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Explore How Factors that Contribute to Online Review Helpfulness in Automotive Marketing

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Short Paper

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Abstract

According to empirical research, a helpful online review (OR) actively affects consumers' decision-making behavior, and researchers explained the factors affecting the helpfulness. However, scholars tend to focus on the traditional B2C context in the research on helpfulness; thus, research on consumer understanding of OR information is scarce. Automotive marketing uses information technology to integrate online and offline resources, while consumers widely apply Internet information, in particular, ORs, to their consumption decisions. In this study, based on the qualitative investigation, we used group interviews and qualitative analysis to explain the three types of factors affecting the helpfulness of OR: channel, presentation type, and quality. We further clarified that the OR quality perceived by consumers is composed of the expertness, interactivity, timeliness, accuracy, and creditability of the information. This study will provide enterprises with an effective approach for identifying and judging useful ORs, and operable criteria for selecting useful information.

Keywords: Online review, helpfulness, channel, presentation type, information quality

Introduction

As information technology, especially Internet technology, has been deeply developed and widely applied, consumers in the online shopping environment can freely share their experiences purchasing and using specific products (Zhu and Zhang 2010). At the same time, consumers can comment on the purchased products or services in terms of price, performance, etc. Due to the virtuality of e-commerce, consumers cannot touch products, as in the traditional channel, which results in large uncertainties and risks in online shopping (Li and Karahanna 2015). Thus, checking online reviews (ORs) posted by other consumers on the Internet is an effective approach.

In this study, ORs refer to the views and opinions on products, shopping experiences, and companies posted by consumers on Internet media, such as shopping sites, review sites, forums, social networking sites (SNSs), blogs, microblogs, and instant messaging (IM) tools, which may be positive or negative, based on consumers' real experiences or the experiences of others (family, friend, or colleague).

Because ORs affect the behavior intention of consumers, as well as potential transactions, scholars have conducted research on the effects and mechanisms that influence ORs (Hu et al. 2008). However, due to wide sharing of ORs, especially information overload, consumers cannot process so much complicated information, which increases their cognitive costs, and reduces their decision-making efficiency (Liu and Park 2015). Thus, scholars and practitioners have to understand how consumers identify and judge helpful ORs.

Scholars have analyzed the influential factors from different perspectives and explored the relationship between each factor and the helpfulness of ORs. For example, Liu et al. (2013) hold that in an OR, the reviewer's experience and writing styleare helpful indexes for consumers. In an empirical study of 1,587 ORs on Amazon, Mudambi and Schuff (2010) argue that the review depth and product type affect the helpfulness of ORs. Scholars have taken into account the effects of different factors on helpfulness, but existing research is often limited to ORs on traditional business to consumer (B2C) e-commerce platforms, such as Amazon, Taobao, and eBay. These results help enterprises understand the factors affecting the helpfulness of ORs, and develop effective information feedback mechanisms for their online sales platforms, to promote consumers' purchase decisions. However, automotive marketing faces a different environment from that of traditional platform-based B2C e-commerce. Consumers tend to collect and process online and offline information and resources to decide on the purchase of a car. For example, consumers collect varied information about the technical index, price and promotion, dealer reputation, after-sales service, financial service, and evaluation of use via the Internet, and then often visit offline stores to inspect the appearance and driving experience of the car (Qiu 2016). In addition, the purchase is often decided jointly by family members, because, in most cases, consumers have to take into account the opinions of family members and friends (Kong 2018). At present, online and offline environments are integrated in Chinese automotive marketing, and consumers encounter ORs from different sources, in different forms, and of different quality during the purchase decision process. Therefore, research in this field is far more complicated than OR research on common products. Thus, it is necessary to appropriately expand existing research on the helpfulness of ORs to fill the gap in the relevant research field.

Based on the above, this study combined qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis to answer the following three questions:

1. *What factors affect consumer perception of the helpfulness of ORs in automotive marketing?*
2. *Are there different degrees of the effects of different factors on helpfulness?*
3. *How to understand the effects of these factors on customer behavioral intentions?*

Literature Review

Scholars have summarized the effects of ORs on consumers into two aspects: potential consumers' purchase decisions and existing consumers' brand loyalty (Filieri and McLeay 2014; Li and Karahanna 2015; Zhu and Zhang 2010). In terms of purchase decisions, potential consumers can have a faster and more comprehensive understanding of the use and shopping experience of other consumers through the Internet. Such information provides a basis for their decision-making, and reduces the time required. In essence, potential consumers identify relevant information in ORs to construct their behavior intention and affect their purchasing behavior.

