The Effects of Expert and User Ratings on Behavioral Intentions on a UGC Site

Sook Lim, St. Catherine University
Nick Steffel, St. Catherine University

Abstract
The study examines whether expert and user ratings affect students’ behavioral intentions to use a fictitious book at Goodreads.com, a user-generated content (UGC) site regarding books. It also explores students’ perceptions of others’ susceptibility regarding user ratings. Data were collected using both an experiment and a web survey in fall 2013. A total of 206 surveys were useable for this research. The findings show that only expert ratings affected students’ behavioral intentions to use a book. Students tended to perceive others as being more influenced by user ratings than they, themselves, were. The results indicate that experts’ opinions still continue to be important for accepting the object of ratings on UGC sites. In addition, despite the need for more evidence, the influence of user ratings on, at least students’ intentional behavior, may not be as strong as expected.

Keywords: Behavioral intention; expert ratings; user ratings; experiment


Copyright: Copyright is held by the authors.
Contact: slim@stkate.edu, njsteffel@stkate.edu

1 Introduction
The popularity of user-generated content (UGC) or social media has been growing. Pew Internet and American Life Project data (2013) show that as of September 2013, approximately 73 percent of online American adults use social media. In the social media or UGC environment, anyone can offer her or his opinions, which can influence the behavioral intentions or behaviors of UGC users. The literature shows inconsistent findings regarding the effects of laypeople’s and expert ratings or comments on behavioral intentions (e.g., Sundar, Xu, & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2009; Flanagin & Metzger; 2013; Flanagin et. al., 2014; Lee & Sundar, 2013). In a well-established model such as the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989), behavioral intention is considered as a reliable predictor of actual use. Consequently, the variable of behavioral intention is widely measured for the acceptance of technology and related topics (Holden & Karsh, 2010). Given this evidence, it is useful to find out whether user ratings, expert ratings or both ratings jointly, indeed, lead to forming people’s action on the object of rating information.

In addition, the literature shows that people tend to perceive themselves more optimistically than others in terms of discerning the credibility of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Lim, 2013). It is interesting to examine whether a similar phenomenon can be observed regarding the influence of user ratings on people themselves and others.

This study explores the following research questions: RQ1. Do user ratings affect people’s intention of action on a book of ratings? RQ2. Do expert ratings affect people’s intention of action on a book of ratings? RQ3. Does the effect of user ratings on intention of action differ, according to expert ratings? RQ4. Is there a discrepancy between people’s expected reliance on user ratings in making a decision and their perception of others’ being influenced by user ratings?

The usefulness of this study lies in the following: The findings show that experts’ opinions still continue to be important for accepting the book of ratings on a UGC site. The results imply that experts can still play a critical role in students’ intention to act on rating information. In addition, students perceive that others are more influenced by user ratings than they, themselves, are. Despite the need for more evidence, the result implies that the actual influence of user ratings on students’ behavioral intentions may not be as strong as UGC users expect. Or people perceive themselves more optimistically than others on this matter.

2 Relevant Literature
According to Flanagin and his colleagues (2014), “word-of-mouth” is a critical way of gathering and disseminating commercial information. In the digital age, user ratings or comments on the web serve as new forms of electronic word-of-mouth. Previous research has shown that ratings are important in people’s purchasing decisions (Flanagin et. al., 2014). Other researchers discuss evidence that user ratings are positively related to purchase or behavioral intentions (Sundar et al. 2009; Lee & Sundar, 2013).
With respect to authority on behavioral intentions, previous studies have shown weak or inconsistent findings. That is, Flanagin and Metzger (2013) did not find the main effect of source (users versus experts) on behavioral intention. Their study did not have a significant interaction effect between ratings volume and source for behavioral intention, either. On the other hand, Sundar and his colleagues’ (2009) study shows that the effect of authority cues on behavioral intention is coupled with other factors, such as the outlying review condition on an e-commerce site. More recently, Lee and Sundar (2013) did not find a significant relationship between professional tweets (authority) and people’s intention of action on the information of tweets. However, they found that people were more likely to act on the information of tweets when a professional source with a high number of followers tweets than when a layperson with a high number of followers tweets.

