* I would like you to carefully formulate a research question.   Your readings examine moral decision making and justice across multiple domains.  I would like you to choose an existing digital app.  The app could be used on people’s phones, etc.   Please choose an aspect of this app that involves moral decision making.  This could be on the part of the users, developers, company, etc.  Please formulate a precise research question around this moral decision and outline a method of investigation.   Please defend why your research question is important and why it is necessary to investigate it.

Comprehensive Exam Answers: Clint Davis-Stober

Main thing we can do:

* People who are incentivized to review items
  + Do people give ‘great’ reviews, because they ‘choose’ to be ignorant of other products (they want to give a good review, might not ethically be able to do so if they look @ other products in the same space), can we look and see if helpfulness ratings are predicted by incentivized reviews for people who ALSO look @ other products?
    - Are avg review scores higher for a product when there are no other products to compare against?
  + People generally prefer equity over efficiency (wasting a gift card instead of one person ‘unfairly’ benefiting).
    - How does this relate to people being given incentives to review?
    - If free product is being given out anyways… can the way it’s given out change how people perceive incentivized reviews?
      * If the free product is handed out ‘at random’ or in an equivalent manner to random amazon shoppers, would people still have the same thoughts on sponsored reviews?

What types of moral questions are we well equipped to answer?

* Generosity and splitting resources
* ‘Fair behavior’ and why it looks good, people dislike appearing unfair (to themselves or others)
* ‘Giving’ things away as a form of ‘buying’ equity or social welfare (especially for dictators)
  + Giving is more consistent w/ people being compelled to give due to situational factors while not valuing the outcome itself
* ‘Moral wiggling’ to achieve unethical ends
  + Types of basic ethics traps, people persuading themselves that they are NOT violating their ethical standards
  + Briefly talk about what and why people set various ethical standard for themselves?
  + Diffusing responsibilities
    - Vertically: intermediary b/w decision maker and stakeholders
      * E.g. Company can use ‘firing consultants’ which don’t do much other than firing employees.
      * Firms can outsource to contractors that pay less than the standards of the firm itself
    - Horizontally: Relying on others to do what’s best for the stakeholder rather than themselves (bystander effect)
  + Exploitation of uncertainty/hidden information
  + ‘Seeking justifications’
    - ‘Twice work/Twice output = praised, but twice work/normal output, or normal work/twice output are paid less!
    - “fair allocations are malleable”
* The absence of explicit information about procedure = similar effects on selfish people
  + Informing people of procedural fairness is necessary, otherwise people believe they are losing for unfair reasons.

Choose an existing digital application (on phones, computers, etc.)

Amazon (Shopping) Application

What aspect of this app involves moral decision making (users, developers, company, etc.)?

Reviews of products – How to balance different stakeholders interests in the system. Amazon just wants to increase overall sales (needs some products to be well reviewed), individuals want to find high quality products (needs reviews to be accurate), and companies want to sell their products regardless of it’s actual quality (desires high review rankings).

Some reviews are ‘verified’ purchases, some reviews are ‘received item for free’, but this information is not always shared??!?

We can see that there are differences in perception between paid for and not reviews

Morality of Amazon?/Companies?

* Amazon clearly promotes it’s own internal items above those of competitors on it’s own platform.
  + Thus, it is in the dual position of being a seller, like many other entities, as well as the ‘gatekeeper’.
  + Amazon would like to NOT appear selfish (stealing business from local retailers, etc.) even when it is?
* When people buy from Amazon, even if it’s ‘immoral’ they can exploit plausible uncertainty that exists in other sources, so they can choose to get from Amazon instead?
* Rynarzewska 2018:
  + Diffusion of responsibility from the perspective of the companies, they aren’t making the reviewers review, they aren’t even directly interacting with the reviewers, or requesting high product ratings
    - Instead, group administrators are relied upon to enforce high ratings, and the culture of the administrators makes it very difficult to leave lower or honest reviews.

Morality of Those Making Reviews?

