



The mystery of online product reviews

"Read and let write"

Séissmograph report 2017

A self-financed qualitative study conducted by
Séissmo – Markt und Forschung

Editorial: Online Reviews are the New Gold

- It is neither a novelty nor a surprise: the **importance of the internet** is continuously **increasing** and so is our **research scope**. For that reason, this year our self-financed *Séissmograph* report logically deals with the **massive phenomenon of reviews**.
- Indeed, products of any kind can be comfortably searched, compared and bought online. **Reading product reviews has become a new way of gathering information and fine-tuning the decision making process**. As such, they play a considerable **economic** role.
- **We wanted to understand what is behind this new “occupation”:**
 - What happens in shoppers minds while reading reviews?
 - Why do people feel the need to contribute, i.e. write reviews?
 - What prevents other consumers from writing?
- We **met the participants**, in a neutral facility, at the same time, using a multimethodology:
 - Firstly, discussions in separate rooms
 - Parallel to this, individual interviews and paired interviews
 - Finally, we brought the participants face to face
- We hope this report successfully delivers an **interesting understanding of the online consumer feedback phenomenon** and helps **producers and retailers to continuously optimise the reviewing process**.

Research set-up: Online review readers and writers at a glimpse

Dynamic group discussions...



The ones who only read
reviews...



... and the ones
who write reviews...



... meeting each
other

... combined with interviews



Paired interviews



Individual interviews

Our key learning in a nutshell

Why people read reviews?

- **Too much choice:** insecurity, risk aversion, a need for reassurance and self-confirmation
- **Entertaining occupation:** voyeurism, enjoyment from looking into other people's lives, a new kind of reading (for free!)

Why some people write them?

- **On the surface, altruism:** a new social norm, responsible citizens who prevent others from making mistakes by leading them to make safe decisions
- **Below the surface, empowerment:** conviction of being the new elite, guiding others in the dark (through their blindness), personal credit and importance, money!

Why do so many people not write any?

- **Trivialisation:** reviews have become a commodity, individual opinions have lost their value (since everyone is being permanently asked to give one)
- **Tedious process:** too wordy, too long; leaves people with little writing abilities outside
- **Lack of personal connection:** process too anonymous and standardised to affect people emotionally



1

Behind the curtain of online reviews

We looked at the actors

Our observation: there are lots of serial reviewers

- When looking at reviews on the Amazon website, one finds numerous writers with a special membership status/ title
- We were surprised to discover that they write a huge number of reviews on the website:
 - Some have written **hundreds of reviews** (therefore, testing hundreds of products...)
 - Some write extremely often: **several times a week**, up to **several times a day** (we regularly observed up to 5 to 10 reviews written on the very same day!):
For these people, using new products and writing reviews is part of their daily life (work?)
- Looking more closely and reading their reviews, one notices that most of the time, they write about products they have **received from a manufacturer**, for free or with a big discount, in exchange for a review (some specify it, some do not)
- From these observations several questions arise:
 - To what extent are they neutral, independent, impartial and sincere when giving their opinion?
 - Since they test **so many products**, **how much time do they really test them?** How meaningful is their assessment?
 - To what extent are they really **interested in the product** (Would they have bought it if they hadn't got it for free/ with a big discount?)
 - **How trustworthy are these reviews, if at all?**

A few regular consumers among an ocean of professional reviews

- Based on our research we **identified 3 different types of reviewers** – they differed in terms of quantity, quality and style. This resulted in a difference in the level of professionalism.

Amateur ←————→ Professional

The Altruist

- Writes to give his honest opinion
- His/her reviews are sometimes very superficial and not very helpful e.g. vague, not detailed about the product itself
"I liked the product/ the product was nice/ very nice product"
- Overall, they write no more than 40 reviews in the space of a few years
- No regularity in reviews

We tried to meet regular reviewers, but we could not find them in the usual consumer database

The "Professional"

- Overall, have written from hundreds to thousands of reviews
- Daily production of reviews – between 3 and 10
- Often specify that they received the product for free/ with a discount in exchange for a review
- Want to give a complete picture by adding photos

Subtype: All-rounder

- The most common type of reviewers
- Write about any kind of products – products for housing, electronics, jewelry, clothes, cosmetics...

