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Developing an a-priori model of online review process

Full research paper

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Abstract

More and more online feedback is being relied upon to make choices about the purchases and services we use daily. Conversely, companies rely on online reviews to find new customers and understand how people perceive them. At present, online reviewing process and all its entities have become salient. Hence, we analyse online review trends in research between 2000–2021 with an inductive categorization of 181 articles, in over fifty leading academic outlets. Using this categorization, we investigate trends in the discussion and research on the online reviewer, online review, and review reaction to enrich knowledge and understanding. The fact that there are no studies on frameworks which capture online review characteristics and entities associated with the process, we develop a nomological a-priori net of the online review process that could use by researchers and practitioners. Further, we discuss, limitations of the study, to posit research directions for future scholars.

Keywords Online reviewer, reviewer characteristics, review reaction, review process, literature review

1 Introduction

Prior to the era of the internet and social media, consumers relied on 'reviewers' and 'critics' to assist them in making buying decisions. As such, some professional review bodies have been established to provide a uniform, standardized and impartial mechanism for providing ratings. For example, the Michelin Star guide to restaurants and the HOTREC (Hotels, Restaurants, and Cafés in Europe) guide for hotels have been established and managed by domain experts from each of the respective areas (Schroeder, 1985), established through well-established evaluative criteria (Titz et al., 2004). These reviews minimize the reviewer's bias and provide a fair assessment of the subject or service (Schroeder, 1985). However, such reviews and review platforms were limited to a small number of professionals creating communities of exclusivity (Verboord, 2009). With the advent and massive proliferation of the internet and social media, the entire philosophy of providing reviews has changed. Since the end of the 1990s, internet has dominated mainstream media (Nguyen and Western, 2006).

The popularity of online reviews increased heavily as the consumers were able to share their opinions effortlessly through social media, shopping, and communication platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). According to Review Monitoring¹, over 43 percent of United States internet shoppers end up, noting their experience with products or services in such online platforms (Freddie, 2019). Therefore, review platforms such as Google, TripAdvisor, and OpenTable had now become the surrogates of expert reviews. Given the rising examples of how online reviews being unscrupulous, manipulated, and falsified (Luca and Zervas, 2013) and given that 60-80 percent of consumers commence their 'shopping' process online, (Ramachandran et al., 2011), "online reviews" can make a business blossom or wither. A positive review can improve the fame, trust, and revenue of a business. Ghose and Ipeiritis (2011) have discovered a growth in the average subjectivity of the review results in an increase in product sales. Moreover, Luca (2011) has discovered that a one-star increase in Yelp ratings was found to trigger a 5–9 percent increase in revenue at restaurants. On the other hand, a negative review can damage the prestige and trustworthiness of a business leading to fewer sales and profitability. An interesting finding is that a single negative review could wither around 30 customers and people tend to halt businesses with no reviews or with too many negative reviews (Murphy, 2020).

However, a study carried out by Senecal and Nantel (2004) has showed that online reviewers' recommendations are the most influential when making purchase decisions. Online reviewers can provide low-level details that otherwise would be absent in a professional review. For example, while a HOTREC provides a star rating for a hotel, online reviewers could provide a detailed view of the facilities and issues regularly (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). Furthermore, online platforms and the frequency of online reviews allow organizations to be better connected with their customers (Zhu and Zhang, 2010). In addition, the freedom that online reviewers experience in writing comments would allow them to identify genuine issues in real-time, making it easier for organizations to improve their products or services.

Our objective of this paper is to commence an informed discussion on the unique nature of this broad topic as scholars perceive it. We have identified distinctive characteristics of an online reviewer. In addition, we have identified review characteristics as well as review reaction characteristics. We focus on the interrelationship between these entities which are significant in the review process. There exist several past studies that explore fragments of these entities such as review credibility (Wang et al., 2013), review helpfulness (Hsiao et al., 2012) and so on. Some scholars have studied the association between two entities. For example, Ngo-Ye and Sinha (2014) examined the influence of reviewer engagement characteristics on online review helpfulness using a text regression model. Fang, Kucukusta and Law (2016) analysed the influence of readability and reviewer characteristics on online tourism reviews. A number of past research prove the significance of online reviews. However, there's no richer study on understanding and distinguishing online review entity characteristics, attributes and interrelationships. Hence, we aim at identifying the merits of online reviewer and review, the areas that are addressed by academics up to date and areas where more work needs to be done. We aim to add value to existing research as well. Therefore, this research addresses the overarching question:

RQ: Can a conceptual model be developed that captures the attributes of main entities involved in the online review process?

