## 2.3.1 The influence of reviews, ratings, recommendations, and referrals:

Reviews, ratings, recommendations, and referrals are drivers of social commerce (Hajli, 2013). As forms of UGC they require varying levels of effort from the consumer, but all can be influential in the consumer decision making process (Hajli and Sims, 2015). This subsection examines them and their relation to consumer behaviour in social commerce environments. First, ratings and reviews are examined, and then recommendations and referrals are discussed.

Ratings and reviews are conceptually quite similar. A rating is a very basic review in that it rates the product or service (possibly along several dimensions), typically using a numerical or star system. Reviews on the other hand are textual in nature and appear in varying lengths. Both can provide informational support, which is a key part of social support (Hajli, 2015a). Ratings arguably take low levels of effort to complete on the part of the consumer, and the literature on them remains a little contentious. Some studies find no relationship between ratings and purchasing decisions (Chen et al., 2004; Duan et al., 2008) whereas others do (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas et al., 2007; Hajli and Sims, 2015). The overarching trend here is that the older the study, the less likely it is that a positive relationship will be found. This may be partly down to the differing methodologies used and also down to the different contexts of the studies, but of course changes in consumer attitudes over time may also have a part to play.

While online reviews frequently contain a multitude of differing opinions, some consumers may be more inclined to consult the more visually based ratings systems of stars or numbers. Consumers using these ratings systems will often be faced with highly dispersed ratings and little work has gone into what effect this may have. Before the Internet became popular consumers could not access as much WOM information and were more able to solve questions about credibility based on what they knew of the person who they, likely, had strong ties with. This extension of credibility to weak ties on the Internet is therefore a relatively new issue which has emerged with the prevalence of such systems. In fashion weak ties are very important as they help pass on information about what is considered stylish. The credibility of reviews is a key factor for consumers (Hajli et al., 2015). Recent research has demonstrated that negative reviews tend to relate to service issues, while positive reviews tend to relate to the product (Ahmad and Laroche, 2017). Negative reviews can have a more significant impact on sales than positive reviews for fashion consumers (Kim et al., 2013).

The study which currently most thoroughly examines the potential effect of dispersion on consumer decisions is He and Bond's (2015). He and Bond recognised that the small number of prior studies to incorporate dispersion have produced mixed results, with their findings indicating that a wide dispersion has a negative impact on sales in some cases (Zhu and Zhang, 2010) and a positive impact in others (Moe and Trusov 2011). He and Bond's (2015) work incorporates attribution theory to demonstrate that consumers may attempt to decide how similar the providers of the WOM may be. They rely on an assumption from earlier work (He and Bond, 2013) which shows that consumers may also compare themselves to this reference group to assess if they share similar tastes. Consumers are more likely to trust those with similar likes than dislikes when basing their decisions on WOM (Gershoff et al., 2007).

Taste dissimilar groups are more likely to create a wide dispersion in the case of taste related rating (as opposed to product performance related rating) and therefore groups which the consumer perceives to be taste dissimilar to themselves will have less sway on the consumer's decision-making process (He and Bond, 2013; 2015). In terms of fashion, taste dissimilar consumers usually would not buy the same item of clothing; however, there is still plenty room for negative feedback to occur. The more a consumer believes the reviewer to be like them the more trusting they will be of what they are told (Lim et al., 2006).

While He and Bond's research is compelling not all consumers will be equally affected. Consumers with a high need for uniqueness (HNFU) assessing WOM at the information search stage are more likely to try not to fit in with the mainstream perception and preference of a product or brand (Tian et al., 2001; Irmak et al., 2010). Many fashion consumers exhibit HNFU and marketers have very few successful strategies for dealing with these consumers. In terms of HFNU consumers and their generation of UGC, it has been shown that they are less likely than normal consumers to generate positive recommendations for publicly consumed products (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010). This may have knock on effects for fashion consumption. More work needs to be done in understanding the effect of dispersion on HNFU consumers, along with other consumers overall.

Understanding that consumers are different at an individual level, and they have different informational and emotional needs at different points of their consumer decision making process, helps to highlight why different kinds of UGC will be more helpful to certain consumers.

Recommendations and referrals are conceptually similar, much like ratings and reviews are. Recommendations and referrals are drivers of social commerce known to influence social commerce intentions (Hajli, 2013; Hajli and Sims 2015), at all stages of the consumer decision making process (de Valck et al., 2009). They are arguably more personalised than ratings and reviews and capitalise more on the idea of strong as opposed to weak social ties (Ellison et al., 2011; Granovetter, 1973), enabling social support functions beyond informational support and into emotional support (Chen and Shen, 2015), which is also valuable (Hajli, 2014a; Liang et al., 2011; Shin, 2013).

When existing customers give recommendations and referrals new customers can be attracted to businesses they may not have considered otherwise (Hong et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2013). Some relatively recent instances of significant user growth based on referrals include Pinterest, Instagram, Groupon, and Spotify (Koch and Benlian, 2015b). Recommendations and referrals may be given privately or publicly on social media sites (Koster et al., 2015), and whether the referral is provided by a strong or a weak tie in the social network can affect the likelihood of the potential customer accepting the referral (Hong et al., 2017). Much attention has been given to what encourages consumers to give referrals (Biyalogorsky et al., 2001; Koch and Benlian, 2015b), and it’s known that both private and public referrals are most likely to be accepted when the referee does not receive some kind of reward for their recommendation or referral (Koster et al., 2015). Further, recommendations which highlight goods are scarce, or highly desirable, are more likely to be effective (Koch and Benlian, 2015b).

Referrals and recommendations are known to boost sales (Kim and Kim, 2018) and therefore are highly desirable forms of UGC for marketers. This is partially because they help to build consumer trust (Hajli et al., 2014), which is most easily formed in forums and communities. With this in mind, it is now pertinent to discuss the power of forums and communities.