a way to do so. Gender, age, as well as the country of a reviewer can help consumers to find out if the source, and its receiver have similarities between each other. In addition to this, a serious professional looking picture seemed to make the source of message more reliable for female participants in this research. According to the source attractiveness theory (Erdogon, 1999), characteristics of a source, such as likeability, similarity between a source and its receiver and familiarity in

regards to knowledge, belong to source attractiveness and can induce consumers' attitude changes.

Among male respondents, the attitudes toward personal attributes were less positive in comparison to female respondents. The majority of the participants described the content as being the most important factor for trusting the reviewer. However, several men mentioned, that personal information about reviewers could help them to create a better image of the person who writes the review,

“...the more info the better. If you have a picture, name, occupation etc., you can create a better image of the reviewer” (P6, FG2, 2012-04-16).

Personal information could also help them to better relate to a person,

“For a computer for example, I would like the person to be between 20 and 40, so that I can relate to the problems they might have” (P6, FG2, 2012-04-16),

and, in overall, personal attributes could make the review more attractive,

“After reading the content, you probably would make a choice that the reviewer with a photo and age is more reliable than the review of anonymous. However, for me, I could only say that after reading the review. A Picture makes it more appealing, however a real photo, not of a dog or something.” (P1, FG2, 2012-04-16).

Male respondents stated that in order to make a source more attractive, the person who writes this review should be known at least on the Internet, for example,

“...to be credible the guy must be known, like, he has a blog or something.” (P5, FG1, 2012-04-16).

The theory of source attractiveness could be applied here as well, as a number of male respondents see personal attributes as information which could lead them to relate to the review writer (e.g. age). In comparison to this, the reviewer can be seen as a more attractive source, if the person is known on the Internet and is writing reviews.

Expertise

The profession or pseudonym (which can be associated with the person whose lifestyle is believed to associate him or her with more knowledge or experience about a product) on the reviewer's profile, can influence the credibility of the source, according to female respondents. Such a source has the possibility to be perceived as experienced, qualified and professional. Several female respondents stated, seeing the profession of the reviewer near the review, would make them trust the message more while choosing a laptop. Women assumed that software technicians would know more about laptops and, like it was mentioned before, this personal attribute could influence the women's choice of which reviews to read first. Participants of the focus groups said:

“I would trust the software technician more than any other, just because he would know what he is talking about.”(P2, FG3, 2012-04-17),

“...because you think he knows more than just someone without the picture or just this girl” (P1, FG4, 2012-04-17) or,

“...I would first look at the software technician just because I think he has to know what he is doing...”(P4, FG3, 2012-04-17).

In addition to this, the pseudonym DirtySock, which was used as a review example, was evaluated positively by women as they associated it with a ‘nerdy’ teenager or person who uses computers extensively, and hence, could have a deeper understanding about laptops,

“...DirtySock makes me feel like this could be a teenager who spends a lot of time in front of the computer and knows a lot.” (P3, FG3, 2012-04-17) or,

“I would think DirtySock is kind of a geek and therefore might know a lot about computers. Maybe a game player or hacker or some person like that. I would think this is a person who understands a lot about computers and their characteristics. I would trust his opinion more than the opinions of the others.” (P6, FG3, 2012-04-17).

After analyzing the data collected during the male focus groups it became visible, that no one mentioned or agreed upon that personal attributes such as profession or pseudonym could influence the credibility of the review. Thus, it can be assumed that female respondents see reviews with personal attributes such as “software technician” or pseudonyms for example, “DirtySock” as more experienced, qualified or professional and that characterizes the source as an expertise factor which explains the source credibility in this situation (Ohanian, 1990).

Trustworthiness

Consumers writing reviews and are willing to share personal information (e.g. picture, real name, age) could be perceived as more trustworthy by respondents, however, if the information is too precise, it seems to the participants, that the reviewers put extra effort into creating his or her profile and thus look more attractive. This seems as if it could decrease the credibility of reviews. Participants of the research argued that,

“...of course, Barbara and Mr. Jones for me is more reliable.” (P5, FG4, 2012-04-17) or,

“A Facebook link would help me, I think. Where I could click on and just to see their Facebook profile. Just to see for sure that this is a real person.” (P6, FG2, 2012-04-16) as well as,

“...you have picture, name, surname, country and age, then for me it works better, because you can go to a forum and just claim and say something bad about the product... Of course, it can be fake information, but still.” (P6, FG4, 2012-04-17).

On the other hand, male and female respondents stated,

“People who are coming on blogs to express their opinion, they do not want to be recognized.” (P6, FG4, 2012-04-17),

“Usually these people I know, they use real names as a pseudonym, like Barbara or Mandy, and these are not the real. Because usually real is ‘basketball0073’ and so on. So I trust more these.” (P2, FG4, 2012-04-17), and,

“...it can look like a man but can be a lady writing this for a company... to influence the customers.” (P2, FG1, 2012-04-16).

Nevertheless, when respondents were asked if additional information of the person writing the review can change the credibility of the review, the majority agreed that this could happen. To be more explicit, personal attributes could significantly increase but also decrease the consumers’ perception of the trustworthiness of the source. Personal attributes can work on respondents as factors which increase the reliability, honesty or sincerity of the reviewer and influence the source trustworthiness that according to Hovland et al. (1953) refers to the degree to which readers experience the message as valid.

Emotional Involvement was mentioned as a further factor of the source credibility model of Ohanian, adapted by Hunter (2009). This refers to an endorser (in this case, a review writer), being excited as well as show a thrill or dedication towards a product, to possibly influence consumers’ attitudes to this product. However, with the intention to discover if this applies to online reviews, a more detailed analysis of the content of the review towards the consumers has to be carried out. This study though, focuses on the personal attributes of the review writer and not on the content. During this research, no indications were observed that emotional involvement of the review writer towards his or her product, can be identified through personal attributes, therefore the authors did not feel content to include this part of the theory in the analysis. Further research however, could focus on the emotional involvement between a review writer and a review reader and thus might discover a relationship.

4.7. Disregard of personal attributes

Opinions were expressed in regards to the possibility that personal attributes do not matter and respondents do not pay attention to them. The assumption can be made that there are two main reasons why the possibility exists, that respondents will not take personal details of reviewers into consideration. The first reason expressed by men and women, refers to the fact, that it is hard to control what is real and what is fake on the internet. Furthermore, companies could misuse reviews as advertising for their products or as a tool to strive against competitors. According to the participants of this research, companies can use fake personal attributes as a tool to reinforce the source of reviews, for this reason, several participants believe, that it is more efficient to pay attention directly to the content and ignore personal attributes,

“I don’t care about what information I can see. It’s about how professional the review is written.” (P7, FG2, 2012-04-16) or,

“...technician, I would be like, I can write it too, but we can’t check it.” (P2, FG4, 2012-04-17).

The second reason, which was expressed only by male respondents is that paying attention to personal attributes influences their main motive of reading reviews and disturbs their focus from the content of the review,

“For me it is irrelevant, I don’t care. If it’s anonymous, so what? I just read the text.” (P2, FG1, 2012-04-16).

To sum up this information, it can be said that personal attributes could also have no influence towards the review credibility as consumers intentionally might ignore these attributes, due the lack of trust, time or meaning.

4.8. Discussion

The data analysis displayed a high amount of information relevant for this study. However, in order to specifically answer the before mentioned research questions, a closer look into explicit data is helpful.

Participants of this study read online reviews in order to gain more knowledge regarding laptop computers. These reviews offer information and opinions of other people about product specifications, its performance as well as the design of the laptop. A high number of participants mentioned this during the focus groups, a few examples can be seen here,

“With reviews you start learning like how other people think about the product, do they like it or do they have complains about it, is everything working properly, or are there any mistakes.” (P6, FG1, 2012-04-16),

“...you compare prices of laptops on the internet. There you compare the prices, the qualifications, the specifications (specs), the certain specs of the laptops.” (P6, FG2, 2012-04-16),

“I chose a few brands and actually didn’t look too close to the hardware specifications, I just said, this looks nice, this is too heavy and things like these.” (P1, FG3, 2012-04-17).

Therefore, by reading online reviews and thus, observing the opinion of other people as well as using comparisons of different laptops, participants seem to form an attitude towards one or more specific laptops. The new formed attitudes could be positive or negative, depending on the content of the message itself. If the message is positive or satisfying in the eyes of the reader, it is likely that a positive attitude is formed. If the message is negative or unsatisfying, a negative attitude is expected. However, the review reader has to believe the message content in order for this to happen.

“I just bought it spontaneously after reading what the other people wrote about this laptop.” (P4, FG3, 2012-04-17)

“After you know that, like, after I am satisfied with the reviews that I read, and I have a feeling that I’m doing a good investment, I go for that laptop.” (P6, FG1, 2012-04-16).

