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It's not fake, it's biased: insights into morality of incentivized reviewers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to uncover morality and dynamics of community of incentivized reviewers who primarily review products on Amazon.com. and, as of late, on various social media platforms. This study is important because it uncovers unknown dynamics that shapes consumer morality and drives reviewer's ethics. Given the fact that consumers heavily rely on reviews, findings of this paper are of great values to practitioners, consumers and policymakers and highlight potential area of research particularly related to morality.

Design/methodology/approach – This study, conducted over a period of 1.5 years, relying on a netnography to collect data and thematic analysis to make sense of data, uncovered behaviors that contribute to the J-shape distribution of reviews on Amazon.com and questionable reviewer ethics.

Findings – Findings of this study suggest suppressed consumer morality driven by desire to gain benefits in form of free products and manipulation of the review system in an attempt to boost sales and the prevalence of biased reviews. The findings shed light on overconsumption driven by an opportunity to receive free products, introduction of review bias into the public domain and attempts to manipulate Amazon's algorithms.

Research limitations/implications – Findings of this study carry tremendous implications for average consumer who relies on consumer-generated reviews without realizing the presence of bias. Furthermore, the findings shed light of unfair business practices of sellers who demand high ratings. Finally, the findings suggest that there is opportunity for policymakers to address a loophole because incentivized reviewers, regardless of Federal Trade Commission regulations, may be operating in gray area, much less controlled than advertising.

Originality/value – This study is unique because while other studies may conduct similar netnographies of reviewing communities, this community was examined during a span that covered the incentivized reviewing boom, Amazon's ban on incentivized reviewing, and the revival of reviewing activity post ban. Given recent changes to Amazon's Terms of Service, the researcher documented changes that future studies will not be able to examine unless data have already been collected. However, post ban activity continues and is likely affecting purchasing decisions of unsuspecting consumers all around.

Keywords Consumer behaviour, Decision-making, Trust, Consumer-generated reviews, Incetivized reviews

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Online shopping is booming. According to the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce, "the estimate of USA retail e-commerce sales for the third quarter of 2017, adjusted for seasonal variation, but not for price changes, was $115.3 billion" (The Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce, 2017). This amount, for the third quarter alone, is an increase of 3.6 per cent (± 0.7 per cent) over the second quarter. Furthermore, CNNMoney reported that on Black Friday, US shoppers spent $5bn within 24 h, almost 17 per cent more than Black Friday 2016. Sales on Amazon.com reached "record levels" (Wattles, 2015). Amazon.com ("Amazon" hereafter) is at the forefront of this boom. A study by Slice Intelligence, as cited in Business Insider, estimated that 43 per cent of online retail purchases in the USA have been made through Amazon. A number of logical factors come to mind when attempting to explain the prevalence of online shopping. Convenience is certainly one of the most important.

Shopping online gives customers the option to make purchase decisions from anywhere at any time. It enables customers to shop with their fingertips, in the comfort of their own homes, while stuck in traffic, while sitting with friends at a coffee shop. However, online shopping has its disadvantages. Customers seldom have the chance to touch, feel, or sample the product before purchasing, creating a level of uncertainty. One goal of marketers, in the effort to facilitate a positive purchasing journey, is to reduce the uncertainty that consumers feel when making online purchases. Ultimately, marketing strategies should result in a purchase. However, marketers are interested in more than a single online transaction. Rather, they promote mutual gain by building long-lasting relationships with customers. Trust, the foundation of relationship building (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), is crucial to encouraging online purchase behavior in variety of industries and products (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Kusumasondjaja *et al.*, 2012; Sparks and Browning, 2011).

