REVIEWS RICHNESS: HOW ONLINE INFORMATION CONTENT DRIVES PERSUASION

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**Review Richness: How Online Information Content Drives Persuasion**

**Extended Abstract:**
As a special type of electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM), online reviews are commonly used as an important decision-making aid, and have received growing attention from academia to understand their influence on outcomes such as sales and persuasiveness. An implicit assumption in extant work is that review length can be used to measure the information contained in a review, because longer reviews must contain more information than shorter ones (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Mudambi and Schuff 2010; Zhang et al 2010). This assumption is not without consequences, as reviews of the same length could contain different information amounts and valence (i.e., star rating). How information content, length, and valence shape persuasiveness remains unknown.

This study addresses this gap by (1) developing a measurement of review information content, termed review “richness” and (2) examining how review richness, length, and valence simultaneously influence review persuasiveness. Concerning theoretical contributions, this study adopts the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (HSM, Chaiken 1983). As such, review features are conceptualized as either heuristic cues (such as valence by star rating and length), which allow consumers to quickly and superficially evaluate review persuasiveness when they are unable or unmotivated to read through the whole review; or systematic cues, which require readers to spend more effort and carefully read an online review. Review richness is conceptualized as a systematic cue independent from length and valence, which are heuristic cues. Substantially, the study empirically shows how a proposed review richness metric influences review persuasiveness differently from review length. Methodologically, we developed such a metric using Shannon’s information entropy measure (Shannon 1948). Substantially, we uncover the joint role of heuristic and systematic cues in shaping online review persuasiveness, especially when reviews imply a different degree of expected product uncertainty (as judged by the standard deviation of review valence).

Logistic regression analysis on a sample of top 100 Amazon books (as of Dec. 2015) shows that review richness robustly predicts review persuasiveness (as measured by whether a review was helpful or not). When expected product uncertainty is high, richness is the only significant predictor of persuasiveness. Specifically, richness estimates are significant ($p<.05$) for the pooled sample of top books ($\beta=0.59$), and for the sub-samples of low uncertainty ($\beta=0.99$) and high uncertainty books ($\beta=0.29$). As suggested by HSM, when expected uncertainty is high, consumers will be highly motivated to deeply understand the product to make an optimal purchase decision, and will thus focus on systematic cues (richness) rather than heuristic cues (length and valence).

In sum, our results suggest that consumers judge review persuasiveness using both heuristic and systematic cues, and that both capture different aspects of the online word-of-mouth consumption experience. In addition, consumers rely on such cues differently for different levels of expected product uncertainty and, when such uncertainty is high, systematic cues, such as review richness, are most useful to assess review persuasiveness, rather than heuristic cues. Thus, online review researchers should (1) consider both heuristic and systematic cues, as well as the context of review information processing, when predicting review persuasiveness and (2) incorporate review richness into their data analytics models to alleviate potential biases and increase predictive power. Our results also suggest that, given that helpful reviews signal value to consumers, online retailers must ensure that the review features available in their websites match consumers’ motivation to process such features in order to bolster review persuasiveness.