Consumers Rely More on Online Review Scores When They First Form an Independent Opinion

Adrian Camilleri, RMIT University, Australia

We found, over four experiments comprising over 2,200 participants, that people put more weight on reviews when they first form an independent opinion. This effect was robust to the average review score, number of reviews, distribution of reviews, and product type. Our findings are explained by an adjustment-based anchoring account.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1022282/volumes/v44/NA-44

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Consumers Rely More on Online Review Scores 
When They First Form an Independent Opinion

Adrian R. Camilleri, RMIT University, Australia

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There is evidence indicating that consumers increasingly rely on review score information to help them make purchase decisions (Punj, 2013), and that this reliance impacts upon choice behaviour (e.g., Cheung et al., 2009) and sales (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). However, existing research has overlooked the important research question considered in this paper: does it matter when a consumer is exposed to review scores? More specifically, do purchase intentions vary depending on whether consumers read review scores before versus after forming their own opinion of a product? On the one hand, the same information is available. On the other hand, a wealth of evidence suggests that preferences can vary as a function of order.

A primacy effect occurs when a person forms a judgment more consistent with the first presented argument whereas a recency effect occurs when a person forms a judgment more consistent with the last presented argument. The literature associated with order effects in persuasion is quite mixed with some studies finding primacy effects and some finding recency effects (Hauptvedt & Wegener, 1994; Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992). In contrast, the literature associated with order effects in the advice-taking literature tends to find primacy effects (Koehler & Beauregard, 2006; Sniezek & Buckley, 1995; Yaniv & Choshen-Hillel, 2012).

Given the variety of differences between typical persuasion tasks, typical advice-taking tasks, and use of review score information to inform product evaluations, we thought it important to collect new data. We also noted a number of different theories that made different predictions, including Bayes’ Rule, support theory, consistency theory, accessibility-based anchoring, adjustment-based anchoring, and Gricean conversational norms.

In our first experiment, half the participants were allocated to a Pre-Post group and half to a Post-only group. Participants in the Pre-Post group were exposed to a product description before stating an initial intention to buy the product. Participants were then exposed to a review score distribution before making a second evaluation. In contrast, those in the Post-only group were exposed to both the product description and the review score distribution simultaneously before making a single product evaluation. We found that consumers tended to put more weight on review score information in a Pre-Post condition compared to a Post-Only condition. This effect was robust to average review score: a positive average review score (i.e., 4.6/5) was more likely to increase intention to purchase and a negative average review score (i.e., 3.4/5) was more likely to decrease intention to purchase for those in the Pre-Post group. This effect was also robust to product type in that it held for both an experience good and a search good.

In order to test between competing theories, we carried out a second experiment. Half the participants were presented with the product description and then, on the next page, the review score information whereas the others were presented with this same information in reverse order. In addition, half the participants were asked for two evaluations - one after the first piece of information and another after the second piece of information - whereas the others were only asked for single evaluation after both pieces of information. We found that consumers tended to put more weight on the information that was presented second (i.e., a recency effect).

The main observation we made across our experiments is that the weight accorded to review score information when consumers are making a product evaluation critically depends on when that information is encountered. We found that consumers tended to weight review score information more when that information was received after the consumer had formed an initial product evaluation based on the product description. The effect appears to be robust to: whether the average review score is above versus below initial expectations; whether the product is a search or experience good; and whether the initial evaluation was explicitly stated or implicitly formed by the separation of information.

Our explanation for the observed results is an adjustment-based anchoring process (Epley, 2004; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). According to this account, consumers generate an initial evaluation based on the product description that they assume is close to the true value of the product but are ready to adjust away if given new information. The model provided by Hogarth and Einhorn (1992) describes how this adjustment process occurs. People use new pieces of information to update the existing estimate according to an averaging process as they try to estimate the true value. This averaging process can take place either after each new piece of information (a step-by-step processing strategy) or only after all pieces of information have been presented (an end-of-sequence processing strategy). Following Hogarth and Einhorn, we argue that, where possible, people try to match cognitive strategy with response mode. Therefore, when consumers first form their own evaluation from a product description and then learn about product reviews, a step-by-step processing strategy is adopted. In contrast, when consumers form an evaluation based on both the product description and reviews presented together, then an end-of-sequence processing strategy is adopted. Importantly, the model predicts recency when adopting a step-by-step strategy and primacy when adopting an end-of-sequence strategy. These predictions are borne out by all of the reported experiments.

For managers, the presence of order effects affords possibilities of potentially effective strategies regarding the placement of review score information to favor certain products depending on those product’s reviews. First, our data inform on whether review score information should appear in search results, and near the top of product pages. Second, our data inform on whether review score information should appear in printed ad magazines.

For consumers, the presence of order effects is likely to lead to lower-quality decision due to bias, lack of consistency, and less efficient decision processes. One basic strategy to give more weight to review scores, which we argue is closer to the optimal approach, is for consumers to adopt a step-by-step processing strategy by first considering the product description, forming an evaluation, and then consciously adjusting that evaluation based on the review scores.

REFERENCES