In general, ORs are highly subjective. Therefore, consumers have to consider whether the view in each OR is reasonable and helpful, and they have to comprehensively weigh many other views, even conflicting views sometimes. Therefore, consumers have to analyze, compare, and judge numerous ORs to screen out helpful information, as a reference for future behavior decisions. Many scholars have proposed relevant factors that may affect consumers' perception of helpfulness, to accurately understand the helpfulness of ORs. For example, Mudambi and Schuff (2010) argues that the number of words in an OR affects the helpfulness directly. Hong et al. (2017) believe that the release time and textual features of information have an important effect on the helpfulness perceived by consumers. Cao et al. (2011) hold that the information format and extreme reviews have a greater effect on helpfulness. Some scholars believe that the publicity of reviewer identity and the addition of review details can increase the helpfulness perceived by consumers, and thus, enhance consumer confidence (Filieri 2015). In addition, some scholars argue that the reputation and expertness of reviewers may also significantly affect the helpfulness of ORs (Hao et al. 2009; Kusumasondjaja et al. 2012).

In existing research, scholars have identified the factors that affect OR helpfulness, but problems remain. First, as pointed out by scholars, the product type has a regulatory effect on the helpfulness perceived by consumers (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). In automotive marketing, existing research does not provide a complete explanation for the factors affecting helpfulness. Second, due to the development of information technology, and continuous progress in the car industry, car sales are in an era of extensive online and offline integration. Thus, more detailed research and exploration of current developments are necessary.

Finally, existing research explains the effects of different factors on the helpfulness of ORs without clarifying the mechanism behind it. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct more in-depth and comprehensive research on automotive marketing, explore the factors affecting the helpfulness, and explain their mechanisms.

Theoretical Foundation and Hypotheses Development

In this study, generally, we believe consumers' behavior is determined by their own intention, which is rational, and their behavior can be effectively explained by the theory of planned behavior (TPB). Specific to automotive marketing, when consumers have enough time to think about their purchase decisions, their purchase intentions are the best way to examine their purchase behavior. Meanwhile, as consumers tend to be limited by time, money, information, personal ability, etc., their behavioral intentions are affected by other factors. On the whole, consumers' purchase behaviors are determined by their own behavioral intentions, which are determined by the consumers' attitude to their behaviors, others' ORs, and consumers' perceived behavior control (PBC), as shown in Figure 1. Each variable is explained in detail: Intention is used to measure the strength of a consumer's plan to perform the purchase. Attitude refers to consumers' positive or negative feelings while they perform their purchase behaviors. OR refers to the influence exerted by consumers' perception of others on the consumers' behavioral decision-making process. PBC reflects the obstacles faced by consumers' perceived purchasing behaviors. The more resources and opportunities consumers have, the fewer obstacles consumers expect, and the stronger their perception of their control over their behavior.