¹ Review Monitoring is a single source for collecting reviews for every product found on the web in a central designed and organized dashboard with powerful analytics. It provides useful statistics for businesses on online reviews. <https://www.reviewmonitoring.com>

As will be seen, the answer to this question enabled us to then speculate on online review characteristics and reviewer features were interacting, and how areas of current and future interest might be interrelated. We incorporated the review reaction process and attributes in order to come up with a profound theoretical framework. As these interactions take place on technology-based platforms we put much weight on the technology related features as well. It is our intention to build an-a-priori model based on our literature by identifying the areas of interest, the trends in those areas and interrelationships between them.

To the best of authors knowledge, there are no prior studies on models that combine the main entities and characteristics associated with the review process. Therefore, we try to fill this existing knowledge gap in the literature. In addition, in this study we followed the tradition of two research analyses relating to information systems and mobile computing (Wang et al. 2015; Ladd et al. 2010) that complement our research methods and objectives.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the research methodology. Second, we present our annotated bibliography on online reviewer and review characteristics from 2000 to 2021. Our literature synthesis includes across topic and within topic analysis. Third, we introduce an *a priori* model to supplement the analysis. Fourth, this paper concludes with a discussion on practical implications and recommendations for future research.

2 Methodology

With the intention of obtaining a sense of the current state of online review/reviewer studies, we followed the guidelines of Dube and Pare's (2003) inductive categorization method. As per the inductive categorization method, we: (1) carefully selected appropriate journals and conferences, (2) identified the articles relevant to our study, (3) created inductive categories and subcategories based on the content of the articles, (4) assessed the number of articles in each category and subcategory, (5) analysed the trends, and (6) developed an a priori model based on online reviewer characteristics.

2.1 Selection of Appropriate Journals and Conferences

In retrieving appropriate academic research articles for our study, we began our search process by searching the Senior Scholars' Basket of Journals: *European Journal of Information Systems (EJIS)*, *Information Systems Journal (ISJ)*, *Information Systems Research (ISR)*, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems (JAIS)*, *Journal of Information Technology (JIT)*, *Journal of Management Information Systems (JMIS)*, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems (JSIS)*, and *MIS Quarterly (MISQ)* and some other peer reviewed journals: *Computers in Human Behavior (CHB)*, *Decision Support Systems (DSS)*, *International Journal of Hospitality Management (IJHM)*, *Journal of Marketing Research (JMR)* and *Tourism Management (TM)*. We extended our search by referring multiple sources without limiting to academic discipline, publication status and region with the aim to obtain as many relevant papers as possible (Sigerson & Cheng, 2018). Our search included other journals and conference proceedings, specifically those of the Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS), ACM (Association for Computer Machinery) International Conference, Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems (PACIS), Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS) and International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS). For the purposes of this review, to gather new statistics we reviewed few websites while we used Google Scholar to locate useful academic publications. We searched via Google as well.

2.2 Identification of Relevant Papers

As the first step to locate relevant papers, by defining search terms, drawing on Shamseer et al. (2015) we used the key words "review", "reviewer", "online review", "online reviewer", "review characteristics", "reviewer characteristics", "rating scale", "expertise", "trustworthiness", "credibility", "identity disclosure", "online attractiveness", "online feedback", "online comment", "recommendation", "review process", "star rating", "scale", "rating" and "online review model". We used online review characteristics such as "objectivity" and "readability" to locate papers that specifically discuss those features. We excluded the journal and conference articles that returned a positive result and however did not clearly represent an online reviewer or review characteristic. Application of this criteria resulted a total of 181 articles between the years 2000 to 2021, distributed as 144 journal articles and 37 conference articles.