Subtype: Specialist

- Is passionate about one subject and tends to specialise in it - for example technology products, books, movies...
- Wants to be considered and acknowledged as having an expertise

2

Why do people read reviews?

Reviews are considered highly credible and help confirm choice

Despite the observed professionalisation of reviews, consumers still believe in them a lot

- ▶ When asked about sources of information, consumers mention **product reviews** among the sources considered as **highly credible and trustworthy**. Reviews are equivalent to professional retailers, websites and/or personal contacts.
- ▶ Online sources like Check 24, booking.com, Chip Online are rated as **credible** because of their market-leading positions
- ▶ Offline sources like retailers, friends and family are trusted because of their expertise, independence and intimacy

Product reviews on Amazon combine these two elements of credibility becoming a trustworthy sales consultant

- ▶ A professional website
- ▶ Advice written by customers like you and me: a testimony of real-life experience

"a review is like the missing customer advice/ If I feel insecure I read the reviews and I feel a little bit more secure about what I am doing"

The majority is always right



"to fake 500 reviews is difficult"

according to the motto

"that many people cannot be wrong"

Theoretical explanation:

- Theory of social proof → *"when a lot of people are doing something, it is the right thing to do".*
- A behaviour, decision or an opinion is more appropriate if others are acting or thinking that way. (R.B. Cialdini, 1987)
- Especially valid when they feel similar to a group of people (R.B. Cialdini, 1993).

→ Identification with the reviewers: **strengthens trust and credibility.**

Consumers are the best ones to listen to, since they are independent



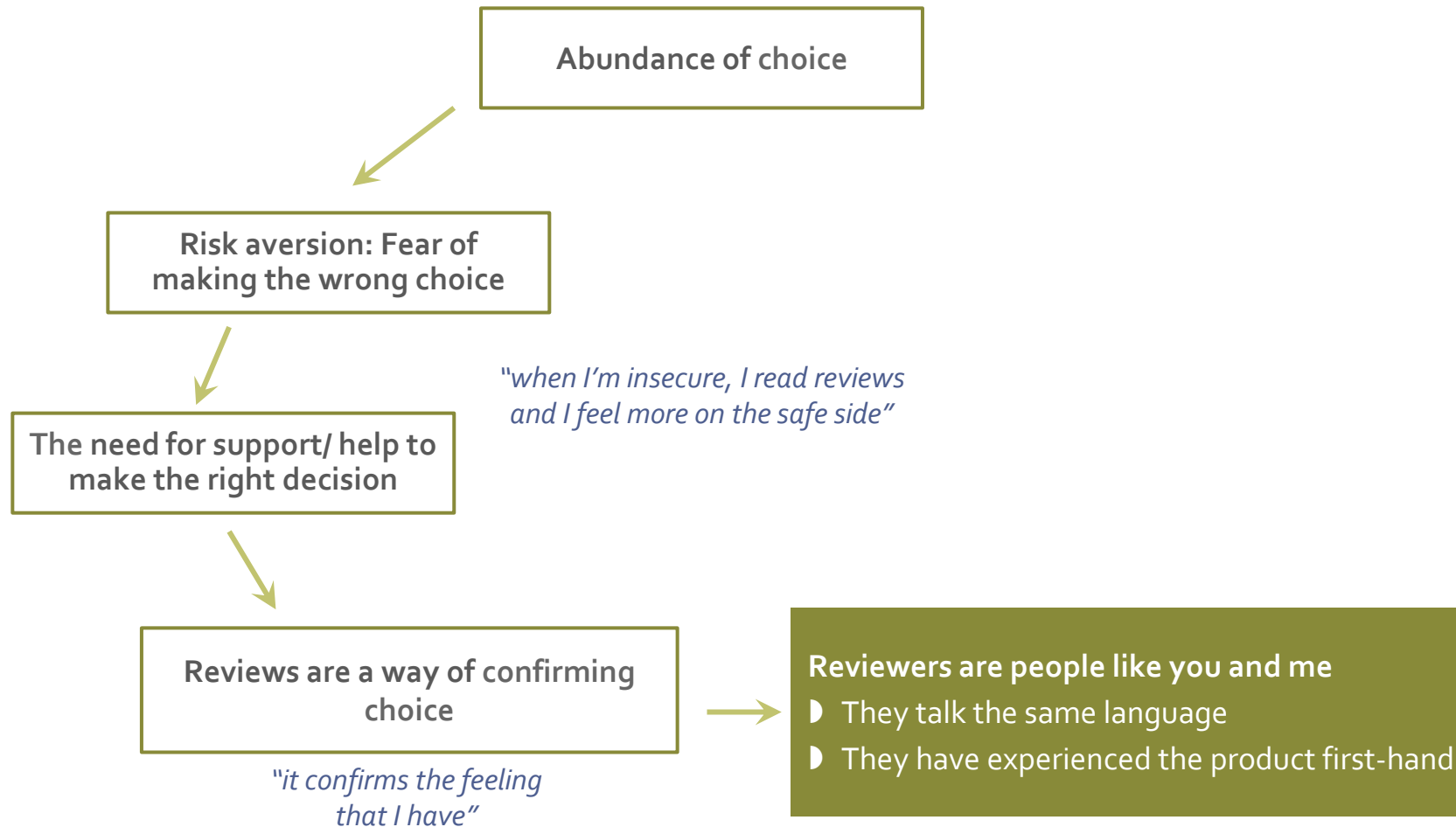
Reviews are written by seemingly **independent, uninfluenced and incorruptible** people unlike other sources of information:

- **Bloggers:** receive money which influences their review of products into an “only” positive direction
- **Retailers interest is obvious:** are dependent on extra commission and would give advice for anything → put pressure on the consumer

The reviewers interest is not (yet) perceived as profit-oriented

The “good reviewer”
Independent, incorruptible, altruistic...

Reviews are a guide and offer reassurance in a world of too much choice



Breaking news: reviews are also actually entertaining

Reviews help people to choose but **once you start reading them you often cannot stop:**

■ Fun to read and entertaining

- While the participants were reading some of the reviews it was **observed that they started laughing and were amused**



■ Voyeurism

- It's not only about the product itself, but **also about the people behind it**
- Peeking **into a stranger's private life**
"she writes that she doesn't like the style of the dress, because she prefers to go to Oldie-parties/ he wants to explain that he has children at home.../ somebody who really loved this book probably has a lot of love poems at home"

3

The recipe for a credible and trustworthy review

Name all the ingredients and add your own personal touch

How to write a good review: keep it balanced!

► Add a **personal touch**

- Information about private life
- Imperfection in the form of spelling mistakes

► Identification with the writer

► **Keep it straight to the point**

"it is good if you are already informed via the headline/ I would not have read this, because it's too long"

► **Positive** aspects



► Keep it **objective**

- Focus on quality, performance and handling
"quintessence"

► Focus on the product and its features

► **But informative**

"a text that I can use but which is not too long to annoy me/ it is important that the review is detailed"

► **Negative** aspects

"It's an honest opinion, since it names positive and negative aspects/ Goes and Nos were listed"

A good review: straight to the point, objective but personal



AXE Haarstyling Spray Gel für Männer Classic Look Signature, 6er Pack (6 x 150 ml)
Preis: **EUR 23,94**

1 von 1 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich

★★★★☆ **Nicht Fisch, nicht Fleisch.**, 28. September 2016

Rezension bezieht sich auf: [AXE Haarstyling Spray Gel für Männer Classic Look Signature, 6er Pack \(6 x 150 ml\) \(Badartikel\)](#)

Vine Kundenrezension eines kostenfreien Produkts ([Was ist das?](#))

Klang zumindest interessant: Gel zum Sprühen.

Faktisch ist es Quatsch, weil nicht sonderlich gut dosierbar; also sprühe ich es wieder in die Handfläche.

Styling Effekt ist okay. Leichter "Wet Look", etwas Hakt im kurzen Haar. Struwel- Look möglich, ohne verkleben. Ganz okay eigentlich.

Aber da kann ich auch eine 90Cent 200ml Tube vom Discounter für nehmen.


Duft ist etwas herb männlich. Nicht sehr schlimm, wie ich (als Frau) finde.