An important question for e-commerce practitioners is how to build trust with customers and to reduce customer uncertainty associated with online purchases. In addition to generating their own marketing messages, offering free shipping and returns, many organizations have added platforms

for consumer reviews. Amazon has been a leader in consumer-generated online reviews since 1995. While many competitors initially thought that allowing consumers to offer product-related feedback was a risky strategy, Amazon has greatly benefited from this approach (Ante, 2009). Furthermore, it established Amazon as trustworthy and the "go-to" place for many online shoppers, for online reviews play a major role in consumer decision-making when making a purchase (Bounie *et al.*, 2005). Consumers consult these reviews during the research phase of their buying decision process to reduce purchase uncertainty. Following Amazon's example, many organizations began allowing customer reviews on their websites. Among these organizations are review moguls such as Yelp, Google Maps and Angie's List, which focus primarily on reviews, and organizations that allow reviews on the products they sell, such as Sears, Wayfare and Walmart. Deloitte (2014), a leading professional service firm, found that over 80 per cent of people read reviews before making a purchase decision. A similar study conducted by Dimensional Research (2013) found that 90 per cent of respondents claimed that online reviews influenced their purchasing decisions. Customers also revealed that because reviews are typically written in plain language they can easily comprehend, they can identify with the reviewer and are more inclined to purchase after reading them, assuming they are favorable. Reviews are essentially electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), an important factor affecting sales numbers (Herr *et al.*, 1991; Laczniak *et al.*, 2001). Given the prevalence of consumer-generated reviews and the impact they have on purchasing decisions, the people who write reviews have an implied moral and ethical responsibility, based on the principle of "public good," as discussed in Section 2 in this paper, to the ones who are affected by reading them: fellow consumers. The overwhelming reliance on consumer-generated reviews suggests a degree of trust in consumer reviews. After all, trust is thought to be confidence in what one says can be relied on Rotter (1967) and Murphy *et al.* (2007). However, popular media users, scholars and Amazon itself discovered that many reviews, especially in the past two to three years, are either not written by real customers or biased. In fact, it has been found that some reviewers were paid to write reviews for products they never purchased or tested; others, when reviewing legitimate products, received their products for free "in return for an honest review" (Perez, 2016; Wattles, 2015). Previous studies have evaluated how positive and/or negative reviews impacted product sales, purchase decisions or how to spot fake reviews (Basuroy *et al.*, 2003; Dellarocas *et al.*, 2004; Li and Hitt, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2004). But no studies have analyzed the community of incentivized consumers who generate reviews in return for free or deeply discounted products. The purpose of this study was to shed light on this community as it operated on Amazon and to take a closer look at behind the scenes. The findings of this study are relevant because of the prevalence of consumer-driven reviews and the impact that they have on consumers and businesses.

2. Literature review

Word of mouth (WOM), which has long been known to impact consumer behavior, is "the act of consumers providing information about goods, services, brands or companies to other consumers. Such information communicated through the internet (e.g. reviews, tweets, blog posts, "likes," "pins," images, video testimonials) is called "electronic word of mouth" (eWOM), and it represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary consumer behavior" (Rosario *et al.*, 2016, p. 297). With the emergence of the internet and online shopping, eWOM generated by consumers on review forums gained importance for consumers and sellers. Online reviews, whether positive or negative, often influence purchase decisions. In particular, ones that are high quality and rated helpful can positively impact consumer online purchases (Chen *et al.*, 2008). Product characteristics, consumer characteristics and other characteristics (e.g. competition), affect the degree of consumer reliance on online reviews (Zhu and Zhang, 2010). Reviews are often assumed to be unbiased (Hu *et al.*, 2011) because consumers voluntarily share their opinions of a product. In fact, many reviewers openly state that their reviews are unbiased. But the actual level of bias is impossible to know with certainty.