It was mentioned before, that personal attributes of a reviewer can increase the perception of reliability, honesty and sincerity of the reviewer. During the process of the focus groups, a number of different personal attributes were mentioned. According to female participants, photos, names, country, gender and the age of reviewers can increase the credibility of the message. Additionally, women seem to be influenced by the profession of the reviewer as well as by a pseudonym. It can be assumed, that reviewers with information about their profession as well as reviewers using pseudonyms are perceived as more experienced, qualified or professional and therefore characterizes the source with expertise which explains the source credibility in this situation (Ohanian, 1990).

In comparison, male participants mainly mentioned the content as the most significant source of credibility. Photos and age of the reviewer were discussed as personal attributes increasing the credibility, however, not as extensively as during the female focus groups. Therefore, it can be said, that male consumers could be affected by semi-anonymous eWOM although they concentrate more on the review's content than on personal attributes. It is important to emphasize, that all above mentioned personal attributes seem to influence the credibility of a review; however, it became visible that some personal attributes or the combination of personal attributes can increase but also decrease the credibility of a review.

As a conclusion it can be said, that personal attributes of a review writer can influence the attitude of these participants in regards to a laptop computer in many ways. Personal attributes such as photo, age, gender and profession can change the credibility of a review, and therefore, the attitude towards this message and product can be changed. Participants, however, mentioned that the content of the message is the most significant characteristic of a review. It was observed that the credibility of the message could still be influenced after reading the content, as the attributes are then considered as additional positive (or negative) factors with which the consumers interpret the message and form their own attitudes toward it.

In regards to the research question concerning the relationship between the gender of consumers and the perception towards personal attributes, a high amount of information was noticeable. It can be said that there is a difference between women and men in regards to the perception of personal attributes and the importance of these towards the credibility of a message. Women seem to be very focused on photos of reviewers as well as the age, as they can relate better to a reviewer if similarities become visible. Additionally, the pseudonym was mentioned as a significant attribute, women appear to trust reviewers with pseudonyms more as it is perceived as a characteristic of a person who uses a laptop intensively. However, this could be completely different in regards to other products as the pseudonym might not be perceived as a characteristic of an "expert" in different situations. A similar situation appears with the personal attribute "profession", which has been said to be important by female participants in regards to a laptop. The profession chosen in the example reviews during the focus groups, was however a software technician and therefore could easily be related to a laptop. It is not clear how the display of professions could influence the attitude towards different products.

Men appear to be more focused on the content in order to decide whether a message is credible or not. Several male respondents mentioned that they do not look at the additional information a review offers. However, it became visible, that ratings of reviews and reviewers are considered to influence the credibility of a review. Thus, men seem to trust the people who write a high amount of reviews and are influenced by their opinion. On the other hand, several men mentioned, that personal information about reviewers could help them to create a better image of the person who writes the review, make it more attractive and help to relate to the reviewer. Thus, it can be said, that there is a possibility for men to be additionally influenced by personal attributes, after familiarizing with a review.

Hence, it became visible, that male attitudes seem to be more influenced by the characteristics of a review, whereas the personal attributes of a review seem to have a deeper impact on the influence of female attitudes towards laptop computers.

In regards to the before mentioned assumptions and conclusions, several propositions can be suggested for future research in order to obtain a deeper insight of the relationship between semi-anonymous eWOM and consumer attitudes towards different products.

- Proposition 1: Semi-anonymous eWOM increases the sources attractiveness for women more than for men.
- Proposition 2: A high amount of personal attributes can decrease the trustworthiness of a review source (reviewer).
- Proposition 3: The display of profession or the use of a pseudonym can increase the credibility of a message for female consumers.
- Proposition 4: The display of personal attributes of a review writer can increase the willingness for women to read online reviews.
- Proposition 5: The display of age, picture, pseudonym, country and profession as personal attributes can influence the trustworthiness of a review source in a positive way.

5 Limitations

This chapter gives a more detailed view of the limitations of this study, further focus groups, as well as cultural aspects are part of these limitations. Additionally, language is an issue discussed here, since it is not the first language of authors and participants.

Although this research was carefully prepared, the authors are still aware of its limitations and shortcomings. According to Cozby and Bates (2012), it is preferable to conduct at least two or three discussion groups on a given topic in order to ensure the information gathered is not unique to one group of people. However, Malhotra and Birks (2007) argue that focus groups should be continued until the last group reveals no new information than the focus groups before. In this thesis two focus groups were held, each with different types of participants (female and male). Both latter focus groups brought in new information which has not been observed in the focus groups conducted before; however, the data was more supplementing what was heard previously and did not seem controversial. Assuming this, and the time as well as resources of the research, it was agreed that the data gathered during these four (two female and two male) focus groups are fairly enough to answer the research questions. Nevertheless, this is a limitation of this research and in order to improve it, more focus groups could be arranged.

Further limitations can be seen in the sample of the research itself. Firstly, as it was mentioned before, this thesis tried to select participants with different nationalities with the intention to have a possibility to gather a high number of different attitudes. However, this could influence the communication during the focus groups, as focus groups are supposed to be as homogenous as possible (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, the researchers could also misunderstand the answers and, thus, influence the data analysis. The exact problems in regards to cultural influences were not discussed nor indicated, however, the possibility of occurring is present. Secondly, even though the factor of consumer expertise was tried to be illuminated by the authors, the diversity in respondents' knowledge and experience could still differ significantly. Respondents were asked how they evaluate their own expertise towards laptop computers and participants, who considered themselves to have a high amount of knowledge, were not invited to the research. Nevertheless, this measuring method was not precise and the authors trusted the opinions of the participants. This again, could influence the homogeneity of the group as well as influence the answers of the participants (Darlington & Scott, 2002).

Additionally, there is the possibility of respondents not revealing all information they had due to selective memory (memory or no memory of some experiences in the past), telescoping (recall of events that occurred at one time, however happened another time), attribution (attributing positive events to themselves and negative to external forces) and exaggeration (representing outcomes as more significant than they actually are) (Solomon et. al., 2010). The fluency in a language can be seen as an additional limitation. For both authors, the English language is only the second language, as it is for all participants of the research as well. This could influence the collection of data, since respondents could misunderstand some parts of the questions or could have difficulties expressing themselves exactly how they think or feel.

6 Conclusion

The conclusion chapter presents significant findings of the research as well as further information about the meaning of this research. Additionally, implications in regards to the managerial field as well as implications intended for consumers are discussed here.

This study focused on the relationship between anonymous and semi-anonymous eWOM and its corresponding characteristics towards consumer attitudes in regards to a laptop computer. The research aimed to identify as well as understand the influence of characteristics and personal attributes of online review writers. Additionally, gender specific differences concerning the perception of personal attributes were part of the analysis of this research. These factors were analyzed through a qualitative research method, conducted through four focus groups with overall 14 male participants as well as 14 female participants. Gender divided focus groups were held, in order to ensure specific information about each gender separately, and therefore be able to provide accurate and useful data.

In the opinions of the authors, the research was successful as it led to identify a relationship between the personal attributes of a reviewer and the consumer attitudes towards a laptop. By reading online reviews and thus, observing the opinion of other people as well as using comparisons of different laptops, it seems that consumers form attitudes towards laptops. It appears that consumers' attitudes are more likely to be influenced by the messages if they are perceived as credible. Several personal attributes of a reviewer were identified to have an influence on the credibility of a message, whether they increase or decrease the credibility. Additionally, it became visible, that women are relatively more likely to be influenced by personal attributes of a reviewer than men.

One unexpected finding was the aspect of video reviews, it seems as if these reviews have a strong influence towards the credibility of the information received, in regards to the product. The authors believe a reasonable interpretation for this could be, that the consumers not only like to see the product in action but are also affected by the fact that the person shows himself. The authors did not consider including video reviews in this research, however, it seemed very significant for the participants, particularly for men. It has to be mentioned though, that the focus of this research is on written online reviews.

In the eyes of the authors, the finding of this research could significantly help organizations to predict the influence of reviews on product attitudes as well as to conduct reviews in their own virtual space. However, there is a risk of using these findings for unethical reasons in regards to companies trying to manipulate consumers in buying their products. The academic world can benefit from this research in the sense of better understanding the influence of specific characteristics of online reviews in regards to consumer attitudes. In addition to this, current research could be used for the further studies measuring the influences of personal attributes and its effects on consumer attitudes and message's credibility.

Most consumers nowadays, are aware of the possibility of companies writing online reviews themselves, in order to manipulate consumers' attitudes. However, this research reveals that consumers can still be affected by certain triggers such as the personal

attributes mentioned before. Thus, this research can give consumers the possibility to become more conscious towards online reviews and therefore, it might help them to build a stronger shield in order to protect themselves from companies advertising its products with misleading reviews.

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8 Appendices

Appendix I - Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet

Introduction:

Explain to participants that they will stay anonymous and ask if it is okay to record them.

The demographic information is collected: name, age, nationality.

Introductory: Talk about laptop - how important it is in your life? How did you decided to buy that one you own now?

