

DOCTORAL PROGRAMME

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Three Essays on How Social Influence Impacts Behaviour on
Online Platforms

By

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Abstract

The impact that online review platforms have on consumer choice is undisputed. While in the past, our choices were based on the opinions of a few close others, the advent of online review platforms has allowed us access to the views and experiences of thousands of internet strangers. Others' opinions matter to us because of our need to be accurate and the need to affiliate with or diverge from certain groups, both of which are driven by an underlying need to maintain a positive self-concept. Social influence- the impact others have on what we say and do- is thus an integral part of the online shopping experience. This thesis examines the behavioural consequences of social influence in the context of online review platforms. In the first part of the thesis, I explore the impact of social influence on what consumers say online. Using real-world review data from Amazon, I demonstrate that products receive higher ratings on platforms when buyers purchase these products as gifts than if they were buying these products for themselves. I follow up this study with experiments to show that givers who care about choosing the perfect gift for recipients engage in motivated reasoning, leading them to exaggerate how favourably the recipients will evaluate these products.

In the second half of the thesis, I study how social influence impacts what consumers do. Essays II and III examine how consumer responses to product review information are impacted by the presence of commonly co-occurring website elements. In Essay II, I explore the impact of recommendation framings on consumer responses to rating dispersion information. I focus on two widely used recommendation framings – “bestsellers” vs. “based on the choices of similar others” – and find that consumers' responses to rating dispersion information differ between these two. Evidence from Essay II suggests that these co-occurring platform elements can lead to unintended consequences that were overlooked in the past because these elements were studied in isolation. While the first two essays focus on numerical ratings, I focus on language features of review text in the final essay. In Essay III, I use real-world restaurant review and check-ins data from Yelp to understand how the presence of explicit credibility cues impacts consumer responses to the linguistic abstractness of review text. The results suggest that although linguistically abstract reviews do lead to more restaurant check-ins, the presence of explicit credibility cues reduces the persuasive impact of review abstractness. Taken together, these three essays provide new insights into how social influence impacts consumer behaviour on online review platforms.

Keywords: *Behaviour on Online Platforms, Social Influence, Product Reviews, Product Ratings.*