* Dana 2007
  + When people themselves make reviews, they want to produce what they consider a ‘fair’ review, because people intrinsically dislike appearing unfair to themselves or others.
    - What actions can people engage in to maintain the ‘illusion’ of not appearing biased?
      * People who might review something worse if they had access to other items or services may choose to not look at those items/services to review something well (“this is the best I’ve ever tried!”)
      * I don’t have to look critically at other products, because someone else will!
    - People will not look for easily findable hidden information, if they can get a better outcome by ignoring this information!
  + It’s known that selfishness increases SIGNIFICANTLY in the absence of transparency
* Dana 2012
  + Do people giving highly biased reviews realize that they are doing so?
  + People are able to persuade themselves that they are NOT breaking ethical standards.
    - A reviewer may truly care about ethics, but would prefer not to incur the costs of taking the ethical action (a bad review, and less products/gifts moving forward) themselves if there is a good chance someone else will.
    - A reviewer may not care about what ‘ethical choice’ (purchasing decision) that someone else makes, if they don’t feel responsible ( “it’s their money, they can spend it how they like/ It’s just my opinion”)
* Choshen-Hillel 2015:
  + When we reduce partiality, there is more support for efficient but inequitable resource allocation
    - If ‘free products for review’ are provided in an impartial manner, with a transparent system, people’s perception of how much they are likely to be biased (or how helpful they are) could be shifted.
    - Perhaps other people can choose to assign ‘points’ or things they would like reviewed to others?
* Rynarzewska 2018:
  + Suppressed consumer morality driven by desire to gain benefits (free products)
  + Manipulation of the review system to boost sales
    - High prevalence of highly biased reviews.
* Tsao 2018: Does an ethically sound way to disclose sponsorship/incentivized reviews exist?
  + Quasi-experiment on method of sponsorship affects perceptions of reviews w.r.t. helpfulness, credibility, and purchasing intentions.
  + Does voluntary disclosure of sponsorship undermine how effective reviews are?
    - If so, hiding sponsorship is deceiving consumers for personal benefit.
  + ‘Failure’ to disclose sponsorship, then having that failure be revealed, significantly hurts consumer credibility of a product review.
  + Sponsorship type:
    - Monetary incentives (paid reviews, money, raffles, discounts, ‘points’ to spend in a system, refunds/rebates)
    - Non monetary incentives (free products, services, experiences)
    - Dual sponsorship, both monetary and nonmonetary
  + Sponsorship type matters, experiential sponsorship (just given the item to test) indicates to consumers that this is at least a review based on something they’ve tried. Persuasiveness on these reviews did NOT diminish, even after disclosure
    - “This review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for a free meal”
  + For paid reviews, it is hard for them to say what they feel, and consumers that know it was paid for question the fairness/authenticity of the review, even if the person DID experience the product itself.
    - “This review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for financial remuneration”
    - “This review was solicited by the restaurant in exchange for a free meal and financial remuneration”
  + Reviewer Type/Online influence of reviewer matters a lot. Highly influential reviewers (long running, many reviews, subscribers/friends, and awards) vs uninfluential reviewers (internet randos)
    - Greater influence leads to greater consumer perception of review helpfulness, credibility, and purchase intention.
    - A picture containing diagram

      Description automatically generatedSignificant interaction w/ sponsorship type as well; Everything except the pure monetary sponsorship was considered increasing helpfulness of the high influence reviewer.
      * Non-disclosure/Experiential sponsorship had greater credibility for high influence person as well.
      * The same effect occurs for purchase intention!

Morality of companies asking for reviews

* Dana 2012:
  + Companies have ‘vertical diffusion’ when they heavily incentivize others to promote their products and review it well (even if you include free items/payment!)
  + Also, Horizontal diffusion – relying on the ‘bulk’ of reviewers, or the people themselves to make the best choices for them (essentially belief that their product, while not the best for SOME people, is very good for others, and trust that people who buy their products fall in that category)

Please formulate a precise research question around this moral decision and outline a method of investigation!