Transitional: When do you read reviews? Did it help to form the attitude towards the product you are interested in? Do you use reviews just for online shopping or for regular shopping too? *(Not all need to be used.)*

Key:

- Then examples of the reviews are shown. The respondents are encouraged to discuss what attracts their attention, which they believe and which one is more likely to change the attitude or increase the trust towards review. *(Not all need to be used.)*
- What they would like to know about a reviewer?
- What attributes they know, to what they pay attention?
- Which personal attributes change a credibility of a review?
- *(Used if discussion changes the direction)* Do they pay attention to the picture (“avatar”), name, do they try to look for additional information such as how old is the reviewer, sex, nationality and so on. How does it change their trust of review?

Appendix 2 - Reviews

Negative Reviews



Review by [M. Jones](#) (Age 35, Takoma Park, MD, USA)

REAL NAME

“... the damn thing started falling apart. First, with the DVD Rom. It wouldn't open right, and eventually just got stuck. The screen cracked, and not long after, I had a huge black dot the size of a dinner plate on my screen. I decided to overcome that by plugging it into a PC monitor, which worked just fine for a few more weeks, and then that blinked out on me as well...”

Review by *Anonymous*

“... the damn thing started falling apart. First, with the DVD Rom. It wouldn't open right, and eventually just got stuck. The screen cracked, and not long after, I had a huge black dot the size of a dinner plate on my screen. I decided to overcome that by plugging it into a PC monitor, which worked just fine for a few more weeks, and then that blinked out on me as well...”



Review by [Heather Walton](#) (Age 29, Australia)

REAL NAME

“... the damn thing started falling apart. First, with the DVD Rom. It wouldn't open right, and eventually just got stuck. The screen cracked, and not long after, I had a huge black dot the size of a dinner plate on my screen. I decided to overcome that by plugging it into a PC monitor, which worked just fine for a few more weeks, and then that blinked out on me as well...”



Review by [DirtySock](#)

“... the damn thing started falling apart. First, with the DVD Rom. It wouldn't open right, and eventually just got stuck. The screen cracked, and not long after, I had a huge black dot the size of a dinner plate on my screen. I decided to overcome that by plugging it into a PC monitor, which worked just fine for a few more weeks, and then that blinked out on me as well...”

Review by [L.C.](#) (software technician)

“... the damn thing started falling apart. First, with the DVD Rom. It wouldn't open right, and eventually just got stuck. The screen cracked, and not long after, I had a huge black dot the size of a dinner plate on my screen. I decided to overcome that by plugging it into a PC monitor, which worked just fine for a few more weeks, and then that blinked out on me as well...”

Positive Reviews



Review by [M. Jones](#) (Age 35, Takoma Park, MD, USA)

REAL NAME

“...I could not be happier. Hands down, the best purchase I've ever made and even having been an objective person and "not getting to close and liking things too much", I can see why people like this laptop. I didn't think I could be so impressed with a piece of technology. Seriously. Get one and it and learn about all the benefits, it's completely worth it...”

Review by *Anonymous*

“...I could not be happier. Hands down, the best purchase I've ever made and even having been an objective person and "not getting to close and liking things too much", I can see why people like this laptop. I didn't think I could be so impressed with a piece of technology. Seriously. Get one and it and learn about all the benefits, it's completely worth it...”



Review by [Heather Walton](#) (Age 29, Australia)

REAL NAME

“...I could not be happier. Hands down, the best purchase I've ever made and even having been an objective person and "not getting to close and liking things too much", I can see why people like this laptop. I didn't think I could be so impressed with a piece of technology. Seriously. Get one and it and learn about all the benefits, it's completely worth it...”



Review by [DirtySock](#)

“...I could not be happier. Hands down, the best purchase I've ever made and even having been an objective person and "not getting to close and liking things too much", I can see why people like this laptop. I didn't think I could be so impressed with a piece of technology. Seriously. Get one and it and learn about all the benefits, it's completely worth it...”

Review by [L.C.](#) (software technician)

“...I could not be happier. Hands down, the best purchase I've ever made and even having been an objective person and "not getting to close and liking things too much", I can see why people like this laptop. I didn't think I could be so impressed with a piece of technology. Seriously. Get one and it and learn about all the benefits, it's completely worth it...”

Appendix 3 - Transcripts

Focus Group 1, male participants , 16.4.2012, 12 pm

Moderator: Thanks everyone for coming! It is really nice of you to help us. Let's start... So, how important is a laptop computer for you in your life?

Participant 1: Computers are very important, but I don't carry my laptop with me all the time.

Participant 2: Pretty important...

Moderator: How much time do you usually spend with your laptop?

Participant 3: Since you get up in the morning. For school or entertainment...

Participant 4: All my time basically, when I'm not in school, or training.

Participant 5: Yes, when I'm at home, I watch TV and I don't understand anything, so I go to my laptop and the magic of Facebook.

Participant 6: The same, basically I do everything with it, whatever you can imagine you are doing, everything goes digitally. And with digitally, what we are talking about, laptops or computers, so yeah...

Participant 7: Yeah, my laptop is always on. I use it for everything, I mean like basic stuff, if you put away the stuff we have to do for school, then it is music, broadcast, series, Skype, yeah, actually it replaced probably the TV.

Participant 1: Yes, the same for me, unless I'm not at home, I don't carry it around, but yeah...

Moderator: How did you make the decision to buy the laptop you have now? What is the process? How do you look for information?

Participant 5: I was looking for a while first. And then I went to the store and got the only one I had money for. There are some certain things, like, I want the processor to be this kind, this much memory and stuff. But then it comes to the budget and how much you have at the moment.

Moderator: What about the other guys? How about you?

Participant 1: Reviews, and magazines, like something you can find on the Internet. And the store also.

Participant 6: For me, it was specially the internet. You go to the store you try it out, if it is possible, if they have it, and then you go home again, and when you go home you start read the reviews. With reviews you start learning like how other people think about the product, do they like it or do they have complains about it, is everything working properly, or are there any mistakes. After you know that, like, after I am satisfied with the reviews that I read, and I have a feeling that I'm doing a good investment, I go for that laptop.

Participant 7: Same for me, first I based it on my budget, for the price and capabilities based on the price, and then I did the same thing as him: go to the store, check it physically, go back home and do some more research and decide whether to buy it or not.

Moderator: Do you read online reviews for other products?

Participant 7: Yes, mobile phones.

Participant 6: Yes, especially for electronic products, basically everything technological. You even can go more, to the clothing, accessories and other stuff. For holiday, everything.

Moderator: Okay, now I will give you some examples of reviews, we are not concentrating on the content, but on the reviewers itself, the people writing the reviews. These reviews are just parts of reviews, just a few sentences to show whether the review is negative or positive. The negative and positive reviews are taken from the same source amazon.com. Everything is about the laptop. So, just go through and check them.

(Everyone is reading the visuals.)

Moderator: So, do you think that information about the reviewer is important to you? You read the review and do you pay attention who wrote it?

Participant 5: Well, on some websites they have like grading or whatever it's called, on people who review stuff, and if the person has five stars or four stars, then you think alright, I mean, at least I trust them. So I go by that.

Moderator: And if they don't have that?

Participant 5: And if they don't then I make sure it is a man who wrote it.

Participant 6: Yeah, but then the picture might look like a man, but it is a woman, so how do you know online?

(Laughing)

Participant 1: No, I think for me, it varies, from review to review. It depends what they wrote, if they go into details, not just, if it's good or if it is bad, they give like reasoning, like that. I don't really read short reviews because I think the reasoning must be missing. Sometimes I don't really care that much about the other information.

Participant 6: Yes. The way they write, the structure, you see how many paragraphs, the person uses 'u' or 'damn' or stuff like that, I don't read it, it's worthless. If the guy is not capable expressing something correctly, I mean, it is up to the product but usually if you have a certain structure I think is more pleasant to read. Not like, two sentences yea, I get it, it's the best. Yeah, thank you but it is not what I'm looking for.

Participant 1: Yes, it is about the content, that's more important.

Moderator: But if you have two very different reviews, one is very negative and an additional review is really negative and the content is not that useful. Would you think that additional information about the reviewers could influence your attitude?

Participant 5: I would say one thing first, I would, let say, if I would read three positive reviews and I would see one negative review, I would get suspicious about it. I would say, okay, what is the complain about. Then I would also start searching for other places if I can find other negative reviews as well. That being set, I think that if I can find the information of real persons instead of anonymous that would be my preference. Especially like profession, for instance, like software technician I would think like, oh, this guy knows probably more than I do. So I would also assume that...yeah.

Participant 6: It also depends on... Okay, let say you buy a laptop, you look for what doesn't work not for what works so maybe you will be more careful with the negative reviews to compare with the positive ones.

Participant 1: Yes, probably, I think so.

Participant 2: Yeah, and if a review is too perfect you get suspicious, because no product is perfect.