2.3 Creation of Inductive Categories and Subcategories

As there is no existing methodology for classifying online reviewer characteristics, we followed the inductive categorization guidelines introduced by Dube and Pare (2003) and Esteves and Bohorquez

(2007) in their Information Systems studies. First, we created two separate tables for online review and reviewer including all the identified characteristics by referring to scholarly articles. We were able to identify more than twenty online reviewer characteristics. Hence, we categorized similar characteristics into broad categories for simplified understanding. Next, we identified overlaps, as well as relationships between main constructs and sub-constructs. Then, this consolidation produced seven major constructs. Table 1. depicts the main constructs, the segmentation of the constructs, how these sub-constructs are established and definitions of the subsections for online reviewer respectively. In sub-construct establishment, we have used the term ‘automatically defined’ if the attribute is defined by the review platform/system while ‘user defined’ delineates the attributes that are defined by the reviewers themselves. Some attributes are defined by the other users in the online review platforms and we have categorized those as ‘community defined’ while the attributes that do not fall under the above categories remain ‘undefined’.

Main Construct	Sub Construct	Sub Construct establishment	Description of Sub Construct
Identity Disclosure (Allington, 2016; Liu & Park, 2015; Chen & Lurie, 2013)	Age (Forman et al., 2008)	User defined	Reviewer’s age
	Name (Baek et al., 2012)	User defined	Name of the reviewer or Online Username
	Location (Ma et al., 2013)	Automatically defined	Geographical location of the reviewer
	Profile picture (Karimi & Wang, 2017)	User defined	Reviewer’s real photo used when creating an online account in a website.
	Ethnicity (Lin & Xu, 2017)	User defined	Reviewer’s common national or cultural background
	Reviewer ID (Wu, 2019)	Automatically defined	The identity of the reviewer in the online market
Expertise (Gretzel et al., 2007; Hu et al., 2008; Pinch & Kesler, 2011)	Length of membership (Gretzel et al., 2007)	Automatically defined	Reviewer is active for a long time (more than a year) as a member and has more experience in posting reviews
	Quality of engagement (Wu, 2019)	Automatically defined	Badges received according to the performance as a reviewer. Best contributors receive a higher status badge
	Frequency of engagement (Cao et al., 2011)	Community defined	Number of helpful votes received by the reviewer for his review from the online community
	Internet / Computer Skills (Pinch and Kesler, 2011)	Undefined	Reviewer’s knowledge/competency about Internet and computer technology
Online Attractiveness (Guo & Zhou, 2016; Karimi & Wang, 2017; Wang et al., 2013; Hsiao et al., 2012)	Familiarity (Pinch & Kesler, 2011)	Undefined	Knowledge of the source through exposure
	Likability (Zhou and Guo, 2017)	Community defined	An affection for the source due to physical appearance, behaviour, or other personal traits
	Similarity (Guo and Zhou, 2016)	Undefined	A supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver
	Online social status (Zhou and Guo, 2017)	Community defined	Position of the reviewer holds in an online community
	Response speed (Weiss et al., 2008)	Automatically defined	How long does the reviewer take to respond questions raised by review readers in the online community
	Connectedness (Guo and Zhou, 2016)	Undefined	Friendly and effective communication with other reviewers in the community
	Reviewer Exposure (Wu, 2019)	Undefined	Reviewer visits other virtual communities and read reviews, open to various opinions