Why is this research question important?

* US Economic Census Data
  + Online shopping, especially post COVID-19 pandemic, is booming, with 257.3 billion dollars of e-commerce happening in the 1st quarter of 2022 alone
  + This makes up 14.3% of total retail sales!
* Amazon Quarterly Release
  + Amazon itself makes up over 110 billion dollars of net sales in e-commerce in this quarter alone!
  + It is clear that online shopping is very convenient and used commonly in contemporary times
* Bounie 2008
  + There are real weaknesses to online shopping, as you cannot directly ‘experience’ the product itself, increasing uncertainty on the quality of the item.
  + Online ‘peer’ reviews, as compared to offline press/expert reviews, and when comparing the direct effect of those reviews against each other, the researchers generally conclude that online peer reviews are more important to consumers than general review websites or expert opinion.
  + Ideally, the existence of online peer review provides a ‘channel’ to counter or disrupt traditional media narratives or unfair editorial reviews.
* We can state the belief that people who write reviews have an implied moral and ethical responsibility (under principles of public good) to those who read them: Fellow consumers.

Why is it necessary to investigate this research question?

Rynarzewska 2018:

* Tremendous implications for the average consumer who uses consumer generated reviews online, while aware or unaware of potential bias.
  + Unfair business practices from product sellers who ‘demand’ high ratings
  + Advertising is heavily regulated, but incentivized reviews, as seen by the FTC regulations, are seen as a more ‘grey’ area.
* A great deal of reviews are written by either ‘fake’ customers, or were biased because reviewers were paid to write reviews for products they never purchased or tested.
  + Or, being given an product for free ‘in return for an honest review’
* For a period of time, reviewers could get as many free products as possible, and they were allowed to give a good review as long as they disclaimed that it was done in exchange for free product.
  + Most review communities required at least four or five star ratings.
  + Those in the communities who were good reviews, were provided with codes for free product.
    - Consumers who gave ethically unbiased reviews (low scores if deserved) were chastised in group settings, attacked and made to feel guilty for not ‘appreciating’ free/discounted products.
* Amazon eventually banned ‘incentivized reviews’ through the TOS on October 2016, however, incentivized reviewing STILL occurred and is occurring (though in violation of the TOS)
  + Purchases would be made and reimbursed through Paypal, or people were given Amazon gift cards and then used the credit to buy the item itself.
  + In the ‘Amazon’ system, these purchases were marked as ‘verified’ and looked like they were unbiased unincentivized reviews!
* Note: This incentivized unethical reviewing was in occurrence as Amazon was dropping the hammer, and revoking reviewing/purchasing privileges from accounts they suspected to be fake

Hu 2011:

* Customers generally assume that online peer reviews are considered to be unbiased, and reflective of actual consumer experience.
  + Online review manipulation does indeed exist!
  + Manipulation strategy of companies is a monotonically decreasing function of the product’s true quality/mean consumer rating of the product.
* Thus, manipulation decreases how useful/informative online reviews are.
  + Because a positive correlation exists between the avg. review score and product sales!
* While not all firms manipulate online reviews, the lower the quality of the product, and lower average rating of other items sold by that firm, there is a greater likelihood of online manipulation of reviews.

Hu 2008: Study on non-score aspects of reviews and how they affect consumers.

* Consumers pay attention not just to review scores, but contextual information about reviewers themselves
  + Such as the reputation or exposure of the reviewer.
  + Reviewer quality, as measured by how many customers read a review and call it ‘useful’ (amazon metrics). Mean # of useful votes divided by total votes of all reviews ever written by that reviewer.
    - Consumers react well to favorable reviews form a high quality reviewer, while consumers feel indifferent about both favorable or unfavorable news when it comes from a low quality reviewer.
  + Reviewer exposure, consumers paying more attention to high exposure reviewers (those who review more than the median number of products)
    - Same as for quality, but to a lesser extent.