Kann man(n) probieren, ist aber irgendwie überteuert Schnickschnack.

 [Kommentar](#) | [Kommentar als Link](#)

- **Good length** – short, but not too short. You get all the relevant information without spending too much time reading. The focus is put on the product and its features.
"short but specific"
- **Pros and Cons are mentioned** – a sign of objectivity and independence → trust
"both positive and negative aspects are mentioned"
- **A personal touch** – the impression is given that the products are being used in the reviewer's life. The reader is also able to personally identify with the reviewer.
"he explained his experience and added his own opinion"

A bad review: too long, impersonal, too enthusiastic and a lack of objectivity



Glucosamin Sulfat 2KCL hochwirksame 1500 MG Ergänzung GELD-ZURÜCK-GARANTIE 365 Tabletten (1 Jahresvorrat) - Chondroitin - Kein Gel, Kapseln, Flüssig oder Pulver - Vorteile sind Unterstützung der Gelenke, Pflege der Gelenke & verbessert Arthritis - Hergestellt im vereinigten Königreich
Wird angeboten von No.1 Supplements Limited
Preis: EUR 39,99

8 von 9 Kunden fanden die folgende Rezension hilfreich

★★★★★ **Guter Stoff !**, 5. August 2016

Rezension bezieht sich auf: Glucosamin Sulfat 2KCL hochwirksame 1500 MG Ergänzung GELD-ZURÜCK-GARANTIE 365 Tabletten (1 Jahresvorrat) - Chondroitin - Kein Gel, Kapseln, Flüssig oder Pulver - Vorteile sind Unterstützung der Gelenke & verbessert Arthritis - Hergestellt im vereinigten Königreich (Badartikel)

Ich teste dieses Produkt, mit zwei Freundinnen seit Mai 2016.
Meine Freundinnen sind begeistert !
Gerda hat Fibromyalgie, Arthrose und Knochenschmerzen (besonders bei Wetter Umschwung).
Seit sie diese Glucosamin Kapseln nimmt, geht es ihr extrem besser und die Hände sind weniger geschwollen.


Birgit hat sich schon früher hochdosierte Glucosamin Kapseln besorgt, die gab es nicht mehr und jetzt ist sie froh das es diese hier gibt !
Wenn sie diese nimmt, hat sie keine Gelenkschmerzen.
2005 wurde bei ihr Hüftgelenksarthrose diagnostiziert, nach 5 Jähriger täglichen Einnahme von Glucosamin Sulfat, war beim MRT keine Arthrose mehr erkennbar.
Das heißt jetzt nicht unbedingt, das es ganze 5 Jahre gedauert hatte, aber es wurde danach fest gestellt !

Ich nehme sie ab und zu, bei Schmerzen, sie helfen dann gut.

Gesunde Knorpelmasse braucht drei Nährstoffe:
Wasser als Schmiermittel und zum Abtransport der Stoffwechselprodukte.
Proteoglycane zum ansaugen und speichern des Wassers.
Kollagen um die Proteoglycane zu halten.

Glucosamin Sulfat ist ein wichtiger Baustein der Proteoglycane.
Wenn viel Glucosamin vorhanden ist kann genug Proteoglycane produziert werden und somit Wasser gespeichert werden.
Es spornt auch die Chondrozyten an mehr Kollagen her zu stellen, normalisiert den Stoffwechsel des Knorpels und schützt vor Verschleiß.
Da es so eine wichtige Rolle spielt, kann es dem Körper wirklich helfen verschlissenen Knorpel zu ersetzen.
Es hilft gegen Schmerzen und unterstützt die natürlichen Heilungsmechanismen.
Die Gelenkfunktionen werden verbessert.

Ich hoffe, meine Rezension ist hilfreich !

 [Kommentar \(1\)](#) | [Kommentar als Link](#) | Neuester Kommentar: Aug 11, 2016 5:38 PM MEST

- Too long, takes too much time to read, not motivating, tiring in advance
"a lot of text/ I would never have read it"
- When a review is **not about a personal experience**, but more about someone else – **less credible**
"she writes 4 lines about Gerda and 4 lines about Birgit and only one about herself"
- The impression it has been copied and pasted
"Copy and paste from a medical site"
- Only positive**, no negative counter argument to balance it out: the impression that the review is **not objective** → the impression that it is **written by a professional/a company**
"the company or an intern has written it"

4

Why do people write reviews?