Reviewer Reputation (Forman et al., 2007; Willemsen et al., 2011)	Reviewer engagement (Ngo-Ye & Sinha, 2014)	Automatically defined	How many reviews have user written, Number of friends, fans, and awards
	Recency (Lee & Choeh, 2014)	Undefined	Being recent, new, updating regularly
	Frequency of Reviewing (Cao et al., 2011)	Automatically defined	Number of reviews made over a particular period
Credibility (Tanaka et al., 2012; Lin & Xu, 2017; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Wang et al., 2016; Kuan et al., 2015; Metzger et al., 2010)	Fairness/ Unbiased (Pinch and Kesler, 2011)	Undefined	Impartial behaviour without favouritism or discrimination. Writes reviews without getting paid
	Trustworthiness (Zhu et al., 2014)	Undefined	Reliable and truthful expression of opinion/evaluation without false information
	Complete profile (Lim and Heide, 2015)	Undefined	Inclusion of all the necessary and appropriate details/specifics/photo about the reviewer
	Accurate (Banerjee et al., 2017)	Undefined	Precise and exact details
	Believability (Banerjee et al., 2017)	Undefined	Information that can be believed or credible
	Objectivity (Abedin et al., 2019)	Undefined	Concept of truth independent from individual subjectivity
Reviewer Innovativeness (Pan & Zhang, 2011)	Reviewer Innovativeness (Pan & Zhang, 2011)	Undefined	Generate new opinions and adds value to the review by thinking beyond and viewing things in different ways.
Reviewer Attributions (Barkhordari, 2007)	Reviewer Attributions (Chen and Lurie, 2013)	Undefined	Reviewer's personality, traits, character, personal style, attitudes, choice, and mood

Table 1. Online Reviewer Main and Sub-Constructs

Table 2. demonstrates the main constructs and identified sub constructs in relation to online review.

Main Construct	Sub Constructs	Description of the Sub Construct
Rating Scale (Decker & Trusov, 2010; Pinch & Kesler, 2011)	Rating (Guo & Zhou, 2016)	Number of points allocated by the reviewers indicating their assessment of the products/services used.
	Conformity (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2009)	A review will be more helpful when the rating it gives is close to the consensus reached among ratings.
Review Content (Shen et al., 2015)	Comprehensiveness (Fang et al., 2020)	Detailed and specific knowledge including images
	Position (Chen et al., 2006)	Featured reviews or not
	Quality (Chen et al., 2006)	Quality of the information given in the review
Valence (Forman et al., 2007)	Valence (Zablocki et. al., 2019)	Positive or negative nature of the review
Timeliness (Zhao et al., 2015)	Timeliness Zhao et al. (2015)	Current, up-to-date, and timely message
Review Depth (Otterbacher, 2010)	Length (Zhao et al., 2015)	Extensiveness of the information offered in the review
	Volume (Park & Lee, 2008)	Total number of interactive reviews
	Readability (Li et al. 2019)	The degree to which a piece of text is understandable to readers
Rationality (Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2011)	Fact Based (Cheung et al., 2012)	Based on true events or experiences
	Objective (Cheung et al.)	Not influenced by personal feelings

	Verifiable (Cheung et al., 2012)	Exist evidences to be proved true or genuine
Consistency (Gretzel et al., 2007)	Consistency (Cheung et al., 2012)	Level of consistency between review text and its attendant review rating

Table 2. Online Review Main and Sub Constructs

For Table 1. and Table 2. all the references are not included due to space limitations. Please contact the authors to receive a copy of the full reference list.

3 Results and Discussion

In this section, we will discuss the reviewer's characteristics that have a significant influence on the review he/she is would make. Further, this section continues with steps 4–6 of Dube and Pare's (2003) inductive categorization method: (4) assessment of the number of articles in each category and subcategory, (5) analysis of the trends, and (6) development of an online review comprehensive framework.

3.1 Analysis of Trends

We first discuss the distribution of articles by year to identify the trends in online review research. For the literature search, we explored studies published between the years 2000 and 2021 in leading peer-reviewed journals. To develop an overview of academic activity relating to online review criteria, conferences were scanned for the period 2000-2021 as well. We used the framework used by Esteves and Pastor (2001) to develop the table of publications identified from journals and conferences (Sedera et al. 2017). We also included relevant articles from other sources we found during the literature collection process (Esteves and Pastor, 2001). We could identify that there has been more focus on online review criteria between the years 2010 and 2017.

Having established a table representing academic literature, we have explored the distribution of articles and topics, and which of the topics were under-explored in the main constructs. Shown in Figure 1, within the three main categories the overwhelming area of interest was – Online Reviewer (90), followed by Online Review (60). Finally, the least-represented major area was Review Reaction (8).