Based on the qualitative investigation, the real-world situation of Chinese automotive marketing, and group interviews, the factors that influence the helpfulness of ORs are expanded, and summarized in three types: channel, presentation type, and quality. In addition, the quality of ORs perceived by consumers is composed of the professionalism, interactivity, integrity, timeliness, accuracy, and credibility of the information. Specific models and research hypotheses are shown in **Figure 1**.
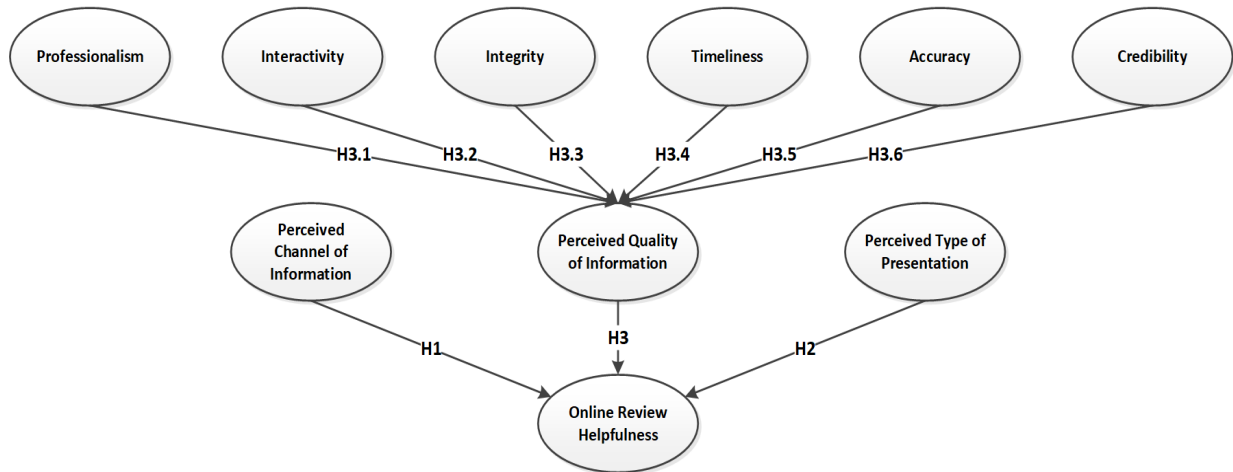

Figure 1. A Preliminary Research Model

Currently, the market size of China's automotive marketing is huge. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2018) from 2009 to 2017, auto sales in China maintained steady growth, with sales of new cars up 3% year-on-year, to 28.879 million units in 2017. As a relatively mature automotive medium, vertical websites have made great achievements in the depth and breadth of automotive information, accumulated a large number of automotive users, and become the main source from which consumers obtain automotive information. According to survey data from iResearch Consulting Group (2018), 58.9% of consumers obtain relevant information through vertical websites In addition, in recent years, automotive sales platforms have gradually become new information acquisition channels, by taking automotive trading as the entry point, to provide consumers with more comprehensive automotive information and car purchase services. Meanwhile, with the continuous development of social media, new media represented by WeChat, Weibo, and Tik Tok, are becoming another important source from which consumers obtain review information and recommend information.

By analyzing current Chinese automotive marketing, in this paper, it is believed that the channel through which consumers obtain ORs refers to the medium in which consumers obtain ORs or help transfer information when ORs move from the publisher of the information to the receiver of the information. This medium may be an automotive sales enterprise, or a third-party independent platform, or social media. Based on this, we defined the channels available to consumers as follows: a channel refers to a medium through which the information is obtained or transferred when it moves from the distributor to the recipient. This medium may be another consumer, a seller or a third-party platform. In this study, the channels for consumers to obtain ORs are divided into three types: seller-, platform-, and SNS-based. In seller-based ORs, the site for posting and exchange of the reviews belongs to the seller, and the seller reserves ownership of review information released in this environment. In platform-based ORs, the site for the posting and exchange of reviews belongs to an independent third party, such as a third-party sales platform or review agent; the seller of the product does not retain ownership of the information. In SNS-based ORs, the exchange of ORs mainly occurs in the social network environment, such as social media websites, blogs, microblogs, instant messaging tools and other network media; information distributors reserve ownership and modification rights of such information. In the group interview, interviewee 3 stated:

> I will certainly consider comments from different sources in my shopping decision. I think the source of information is an important reference for me to judge which information is more useful and trustworthy. For example, reviews from friends in my social circle are the most reliable and useful information for me.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> **H1.** Channels for consumers to obtain ORs influence consumers' judgment of the helpfulness of the information.

Due to the development of Internet technology, consumers can present their reviews in different ways, such as text, pictures, video, etc. In this study, the presentation mode of ORs is used to measure consumers' views on the presentation effect of ORs, and thus, influence consumers' perception of the helpfulness of the information. Interviewee 9 stated:

> When I think about a specific review, the way it's presented affects my acceptance of it. Suppose this information for recording the evaluation of a certain car model presented in the form of video must be more useful and valuable to me than that represented in mere words. Especially for the negative reviews, I think the combination of pictures and words is more useful to me.

Presentation type represents consumers' opinions of the effect of information presentation. As platforms and websites are flooded with a myriad of review information, good presentation is required by consumers to quickly find relevant reviews. If the review information can be clearly presented to consumers in a friendly way, it is easy for consumers to access reviews and make behavioural decisions accordingly (Hu et al. 2012; Liu and Park 2015). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> **H2.** The presentation type of ORs influences consumers' judgment of the helpfulness of this information.