The increasing popularity of online user-generated content has attracted scholarly attention to online review activity and its impact on consumers and businesses (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2007; Scoble and Israel, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006). Millions of reviews were analyzed to uncover a natural distribution of ratings. This distribution tends to follow a J-shape, meaning that most reviews are either 5 stars, the highest rating on Amazon, or 1 star, the lowest rating, and that neutral ratings between those two extremes are less common. This particular distribution, though it might appear to be natural, could be manipulated to skew review ratings. Several studies have found evidence of review fraud and manipulation (Hu *et al.*, 2011; Mukherjee *et al.*, 2012). In recent years, numerous deceptive practices have been uncovered in review systems. For example, Amazon found and consequently sued individuals who posted fake reviews without ever receiving the product, individuals who received compensation for reviews, and finally, websites that promised marketplace sellers on Amazon a five-star rating (Wattles, 2015; Perez, 2016). In other words, consumers have engaged in opinion spamming, which consists of:

> [...] human activities (e.g., writing fake reviews) that try to deliberately mislead readers by giving unfair reviews to some entities (e.g., products) in order to promote them or to damage their reputations (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2012, p. 1).

ReviewMeta.com, an independent research company, found that incentivized reviews were roughly 0.4 stars higher than non-incentivized reviews on average, suggesting that the former were more likely to leave positive reviews than the latter (ReviewMeta, 2016).

Consumers who contribute review content typically do so to help the product provider, to help others, to share their level of expertise, and to self-enhance (Chen *et al.*, 2011; Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). To the extent that their opinions contribute to the public good, consumers who write reviews should remember that their words and rhetoric have influence over the decision-making of other consumers. Public good is defined:

> [...] a shared resource from which every member of a group may benefit, regardless of whether or not they personally contribute to its provision, and whose availability does not diminish with use (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2012, p. 693).

From this point of view, consumers who write product reviews have a responsibility to behave ethically. In many cases, ethical behavior is prompted by the terms of service put in place by businesses that permit consumer-generated content. The terms of service, then, represent a consumer code of ethics. However, the reality is that ethical behavior that is not codified by law cannot be enforced. Given the impact of online reviews on consumer purchases and product sales, understanding behaviors of consumers who generate review content is important. Consumers who are reviewers, particularly those who receive free or deeply discounted products in exchange for reviews, engage in heightened consumption due to the number of products they receive. This heightened access to products and increased consumption can impact their ethical thinking and moral choices. Wilk (2001, p. 269) argued that "consumption is in essence a moral matter, since it always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self vs. group interests, and immediate vs. delayed gratification." Immoral consumer behavior is defined as ethically questionable through "various kinds and degrees of consumer dishonesty" (Brinkmann, 2004, p. 8). Dishonest reviews are problematic for a number of reasons, including consumer distrust toward the product and/ or seller; in the long term, distrust is likely to damage the relationship between brand and consumer. Investigating incentivized reviewing is important because reviews in exchange for benefits, while still potentially voluntary, might be inherently not altruistic in nature, they might not be written to contribute to the public good. Instead, they are likely to be egoistic in nature. This behavior should be labeled as egoistic because while it might serve the public good to an extent, it also benefits the one writing the review (Cheung and Lee, 2012).

Therefore, this study:

- investigated whether immoral and unethical consumer behavior exists in the form of dishonest reviews;
- determined the prevalence of those reviews; and
- identified factors that might be driving the community of incentivized reviewers.

3. Method

Data were collected over a period of 1.5 years using observational netnography. According to Kozinets (2002, 2006), netnography stems from its predecessor, ethnography and the cultural analysis of communities. In fact, Caliandro (2014, p. 1) defined netnography as ethnography in a virtual setting: "the most appropriate method to understand the culture that consumers produce within their daily life practices on social media is undoubtedly web-based ethnography." Netnography, which developed after the emergence of the World Wide Web and online communities, allows for analysis of online communities in their natural setting. Because of its anthropological perspective, netnography offers an opportunity to enhance our understanding of online cultural phenomena (Kozinets, 2006). Netnography is much less obtrusive than ethnography, focus groups and surveys because, in most instances, members of the online communities do not know that they are being observed. What adds to an unobtrusive nature is the fact that information posted in various online forums is voluntary and unprompted by the researchers. Additionally, anyone can gain acceptance into the group.

Offering great flexibility, netnography "can be used as a purely observational method or as one that incorporates a high degree of participation" (Kozinets, 2006, p. 281).

