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To Disclose or Not to Disclose, That Is the Question: Evidence from TripAdvisor

Short Paper

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Abstract

Online consumers may be hesitant to disclose personal information due to potential threats, leading to an impact on their content generation. This, in turn, poses a challenge to the credibility and sustainability of online reviews on digital platforms. To address this issue, our research examines how consumers' self-disclosure affects their rating behaviors and the existence of the positive-negative asymmetry based on negativity bias. Utilizing data from TripAdvisor, our analysis demonstrated that consumers' self-disclosure had a negative impact on rating inconsistency and a stronger herding behavior for those submitting ratings lower than the hotel's average ratings. Additionally, we found that certain factors, such as more peer disclosure, longer time intervals between check-in and review posting, and greater expertise, can mitigate the negative impact of self-disclosure on rating behavior. Our findings make critical contributions to the extant literature, as well as provide significant managerial implications to participants in the digital platform.

Keywords: Online self-disclosure, rating inconsistency, herding effect, negativity bias

Introduction

As e-business related technologies and concepts have expanded quickly, digital platforms have progressively broadened and improved to meet the requirements of various customers and merchants. Online reviews have emerged as a trustworthy source of supplementary information for consumers seeking to mitigate the risk of purchasing products and services online (Chen & Xie, 2008; Huang et al., 2017). Indeed, according to BrightLocal (2022), 98% of consumers read online reviews before making purchasing decisions, underscoring their importance in shaping consumer behavior. Thus, online reviews have been regarded as valuable digital assets that affect consumers' purchase intentions and behaviors. However, reputation inflation caused by high ratings with low variance has become a major concern on most digital platforms (Aziz et al., 2022; Filippas et al., 2022). A large number of such homogeneous ratings for products or services are considered to be less informative, from which consumers do not receive valuable and diverse information. Therefore, in order to improve the information richness from online reviews, it is crucial for digital platforms to develop strategies for inspiring consumers to objectively express differential opinions.

To enhance the credibility of online reviews and suppress fake reviews, digital platforms devise multiple strategies to incentivize consumers to voluntarily disclose personal information, covering identity, pseudonym, location, gender, age, avatar, etc. For example, TripAdvisor, one of the most popular digital platforms for tourism, offers the function of trackable user-profiles and invokes user-related information to be shown in the section of online reviews automatically. However, every advantage has its disadvantage.

While consumers receive personalized service recommendations through self-disclosure, they are also exposed to the potential risk of information leakage (Pu et al., 2020). As a result, consumers tend to seek more discreet approaches to processing personal information on digital platforms, even some remedies in response to the potential influence of self-disclosure. Among them, the herding behavior that manifests as maintaining similar behaviors to most individuals on digital platforms is, to some extent, an efficacious remedial behavior, which is expressed as rating inconsistency (Lee et al., 2015; Vedadi et al., 2021). In other words, individuals who have disclosed personal information may be more likely to rate products or services similarly to the overall ratings of previous peers, thereby reducing unnecessary and excessive attention. In addition, such inconsistent ratings can also reflect the strengths and weaknesses of a product or service more informatively, thus enhancing the richness of the platform's information.

Existing research on online self-disclosure has primarily focused on investigating its antecedents, with few studies examining its consequences, particularly its impact on consumers' rating behaviors (Forman et al., 2008; Jiang et al., 2021). Furthermore, previous research has attributed potential rating inconsistency to factors such as self-selection, sequential dynamics, and online social relationships, among others (Li & Hitt, 2008; Godes & Silva, 2012; Wang et al., 2018), but has not considered the role of consumers' self-disclosure. Additionally, there is a lack of understanding regarding the positive-negative asymmetry in this effect. To address these gaps in the literature, we aim to explore the following questions: (1) *How does consumers' self-disclosure influence their rating behavior?* (2) *Is there a positive-negative asymmetry in this effect?*