ORs are an important source from which consumers obtain information about products, services, and other aspects. Scholars have pointed out that consumers' acceptance of ORs is significantly affected by the quality of the information (Korfiatis et al. 2012; Liu et al. 2013; Pan and Zhang 2011). In other words, the quality of the information itself significantly affects consumers' judgment of the helpfulness of an OR. Some scholars believe that quality is related to the details in the description of goods, services, or shopping experience in ORs (Korfiatis et al. 2012). Other scholars believe that whether the content of reviews is true and reliable, whether it is closely related to the product, and whether the information is sufficient are important criteria for judging the quality (Fang et al. 2016). Interviewee 16 explained the influence of the quality of an OR on its helpfulness:

> I think there is too much, rather than too little, review information about cars and dealers right now. Buying a car is a relatively long process, and we must collect a lot of reference information in the early stage. In the process of sifting through the information, I will only keep the reviews that are of high quality. Poor-quality information is of no value to my decision-making and wastes my time and energy.

Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. The quality of an OR significantly affects consumers' perception of the helpfulness of ORs.

As information quality is a complex and abstract concept, scholars have tried to explain the connotation of information quality from many different perspectives, which includes many different factors, such as the number and length of words in a review, the time of its release, the credibility of the information publisher, the understandability of the message, the completeness of the review, and the professionalism of the content (Cao et al. 2011; De Chernatony 1989; Filieri 2015; Liu et al. 2017; Liu et al. 2013; Mudambi and Schuff 2010). However, there are no clearly defined judgment criteria for measuring information quality of ORs (Korfiatis et al. 2012). Based on the literature review and the group interview, the quality of ORs perceived by consumers seems to be based on the professionalism, interactivity, integrity, timeliness, accuracy, and credibility of the information, as shown in **Table 1**.

Construct	Description
Professionalism	Professionalism refers to the professional knowledge or seniority of ORs in the online environment; it reflects the professional ability and specialty of reviewers.
Interactivity	Interactivity refers the communication and interaction of information between the information providers (reviewers) and the information recipients (potential consumers browsing the review).
Integrity	Integrity refers the degree of completeness of all necessary information provided by an OR.
Timeliness	Timeliness refers the difference between the time the OR publisher makes a review and the current time the review is read.
Accuracy	Accuracy refers to the accuracy of the evaluation of the product or service presented by ORs.
Credibility	Credibility reflects the rating of the OR recipient for the OR publisher.

Table 1. Constructs Description for Quality of Online Reviews

Because some professional knowledge is inevitably involved in the car purchase process, the professionalism of an OR significantly influences consumers' decision about whether the information is useful (Yang et al. 2019). For example, interviewee 4 said, *"When I buy a car, I will certainly consider a lot of vehicle performance indicators, configuration parameters, and other information. Thus, the high-quality OR must be highly professional."* Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3.1. The professionalism of an OR significantly affects consumers' perception of the quality of ORs.

In the group interview, many consumers pointed out that the communication and interaction of information would affect their judgment of the quality of the information. For example, interviewee 8 said, *"I like to view reviews of further interaction with consumers."* Interviewee 11 said, *"If the reviewer can further interact with others concerning his or her own reviews, it will help me better understand his or her point of view."* Interviewee 13 stated, *"Information interaction allows for a deeper exchange of views on specific issues. For example, about discussion on performance of cars and other aspects, further interaction will allow me to get targeted suggestions, and its reference value will be higher."* Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3.2. The interactivity of ORs significantly affects consumers' perception of the quality of ORs.

Integrity represents the degree of completeness of all necessary information provided by an OR. Interviewee 18 explained, *"Some of the reviews so far can't give out complete information, such as only giving the conclusion, but ignoring the description of what happened. I don't think such information is of much value to me, because I can't make a sound judgment without complete information."* Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3.3. The integrity of ORs significantly affects consumers' perception of the quality of ORs.

Timeliness measures the difference between the time the OR publisher makes a review and the current time the review is read. The smaller the difference, the more consumers think they will encounter the situation described in the review (Malik and Hussain 2020). Interviewee 9 said, *"A recently released OR will be a more important reference for me, and too old information doesn't tell you what's going on. I think by collecting current reviews, we can get a general idea of the current state of the car and the problems we face."* Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3.4. The timeliness of ORs significantly affects consumers' perception of the quality of ORs.