While netnography is usually less obtrusive than ethnography, the closed nature of review groups required the researcher to use an emic approach to data collection, a viewpoint that "results from studying behavior as from inside the system" (Pike, 1996, p. 37). Kozinets (2006) suggested that researchers need to initiate entrance into the culture under investigation. For the current study, the researcher became a reviewer actively participating in the community but not prompting participants to answer any questions. In other words, the researcher became a reviewer for the purpose of cultural immersion but refrained from asking questions or probing for more information, therefore retaining unobtrusive status. This emic approach increased understanding of the incentivized reviewing culture and its rules, morality and nuances and allowed the researcher to empathize. Furthermore, by becoming a reviewer, the researcher gained access to a large community of reviewers, becoming truly immersed in the experience. To become a reviewer, the researcher had to establish a track of "quality reviews" in a personal Amazon account. The researcher then requested access to Facebook review groups, submit her public review profile, name and email address, and commit to providing reviews within three to seven days of product receipt. However, to remain relatively unbiased during analysis, the researcher shifted to an etic approach, permitting analysis of data from the outside and minimizing personal bias.

The etic approach to analysis was particularly useful. Constantly shifting between the etic and emic approaches was a struggle because the immoral behaviors of the community clashed with the ethics of the researcher. The determination to understand the reviewing community, despite personal disagreements, allowed the researcher to maintain investigative distance.

4. Analysis

Thematic analysis was used instead of data mining because netnography is known to offer context-rich information. Unlike digital ethnography, which relies on data mining, netnography uncovers nuances that are otherwise difficult to uncover using other methods (Kozinets, 2006). Thematic analysis permits fuller understanding of context, reaching far beyond the written communication that the online community uses. First, over a period of 1.5 years, numerous screenshots of online discourse among members of the community were collected. Second, the textual data were analyzed into themes based on emerging patterns. Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as "conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p. 131). After the themes emerged, the identified patterns were further organized into supporting sub-themes based on current recommendations of thematic analysis (Aronson, 1995; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Supporting themes deepened understanding of the main themes. Finally, based on the most prevalent patterns, themes and sub-themes, a story line was developed and supported by selected direct quotes in the form of screenshots. A brief

timeline of events was developed and summarized into three periods: incentivized reviewer boom, incentivized reviewer activity ban and post-ban revival of reviewer activity.

5. Findings

To provide a clear picture of incentivized reviewer culture and the forces that drove it on Amazon, a timeline was established around the changes made to Amazon's terms of service regarding reviewer activity. The first period was the *incentivized reviewer boom*, during which reviewers could receive as many free products as they were given. Reviewers might receive ten products a day, and the higher their reviewer ranking, the better the products would be. In fact, incentivized reviews were explicitly permitted by Amazon if the consumer left a disclaimer informing potential readers that writing the review was done exchange for free product. The second period occurred after Amazon decided to change its terms of service on October 3, 2016, launching the *incentivized reviewer activity ban*. After the initial shock, the Facebook groups where online reviewing communities thrived changed their rules as well. Afterwards, the third, and still current (as of 2.25.2019), period began: *post-ban revival of reviewer activity*. Incentivized reviews are still banned, but reviewing activity continues.

During the first period, three main themes emerged. The first theme is forced high rating during the incentivized reviewer boom. Most of the online Facebook group communities required at least four-star, preferably five-star, ratings. Consumers who were incentivized to receive the product needed to write a review within 3 to 7 days of product receipt. The review (most often) had to be at least 75 words (the minimum length differed from group to group) and include media (e.g. images). While media such as pictures or videos were not always a requirement, individuals who opted in to receive a product and promised to use a particular type of media to supplement the review received priority over others (Figure 1). Facebook review group administrators personally checked every applicant's Amazon reviews to ensure high-quality content (Figure 2). Oftentimes, group administrators had hundreds or thousands of product discount codes to distribute to members, who then had to deliver a high-star rating and an in-depth description (Figure 3). The reason for this high number of codes was to manipulate the seller-ranking system. Products that recorded high increases in sales could earn the bestselling badge or gain higher placement in search results.