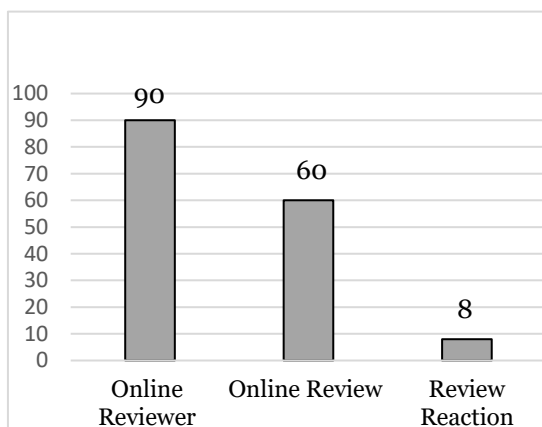


Figure 1. Number of Articles by Category

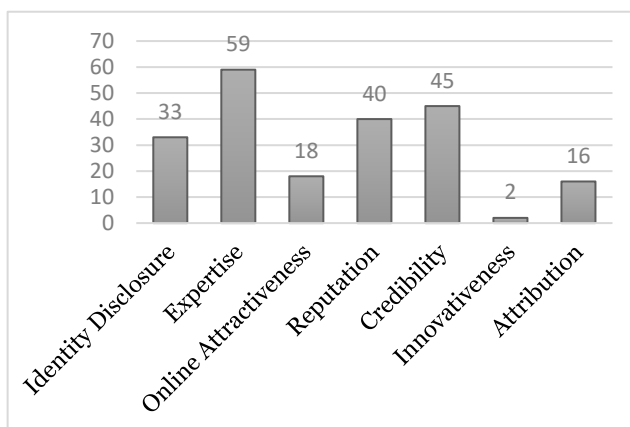


Figure 2. Number of Articles by Online Reviewer Characteristics

Finding a relatively large number of article categorizations in each of the online reviewer and review categories is encouraging because it indicates that we were able to successfully find the main areas of interest in online reviewing. Perhaps due to the small number of articles in review reaction category, i.e., contained only two constructs: helpful votes and likes/emojis. However, it does not answer as to whether there exist main areas of online reviewing that may either not yet exist, or exist in such small numbers that they are not yet considered main areas. As was the case with Scornavacca et al. (2006) and Ngai and Gunasekaran (2007), these constructs exist only through the lens of the type of study that was conducted.

Similarly, when we consider the number of articles according to the online reviewer characteristics many researchers have studied on expertise, credibility, reputation and identity disclosure. There has not been extensive research on reviewer innovativeness, online attractiveness and also the reviewer attribution features.

Figures 2 and 3 provide an overall interpretation on interest over the years for consolidated sub-constructs in the online reviewer and online review main constructs respectively.

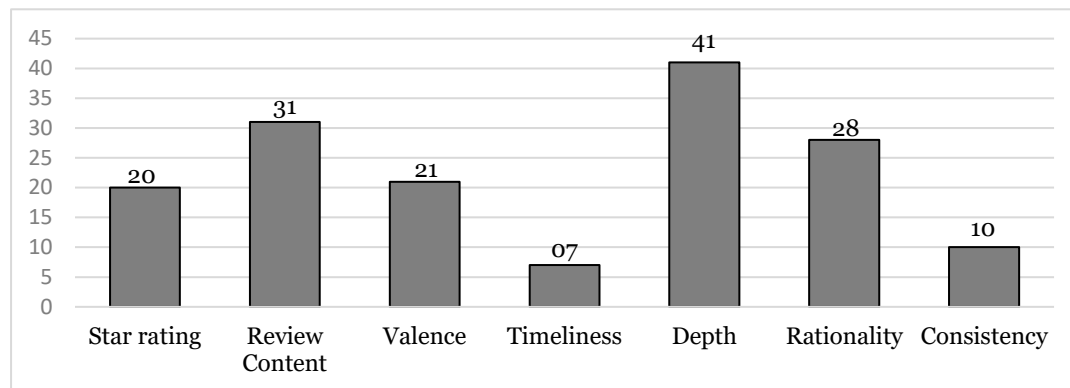


Figure 3. Number of Articles by Online Review Characteristics

We first examined the distribution of categories, and made note of the areas that are commonly addressed, noting, and analysing an interesting trend in the subcategory counts over time. Finally, we make note of the areas that are less commonly addressed, and begin to focus on areas that might prove fertile to future research. Ultimately, this analysis enables the creation of a nomological a-priori net i.e., a theoretical network containing a construct of interests are confirmed of online review process characteristics and attributes in the next section.

