MOTIVATIONS AND OUTCOMES OF SEEKING ONLINE CONSUMER REVIEWS: A LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

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ABSTRACT

Online consumer reviews (OCRs) have shown to significantly impact consumer behavior. Considerable research has been conducted to understand the OCR phenomenon, particularly around what motivates people to post OCRs. However, similar consolidation of insights from OCR readers perspective is missing. What motivates people to seek OCRs? Why are certain OCRs more persuasive? How do readers discern the credibility of OCRs? How do firms benefit from OCR-seeking? This article addresses these and related questions, and cohesively integrates various research perspectives on motivations to read OCRs. The article also presents interesting differences between motivations to provide vis-à-vis seek OCRs. While the reasons for providing OCRs are driven by psychological and social factors, OCR-seeking is primarily outcome-focused. From a consumer perspective, OCR-seeking results in psychological and behavioural outcomes like decision-making, attitude formation, purchase intention, price/value perception, trust, risk reduction, and loyalty, among others; whereas the outcomes on firms, although indirect, is considerable, in the form of economic (profitability, sales rank, value) and brand equity-related effects (awareness, loyalty). This article also reviews the role of key contextual factors (i.e., message characteristics, reviewer characteristics, and receiver characteristics) that moderate the influence. Finally, this assimilation leads to the identification of fruitful areas for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers often share experiences, information, and opinions about products and services with current or prospective buyers (Westbrook 1987). This Word-of-Mouth (WOM) conversation has a tremendous influence on consumer decision-making. However, with the proliferation of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), this impact is becoming multi-fold because of the ease and speed of information availability (Lee, Park and Han 2008). Online consumer reviews (OCR) constitute the bulk of eWOM (Cheung and Thadani 2012). OCRs are a type of product information created by users based on their personal experience and posted on the company or third-party websites (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). They significantly impact the consumer decision-making process (Hung and Li 2007), by influencing purchase intention and attitude towards the brand (Bickart and Schindler 2001); as well as directly/indirectly influencing retailer performance (Li and Hitt 2008).

Previous research has looked in detail at motivations to post OCRs as well as the different factors that influence this act (Berger 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Berger (2014) synthesized the WOM sender-side research and discussed why individuals contribute to interpersonal communication and what they discuss. The author argues that WOM is goal-driven and serves five key functions, which are

impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion; and the motivation to engage in WOM is primarily self- (rather than other-) serving. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) show that consumers' desire for social interaction, desire for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth; are the primary factors that motivate individuals to post eWOM.

However, despite the evidence that eWOM is a leading source of decision-making, marketers have a limited understanding of the motivations that drive consumers to seek eWOM (Toder-Alon, Brunel, and Fournier 2014). A deeper understanding of several questions remains: What motivates people to seek and read OCRs? Why are certain OCRs considered more persuasive than others? How do readers discern the credibility of OCRs? What individual characteristics drive the audience to seek and rely on these reviews? Finally, do firms benefit directly or indirectly from OCR-seeking outcomes?

This article addresses these questions and integrates different research perspectives on motivations to read OCRs. We also synthesize the direct/indirect outcomes of OCRs on receivers and firms. In addition, we argue that certain message and source characteristics shape how the audience perceives these OCRs. Further, we synthesize extant literature findings and suggest that OCRs importance is a function of product/service category. Even though a review for a common utility item like washing powder might be written by an expert (with all possible details), it may still not be relevant or helpful, and may even not be sought by consumers; as compared to, say, a review of a newly launched fine-dining restaurant. We also argue that firms can play a very active role in elevating the outcomes of OCRs through an efficient and customized management response strategy. Finally,

this assimilation helps us in the identification of fruitful areas for future research that can benefit both academicians and practitioners. We end the article by briefly discussing them through two broader themes.

This paper, like any other paper that attempts to review a large and growing area, has some limitations. First, while we have attempted to be comprehensive in our integration of the emerging themes and dimensions in OCR-receiver literature, the article is not a full review, in the sense that not all the literature in the past 10 years has been included. King, Racherla, and Bush (2014) and Cheung and Thadani (2012) present more detailed review. Second, we have tried to include more recent literature that builds upon the OCR-receiver synthesis of the above review papers; so that the reader can benefit from how the domain understanding has evolved.