The second theme that emerged was consumer morality crushing. Consumers who showed signs of ethical reservation or were unwilling to give a five-star rating when the product was undeserving were often publicly scrutinized, targeted in group chats and made to feel guilty for not appreciating free or discounted products. For example, Facebook group administrators would say that they had worked hard to provide reviewers with free products, under certain conditions. Non-compliant reviewers were then asked to give a higher star rating and threatened to be banned from the community if they refused. Alternatively, they had to contact the seller in an attempt to resolve the issue, or submit a form explaining to the group admin why the product did not deserve a five-star rating (Figure 4). Even after submitting that form, reviewers were

Figure 1 Sample from review requirements of one Facebook group

Figure 2 Selection criteria based on quality review writing on Amazon

Figure 3 Facebook post boasting about the number of codes available to consumers

sometimes not allowed to submit their lower rating. In other words, form submission relieved reviewers of their obligation to write a review of any kind.

The third theme that emerged during the first period was the prevalent fear of being wiped by Amazon. Amazon began so-called "wiping" of previously written reviews and either taking away reviewing privileges or removing Prime privileges (including prime purchases, video streaming, etc.) of those

**Figure 4** Examples of morality crushing requirements
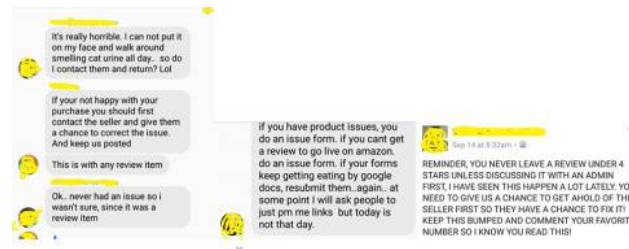
consumers who were in violation of its terms of service and participated in manipulating the review process. Manipulation of the review process included giving high star ratings for undeserving products, failing to provide the disclaimer that the product was free or discounted in exchange for a review, and taking part in "search and buy." This last violation involved a three-step process to obtain a code to purchase a product:

- search for a product using a provided keyword;
- add the product to a wish list; and
- add the product to the cart.

Finally, other violations not clearly specified by Amazon may have led to wiping. The fear of being wiped was ever-present, and every time reviewer rankings were updated by Amazon, many would check and post whether they had been wiped or were safe. Individuals who were wiped were often confused, having lost the ability to receive free or heavily discounted products. They mourned the loss of their review privileges or experienced deep anger toward Amazon. During wiping episodes, reviewers were asked to stop reviewing until the wave of wiping had passed (Figure 5).

The second period began when Amazon suddenly banned incentivized reviewing activity. The new terms of service were published on October 3, 2016, and Amazon cited reduced consumer trust in Amazon reviews as the reason for the ban (Perez, 2016). This change resulted in a community-wide outcry that ranged from deep sadness to extreme anger (Figure 6). However, some reviewers celebrated the possibility that reviews might start gaining validity (Figure 7).

Finally, during the third and final period, two themes emerged. The data showed distinct patterns of behavior. First, one group of reviewers decided to move all of their reviews to other sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. That group of individuals agreed to follow each other's pages and profiles in return for following back (Figure 8) so that reviewers could show sellers that they had a wide reach and a great

Figure 6 Sample of feelings expressed after new terms of service were published
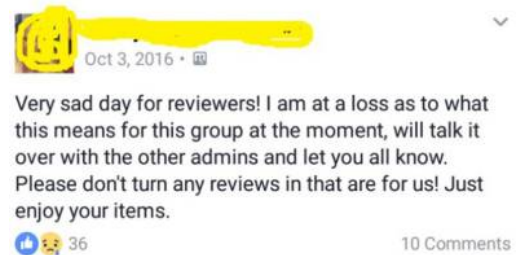
following. The reviews were done on social platforms to reach a wide network of potential consumers, and group administrators discouraged submission of Amazon reviews to avoid being wiped (Figure 9).