To address these research questions, we analyzed a rich dataset of reviews from TripAdvisor to investigate the impact of consumers' self-disclosure on rating inconsistency and examine the positive-negative asymmetry in this relationship. The main results of our study suggest that consumers who disclose personal information rate hotels with herding behavior that more closely resembles previous peers' overall ratings. Moreover, we also demonstrate the existence of the positive-negative asymmetry based on negativity bias. In addition, several review-related and reviewer-related factors are suggested to be moderators of the main effect in our study. Our findings not only extend the literature on consumer behavior on digital platforms, but also offer managerial implications for participants and managers of digital platforms.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we review the related literature and propose the research gaps. Second, we develop our hypotheses on consumers' self-disclosure and rating behaviors. Third, we describe the data, variables, and models in our study. Fourth, we illustrate the empirical results of this study. Last, we summarize the conclusions and indicate theoretical and practical contributions.

Literature Review

In our study, we reviewed and sorted through the following three streams of related literature: (1) online self-disclosure on digital platforms, (2) herding effects in consumers' decisions, and (3) negativity bias in online reviews.

First, our study draws on prior work on online consumers' self-disclosure. Scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding self-disclosure, which refers to the voluntary expression of one's feelings, thoughts, or personal information related to privacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Melumad & Meyer, 2020). Although online self-disclosure satisfies consumers' psychological needs for social presence on digital platforms, inherent risks exist for personal information leakage or misuse due to consumers' limited control over shared details (Krasnova et al., 2012; Pu et al., 2020). Previous studies have investigated the various factors that impact online self-disclosure, containing privacy concerns (Taddei & Contena, 2013), online privacy policies (Kroll & Stieglitz, 2021), network media (Melumad & Meyer, 2020), etc. Meanwhile, scholars have explored the impact of self-disclosure on online behavior, which mainly focus on the influence of self-disclosure on disclosure willingness and content generation of subsequent other consumers (Forman et al., 2008; Pu et al., 2020). While some studies have examined the consequences of online self-disclosure, few have explored its effects on consumers' herding behavior when posting ratings. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge a knowledge gap by analyzing the relationship between consumers' self-disclosure and herding behavior in content generation.

Second, this work builds on related literature about herding effects in consumers' decision-making. With rapid advancements in internet technologies, it is easier for consumers to learn from the generated content by previous peers including transaction records, textual evaluation, photo sharing, etc. (Li & Wu, 2018; Muchnik et al., 2013; Sunder et al., 2019). When consumers are indecisive or do not want to conflict with

others, they may follow in the footsteps of the majority on digital platforms due to fewer mistakes and less effort. Especially, when online consumers face potential risks, they often refer to the crowd's choices to remain inconspicuous (Lee et al., 2015; Vedadi et al., 2021). Despite researchers examining online consumers' herding behavior in particular scenarios, there remains a lack of understanding regarding how consumers create content, especially summit ratings for product or service, after revealing personal information online. The distribution of ratings could provide a more comprehensive view of the advantages and disadvantages of products or services, which can help consumers make decisions more informatively. In our study, we take an innovative approach to exploring the factors that influence consumers' herding behavior in the content generation following self-disclosure.

Third, this study is also inspired by the literature related to negativity bias in online reviews. The concept of negativity bias suggests that individuals tend to focus more on negative information than positive information, particularly in the field of online reviews (Baumeister, 2001). Studies have shown that consumers tend to find negative reviews more helpful and diagnostic than positive reviews (Sen & Lerman, 2007; Yin et al., 2016). For example, Yin et al. (2016) illustrated that the positive-negative asymmetry exists in the effect of review ratings on review helpfulness. Since negative reviews are more likely to be noticed by merchants and other peers, consumers who disclose personal information are probably more cautious in their online generation behavior. Although previous literature has explored the effect of ratings on review helpfulness based on negative bias, this study provides a new perspective on how the negativity bias explains the effect of consumers' self-disclosure on rating behavior.