Participant 3: Because with some reviews they give the overall feeling how the product works for them, because although they would state the positives. They would say, okay, but they need improvement in this and I felt that I was a little disappointed with this capability so although you have a positive review, it can't be too positive because you get too suspicious because no product is perfect.

Moderator: Can personal information influence the credibility if you have two very positive reviews? For example one is really positive and the guy with the picture, name and age and so on, and other one is also positive, but anonymous. Would that change anything?

Participant 2: No, for me, I'm looking at the content, because you can see, especially with the profiles and stuff, we learned not to trust profiles, because, like I have mentioned before, this person shows it is a man, and it could be an automated system that writes these types of things, or just... It can look like a man but can be a lady writing this for company, that represents the company could be used to influence the customers. So I mainly read the contents, to see whether they are fair, and on bias, how they review the product.

Participant 3: Well, also, I think it depends on the period of time that he has a computer or laptop, you never know, maybe he wrote this negative review after a year that he was using actually the laptop, you know. Of course maybe in a year the laptop just gets wasted or something, you know, so you have to see like exact time when they are actually talking about the laptops and everything, because if you buy a laptop, like the first week it will work perfectly, so you will write, of course a positive review, everything is perfect and everything, but maybe in the year or two it just fall apart, and... I mean it is a technology so it will fall apart someday. So, let's take in the consideration when they are writing the reviews as well.

Moderator: And what you would like to know about the reviewer when you read? For example one participant said that he wants to make sure that it is a man who writes the review. What additional information would you like to know?

Participant 5: I think to be credible the guy must be known, like he has a blog or something. He is all the time doing this. And then he is giving review, then, I think it is worth it.

Participant 1: Yes.

Participant 5: Because, if I give a review, eh, no one knows me, it is not important. [what the content is]... if you put someone famous on group, these “blogosphere” or whatever you want to call them, usually does that and I think it has a lot of power. You got those people on the YouTube like channels they all the time test products. This is, like, I think you hammer something... Like student form Jonkoping bought laptop, nobody cares, unless you are interested in Sweden, but that’s all...

Participant 3: Your parents will be interested. (*Laughing*)

Participant 2: And your friends. (*Laughing*)

Participant 5: With friends it is mouth to mouth commercial, that is one thing, I would trust, like J. would say, yeah, I bought this laptop and it’s really good, I can show you and trust his opinion because I can see it from his use. I also want to say that, okay, I mean, you do focus on who writes the reviews, but I also have to say that, it is also for me, for instance, on what website I read it. If it is popular website.

Moderator: Well, we said it is from amazon.com

Participant 6: I do not look at who writes it in engadget.com, for example. In that website I just go for like, okay, if he reviews it I just read it, and then go to the comments to see what other people say about it. When you say it is from Amazon, I’m okay, I would lie back, it is trustworthy website, then I don’t really specifically go to search for authors. Because, buying a laptop you don’t do it all the time, and if a specific person, an author only writes for laptops, you can be not up to date who is writing what, and it is bad. In that situation you would go for the specific website and you just go, okay, this website is well known for giving a good reviews and being really critical, and then I would go for that actually. But that’s, yeah, speaking for my own sake.

Participant 1: Maybe also the job description? If you knew that someone knows about that. But it is hard to do I think, to check the job of someone. If he is a computer expert or not, if he is very experienced.

Moderator: The reviewers have their own profile, where you can check information about them, for example what reviews they wrote before and how old they are etc. Have you ever done that?

Participant 4: No...

Participant 1: Mh...

Participant 6: Because than you lose the focus of what you are actually looking for.

Participant 4: It’s creepy, like stalking guy...

Participant 2: Well maybe he is not real, you know.

Participant 6: I did it once, but it was for movies, like this guy had those super nice reviews about movies, really detailed, and you could see that he posted like hundreds of reviews. And every time you go to the movie you read it and you have an opinion that it is raised, that is backed up, with arguments and long and detailed explanations what he liked and what he disliked. So this you can do. Maybe for electronic products it's weird because that you go from one product to another one. Usually you look for one, like a laptop.

Participant 4: Actually for the video, like you just said earlier, on YouTube, in that situation I think, I might have a catch of the name, if a person says, 'hey guys I'm from this website and my name is this and this and you see that on the right side they have uploaded 10-20 videos, then I at some point would think, okay, this guy seems to know what he is talking about. Let's check him out further.

Moderator: Do you think credibility increases, if for example a person is writing a review or if the person is making a video review? Not writing, just coming in front of the camera and talking.

Participant 6: Yes.

Participant 2: Video reviews, that's what made me buy my two last products, my phone and my laptop.

Participant 5: Same for me.

Participant 2: I saw it on YouTube, the video review, because the person can't lie, it is based on visuals, so he really went through and showed you. The camera was there and he showed you how he did it...

Participant 4: Yeah, you can see what is happening.

Participant 2: They give you the strengths and then they say, okay, but for the people who are looking for this and that, might be not the product for you because it is based on this, and they need to improve. And then you get the real feel that this person is not really trying to foul you...

Participant 3: Yeah, usually they also add this nowadays on the websites, they give a review and then they put a video review as well, it is included.

Participant 5: Yes, it goes along with the text.

Moderator: So, all of you watched video review?

(Everyone says 'yes' or 'sure')

Moderator: What if the video is made by a company itself? Is it still more credible than the written one?

(Everyone says 'no')

Participant 4: It loses everything.

Participant 3: Yes.

Participant 5: Because it is their point, some people doing marketing.

Participant 1: It is promotion.

Participant 5: We should know that, the marketers they try to sell the product even if it is not worth for the money. I mean, that's your task and they get this task to sell it and they not going to sell it like 'okay guys, apart this and this, and okay we have to be honest this part, this aspect is not that good, but hey, you can still buy it, right?'. You know this, the only thing that you would go for like watch it, is to see like to get the impression of the product, okay, this product has this functionalities, that is nice, that is what I'm searching for. I mean you can go for these things, you can watch it but, I mean for real reviews, the critical reviews, to know whether you want to buy it or not, to make that decision that is not the proper way.

Participant 6: Did you see the Nokia guys? That is a new Nokia, it is great, but just...

Participant 2: You saw the ad?

Participant 3: Yeah...

Participant 2: I started laughing.

Participant 4: You don't like Nokia?

Participant 6: I like it, but it was dumb business just to follow now and make smart phones. (*Short discussion about Nokia phones*)

Moderator: I would like to know, what personal attributes, what information about the person who writes the review you would like to know? What information could possibly change the credibility of the message? Year, gender...

Participant 4: About the person?

Moderator: Yes.

Participant 6: For me – job.

Participant 2: For me it is irrelevant, I don't care. If it is anonymous, so what? I just read the text. Go through the lines...

Participant 7: But that's the same, I thought about it and I'm not really looking for the persons, I just go over it quickly, where are the pros, cons...

Participant 6: Coz you missing the point...

Participant 7: ... And I'm not reading every review; it is hard to read all. Some are often badly written ... And, I mean, I do not look who wrote these.

Participant 6: Because, like at the end of the day, the average consumers are not experts in the products, at the end of the day they are just giving their experience, opinion of how they felt how the product worked for them. That is why for me it is irrelevant to know his age, where he is from, and what he does.

Participant 5: Can I add something? Did you finish?

Participant 6: Yes, yes.

Participant 5: Look, one, two three, four, five reviews, the text is the same, the pictures are different. So that means actually, doesn't matter who wrote it, because, basically where you see if this person knows about the product or not comes from the text, if the person has a lot of knowledge about the product, you will notice while reading. That means that it is not really important who wrote it down. He says he is a software technician, but what does he know? He says nothing about processor, hard drive...

Participant 1: Exactly.

Participant 5: So everyone can act like someone on the internet, like E, said earlier, but are they what they say they are?

Moderator: If you read a review with a lot of information, and then see that it is written by a guy who is 14 years old. Would that change anything?

Participant 5: No, because there are people who hacked actually the governments and stuff and they are 16 years old, if a guy knows a lot, it means a guy knows a lot.

Moderator: How did you actually decide how you read reviews? Do you from the top?

Participant 6: The content, you can see how much it is written.

Participant 1: Like someone mentioned, we do not buy laptops all the time, one in a couple of years, just take your time and go there...

Participant 2: Usually, you read the last one that pops on. If you go to Amazon, you can choose, I think they have two options, one is the most read one (review) and the other the most critical one (review). So you can go to the critical one.

Participant 7: Yeah, I do the same like, with the stars. Maybe start with five stars, read some. Then go to the middle, and then go to the bad ones, read some. But I don't look too much into who wrote the review...

Participant 4: Yeah, it is what you looking for, you know the product is good, but you want to know the drawbacks. If in the start they say it is a shitty product, it says anything; I even do not look at who the guy is who wrote this.

Moderator: Well thank you, you answered all the questions we wanted you to. Do you want to add something?