In the subsequent sections, literature findings on each key dimension have been discussed. We begin with motivations to seek OCRs, followed by studying the literature on OCR influence on receivers and firms. We then look at the message, source and sender characteristics that moderate these outcomes. We also discuss how the OCR influence is disaggregated and the role which firms can play to make OCR influence more impactful. Finally, since the intention is not just to synthesize and summarize research, but also identify gaps that can benefit from further investigation; at the end of each section, research gaps that can be tested empirically in the future have been suggested. We conclude the article with a broad summary of future themes that can benefit from further investigation.

What motivates people to read online reviews (Antecedents)?

Consumers today are overwhelmed with choices and information. Should I go to this movie vs. other?; Which is the best technology in televisions?; How can I fix a

particular gadget?; and so on. In this marketplace, filled with numerous choices, OCRs offer relevant guidance and assistance. They serve as a means of collective knowledge that can help consumers make decisions. From extant research findings, we suggest that the key factors that motivate consumers to seek online opinions are: 1) better decision-making; 2) risk reduction, 3) enact negativity bias, 4) social reasons, 5) curiosity and 6) other miscellaneous factors like economic incentives and validation of existing beliefs. A synthesis of findings on these factors is discussed in the following sub-sections:

Better decision-making

OCRs influence decision-making as they help consumers share experience, perceptions, and feedback on the firms and their products or services (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006) and assist potential consumers in getting a valuable brand- and product-related information (Naylor, Lamberton and West 2012). OCRs reduce search and evaluation efforts due to ease of access and processing (Papathanassis and Knolle 2011). They are especially useful when limited or untrustworthy information is present. In addition, consumers seek OCRs to get advice on how to deal with post-purchase issues. For example, OCRs about a particular car brand may talk about poor after-sales service. This forewarns consumers about potential issues. In summary, OCRs have resulted in a number of changes with regards to decision-making, like, i) access to price/non-price features, ii) alternative comparisons, iii) improved quality of information, and iv) organized and structured information availability (Varadarajan and Yadav 2002), and v) ease of resolving problems. However, an understanding of how the consumer decision-making journey has evolved due to the adoption of OCRs needs further investigation.

Risk reduction

Several researchers have argued that consumers seek OCRs to reduce the risks associated with the purchase by balancing their informational disadvantage (Cheung and Thadani 2012). Consumers seek OCRs when they are presented with decisions that are risky, uncertain or complex. There is also evidence that brands or product categories associated with greater risk (usage-wise or monetarily) are discussed more (Lovett, Peres and Shachar 2013). Risk reduction has been studied together with variables like perceived trustworthiness, credibility, and reviewers' expertise (Xie et al. 2011) and the findings suggest that all of these variables moderate the degree of risk reduction in a positive way.

Enact negativity bias

The negativity bias refers to the phenomenon in which people value positive information less than negative information (Rozin and Royzman 2001). Research suggests that in making decisions, negative reviews are given more importance (Park and Lee 2009b). Although online positive reviews outnumber negative reviews in the ratio of eight-to-one (Weisfeld-Spolter, Sussan and Gould 2014); yet, negative reviews are more effective (Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid 2003). Consumers actively seek negative reviews in order to be aware of potential issues or shortcomings in the product/service and then weigh the pros and cons. Future research can look into how the disproportionate attention to negative reviews influences outcomes.

Social reasons

Several studies have looked at the social capital and consumer engagement theories to explain why consumers seek OCRs. Cognitive and relational social capital, as well as the social network structure impact individuals' motivations to view messages. These include the need to enhance social position, find social assurance/reassurance

by seeking OCRs, show belongingness to a virtual community and activate social ties. These are further explained in detail:

Enhance social position
O'Reilly and Marx (2011) used the Grounded Theory approach to show that most receivers view their online access to information as a way to build their credibility and self-worth in the eyes of their family and friends. For example, one may say that the particular brand of the phone purchased by them is best as it has been recommended by more than 95% of people on Amazon.com.