Hypotheses Development

Online consumers often make decisions about their disclosure behavior by weighing the potential risks of publicly disclosing personal information against their coping abilities (Mousavi et al., 2020). Even after relatively rational trade-offs, consumers who disclose their personal information may alter their content generation behavior due to certain concerns (Forman et al., 2018). Generally, they are more likely to adopt protective behavior to mitigate risks associated with self-disclosure (Li & Wu, 2018; Vedadi et al., 2021). In the context of digital platforms, herding behavior can serve as a mechanism for consumers to blend in with the crowd and avoid drawing excessive attention from their peers (Lee et al., 2015). The lack of fully anonymous mode on the TripAdvisor platform further reinforces this tendency towards herding behavior. To put it differently, when consumers reveal personal information about themselves, they tend to conform to the opinions of the majority while providing ratings, in order to avoid being singled out by other members of the digital platforms such as sellers and potential buyers. Therefore, our first hypothesis is proposed as following:

H1: Online self-disclosure of consumers negatively influences rating inconsistency.

The negativity bias effect refers to the tendency for negative information to carry greater weight than positive information in the processing of information (Baumeister et al., 2001). This effect has been demonstrated in various contexts, including consumer behavior. Specifically, when consumers post reviews, they are more likely to attract excessive attention from peers if the reviews are negative. This is because negativity bias is more likely to manifest when sharing ratings that are negative compared to the average rating for products or services. With such effect, consumers who choose to self-disclose and rate hotels negatively deviated from average ratings perceive greater potential risks, thereby being more likely to engage in higher levels of protective behavior. Hence, we propose our second hypothesis:

H2: The negative deviation in ratings strengthens the main effect. Namely, compared to those who submit higher-than-average ratings, consumers who self-disclose and submit lower-than-average ratings tend to rate hotels aligning more closely with the majority.

Some review-related and reviewer-related factors may subconsciously evoke or dampen consumer concerns about information exposure. We attempted to explore how two review-related factors (i.e., peer disclosure and temporal distance) and one reviewer-related factor (i.e., consumer expertise) evoked or suppressed consumers' potential concerns when they revealed personal information, thereby enhancing or weakening the direct effect of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency. To begin with, observational learning suggests that peer disclosure is a crucial factor in shaping consumers' perception of potential threats (Jiang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2018). Specifically, the degree to which peers disclose information can significantly influence how consumers perceive the level of risk associated with a particular product or environment. As

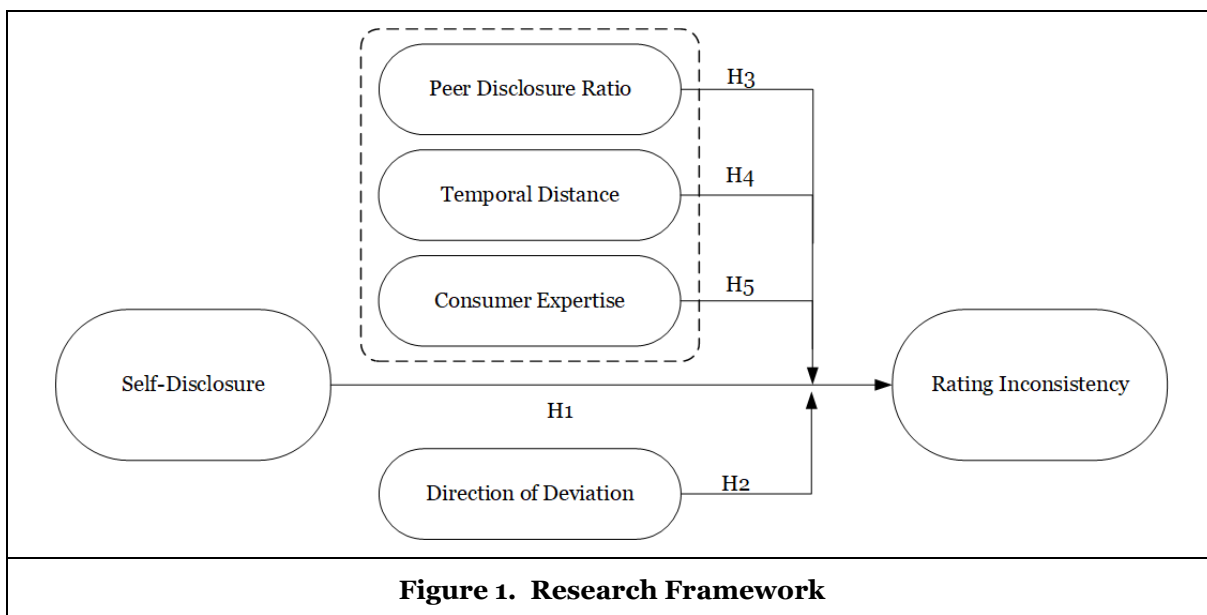
a result, peer disclosure serves as a crucial indicator that consumers utilize to assess the safety of information shared on digital platforms. This assessment, in turn, moderates the degree to which consumers engage in herding behavior. Additionally, temporal distance plays a significant role in shaping consumers' rating behavior. In particular, for experiential products such as hotels and tourism, temporal distance can result in a fading effect, where merchants and potential consumers' curiosity dampens over time (Huang et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2021). Consequently, it is expected that increasing temporal distance will reduce the negative effect of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency in this situation. Lastly, consumer expertise serves as a crucial indicator of online reputation and professional competence (Rocklage et al., 2021; Zhang & Guo, 2021). Consumers who possess a higher level of expertise are typically more goal-oriented and better equipped to manage potential threats. Therefore, when such consumers reveal personal information online, they are likely to feel less apprehensive about doing so and less influenced by herding behavior in ratings. To sum up, the following hypotheses are hence proposed:

H3: Peer disclosure alleviates the negative effect of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency.

H4: Temporal distance alleviates the negative effect of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency.

H5: Consumer expertise alleviates the negative effect of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency.

In summary, we proposed the theoretical research framework for our study as shown in Figure 1.



Methodology

Data and Variables

We collected a comprehensive dataset from TripAdvisor, which is considered one of the most popular digital platforms for tourism worldwide (Ravichandran & Deng, 2022). TripAdvisor generates profiles for every registered user, showcasing their past reviews and listing personal details like their username, location, brief introduction, and membership time. The key elements of these details would be revealed next to the reviews they have posted on hotels' review pages. To control their level of self-disclosure, users are required to manage the information contained in their profiles. In our study, we developed a Python-based crawler to automatically extract the detailed information of hotel reviews and user properties from TripAdvisor. Ultimately, we compiled a dataset consisting of 894,696 reviews posted from August 2002 to March 2018 by 758,539 consumers about 654 hotels in New York City.

We defined the dependent variable *Rating Inconsistency (RI)* as the extent of disparity between the current consumer's evaluation and the collective assessments of prior consumers. Specifically, we calculated *RI* as the absolute discrepancy between the rating given by the current review and the mean rating for the

corresponding hotel (Yin et al., 2016; Aghakhani et al., 2020). In addition, we designated *Self-Disclosure (SD)* as the independent variable, which indicates whether the current consumer divulged their geographical location in their user profiles. We coded *SD* as 1 if the user revealed their geographical location, and 0 if they did not (Forman et al., 2008). To investigate the positive-negative asymmetrical effect, we employed the dummy variable *NegDev* to denote the direction of deviation between the current rating and the hotel's average rating. The variable *NegDev* takes a value of 1 if the current rating is lower than the hotel's average rating and 0 if the current rating is higher than the hotel's average rating.

As for the three moderators of interest in this study, we defined them as follows. The first moderator *Peer Disclosure (PD)* was measured as (number of reviews that reveal the location of reviewers / total number of reviews in most recent ten reviews) \times 100. The second moderator *Temporal Distance (TD)* was calculated as the difference between review time and check-in time. The third moderator *Consumer Expertise (CE)* was measured by the total number of reviews in their profiles before they posted the current review.

Furthermore, in order to more rigorously assess the impacts of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency, we accounted for several factors identified in previous research. Specifically, we controlled for the number of total words in the current review text (*TW*), the electronic device used to write the current review (*ED*), the total number of usefulness votes received by the current review (*UV*), and the total number of reviews for the current hotel (*HTR*). The description of the variables involved in our study are shown in Table 1.