Participant 5: I think, you know, just as a final note, I think if people have different experiences in buying things, they see it differently. When I do not know about the product, then I go to the official page, and then find information about what I need, and after that I read the reviews.

Participant 6: Yes, I think it is the way we shop now, for example, my parents, I think, even do not know about the reviews, that you can go to the internet and post your opinion about the product, they just go to a couple of websites they know, or go to the store and just buy it.

Participant 2: Yes, just trust the sales man in stores. My parents even do not own a computer.

Participant 3: Some of us just take an analytical and structured way of how we come to the conclusion to buy or not, and some are just easily influenced. The majority can be influenced by others opinions, because they trust the profiles, and buy. But we know, that nowadays companies pay for websites to not be to critical about their products.

(Discussing about iPhones...)

Moderator: Anything more to add?

Participant 3: Yes, the cookies were good... *(Laughing)*

Focus Group 2, male participants, 16.4.2012, 4 pm

Moderator: Thank you everybody for joining our focus group. We would appreciate it, if you would write down your nationality and age. This focus group will be anonymous, so you do not have to write down your name. Does anybody mind if we will record this meeting?

Participant (everybody): No! And these cookies are really good!

Moderator: Okay, let's start now. The main topic we will discuss today are online reviews, however, we will start with some more general questions. How important is your laptop for you?

Participant 1: I would say, it's really important for me. I use it for studies a few hours a day and entertainment, movies mostly, browsing the internet. I think I would have a hard time during the day if I could not use it actually. It would make me feel bad. It's important, definitely. I'm using it daily.

Moderator: What do the others think?

Participant 2: I agree. I use it for the same reasons basically. Studying, plus a lot of entertainment. In my spare time, I always use my computer. Especially now, that I am a master student. Yes, I use it all the time.

Participant 3: I also use it for gaming. Yes, I guess it could fall under entertainment, but I think it could be categorized also under just gaming.

Participant 4: Does it work on a laptop, or what kind of games do you play?

Participant 3: ah, all kinds of games, football, sport games, racing games..

Participant 4: Ahh, I guess it's not a Mac then..

Participant 5: Well, I think the computer is the thing that is most integrated, in our daily lives. Technology wise like our phones, our computers. We use it for almost everything I guess. Using Skype to call friends all over the world, connecting with other people through facebook, for studies, for entertainment, I use it for pretty much everything almost.

Moderator: okay, anything else?

Participant 1: yes, also for shopping and banking! I don't go to the shop or bank anymore that often. I use the computer for this.

Participant 6: It would be hard to imagine to go through the day without using the computer. It almost never happens. So, it's very integrated into my life.

Moderator: Yes, that's true, what about you participant?

Participant 7: It's basically the same as already mentioned by the others. Studies, gaming and movies.

Participant 4: Well yes, the main reason I bought a laptop was for university. I didn't have one before, but now that I do, I use it for both, school and entertainment. Notes while I am at school, internet obviously. It's pretty much on all the time when I am home, even when I am not on it. I could be playing music or off it, or things like that.

Moderator: okay, can you tell me, how you decided to buy this laptop? What are the processes of your shopping? What did you do or do you do?

Participant 3: Well I can tell from my experience because I just bought one a few months ago. It took me a while to find the right one. I was looking for certain specifications, not only about gaming, it just had to fit everything. Long battery life, good graphic engine, and stuff like this. So it took me a while to find the right one. I used one website "notebookcheck.com", I looked it up and you can look up all the laptops and compare them and stuff like this. It still took a long time until I made the decision.

Moderator: Did you read reviews or something like this?

Participant 3: Yes, especially from these expert reviews, from these guys. The guys from that magazine or site, they write reviews about the laptops.

Participant 1: I basically had a certain budget, it was when I started studying. I went on the internet and then googled "laptops" "best laptops" until a certain amount and I looked at it. But then I had a friend who had a really good laptop and I looked at it, he said he was satisfied so I actually bought the model he had. He bought it like a week before I did. That was how I made my decision. I didn't know anything about computers, I just wanted a decent performance, so I based my decision on my friend because he was better in this than I was.

Participant 7: My friend is making computers, so I just asked him. I have a really good one, but not that expensive.

Moderator: What about you guys, anything to add?

Participant 2: Ah I don't know, I just took some random computer I think. I didn't really care about. When I use my computer it is mostly for entertainment, watch videos and stuff like that. And internet of course, but it didn't really matter to me.

Participant 6: I use like "pricerunner" or we have a Swedish website as well, which is like, you compare prices of laptops on the internet. There you compare the prices, the qualifications, the specifications (specs), the certain specs of the laptops. That's how I did it, just checked out forums etc., searched for computers where I liked the specs of, and for people who also liked it before me.

Participant 3: The first thing that I did was, I think, I looked up some specs and other things, to see which one is the best. I remember, I also looked up some forums, if someone has some critics about it or some bad experiences or something. I mean, you hear sometimes that from some producers, the products are not that good or have problems, others are okay. So I just wanted to clear or clarify if it's a good decision to make.

Participant 4: Well, I always was an Apple guy, so I was just set on getting myself a Mac for when university started. So, I was saving up before hand, so I guess for me, it's more branding that was or is important to me. I do like Apple, they come up with new models every year or upgrades. Every year it makes me want to get one even more. And finally just before University I was able to get myself one.

Moderator: How about in general, do you read online reviews if you buy or if you are planning to buy something online?

Participants (all): Yes, of course.

Participant 6: Yes, especially when it comes to products which are very technological, then I feel for myself that I need to use the "experts" knowledge and read reviews. When it is just normal consumer stuff, like clothes, I don't do that and I think it's not necessary then. In that case, it's more about branding then.

Participant 1: I feel the same here. I read reviews especially when I enter a website with the comparisons of products. I look at the average score and then the first thing I look at is the negative opinions, how many there are and what they are about. Then I decide if it makes sense to me and if I can live with this or not.

Participant 2: I usually go to stores and ask there, the personnel. And also ask around some friends where I know that they know more about computers.

Moderator: Ok, great. Now I will give you some examples of reviews. There are reviews on both sides, negative and positive ones. It is important that you know, that these are not full reviews, just some part of a review. All positive and all negative reviews are the same, content wise, but they give you different information about the reviewer, therefore the person who writes the review. So, just have a look and we will talk about it. Both reviews are taken from Amazon by the way, just to let you know the source of the reviews.

Moderator: Do you think additional information of the person writing the review can change the credibility of the review?

Participants (all): yes

Moderator: Do you think there is a difference between negative and positive reviews?

Participant 3: It doesn't matter I think. It's about the person who writes the review. It's about trust, if I can say that. I probably trust a guy more in regards to technological things, with a picture or so. Maybe I can even look him up, on facebook or something like that. If I know his name, I could search for him on facebook and see if he really exists or not. So, is that person would write he is satisfied, I would believe it the same way as when he would say its total bullshit. I kind of trust more people that I think really exists than the "dirtySock" guy.

Participant1: Software technician. I have a distance to that, if I look at this. It looks to me more, like someone is trying to pull the product.

Participant 2: I don't really care where the people are coming from, I would look more into what the person is actually saying. That's probably why I go to stores more, I want to see the person I talk to, really ask good questions. Reviews could just be some fake people, working for companies.

Participant 3: But do you then get appropriate answers to the questions when you go to the store? Did you really have the feeling they answered them correctly? Because I would think that they would try to pull the product in order for you to buy them.

Participant 2: Well, they answered them yes.

Participant 7: Yeah, but it's the salespersons purpose to sell these products.

Participants (almost all of them): exactly, yeah, that's what I mean

Participant 2: well yeah that's true.. They usually only give good answers. But I don't buy a laptop in the first store I go to. I will go to more stores, get more opinions etc. After that I look online, read reviews etc. But to get a first idea or look, I go to the stores.

Participant 3: I went to stores to ask about products that they only sold online and they couldn't give me proper answers. That's what I like about online reviews, some of course also try to sell the products but it's more about personal opinions.

Participant 4: I think, even if its someone who doesn't seem too reliable, like "dirtySock", it's still worth looking at because that person might mention recurring problems etc, so it's not just one person who says it, but more.

Participant 6: not everyone is born to be a seller either. And the internet is enormous. There is sooo much information out there, which is free for you to just get your hand on it. Whereas if you go to a store, these people are sellers! They want to sell you the product and not discuss opinions. And there are only 3 or 4 salespersons in that store, while on the internet there are hundreds of people.

Participant 3: I'm afraid that people online are also just trying to pull the product, like mentioned before. Or some agencies making up people and pay them to create positive reviews. The same might be happening with negative reviews in regards to their competitors.

Moderator: So you think, additional information about the reviewer could avoid this?

Participant 3: some verification, like that this is kind of honestly written, or the source is reliable or something like this.

Participant 6: a facebook link would help me, I think. Where I could click on and just to see their facebook profile. Just to see for sure that this is a real person. So, it won't be some company pulling or pushing down a product.