In addition to honourable motives, we also discovered some less honourable ones

We identified 4 main drivers behind review writing

SOCIAL DIMENSION



INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION

Altruism

"the good guy"

Wants to help and prevent others from making mistakes

"I would be happy if it helped her, if she has the same opinion and if she found a good product"

"for me it's really about helping people"

Proselytism

"the prophet"

Only writes positive reviews, wants to 'spread glad tidings'

"(I write) if I am convinced of something/

"I always get a bit euphoric when I find something really good (...) Then I have a bigger motivation to say it"

Need for personal valorisation

"the professional"

Wants to show he/she has extensive knowledge and wants to express it

"I buy a lot on the internet and therefore I can evaluate many different products"

"For me it's the chance to express myself and I want to get it off my chest"

Boredom

"the opportunist"

He/she has a lot of spare time and needs distraction

"Often I write when I'm in the train and I'm bored/ It always takes me a one and a half hour train ride to work and back. If I get an e-mail in that time where I'm asked for something I can do with my phone, I do it"

Reviewers tend to promote the positive, denying the “dark side” behind their motivations

I review for others to benefit

- **Most reviewers categorise themselves as “good guys”**
 - They make and act upon **rational decisions** (“a pragmatic attitude”)
 - They endorse “**social duty**” in the **community** embracing the motto “**together we are strong**”
- **Surprisingly, reviewers tend to deny other motivations – even if they are aware of them.**
 - They distance themselves from those who want to be “**the centre of attention**”
 - And from those whose **interests are primarily oriented towards themselves**

I review for my personal benefit

The reasons behind a reviewer’s motivations are long - and only a few confess to them:

- He/she knows the **power** of reviews; that they can **put pressure** on manufacturers and institutions
“He complains a lot/ somebody who always contradicts everything/ somebody who finds everything bad”
- He/she longs for **social acceptance - and recognition**
“He’s lonely/ he needs to communicate/ he is looking for approval/ writing reviews gives him a lot, because he does not have anything”
- He/she uses reviews as a **tool for boosting his own reputation** and becoming **part of a system**
“on eBay, maybe you sold something yourself and there it is important to write reviews to get them yourself”
- Finally, there are substantial **monetary incentives**
“in this case, the motivation is profit/ in that moment, I don’t really care if it helps someone else”

Reviewers like to be complimented about their reviews but do not want to get to know their readers

- Reviewers are “**authors**” who **enjoy** the certainty of **being read and listened to**
- the majority of them did **not express the wish to interact closely with their readers...** (this explains the pseudonyms used by many of them on certain portals at least)
“I don’t want to establish a personal contact or philosophise about a product for hours. For me that’s too much work”
- ...some of them stated that it **feels good to get positive feedback**: for some, it means a number of **useful comments**; for others, it goes as far as getting a **personal message** from another reader – and this **validates them**
“I was surprised... I thought cool, someone actually read my comment, it was nicely worded... we developed a correspondence/ I got a message: ‘Thank you, you helped me a lot to make my purchase decision’ / I answered a technical question and he was grateful”
- Many consumers show **readiness to push the button: “USEFUL COMMENT”**
“that’s fine to indicate the review as useful”

Food for thought: there is potential to make the reviewers’ audience more visible (number of reads, number of likes/ helpful...) to encourage writing

5

Why are there still so many people who do not write reviews?

In the context of increasing demand for feedback and comment, many online readers do not see the value of their contribution – besides that, the process of reviewing can be tedious!

Reviewers consider non-writers (who read reviews) as lazy profiteers

From the point of view of reviewers, people who **only read** reviews...