Another group of reviewers chose to continue reviewing on Amazon in a fashion that violated the new terms of service. Administrators either encouraged reviews on Amazon or required them (Figure 10). Three methods became prominent. The first way was to follow the same process that groups had used before the ban. The second was to purchase products and be reimbursed via PayPal. The third was to receive an Amazon gift card and use the credit to purchase products (Figure 11). The idea is that these reviews would be marked by Amazon as verified, meaning that they would appear to be written by non-incentivized reviewers. Often, these reviews did not include a disclaimer that the product had been received for free, a violation of Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requirements:

> The FTC's Endorsement Guides provide that if there is a "material connection" between an endorser and an advertiser – in other words, a connection that might affect the weight or credibility that consumers give the endorsement – that connection should be clearly and conspicuously disclosed, unless it is already clear from the context of the communication.
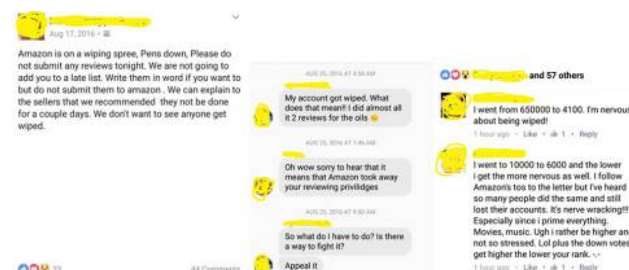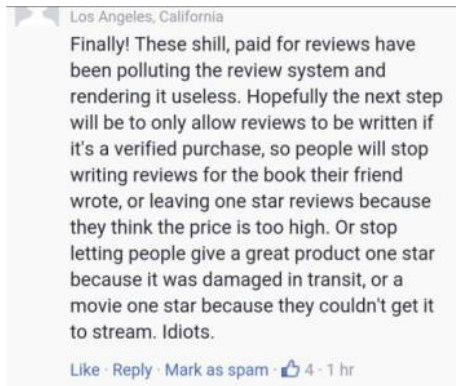
Figure 5 Effects of potential "wiping" on Amazon reviewers

Figure 7 Example of positive response to Amazon's ban on incentivized review activity

Figure 8 One group's shift to social media platforms

Figure 9 Group administrators discouraging reviews on Amazon

A material connection could be a business or family relationship, monetary payment, or the gift of a free product. Importantly, the Endorsement Guides apply to both marketers and endorsers.

Judged by these principles, group administrators encouraged and required both unethical and illegal behaviors of active group members.

In summary, over a period of 1.5 years, the researcher, through careful netnography and thematic analysis, uncovered behaviors that contributed to the J-shape distribution of reviews on Amazon and questionable reviewer ethics. Above all, the findings suggest manipulation of the review system in an

Figure 10 Encouragement of unethical behavior

attempt to boost sales and highlight the prevalence of biased (more than fake) reviews.

6. Discussion

This study revealed that incentivized reviewers, in most cases, violated Amazon's terms of service and, intentionally or not, biased the review system thereby negatively affecting other consumers by manipulating the reviewing system in several ways. First, the requirement to post high ratings contributed to an inordinate number of five-star reviews that likely affected the "at first glance" perception of consumers who only check star ratings prior to purchase. Second, reviewers were discouraged from leaving unfavorable reviews regardless of their true experience, magnifying the unethical practices of these groups and further amplifying the J distribution. Over time, this behavior seemed to bother fewer and fewer consumers, suggesting that unethical behavior was being normalized in the group culture. All these behaviors occurred under the prevalent fear of being caught by Amazon and having reviewing or purchasing privileges revoked. When Amazon banned incentivized review activity, some reviewers celebrated the potential for validity and honesty in product reviews. At the same time, unethical behavior continued, and some groups even encouraged illegal behavior. To circumvent Amazon's terms of service, some groups found ways to look like verified purchasers when they were still receiving free or discounted products.