3.2 Development of an a-priori model

Our study of online review literature helped us posit interrelationships between these areas while identifying the areas of interest, and the trends in those areas. We captured these areas of interest and interrelationships in the process and developed a nomological a-priori net of online process as provided in Figure 4. “A nomological net is a broadly integrative theoretical framework that identifies the key constructs associated with a phenomenon of interest and the associations among those constructs. For example, psychopathy is a complex notion involving a significant nomological network of knowledge and speculations about components, causes, correlates, and consequences as well as their interrelationships and means of measurement or evaluation” (“APA Dictionary of Psychology”, 2021). It demonstrates the online reviewer characteristics, review process characteristics and review reactions. Moreover, it exhibits the attributes that may act as catalysts as reviewer attributes and review process attributes. In this model we have proposed technology and platform attributes: ubiquity, diffusion speed, augmentation speed, multi-platform integration and co-creation under review characteristics as well as attributes such as rating scale, valence, timeliness, consistency and lurker and poster under review reaction.

When developing the model, first we identified the main entities: Reviewer, Review and Review Platform. Then, we mapped significant characteristics of each entity. Using the past literature, we tried to find interrelationships between entities and attributes. Fang et al. (2016), found that reviewer characteristics affect the perceived value of reviews. A study by Liu and Park (2015) revealed that a combination of both reviewer and review characteristics positively affect the usefulness of the reviews. Kuan et al. (2015) studied the relationship between review voting in online review systems and the review characteristics. The amount and quality of reviewer contributions on review platforms play a critical role on long-term success of the online review platforms (Samiei and Tripathi, 2013). Finally, we were able to identify connections between the entities, characteristics and attributes who play a major role in the review process that takes place in an online environment.

Our proposed nomological *a-priori* net of online review process is distinctive to the prior models of online reviewing. Previous research has proposed models for examining the relationship between the valence of online reviews and perceived enjoyment (Park and Nicolau 2015). A study by Zhang et al. (2014) has developed a heuristic-systematic model to examine the influence of online reviews. There are many models that investigate online review, reviewer, product and consumer characteristics and purchase intentions (Xu et al. 2015; Tran 2020; Zheng and Chi 2014). However, authors could not find a complete model of online review process including characteristics of review, reviewer, review platform and review reaction. Hence, we expect this study will add value to current and future research on the online review process.

It is clear from Figure 1 that areas of research on online reviewer and online reviews have received ample

attention, while few studies have examined the way individuals react to the reviews that are already posted in the system. However, there exists studies that address how businesses react to reviews. Therefore, more studies observing the reactions of individuals on reviews are required. By referring to popular review sites such as yelp.com, trip advisor and google reviews, we found that reaction options such as helpful votes, likes, emojis: cool & funny, follow, share, save and report are provided by those platforms for individuals to interact in the review process rather than merely reading the online reviews.