Find social assurance/reassurance
Need for social assurance and reassurance motivates consumers to seek OCRs. It helps to comfort buyers who are either seeking post-purchase assurance or simply looking to reduce dissonance (King, Racherla and Bush 2014). Reading about similar experiences can aid in emotional regulation and reduce the feelings of doubt (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard 1993).

Belonging to a virtual community
Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) show that belongingness to a community also drives consumers to seek OCRs. User participation in online communities has shown to increase customer and brand loyalty (Holland and Baker 2001). In addition, individuals who seek OCRs have a greater inclination to share their views and engage in eWOM (Punj 2013).

Social tie
Past research states that people are motivated to contribute or read OCRs due to social ties (Chan and Ngai 2011). Tie strength refers to "the level of intensity of the social relationships between consumers or the degree of overlap of two individuals' friendship that varies greatly across a consumer's social network" (Steffes and Burgee 2009, 45). Steffes and Burgee (2009) analyzed OCRs among college students in RateMyProfessor.com

and studied how social ties influenced the choices of both courses and professors. An implication of the above is that managers must create/manage virtual communities and foster social ties.

Curiosity
Recently, Fang (2014) linked both cognitive and affective reasons to explain seeking and adoption of OCR. The study concluded that two curiosity constructs, i.e., informational deprivation epistemic curiosity (D-EC) and interest-type epistemic curiosity (I-EC) moderate the cognitive path and the affective path, respectively; and finally influence OCR-seeking. This has implications on how content and context of OCRs can trigger their adoption.

Others
Some people also seek OCRs to validate their existing beliefs (Cheung et al. 2009). In addition, King, Racherla, and Bush (2014) show that many readers read OCRs as a leisure activity. Finally, economic incentives or a chance of getting rewards has also been found as a reason for OCR-seeking (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003).

In summary, OCRs have influenced the consumer decision-making journey across different levels. For example, in hospitality, studies have shown that review content influences the entire planning process, including the formation of consideration sets, final decision-making and subsequently resolving post-purchase dissonance (Leung et al. 2013). This has critical implications for marketers who wish to improve awareness about their products/services and drive consumer opinions about the same. However, an understanding of strategies and heuristics that can help channelize these OCRs to achieve maximum benefit for consumers and marketers is lacking.

Additionally, several times, consumption of OCRs may be accidental, without there being a need. This may

happen when consumers are exposed to OCRs through direct marketing, computer-mediated recommendation agents or merely during habitual Internet browsing. This can sub-consciously alter consumer perceptions and this phenomenon needs to be further explored in detail. In addition, King, Racherla, and Bush (2014) discuss that at times there are unintended and contradictory reasons for seeking OCRs; for example, one may read OCRs to dissuade oneself from purchasing a product/service, or previously read reviews may subconsciously alter perceptions about competitors/category. This phenomenon has not been studied in the academic literature. Thus, one can also look at some of the counter-intuitive reasons for reading OCRs. Table 1 provides a summary of the key areas/gaps:

Finally, while these reasons help explain the motivations to seek OCRs, it is important to acknowledge that not all receivers are alike. Similar information is viewed and adopted differently by different individuals. Past research has shown that a number of factors like demographics and individual characteristics, message attributes, and receiver characteristics can influence adoption of OCRs and their consequences. In subsequent sections, we discuss these variables and their impact on OCR adoption.

TABLE 1
What motivates people to read online reviews ("Antecedents")? –
Scope for Future Research

1. How has online word of mouth influenced and altered the consumer decision-making journey?
    o At which stage within this journey is the influence of OCR most powerful?

2. How can we classify online reviews according to the different needs and motivations that they accomplish?

3. What strategies and heuristics are needed to better channelize OCRs to reap greater benefits for consumers and firms?

What is the impact of reading/seeking online consumer reviews (Consequences)?

The impact of seeking OCR can be both direct and/or indirect and are studied from both the consumers' and the firms' perspectives in previous literature.

- Receiver/audience: Studies have looked at how receivers process and adopt OCRs and how that results in socio-eco-behavioural outcomes like product adoption, awareness, loyalty, perceived effectiveness/usefulness and finally consumer willingness and purchase intention. In addition, studies have identified the key message, source, and receiver factors that influence these outcomes.