The findings of this study, therefore, address consumer morality and uncover numerous unethical behaviors that violate the principles of public good that should govern consumer WOM. Consumers who were part of an incentivized reviewing community were willing to behave unethically, often in violation of the retailer's terms of service. The unethical behavior was seemingly driven by a desire to receive free or discounted products. Those individuals who felt uneasy about leaving high ratings for sub-par products were either pressured to leave a good review under threat of being banned or go through a lengthy process that would release them from writing

Figure 11 Encouragement and requirement of unethical and illegal behaviors

a review, if the review was going to be negative. Many of those reviewers chose to leave a good review after all because doing so was easier than having to submit all of the forms and explain themselves to group administrators.

Overall, consumers who were active members of the reviewing communities under investigation engaged in unethical behavior driven by the desire to receive free products. They posted dishonest reviews that potentially influenced consumers to make purchases. That spreading disinformation was widely accepted in these reviewing communities suggests that they, like many sub-cultures, developed their own set of moral standards, standards that not only permitted but also encouraged inflated reviews. The only major division between members of these communities occurred in the third period; some followed Amazon's terms of service by moving to other sites (Sears, Walmart, Wayfair), while others clearly violated Amazon's terms of service, even accepting gift cards and PayPal payments to maintain the illusion of verified purchases.

The problem revealed by this study, however, goes far beyond the morality of reviewers. Even if merchants are not directly requesting high product ratings, their reliance on group administrators to enforce high ratings, the merchants knowingly induce consumers to purchase a product based on biased consumer (here incentivized reviewers) opinions. Furthermore, the sheer number of discount codes offered to consumers presumably affects Amazon's algorithms that automatically assign "Best Seller" badges to products that seem to be frequently purchased and in high demand. In reality, this "demand" is driven by incentivized reviewers. Therefore, all of these manipulations affect not only J-shaped distributions and popularity algorithms but also consumer decision-making. Instead of trust, the relationship between buyer and seller is based on system manipulations, and transactional marketing seems to matter more than long-term relationships.

The findings have tremendous implications for unsuspecting consumers who still rely on online reviews, sellers who refuse to engage in dishonest reviewing practices, and scholars who are interested in not only corporate social responsibility but also consumer social responsibility. Furthermore, the findings imply that sellers who engage in system manipulation might be engaging in unfair competitive practices.

7. Conclusions limitations and future research

This study focused on the online community of incentivized Amazon reviewers. The research process and analysis resulted in rich and in-depth insights into the ethics and culture of online Amazon reviewers. As it is the case with qualitative studies, this study is highly context bound and no attempts

should be made to generalize the findings into population. However, given fact that reviewing group sizes ranged from 200 to 64,000 members, the size of groups and prevalence of behaviors across groups appeared to be quite consistent. Additionally, the benefit of this study goes beyond its findings and includes data collection over period when many changes occurred, something difficult to replicate. Attempts to replicate can be made particularly with respect to the third era which is post TOS change.

Regardless of its potential benefits, the study only uncovered a small portion of a much larger picture. Future research should focus on expanding this study to uncover additional portions. Using in-depth interviews, for example, future studies could shed light on potential motivators behind incentivized review activity. Sellers should also be examined to determine whether their behaviors are equally questionable. If so, identifying difference in practice between sellers who agree to rely on incentivized reviewers and seller who do not would be insightful. Furthermore, quantitative studies should measure why consumers behave in certain ways and the magnitude of those behaviors. For example, testing might reveal heightened levels of materialism in reviewers who post inflated star ratings. Additionally, given that some incentivized reviewers have moved from Amazon to social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, comparison studies might help marketers better understand the benefits and drawbacks of sending products to those reviewers. Finally, determining whether consumers perceive incentivized reviews as less trustworthy than non-incentivized reviews could help gauge the usefulness of giving away products for free.

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