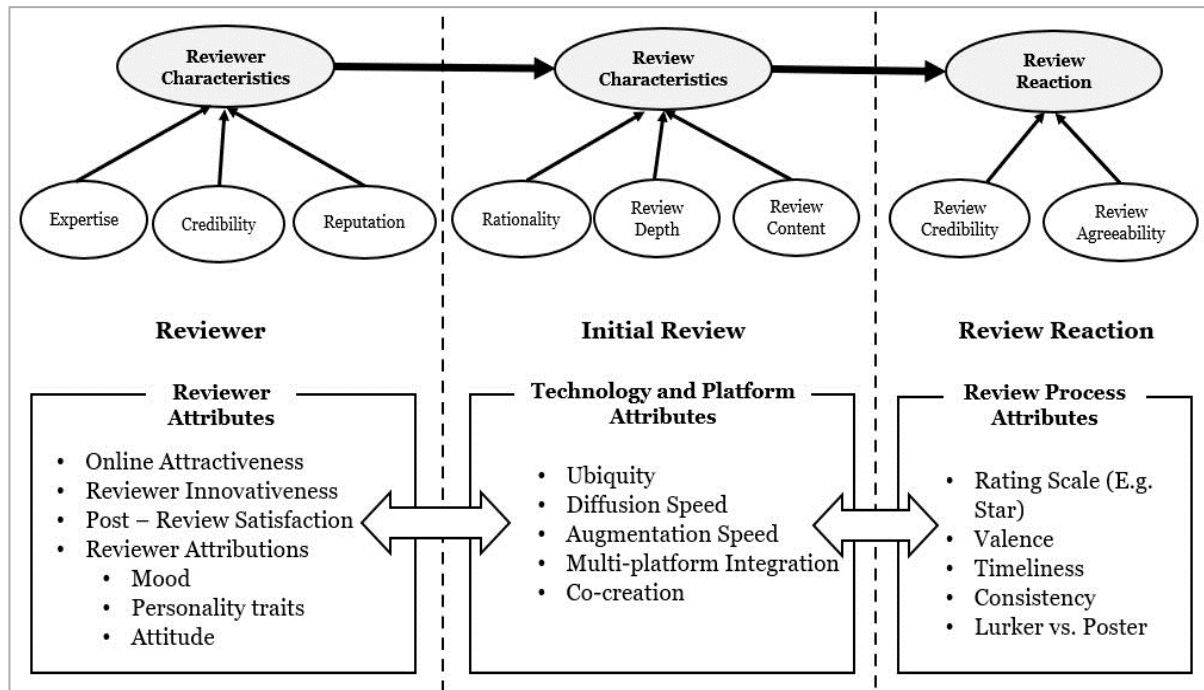


Figure 4. The a-priori nomological net of online review process

Our review shows that few studies have examined the characteristics, attributes, processes, and interrelationships that we have proposed in our model. Reviewers are the ones who essentially write the reviews and these reviews pose a direct impact on the individual's behaviour in the system. Therefore, more studies are needed to learn how the individuals react to the reviews in the system and reviewer attributes that influence the reviewing process. In addition, future research can be conducted on technology aspects of online review platform and post-review satisfaction of the reviewer. Therefore, future researchers could make use of this complete nomological a-priori net to examine new and under-explored online review research areas and develop adoption frameworks, interacting strategies and practices to improve the quality of the online reviewing process.

4 Conclusion

This research attempted to answer the question: Can a conceptual model be developed that captures the online review process entities, characteristics and attributes that can be used by researchers and practitioners. In order to answer this research question, we scrutinized online reviewer, review process and technology attributes using an inductive categorization of articles in leading academic outlets.

The first contribution of this study is in the development of an *a-priori* model of online review process itself. We attempted to expand the scope of our understanding of the online reviewing process, entities, and characteristics. The second contribution of this study will be for product designers. Studies have found that the information concerning user needs is identifiable in product reviews (Ji et al. 2016; Zhang et al. 2016). In fact, collecting and understanding user behaviours and needs are critical to the success of new product development. Thus, analysis of individual entity characteristics and identification of interrelationships between those entities will bring insights into new product innovation and improvement. Moreover, the model proposed by the authors will allow business organizations to investigate how individuals react to reviews available in the system, its influence on the product sales and marketing. Business firms will be able to exploit new technologies based on the newly expedited marketing strategies.

This study identifies several avenues for future research. First, it identifies the opportunity for research

in under-explored online reviewer attributes. The model will enable future prospective researchers who are interested in exploring this area to frame their research within the online review process and focus on areas requiring additional attention. For example, a study can be carried out to explore the post review satisfaction of the reviewer. Second, it identifies the opportunity for research in technology and platform attributes. Third, it identifies the opportunity for research addressing how individuals in the system react to the reviews and the feedback options that available for individuals to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction after reading a review. Moreover, future research may carry on lurkers as opposed to posters. Fourth, it identifies the opportunity for research into broader impacts of the online reviewing process for individuals, professionals, and business firms. We do not offer definitive research questions; however, rather, illustrate how researchers can examine and understand the characteristics and relationships associated with online reviewing. We hope this review will provide researchers with a foundation to study this important phenomenon.

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