Participant 7: but there are so many fake facebook profiles as well. Many Chinese companies do that, so you can't be too sure either. They create a whole face person, with a fake facebook page and pictures etc. who comments on everything and so on.

Moderator: What information of the reviewer would be important to you? What would you like to know or see?

Participant 3: the address (laughing)

Participant 4: I think the thing they have used. For example I would look at people who used Mac computers for a long time. Who knows more specific information about what works, what crashes and stuff like this.

Participant 5: But I think you mean more, what information we would like to see before reading the review?

Moderator: Yes, like in these examples. In some you can see photos, or age etc.

Participant 6: For me it's like, the more info the better. If you have a picture, name, occupation etc., you can create a better image of the reviewer.

Participant 1: And maybe you can also have statistics of the person, like how many reviews this person has done and how long the person has been on Amazon or a different forum.

Participant 7: for me, I don't care about what information I can see. It's about how professional the review is written.

Participant 5: I actually prefer to create my own image in my head. So I just look at the content and make my own little story.

Participant 3: It also has to fit in with the other reviews. If there are 10 reviews on a page and only 1 is negative, I don't really care about this.

Participant 7: But it depends on how critical a person is. Every product has some setbacks or disadvantages, and it's everybody's own choice or opinion to decide if they can deal with these or not.

Moderator: Ok, but to come back to the reviews you can see here. If you would have to choose one or two attributes of the reviewers, what would you like to see or have in terms of information?

Participant 4: for me, I would say, the first name. That's enough for me.

Participant 1: picture makes it more appealing, however a real photo, not of a dog or something. That's just silly.

Participant 6: I like to see a photo, age, name, for some reason I feel more comfortable. For a computer for example, I would like the person to be between 20 and 40, so that I can relate to the problems they might have. Instead of being 65 or something. But, the most important thing is more the content, the information has to be well written.

Participant 3: yeah.. The content (is important), or let's say HOW it is written. I like to read about real problems and for that they use this laptop. Furthermore a longer post is more reliable in my opinion

Moderator: Have you ever tried to find more information about the reviewer? In case he or she had a profile, did you ever click on it?

All participants: no, never.

Participants 7: I just go to other forums or something like that. just to get more information on the product itself.

Moderator: What about video reviews? Have you seen some of them?

All participants: yes, they are really good.

Participant 5: It's good. I bought a new cell phone not too long ago. I went to YouTube and watched videos where people compared it to other phones, for example iPhones and so on. By normal people but also by experts. You get to see the product in action.

Moderator: So, do you think video reviews are more credible than just written online reviews?

All: yes, for sure.

Participant 2: I mean, you still don't know the person, but it takes more time to shoot a video , you know?

Participant 4: You can usually get more info, not just negative things or positive, it's more a comparison but you actually see the results.

Participant 1; they show if something is wrong. But I don't watch the profession videos, I only watch the videos where I think it's a random guy, like me. Like where they say "okay, I'm unboxing it now, now I put the battery in and things like that" I feel like this is real.

Moderator: Good, do you have anything else you want to share or talk about with us? This is basically everything we needed from you guys.

Participant 6: for the written reviews, the content is more important, while reading you can see how competent the person is.

Moderator: Do you think your own knowledge of the products plays an important role for reading reviews?

Participant 5: I don't know.. Because I have no idea about computers ..

Participant 7: Of course! If you don't know anything, you don't know right from wrong. You are more dependent on what the reviewers say. If you have a broad idea of computers, it is easier for you to decide what is reliable and what you cannot trust.

Participant 1: After reading the content, you probably would make a choice that the reviewer with a photo and age is more reliable than the review of anonymous. However, for me, I could only say that after reading the review.

Participant 6: People with no knowledge probably just go to the stores and trust the salesperson. But the people who know a bit, they use the internet more, they ask friends. It's a longer process to make a decision.

Participant 5: Well I don't think it's a longer process. If you already know a lot about computers, you know what you are actually looking for. So you refer more to the specifications of the laptop and trust yourself more.

Participant 6: I know quite a bit about computers but when I wanted to buy one, I wanted to know more about it etc. I wanted to be certain. The process took a very long time to actually make the decision.

Participant 4: for people who don't know a lot probably go back to the brand. They know the brand so they buy it.

Participant 3: and the price I would say. They would just use the computer for entertainment so the design, price and brand would be more important to them and not the specifications..

Moderator: Okay then, thanks a lot for participating! You were a great help.

Focus Group 3, female participants, 17.4.2012, 10.00am

Moderator: Thank you for coming and helping us out, let us start with the first question now. I would like to know how important your laptop is for you, in your daily life. How much time do you spend with it and what do you use it for?

Participant 1: I spend a lot of time with it, it is the first thing I take in the morning. I check all my mails and so on, and it's the last thing that I put down before going to sleep. I watch something before sleeping, like movies or TV series. I spent a lot of time during the day with my laptop as well, I use it for university work, I watch a lot of things, I write blocks, I communicate with my family and friends. Basically, my laptop is one of the things that is always with me.

Participant 2: It's pretty much the same for me. Or actually it is exactly the same for me haha. My laptop was broken for a few days and I thought my life was completely different. I felt like I was without clothes, it's hard to explain. All my information, school information, personal information, to contact my friends and family. It is very important to me. I think it is the most important object that I have nowadays actually.

Participant 3: It is the same for me, but I'm tired of carrying it with me because I am carrying it with me all the time. I cannot live without my laptop. I use it daily, first thing and last thing that I use. So yeah, pretty important.

Participant 4: I also carry my laptop almost all the time, even when I'm going to the city center. In case if I need it. And I do a lot of online shopping with it, so I do a lot of browsing. My computer is on every day. Even when I'm sleeping sometimes.. I only turn it off in the evening.

Participant 5: Well, I don't take it to the city center, but I use it a lot, I would say 12 to 14 hours a day. I have the feeling that it connects me to the world, so I really need it. It is all about the internet. I also use it for university but for me it is more important to have internet for private connections and entertainment. For university, I could also use computers at school, but for my private life, the laptop is very important to me. So, generally it is very important to me.

Participant 6: I think I would rather stick to the internet connection with the computer because I had it as well, like two days ago, that I couldn't connect to the internet. And I thought I don't really need the laptop when I am not connected to the Internet. I could

also use normal computers or pen and paper to write stuff down. But I really need the laptop for working and browsing. I need it for my job, I have to be updated about everything, like whats happening with everyone that I'm in contact with. I need to be connected with my thesis partners, so it is impossible when I don't have an internet connection. Well, the phone works as well, but it's not that much help. The only time I do not use my laptop is when I am at work, and cannot use it. But then I still have my phone to check facebook etc. I am not that addicted to staying in front of my laptop, like, I can survive without it. But currently, when I'm studying, doing projects and thesis, or looking for jobs, it is kind of necessary.

Moderator: Okay, could you tell me about the process of your buying decision of your laptop? What did you do to choose this specific one?

Participant 5: I always had problems with my old laptops, one was a DELL laptop which was supposed to be very good and one was a used one from EBay. They didn't run that good and also didn't last very long. Then I thought, I want one that last longer. My brother has an Apple and my friends who also use Apple laptops were really happy with it and told me that their laptop last very long. So I choose one, I take it everywhere, it was a very good choice, because I take it everywhere and it's a small and light one.

Participant 6: My old laptop was perfect in terms of usage of internet, connections etc, but it broke down in terms of hardware. I left it at home because it had to be repaired, or tried to get repaired. Then I wanted a smaller one, that I could carry everywhere and just put in my purse. That was my first requirement of the potential laptop, to fit in my purse. I didn't want a MAC, but it had to be thin and easy to carry and lighter. I wanted not the smallest one available but one with which you can work comfortable. So I asked my brother for some specifications, that are necessary but then I just went online and looked at websites etc. Then I contacted the customer service of one website and we had a talk twice and he told me to come to the store and have a look and the products I was interested in. The products I chose with the customer service had the same specifications, just different design etc. so he said it would be better if I would have a proper look at them. So, at the end I bought it in the "physical" store. The whole decision making process was made online though.

Participant 2: For me it was basically all done online. My old computer wasn't working anymore, or not properly, it was really slow and outdated. I wanted a MAC but I couldn't afford it, then I thought, I was satisfied with my old one, so I should stick to that brand. But it was still too expensive. I ended up with a HP, but I looked at the hardware characteristics and really simple design, black and light. I asked some friends what they thought about it, and then bought it online.

Participant 1: For me it was quiet different, it was suppose to be a gift from my dad. He works in IT services, people from his work told me not to look at this one but on this one and so on, this computer is more for people who work with Photoshop and stuff like that. After choosing a few brands, I went online to read some reviews and see some more pictures. I chose a few brands and actually didn't look too close to the hardware specifications, I just said, this looks nice, this is too heavy and things like these. And I'm happy with my choice.