- ...are **scroungers**: they just take, do not give back
"somebody who doesn't do a lot for what he gets/ welfare recipients/ they are lazy about writing"
- ...have **low education** (unable to write)
"it would make sense that dyslexics would not write any (reviews)/ he doesn't know how to write comments/ education plays a role as well"
- ...reveal a **lack of self confidence** → Fear of being judged/ exposed
"somebody who thinks he'll make a fool of himself/ somebody who thinks that writing reviews makes him vulnerable"

The reviewers' description shows that writing product reviews has become a (new) social norm

Reviewers have taken on the leading role of a "social elite"

The readers had a defensive attitude when it came to their own non-existent writing activity

- Our readers were put together in a **homogeneous group**. They were not initially **confronted with the reviewers**, but even at this stage, it appeared they **felt social pressure**.

Real life happens offline!

People who do not write product reviews prioritise real life over the “unimportant” internet

*“...have no time/ ...are right in the head/ ...are down-to-earth/
...have real problems/ we aren’t nerds”*

But online reviews are useful

While readers downplay the importance of digital activity, they admit that they make use of reviews

„When I am not sure which product to choose – especially with electronics – then I inform myself on an internet forum/ when booking my holiday: ... the reviews of different hotels, apartments...”

Still, why should I?

Readers make the assumption that reviews are only necessary and legitimate when there is a problem to highlight– not for regular assessment.

“if I order a product I assume I’ll be happy with it, otherwise I wouldn’t get it in the first place/ If I’m not satisfied, I just send it back/ She buys socks, she’s content, they are like they were described – why should I rate that?”

Non-writers mention numerous technical barriers which makes the review process tedious and unappealing

Many non-writers have **tried** to submit reviews but were **put off by the digital process and the lack of user-friendliness** in terms of the respective portal:

- ▶ **Review guidelines** which impose a **minimum number of words** are **discouraging**, especially for standard products which are not worth a lot of money
"some nasty websites do it like this - they are really tough and say: you have to write 50 words – so you have to complete 50 words so you do not feel like writing if it is a commodity"
- ▶ **Daily items are not worth the cognitive effort** and the digital process appears **disproportionate** (i.e. It isn't simple enough)
"...like with everything on the internet: when you are looking for something for 8€, the [tolerated] search time is two minutes if at all..."
- ▶ The desire for a **very quick and easy process** in a few **simple clicks** for immediate assessment
"I would do, if it was fast, where you could click quickly"

Lower the barriers: the user-friendliness reduces writing and has to be visual/ iconic/ intuitive with simple clicks

When readers encounter reviewers in person, they tend to feel guilty and inferior

- ▶ The behaviour of the participants, especially of the readers, changes when the anonymous online identities turn into real people: **we had them meet in our research facility.**

Reviewers

- ▶ Reviewers participate more actively in the discussion, perform as opinion leaders not only on the internet, but also in real life
- ▶ Writers tried to persuade the readers to start writing themselves, i.e. to fulfill the social norm
"Write more!"

Readers

- ▶ Readers try to justify themselves
"maybe I am just looking for excuses.../ maybe we were just luckier and only buy things that are not worth being rated"
- ▶ Readers demonstrate feelings of admiration, inferiority and gratitude towards the reviewers.
"they're very likeable/ It's very kind that they write. I, as a non-writer, am very happy about all the reviews because they do help me indeed/ actually I don't know either why I don't do it (writing). I am very thankful that there are people who do it/ yes, I also feel a little bit sorry (for not writing)"

6

How to convert non-writers?

Food for thought to increase online shoppers willingness to submit reviews

Improve the **process of reviewing** to make it more entertaining, short, less wordy, and more adapted to the specific product

Main barriers to writing

1. Writing reviews for products which deliver exactly what is expected of them makes no sense
2. Writing reviews is only legitimate when there are massive problems/ disappointment or great over-performance
3. The process of writing is suboptimal: takes too much time, is tedious, requires **communication skills** (writing full sentences, articulating vocabulary)
4. What's in it for me? Lack of personal benefit: monetary, derived status...



Overcoming the barriers

1. Stress that every single opinion is important, like in a **democratic system**
2. Challenge online shoppers with more personal, but also provocative and/or ironic questions:
*"the product you purchased was **just** nice/ **just** as you expected? It is not trivial! Please say it!"*

*or: "It is **only a pair of socks**, still people want to know your personal opinion"*
3. Allow people to choose between several **modes of expression**: Why not a series of emoticons to choose from, a series of pictures/ mood-boards, and leave the writing without constraints!
4. Communicate clearly the **pecuniary incentive**: in the form of an immediate financial voucher, loyalty points, promotion/ discount, free gifts...

