* 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

What existing digital app would you like to research, and what aspect of this app relates to moral decision making?

Amazon online shopping is unbelievably popular, with enormous prevalence throughout the entire world and a customer-base that parallels its prevalence. Due to its sheer popularity, there is likely a great volume of data available internally to Amazon data scientists. Thus, I believe that Amazon digital shopping would be a very fruitful digital app to examine for academic research. The aspect of this application that I would like to look at, as it relates to moral decision making, is the customer review system and process. The moral aspect of rating and reviewing items online is obvious, as there is a persistent belief that those who write reviews have an implied moral and ethical responsibility to the fellow consumers who rely on them to make purchasing choices with their limited resources (Bounie, Borreau, Gensollen, and Waelbroeck, 2008).

Specifically, I would like to experimentally extend some concepts in the domain of general moral and ethical reasoning that have not been previously applied to the niche of online product reviews. In general, people are able to engage in less moral activity when they are able to persuade themselves that they are not breaking their own ethical standards (Dana, Weber, and Kuang, 2007; Dana, Loewenstein, and Weber, 2012). There are many ways areas in which online reviewing can be susceptible to these immoral actions, as we will briefly review. One common aspect is that of exploiting hidden information, where there is a plausible excuse to not have to know the consequences of one’s own actions. For example, an individual who has an STD might not have sex with others if they knew for sure, which is a moral action. However, this person may choose to avoid getting tested, thus exploiting the ‘uncertainty’ of their situation, being able to feign ignorance of any actual STD’s they may have spread. Another concept that is common is that of ‘diffusing responsibility’. In this case, people avoid accountability for tough ethical decision by diffusing the responsibility for the choice across multiple individuals. Vertical diffusion is when there is a third party that sits between the decision maker and the stakeholders, the introduction of this third party ‘diffuses’ responsibility and results in the decision-maker being ‘less directly’ responsible for the outcome. For example, a company might have high standards with regards to paying their employees, but that company may hire contractors that pay less than the standards of the company’s own employees This can result in a supposedly more ethical company that pays higher wages in general, to pay lower wages for work that is ostensibly done on their behalf. Horizontal diffusion can be seen when decision makers rely on others to act in the best interests of the actual stakeholder, best described as the ‘bystander effect’ in traditional psychology literature.

There are several ways these concepts can be related to issues of ethics in online reviewing. For example, incentivized reviews are extremely common, and provide an obvious moral problem. How can someone be expected to provide an objective review when they were provided monetary or material gain for doing so? Researchers have found that is indeed the case, with reviewers who received compensation leaving good reviews for sub-par productg even when feeling uneasy about doing so (Rynarzewska, 2018). Likewise, many companies distribute promotional codes or rebates for their products through externally managed ‘review communities’, managed by administrators. There are clear examples of vertical diffusion here, as the ‘review communities’ take on the role of the third party between the decision-maker and the stakeholders. In these groups, while the company providing the resources did not explicitly demand biased reviews of the reviewers, the administrators of these review groups that distributed the monetary and material benefits clearly did. Participants in communities who were good reviewers were given more material benefits from the administrators, and those who gave ethically unbiased reviews (low scores if deserved) were chastised by group leaders and made to feel guilty for not ‘appreciating’ what they were being granted.

Why is this research question important?

Broadly, this research is important because a huge proportion of total commercial transaction in the United States occurs through e-commerce. This is especially true when considering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented many from engaging in physical retail shopping, and diverted demand instead to online platforms. This lead to a staggering 43% increase in e-commerce in 2020, the first year of the pandemic (Annual Retail Trade Survey, 2020). Online shopping has not cooled down since, with 257.3 billion dollars happening in the 1st quarter of 2022 alone, making up over 14.3% of total retail sales (US Economic Census Data, 2022). The largest online retail platform, Amazon, has made up over 110 billion dollars of net sales in e-commerce in the 3rd quarter of 2022 alone! It is obvious that online shopping is extremely popular, and growing.