Participant 3: I bought my laptop around 6 years ago, I think. It was mainly my boyfriend at that time who told me what to buy. So, I just bought a MAC, but I think I

wouldn't look too much at the hardware specifications and the technological things. More the design and how heavy it is and stuff like this.

Participant 4: When I usually buy a laptop, I first ask some people who are good with computers to help me narrow down my choice. Then they tell me which brands would fit what I want or what to choose from. Only after this, I just googled reviews online, what other people said about this laptop. They ask me then for what I want a laptop, what I am planning to do with it etc. For example if I want to play games or something like that. But the last computer I bought, I bought really spontaneously, I found it on the internet and the price was very good. It had a good size and was not too heavy, so easy to carry. Not too big because I was looking at a smaller one for going abroad and so on. And the price deal online was only for one day. So I didn't have the opportunity to ask my friends so I just googled reviews online, what other people said about this laptop. And the reviews were mostly positive, that the keyboard was similar to MAC laptops, that it has a long battery life etc. So I just bought it spontaneously after reading what the other people wrote about this laptop. I'm really satisfied so far.

Participant 7: Well, I actually didn't make the choice about this laptop, because my sister's boyfriend is in the IT business and he told me which laptops are good, I needed a relatively cheap one and I needed one immediately. I just talked to him and he made a choice. And I'm really happy for it. I mean, it is really big and heavy but otherwise, it's really good.

Moderator: In general, do you read online reviews before buying products? Not only if you want to buy things online but also if you want to buy it in a store. Just in general.

Participant 1: Yes, I am. I mean, I got my laptop as a present but if I would have to spend my own money for something I usually look online to see if it's worth it. To check different opinions. So especially if I would spend a lot of money, I would research a loooooo online. For example when I wanted to buy a mp3 player, I didn't know where to start to look. I didn't know what I wanted, which brand, nothing. So I just search a lot online and read many many reviews. I mean, companies of course only say good things, but people give their honest opinion in these reviews. They say what is real and how to evaluate the product properly.

Participant 2: For me it depends. I do read reviews when it concerns expensive products, things that I cannot "just" buy. But I also look at the specifications of the product itself, so, what the company says about it. So, first I compare the characteristics of laptops and narrow my choices down, and then read the reviews of the few choices I have. And of course I also ask my friends for help, just people who know more about these technological things. I discuss the aspects etc with them, just to be sure that I am not completely wrong.

Participant 6: Well, I check the website of the products first, to see how it looks and after that I read reviews of other customers. I just want to make my own picture first and build my own opinion of the product and then see what negative aspects other people found. But before buying, if I have the time, I usually send the product information to my brother, I trust his opinion and if he says that it sounds like a good laptop, then I will buy it.

Participant 5: Before buying the MAC, I was actually already very sure that I wanted it. But I thought it was better to have a look online as well. I read reviews and I just got mixed feelings about all these different opinions. Especially with MAC, they say you either love or hate it. So I went to YouTube to watch some product review videos. These are more to compare and show the product and not to put the product down. It doesn't mean I really trust them, but it helps to see the product, how it's handled etc. I just try to get all the information I can get.

Moderator: Now we will give you some examples of reviewers and reviews. One site shows negative reviews, the other one positive. The content is the same however of each negative and positive review, as we do not want you to focus on the content itself. These reviews are taken from Amazon, furthermore, these are just parts of a review, just a few sentences. The reviewers give different information of themselves, so just have a look and we will continue then.

Moderator: What makes you choose a review? What makes it credible for you?

Participant 5: For me it's the picture. I would really focus on reviews with a real picture of a person. And the age and country is important to me. The woman in these reviews is 29, so I can relate to her more than to the man who is 34. I would believe that she would have the same problems or something like that so I would think that she is the most credible of these reviewers, for me at least. I'm more interested in people around my age.

Moderator: What do you think about the reviewer called "DirtySock"?

Participant 4: I would think that this is a teenager.

Participant 5: It's a funny name, it doesn't sound very serious and the picture well, it's a picture of a dog. I just wouldn't take this person seriously.

Participant 6: Well I think a bit different, I would think "DirtySock" is kind of a geek and therefore might know a lot about computers. Maybe a game player or hacker or some person like that. I would think this is a person who understands a lot about computers and their characteristics. I would trust his opinion more than the opinions of the others.

Moderator: What do you think about the profession?

Participant 2: Well, of course I would look at for example like here, at the software technician's review. I would trust the software technician more than any other. Just because he would know what he is talking about. This would be my first choice of review. And then it depends on the content of course. If it's too technological, then I can't understand anything. I would also look at the girls review, she is almost my age, so I could relate to her, like someone already said before. However, the 34 year old man, he might not be up to date, he might have other problems. I would not read the review of "dirtySock" I just cannot find any connection to this review.

Participant 3: I don't think I have ever seen a review where the profession "software technician" or anything similar like that was written next to the review. So it seems weird for me. I don't really trust it, I think it might be written by the company itself. I

would trust the people with the pictures the most, especially when they are my age, like the woman here. I would not even take a glance at the anonymous review though, it just doesn't give me any information, where as DirtySock makes me feel like this could be a teenager who spends a lot of time in front of the computer and knows a lot.

Participant 4: I have to separate from positive and negative reviews. If it's a positive review, I don't really care where the person is from etc because it's a positive review anyways. Everything is ok with the product, so that fine. However, when it comes to the negative reviews, I think I would first take the country of the reviewer into consideration. It doesn't help me when they have problems in America or Australia with this product, they might have different characteristics or something like that. For me it is important that the reviewer is close to where I live. From these reviews, I would first look at the software technician just because I think he has to know what he is doing, and dirtysock. In my opinion, teenagers often use fake and funny names, to not be boring etc, so I believe this is a teenager, nerd, geek, I don't know.

Participant 7: The most untrustful review is the one of the software technician. If this is really his job, why does he have to mention it? Readers will see from how he writes that he knows what he is talking about. The pictures are for me most important, it's just easier to form an opinion about someone when you see his face. Oh and I wouldn't even once look at the anonymous reviewer. It's just, well, boring and not informative when you see the other reviewers here.

Moderator: Does anyone want to add something do this topic?

Participant 5: I think it also depends on how much time you have to reading reviews. If I have more time, I would probably also look or browse through other ones. But first I would look at the reviewers who give me the chance to see their faces. With any doubt I would first read the ones with the pictures.

Moderator: Are there any additional things or aspects that you would like to have from the reviewer?

Participant 1: Well, of course the content plays the most important role, but there are things that just pop up in your eyes first. So, for me pictures are important and the age. I wouldn't be able to trust a 50 year old person with computer problems because I think he or she might not have the background knowledge that I have. I don't really care where they are from or what their professions are. But it also depends on the products. If you are looking for something specific for your work, you might want to see professions, if you look at cosmetics I would want a woman my age and not a 14 year old teenager. But for the laptops, it would be picture and age for me.

Participant 7: Maybe it would be good to see how many comments the reviewer already wrote, just to see how much time he spends on it and how important it is for the person. That would affect my opinion. However, the number shouldn't be too high, then I would be suspicious that the person is doing this as a job. But a number in the middle would make me believe that the person just wants to tell his story and likes to tell other people his problems or what was great.

Moderator: What do you think of video reviews? Have you seen some before?

Participant 5: Yes, that's what I used for choosing my Mac. I used YouTube for this.

Moderator: Why do you like it? How do these reviews make you feel?

Participant 5: for me these video reviews are also more convenient. You can lay back and just watch what others are doing. However this only works when you already narrowed down your choice I think. If you still have to decide between 5 laptops it would be too much I think. You can see the product, how he handles it, how big it is in comparison to hands etc.

Participant 1: these are also good when you look for cosmetics. You actually see the results immediately. But I also think you must have an interest in a specific product already. The video reviews for me are more to confirm the opinion I made through the written reviews.

Moderator: So, this is actually all from our site, thank you very much. If you want to add something we can of course continue.

Participant 6: This is more about the content again, but if I see typing or spelling mistakes, I also don't take the review too serious. I just think the person didn't put any effort in writing this review so it couldn't be too important for him. If the person presents himself very serious, like here, a picture with a suit and real name etc, I expect more of him than from let's say "dirtySock". But that I can only see after reading the content.

Moderator: Okay, thank you very much for your time and effort. You are free to go now.

Focus Group 4, female, 17.4.2012, 12 pm

Moderator: Thank you for coming, it is really nice that you are helping us. We can start from here, my question would be: how important are laptops for you? For what do you use it and for how long?

Participant 1: I can not live without my laptop, yeah, mostly I use it for school, but also for social media, things, like facebook and stuff, and my computer is always on. It doesn't mean I use it all day, but, yeah, YouTube, music and stuff like that, yeah. For school, six hours a day, maybe more...

Participant 2: I use it also a lot, for school, iTunes, and so... I try to switch it off when I can, when I'm sleeping (*laughing*), but it is mostly on, because if I have to check something, I can go directly and look for information.