Accuracy refers to the accuracy of the evaluation of the product or service presented by ORs. Interviewee 7 stated, *"I think information accuracy is important to me. If there is a lot of error in the description of the information, or if the logic is mixed, and the message is not clear, then it certainly doesn't make sense to me."* Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3.5. The accuracy of ORs significantly affects consumers' perception of the quality of ORs.

Credibility reflects the rating of the OR recipient for the OR publisher. Existing research indicates that for information publishers with high professional knowledge or rich experience in the use of information, their OR is often regarded by consumers as having higher credibility, and has a greater influence on consumers (Kusumasondjaja et al. 2012). With the development of social media, it seems that the credibility of ORs has been affected by social relations. For example, consumers tend to consider ORs provided by family members, friends, and colleagues who are closely related to them as having higher credibility. Interviewee 6 said, *"Now there is a lot of information on the Internet, reviews are not necessarily all true, and some reviewers may also have financial ties to enterprises, thus it is particularly important to identify the degree of information credibility. The information I find credible is either from professionals or organizations, or from people I know well."* Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3.6. The credibility of ORs significantly affects consumers' perception of the quality of ORs.

Research Design and Methodology

To answer the three research questions in the introduction, we adopted a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis. First, factors pertaining to perceived helpfulness for consumers were collected and summarized in the form of a group interview. Second, with the structured data collected with a questionnaire, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) will be used to verify the research model and hypotheses, and analyze the influence of these factors on the helpfulness of ORs. Finally, data obtained in one-on-one in-depth interviews will be analyzed to understand the mechanism and principle of the influence of these factors on consumers' behavior.

In the group interview stage, six groups of consumers were recruited form Beijing and Hangzhou, China during the December 2021. Six consumers who planned to buy a car within the next six months were invited to participate in each group. A 1:1 ratio of men to women was ensured. A semi-structured interview outline was followed in the group interview, to conduct an in-depth investigation of the influence of ORs on the behaviors of 36 consumers in the process of making purchase decisions. Through an analysis of the interview data, factors that consumers believe affect the helpfulness of ORs were summarized. Based on the qualitative investigation and a review of relevant literature, with data obtained in the group interview, and based on qualitative analysis, a research model of the effect of the helpfulness of ORs is proposed in this paper.

In the future, necessary data will be obtained by distributing a questionnaire, and the research model and hypotheses will be tested with PLS. In this study, PLS will be used, partly because the approach has fewer limitations on experimental data (Hair et al. 2017). Moreover, PLS has no requirement for normal distribution of data (Wetzels et al. 2009). In addition, this approach can easily deal with reflective and formative modes without identification issues (Barclay et al. 1995). As the research model proposed in this paper is a reflective construct and a formative construct, PLS will be chosen to evaluate the research model and verify relevant hypotheses.

To further understand the function mechanism of these factors in the helpfulness of ORs, and provide qualitative analysis, an in-depth interview with 20 consumers will be conducted. During the interview, through a semi-structured interview outline, questions about their buying behavior, specifically about the

perception of ORs, will be raised. Each interview will last for 1.0 to 1.5 hours, during which the participants will be asked about the decision-making basis of their shopping behaviors, and the influence of ORs on their behavior in detail. Emphasis will be placed on how the relevant factors that influence the helpfulness of ORs affect consumers' behavior.

Stage of Research and Future Plan

Based on the qualitative investigation, the results of this study on the helpfulness of ORs to date is discussed. Because research on automotive marketing is different from traditional research on the helpfulness of ORs, by collating secondhand data, in this study, we analyzed the data of automotive marketing in China, expanding the influential factors of the helpfulness of ORs, and dividing them into three types: channel, presentation type, and quality. Using data from group interviews, we improved the proposed research model, and provided a preliminary analysis of these factors' influences on the helpfulness of ORs and the mechanism, according to the data collected from the interviews with consumers. In the future, based on quantitative analysis, we will collect Chinese consumers' opinions on the helpfulness of ORs in automotive purchases, with a structured questionnaire. We adopted PLS-SEM to verify the research model and research hypotheses. The following-up research agenda is as follows:

- In May 2022, we will complete the design of the scale, and determine the final questionnaire items after it has been tested in a small group.
- In June 2022, we will distribute the questionnaire online via Qualtrics, a questionnaire survey tool, and complete the data collection.
- From July to August 2022, we will complete the data analysis and model correction.
- From September to October 2022, via deep interviews with a semi-structured interview outline, we will attempt to understand the process of consumers' decision-making behavior based on qualitative analysis, and explain the reasons for the influence of relevant factors on the helpfulness of ORs.
- In November 2022, we will complete the entire study, and then produce a final research report.