Variable	Definition	Description
<i>RI</i>	Rating Inconsistency	Variable to denote the degree which current rating deviates from hotel average rating, measured by the absolute value of the difference between current rating and hotel average rating
<i>SD</i>	Self-Disclosure	Dummy variable to denote whether the current consumer discloses geographical location in user profile, with '1 = yes' and '0 = no'
<i>NegDev</i>	Negative Deviation	Dummy variable to denote whether the current rating is lower than the hotel's average rating, with '1 = yes' and '0 = no'
<i>PD</i>	Peer Disclosure Ratio	Variable to denote the ratio of geographical location disclosed by peer reviewers in recent 10 reviews prior to the current review
<i>TD</i>	Temporal Distance	Variable to denote temporal distance between check-in time and review time
<i>CE</i>	Consumer Expertise	Variable to denote the current consumer's expertise, measured by the cumulative review volumes of the current reviewer in their user profiles
<i>TW</i>	Total Words	Variable to denote total number of words in the current review
<i>ED</i>	Electronic Device	Dummy variable to denote whether a review is posted via mobile device, with '1 = yes' and '0 = no'
<i>UV</i>	Usefulness Votes	Variable to denote the number of usefulness votes of the current review
<i>HTR</i>	Total Number of Hotel Reviews	Variable to denote total number of previous reviews of the current hotel

Table 1. Variables Description and Measurement

Research Models

To test our hypotheses, we developed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models, which take into account hotel heterogeneity and time-specific heterogeneity. We achieved this by including fixed effects for both hotels and review times in our models. The model specifications are presented below. Among them, Model 1 was developed to investigate the main effect of consumer self-disclosure on rating inconsistency. Model 2 was introduced to examine the positive-negative asymmetrical effect. Additionally, to

comprehensively investigate both the main and moderating effects of these variables, Model 3 fully accounted for these three variables (i.e. *PD*, *TD*, and *CE*) and their interaction terms.

$$RI_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SD_{ij} + \beta_2 Controls_{ij} + HotelFE + RevYearFE + RevMonthFE + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

$$RI_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SD_{ij} + \beta_2 NegDev_{ij} + \beta_3 SD_{ij} \times NegDev_{ij} + \beta_4 Controls_{ij} + HotelFE + RevYearFE + RevMonthFE + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (2)$$

$$RI_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SD_{ij} + \beta_2 PD_{ij} + \beta_3 TD_{ij} + \beta_4 CE_{ij} + \beta_5 SD_{ij} \times PD_{ij} + \beta_6 SD_{ij} \times TD_{ij} + \beta_7 SD_{ij} \times CE_{ij} + \beta_8 Controls_{ij} + HotelFE + RevYearFE + RevMonthFE + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (3)$$

Where *i* denotes the hotel *i*, while *j* denotes the review *j*. *Controls_{ij}* stands for the control variables (i.e. *TW*, *ED*, *UV* and *HTR*). *HotelFE*, *RevYearFE*, and *RevMonthFE* respectively stand for the fixed effects for hotels, review years, and review months. ε_{ij} is the standard error.

Results

Table 1 presents the OLS regression results. First, the results in Column 1 of Table 2 reveals a statistically significant negative relationship between self-disclosure and rating inconsistency ($\beta_1 = -0.050$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that consumers who disclosed more about themselves submitted ratings that were closer to the hotel's average rating. Thus, the findings support H1, indicating that self-disclosure by consumers leads to a reduction in rating inconsistency.

Second, it is shown that the interaction term $SD \times NegDev$ had a negative and statistically significant coefficient of -0.066 ($p < 0.01$) in Column 2 of Table 2. This suggests that the relationship between self-disclosure and rating inconsistency is influenced by the direction of deviation from the average rating. Specifically, the effect of self-disclosure on inconsistency is more pronounced in the negative deviation group compared to the positive deviation group, indicating the presence of a positive-negative asymmetry effect. H2 is hence supported.