Transform the **image of reviews** from a commercial transaction to a social interaction

Prejudices about reviews

- ▶ The **digital world is not the real world**, it is for **outsiders and nerds** who have **too much time** and not **enough friends**
- ▶ But also: reviewers are **extroverts and exhibitionists**

New framing

- ▶ Those who write fulfill the **new social norm**, and are **part of the modern elite**
- ▶ It is an **act of democracy**: it gives back new forms of **power** to consumers
- ▶ It is an act of **altruism**: 3 lines of review help the community a lot
- ▶ It is an **act of self-confidence** (proof of your ability to judge and assess)



Research design and methodology

The research

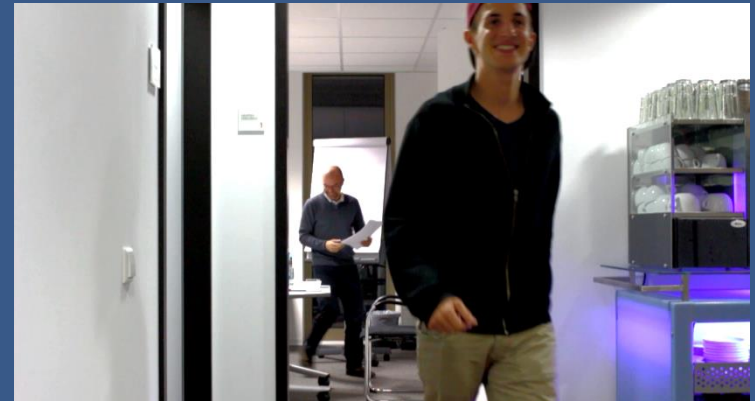
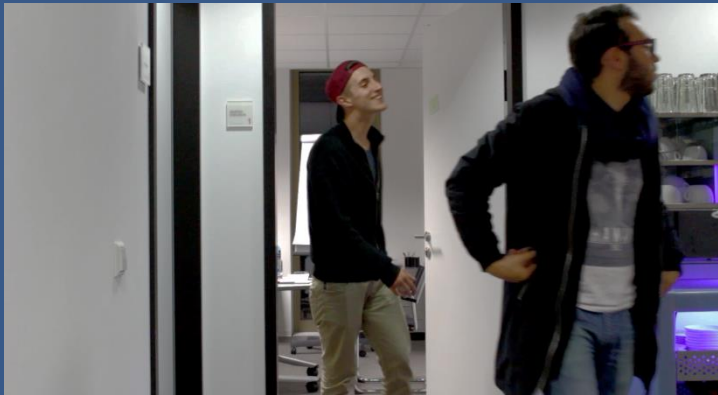
- ▶ **Our field of investigation:** Product reviews as a success factor for companies, due to their high influence on consumer decisions – faced with the **paradox that there is a relatively low willingness to write reviews**.
- ▶ **The research team consisted of:** Marie Arbogast, Monique Bruder, Natacha Dagneaud, Rolf Dobler, Susanne Faber, Sophie Leme Almeida, Tim Niehues
- ▶ Special thanks to our **cameraman and our illustrator:** Benjamin & J.O.!!

Part 1: International Desk Research

- ▶ Analysis of different types of writer based on **Amazon Germany and France**
- ▶ Focus on regular writers - all were among the top 10,000 reviewers

Part 2: Empirical Consumer Investigation in Germany

- ▶ Fieldwork took place in **Mannheim, in the autumn 2016**.
- ▶ Target & Sample: **16 consumers**; initial setting of **2 group discussions**, 3 hours each; additional short **individual or paired interviews** with participants of each group, **removed during the course of discussion**; finally, they got to **meet with each other**
 - 1 target group of review writers: people who regularly write reviews (at least every second week) on Amazon, Ebay, Expedia, Trip Advisor or others. Amazon as a must.
 - 1 target group of review readers only: people who regularly read reviews in order to make a purchase decision, but do not write them



Thank you and good bye!

www.seissmo.com

watch our trailer! <https://vimeo.com/194844172>