Participant 3: Yeah, I use it maybe eight hours a day, it is mostly on, but sometimes it gets really hot, so I switch it off and wait 20 minutes. But I use it mostly for Spotify, music, blogs and facebook, and yes, for school.

Participant 4: For me is the same, when I wake up, the first thing I do is just check my emails, facebook, and, yeah, for school a lot of time, and it's always on, so I can say, oh lets go and check what happens, and read the news, especially from home. And Skype also, calling always...

Moderator: What about the other girls?

Participant 5: I use it for searching for information, for facebook, Skype... Other social media, watching news, I have everything on, my phone, TV, computer, like three sources of information. It doesn't bother me at all.

Participant 6: And I'm really addicted to my laptop, I even take it if I'm traveling or going to my friends. I use it more than my phone.

Participant 7: I use it for everything like it was mentioned before; I believe I'm addicted to it too. But sometimes it feels good to get away from it.

Moderator: How did you decide to buy the laptop you have now? What was the process, where did you look for information?

Participant 7: For me... It's actually, I always go to my brother and he gives me choices that I can look up then."

Participant 1: I just went and bought an Apple, because the battery lasts longer, and for me that is very important.

Participant 2: For me it was also my brother, he said buy that, do not buy another, and then my cousin bought it and I tried and liked it, so I bought it too.

Participant 3: I was very skeptic with Mac computers, because my sister has one and I don't like it at all. So I asked a friend of mine, a boy, who is kind of a nerd, and I told him what I want and he helped me.

Participant 4: I do not have a brother (*laughing*), but I heard from friends that Apple computers are good, so I did search a bit on internet if it is really so good, so I decided to buy it.

Moderator: What did you read?

Participant 4: Yeah, just on internet on few pages some comments, and I went to different stores and asked what are the differences. And if it was worth it to pay more money or if I just should go for a normal pc.

Moderator: Okay, and what about you girls?

Participant 6: I had a HP, but then I realized that everyone uses Apple, and then I bought it because I wanted it, I read a bit before, comments, in forums discussions, I just 'google' it, and read it. It is interesting to hear different opinions from different people, different countries, how they react. And in my case because, I think that Mac it is not so easy to use.

Participant 1: It looks simple, but it doesn't mean it is simple, it is quite difficult.

Participant 5: For me the first thing, I asked my brother, because I had no idea. He would just narrow down the choices, what I can use. And then I was looking for HP, and I found that the battery lasts eight hours, so I was searching on the internet if it's true, I read the forums and you have all information what is true, and what is not true, and I really had no idea how to ... which comments I should follow, then I was searching on YouTube and other websites.

Moderator: Do you read, in general, online reviews before you buy something? Not necessary electronics, but in general?

Participant 7: Yes...

Participant 6: Yes, sometimes...

Moderator: Do you trust them or..

Participant 2: Well it depends, because I know, that for example, the comments for hotels, and stuff like that is also the owner that posts comments, so it's not always actually costumers. And usually these people I know, they use real names as a pseudonym, like Barbara or Mandy, and these are not real. Because usually real is 'basketball0073' and so on. So I trust more these.

Moderator: Great. Now we will give you some examples of some review examples and we will discuss them. These reviews are taken from Amazon, and only parts comments are taken. On the one side you have negative reviews, on the other side there are positive reviews. We do not want you to concentrate on the content, just check the information you see about the person writing the reviews.

(Everyone is reading)

Moderator: Which information about the reviewer and the message would seem more credible to you?

Participant 5: When you first see the page you follow those comments that have photos or something, and if you want to have the reliable information you search, if it's like you said, if it's Barbara or just DirtySock, of course, Barbara and Mr. Jones for me is more reliable.

Moderator: What do the others think?

Participant 1: Yeah, this guy wearing a suit seems more reliable, and the last one, because it is written, the software technician so yeah, if it is about the computer, probably you gonna go for that one because you think he knows more, than just someone without the picture or just this girl.

Participant 6: Well, I think I have a bit different opinion, because, before I was working in the company, and we were writing comments, like commenting on products, and yeah, we were posting photos, names and everything, and then it is kind of consultancy, but you are trying to avoid this negative side of products, so you point out only the good things, but basically people who were commenting how it is in real life and they where posting that they are like software technicians or something like that, but without a photo, because people who are commenting on blogs to express their opinion, they do not want to be recognized. They don't put pictures on their profile, they write like 'bla bla bla' doesn't matter what and then they write their opinion. So, it depends what kind of products also, because if you can 'google' this person and his name and surname, he doesn't want to have this, I don't know, like wrong attitudes towards him.

Participant 7: I also think it is kind of obvious, this 'real name' thing is from Amazon, but it looks a bit suspicious for me

Moderator: What do the other girls think?

Participant 2: It looks just too perfect, look at this product... And they are probably looking for a picture of good looking people and the age, the target group... yeah, I would definitely trust DirtySock.

Participant 3: Yeah, I would trust DirtySock too.

Moderator: What information would you like to know about the person writing the review? What would be important, like age, gender...

Participant 5: For me it is the country, I don't know why, I don't have attitudes or stereotypes, but it shows maybe in which countries this product was used, and it is important. For example if you read the comment from China, so maybe you are not interested, and you don't want to have the same attitude, don't know... You know what I mean?

Moderator: What about the age?

Participant 3: Yeah, I think that matters a bit. If someone writes a comment and it says that he is 20 years old, same as me, and he had problems with the product, than I would feel like, oh maybe then I'm going to have it too.

Participant 6: Yes.

Participant 2: I think the age is also important, because, for example, if someone says this product is difficult to use, it depends if it is someone in our age and know technological things and say it is simple or people who are 80 years old says it is simple, than you know that it is really simple. So you can compare.

Participant 6: And then, to add, I really like when somebody shares their opinions, when they write how they use the product. For what purpose and stuff. Because sometimes it's really different, I can compare how I use a laptop and how my brother uses a laptop, I never had problems, he has problems each week, so it depends. So I want to know a bit about the person and it is nice to know for which purpose they use it...

Moderator: Have you ever read the review and went to check the information about them and their profiles?

Participant 4: Usually I never do it, but on Couchsurfing and stuff like that, I do it a lot. Just to see who these people are, what they do, how they look like, and so on. But for the products... No, not really...

Moderator: Have you ever watched video reviews?

Participant 5: No...

Moderator: These ones like on YouTube where people share their experience?

Moderator: What do you think, would it make you feel more comfortable with the information you get if you would see the person in the video? Would it be more credible than just to read reviews?

Participant 6: For me personally doesn't change my opinion, because it's the same like it depends on the products and it's the same like you reading comment about the movie, you can like it and you can not. It depends on your personality. I watched some reviews,

the video reviews, and one person showed his face and he is talking and stuff, so maybe yeah, I would trust him a bit more. But it depends.

Participant 7: I watched something, a video how to use a camera, and then they showed the price and it was actually nice.

Moderator: But it was from the company or someone else?

Participant 7: No it was a random guy.

Participant 5: I think, I also watched videos, the guy was trying to check an iPhone, I think, and he was throwing the iPhone to the wall, hitting it with a hammer or something like that. I was like, what's wrong with you, you know. You don't have to show it, no one broke his phone like that, you should show like features, you know, like real features how to use it. It was strange for me. And it was a normal guy, not a company review.

Participant 6: But I find it interesting, because if you follow internet reviews there are some guys who are uploading new videos reviews made by them and people are following so it means that they trust probably. Because you can check the amount of followers and reviewers, and they are following, so it means that they trust this person, because he shows his face and so on.

Moderator: Okay, so just to sum up, from the reviewers what and whom would you choose as the most trustful and why?

Participant 7: DirtySock, seems the most reliable.

Participant 5: I think I would choose the software technician maybe.

Participant 4: The software technician or the DirtySock.

Participant 2: DirtySock, it seems to be the most real. And technician, I would be like, I can write it too, but we can't check it.

Participant 3: Yeah, I think the DirtySock too. Because normal people, don't spend so much time writing like or uploading proper pictures and stuff like that. This one seems more realistic, that here he chooses just a dog. Or just a random name, just to get his opinion out.

Moderator: What do you think about the differences between negative and positive reviews? Would you agree, that if it is a negative review, you believe what is written, it doesn't matter who says it, but if it is very positive, then you are more careful?

Participant 5: I think I don't have that, because if I read that something is bad, like this phone is not working, then I'm searching more, and see if other people had this kind of problem. I do not want to rely just on one comment. But when it is positive, then I try to have this in mind, more than the negative stuff, but maybe it just me.

Participant 6: Like, for me it sometimes works, if you have a negative comment and you have a picture, name, surname, country and the age, then for me it works better, because you can go to the forum and just claim and say something bad about the product and everything... Of course, it can be fake information, but still, you know...

Participant 1: I have the same, a picture and info gives me trust.

Moderator: Someone wants to add more?

Participant 4: I believe we have pretty much the same feeling here.