Expected Contributions

Theoretically, existing research shows that ORs have an important impact on consumers' decision-making behavior (Cheung et al. 2008; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2018; Hu et al. 2008; Utz et al. 2012). Researchers have pointed out that helpful ORs can drive consumers' purchasing behavior (Hong et al. 2017; Hu et al. 2012; Kusumasondjaja et al. 2012; Liu and Park 2015). Therefore, identifying the factors influencing the helpfulness of ORs is the focus of current and recent research. Current research focuses on general products, such as clothing, cosmetics, and digital products. Some research has examined service products, such as tourism, resorts, catering, and entertainment. Automobiles have high prices and long service lives. Before making a purchasing decision, consumers are always influenced by various factors, such as their specialized knowledge, economic condition, and intended use. Therefore, purchasing an automobile is quite different from general online purchasing decision-making. Traditional automotive marketing is usually conducted offline; namely, consumers purchase automobiles in physical stores. Today, with the constant expansion of online channels and the gradual popularization of information and messages, the channels for consumers to acquire ORs have changed dramatically. Therefore, we believe it is necessary to explore the factors that influence consumers' perceptions of the helpfulness of ORs based on the current sales mode. The research results can expand the areas for the application of relevant theories, as well as fill in the blanks in relevant research fields.

The proposed research model not only covers the influential factors that have been identified in traditional research but also improves relevant theories. Due to the popularity of social media and the expansion of the sales platform, the channels with which consumers get ORs have changed dramatically: from single-channel information acquisition to multichannel mode. Furthermore, because of the diversity of the methods for sharing information, consumers have more choices for contact with a large number of ORs. When considering the helpfulness of ORs, researchers must make adjustments based on current changes. We introduce the channels by which consumers get ORs, and the presentation type of OR in the model, and further enhance the understanding of ORs, which lays a theoretical foundation for the development of future research.

From the perspective of industrial development, the automotive industry and the amount of automotive marketing in China are enormous. From 2011 to 2017, the online automotive advertisement market grew significantly. In 2017, the market reached RMB 15.07 billion, and the growth rate was 17.3% (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018). Meanwhile, with the continuous flourishing of Internet media and the decline of traditional media, particularly the large-scale development of social media, automotive advertisement budgets will flow into the Internet to a large extent, which will promote the continuous growth of the online automotive advertisement market. It is estimated that in 2019, the online automotive advertisement market will reach RMB 19.08 billion (iResearch Consulting Group 2018). By virtue of the perfect online and offline service layout, the automotive e-commerce platform has obvious advantages, and will gradually become the major participant, pathfinder, and leader of automotive ecological marketing. Due to the continuous development of information technology, it is more convenient for customers to get information relevant to automobiles, and communicate, in an increasingly wider range. In purchasing decision-making, ORs that consumers browse play an important role. Consumers also think that ORs provide more accurate and authentic assessment information, which provides significant references for their purchasing decision-making.

The research results will not only help automotive sales enterprises and consumers have a better understanding of the helpfulness of ORs but also effectively improve their decision-making efficiency. Moreover, this research will help enterprises choose the proper approach to establish a mechanism for assessing OR helpfulness, to facilitate potential sales volume. Specifically, by providing helpful ORs, enterprises can attract consumers to visit their webpages, increase the amount of time consumers browse their webpages, and improve their sales performance. This research will provide enterprises with an effective approach for identifying and judging useful ORs, and operable criteria for selecting useful information. In the future, the quantitative analysis results can also provide effective guidance for enterprises for dealing with ORs, with different features, and offer theoretical support for enterprises to understand the influences of various factors on consumer behavior.

Acknowledgements

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