Finally, the results for three moderators (i.e. *PD*, *TD* and *CE*) are presented in Column 3 of Table 2. The coefficient of the interaction term $SD \times PD$ is positive and significant ($\beta_5 = 0.031$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the impact of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency is weaker when the peer disclosure ratio is high. Similarly, the estimation results for the interaction between *SD* and *TD* show a positive and significant moderating effect ($\beta_6 = 0.018$, $p < 0.01$), implying that the main impact of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency is weakened if the consumer wrote a review long after staying at the hotel. The estimated coefficient of the interaction term $SD \times CE$ is significantly positive ($\beta_7 = 0.011$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the main influence of self-disclosure on rating inconsistency is less pronounced when consumers possess extensive review expertise. As a result, H3-H5 are supported respectively. Meanwhile, the coefficients of the independent variables of interest *SD* in Column 2 and Column 3 of Table 2 are significantly negative, indicating that the main effect is robust.

Conclusion

This research offers several important findings of the relationships between consumers' self-disclosure and their rating behavior. First, our results significantly evidence the negative impact of consumers' self-disclosure on rating inconsistency. Namely, consumers who disclosed their personal information submitted ratings that were closer to the hotel's average rating. Second, we demonstrate the existence of positive-negative asymmetry in the above main effect. Last, three review-related and reviewer-related factors (i.e. peer disclosure, temporal distance, and consumer expertise) are demonstrated to have a dampening effect on the strength of the main effect.

This study contributes to the extant literature by examining the impact of consumers' online self-disclosure on their rating behavior, particularly in relation to the herding effect. The research fills a gap in the literature by investigating the consequences of self-disclosure on individuals' own online behavior. Additionally, the study extends previous work by identifying reviewer and review context characteristics that can moderate herding behavior in consumer ratings.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
VARIABLES	<i>RI</i>	<i>RI</i>	<i>RI</i>
<i>SD</i>	-0.049759***	-0.024513***	-0.056476***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.009)
<i>NegDev</i>		-1.243326*	
		(0.460)	
<i>SD</i> × <i>NegDev</i>		-0.066121***	
		(0.004)	
<i>PD</i>			-0.016233
			(0.011)
<i>SD</i> × <i>PD</i>			0.030947***
			(0.011)
<i>TD</i>			-0.056824***
			(0.002)
<i>SD</i> × <i>TD</i>			0.018247***
			(0.002)
<i>CE</i>			-0.069823***
			(0.002)
<i>SD</i> × <i>CE</i>			0.011149***
			(0.002)
<i>TW</i>	0.066081***	-0.023539***	0.081387***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
<i>ED</i>	0.031814***	0.044480***	0.045160***
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.002)
<i>UV</i>	0.222166***	0.036228***	0.220757***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
<i>HTR</i>	0.009666***	-0.012664***	0.009872***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Constant	0.528958**	1.589223***	1.982596***
	(0.206)	(0.386)	(0.010)
Observations	894,042	892,115	877,573
R-squared	0.113	0.191	0.126
Hotel FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
ReviewYear FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
ReviewMonth FE	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Estimation Results

Note. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Our research offers valuable managerial implications for merchants and digital platform designers. We first provide fresh insights into enhancing platform functionality for unbiased consumer evaluations. Designers

should address privacy concerns by incorporating diverse information disclosure features and encrypting users' personal data. Moreover, we offer guidance for proactive hotel reputation management, emphasizing early investment in quality control to improve online reputation. Merchants should tailor their strategies based on consumers' and platforms' characteristics.

Frankly, there are still a few limitations of this study. First, we only used the location disclosure as the single proxy of the independent variable for the definition of self-disclosure. We should capture richer self-disclosure characteristics of consumers to define self-disclosure more comprehensively in the next stage of this research. Second, regarding the variable measurement and the sample selection, we lack more diversified approaches for in-depth analysis. We would further conduct robustness checks using alternative measures and sub-sample division. Last, there are a few potential alternative explanations that we need to verify further.

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