Finally, the literature shows that people tend to perceive themselves more optimistically than others with respect to discerning the credibility of information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Lim, 2013). A similar phenomenon may be observed concerning user ratings. Given people’s likely skepticism about UGC or user ratings (Flanagin et al., 2014), their concerns about the influence of ratings on others may be overrated. Or it may be that people tend to consider themselves as more critical UGC users than others.

3 Methods

3.1 Participants
Data were collected using both an experiment and a Web survey at a private university in the United States in fall 2013. The study sample consisted of undergraduate students who lived in the university’s residence halls on campus. All of the undergraduate students at the university were female. A total of 233 students participated in this study. A total of 198 (completed surveys) to 206 (completed the experiment only) surveys were usable.

3.2 The design and material of the experiment
The experiment took the form of a 2x2 factorial design, with the user ratings (high and low) and expert ratings (high and low) of a book at Goodreads.com. A total of four different screens were created by manipulating two independent variables: expert and user ratings. A book page was used as the basis for creating the screens of the experiment. Expert ratings were added for the experiment. A fictitious title and a gender-neutral name of author replaced the original title and author. All other objects of each screen were held constant.

3.3 Procedure
The participants were directed to the study’s website via a written URL included in the solicitation email. After giving informed consent online, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the four screens by a computerized program. They were instructed to read the site they were viewing. Then all participants were directed to a questionnaire that they completed online.

3.4 The measurements of the dependent variable
Measurements of the dependent variable of behavioral intention were modified from Hu and Sundar’s (2010) study. The items were: “I would be likely to use the book”; “I would be interested in reading the book”; and, “I would recommend my friends who are interested in healthy eating to take a look at the book.” All three items were measured using a 7-point scale with the anchors “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” Other variables were developed for this study.

4 Key Findings

4.1 Participants
The mean age of participants was 19.5 years old. The majority were Caucasian (76.2%, N=144).

4.2 The effects of expert ratings and user ratings on behavioral intentions (RQ1 through RQ3)
A two-way ANOVA was performed to answer the research questions from RQ1 through RQ3 under α=0.05. Only expert ratings influenced students’ intention to use the book ((F (1, 202) = 4.23, p<0.04, MSE=68.35). However, user ratings did not affect students’ intention to use the book. There was no interaction between user and expert ratings on students’ intention to use the book, either. The means of user and expert ratings on behavioral intention are presented in Table 1.
4.3 Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>User rating</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert rating</td>
<td>14.62</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.87</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13.86</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=206</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Expert and User Ratings on Behavioral Intentions

4.4 Optimistic bias toward themselves or over-concerns about others? (RQ4)

The respondents tended to believe that others were likely to be influenced by the user ratings of the book they viewed (a mean of 5.59) than, they, themselves were (a mean of 4.93). The mean of their reported intention to rely on the user rating information was lower that that of their perception of others’ being influenced by the user ratings they viewed. The pair-mean differences were statistically significant (t=6.16, df=204, p<0.00). The results indicate that people tend to consider others as being more susceptible to social information than they, themselves. Similarly, the results echo the findings of previous studies (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Lim 2013), showing that people perceive themselves more optimistically than others in terms of discerning the credibility of information. Or this result may indicate that the actual influence of user ratings on people may not be as strong as it is assumed.

5 Conclusion

This study examined the effects of user and expert ratings on behavioral intentions. In addition, this study explored users’ general attitude toward others regarding the influence of ratings, as compared to their own expected reliance on such information. The results show that only expert ratings affect behavioral intentions. Students see others as more susceptible to rating information than they, themselves, would rely on. The results indicate that authority is still important in students’ intention to act on rating information. In addition, students may be less susceptible to user rating information than expected. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the study sample was female students. As a result, the findings of the study may not be generalizable to the population of college students in general. Finally, this poster session will further present detailed methods, implications and limitations of the study, as well as a few suggestions for further research.

6 References