- Firm: Studies have looked at how OCRs influence, mostly indirectly, economic (sales, profit, share pricing) and brand (equity, awareness) outcomes for a firm. Most of these studies underscore the importance of review management and how it should be integrated within key marketing and strategic decisions like company-generated content, quality control, pricing strategies, specific marketing strategies, and corporate reputation, among others.

How does OCR-seeking influence receiver/audience outcomes?

Extant literature has established the importance that OCRs have to consumers as compared to firm-driven online content and information (Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski 2006). Significant attention has been given to psychological outcomes that include attitude formation, purchase intention, information adoption, and trust. In addition, behavioural outcomes like product choice, risk-taking, forward

intention of OCR, customer loyalty, and others have also been studied. In the following sub-sections, findings on these social, psychological and behavioural outcomes have been synthesized and discussed.

Purchase intention

Majority of the extant literature on OCR outcomes has focused on studying the impact on purchase intentions. If logical, OCRs significantly influence consumers' willingness to consider or buy a product (See-To and Ho 2014). Studies have shown that factors like information quality, source credibility, volume and content-related factors influence purchase intention. However, Erkan and Evans (2016) note that not all online information has the same effect on consumers' purchase intentions. A related concept to purchase intention is purchase behaviour. Numerous studies and theories (e.g., Theory of Reasoned Action and Technology Acceptance Model) have considered behavioural intention as an antecedent of actual behaviour (Ajzen and Fishbein 1975). However, the actual buying behaviour is influenced by a number of external factors (such as income shifts, accessibility/acquisition costs, and promotional offers by competitors) and purchase intention may not always translate into actual buying behaviour (Sun and Morwitz 2010). Presently, the existing research is lacking on how OCRs influence the actual buying behaviour.

Perceived credibility

Cheung et al. (2009, 12) define eWOM credibility as "... the extent to which one perceives a recommendation/review as believable, true, or factual". Studies have shown that consumers do not trust the recommendations made by firms (Coker and Nagpal 2013), but find

information by fellow consumers more credible (Bansal and Voyer 2000). Moran and Muzellac (2017) have developed a comprehensive framework to summarize antecedents of eWOM credibility. They show that the OCR credibility is a function of source and message credibility. Reviewer's community (tie strength, characteristics) and competence (prior expertise and product/service experience) determine the source credibility. The message credibility, in turn, is a function of content (valence, clarity, quality) and consensus (consistency, reviewer judgement). Huang and Chen (2006) show that consumers perceive peer-reviews as more trustworthy than those of experts. Authors have also studied how consumer ties, social norms (Hung and Li 2007), receivers' characteristics (Cheung et al. 2009), product features (Chen and Xie 2008) and sender characteristics like gender and learning orientation (Awad and Ragowsky 2008; Weiss, Lurie and MacInnis 2008) influence the credibility perceptions.

Past research suggests that credibility is malleable, i.e. it can be easily influenced and reshaped (Chen, Wu, and Yoon 2004). A recent line of OCR research has started investigating how the perceptions of the credibility of OCRs evolve over time (Mackiewicz 2010). Immense scope exists to study the influence of time dependency and OCR endogeneity on credibility and other outcomes. However, the most interesting area within OCR credibility for future research is the issue around fake reviews. Although, results confirm that credible OCR is of greater value, yet it is not very easy for receivers to assess the credibility (Steffes and Burgee 2009). Hence, managers should seek ways to signal credibility (Reichelt, Sievert, and Jacob 2014). Specifically, determining the strategies/heuristics that can be employed to mitigate the generation and adoption of fake reviews can benefit this domain further.

Information adoption

Information adoption is a process in which people purposefully engage in using information (Cheung et al. 2009). Timeliness, comprehensiveness, relevance, and quality of information positively influence adoption (Fan et al. 2013). In addition, perceived credibility of OCR also positively influences its adoption, moderated by product type i.e., information adoption is greater for the experience than search products (Cheung et al. 2009).

Helpfulness/usefulness

Information usefulness is defined as people's perception that using new information will enhance his/her performance (Cheung et al. 2009). Specifically, review helpfulness is interpreted as the perceived value of a given entry to inform purchase decisions (Mudambi and Schuff 2010). As reviews gain in popularity, it becomes harder for consumers to find ways to assess the usefulness of the information offered (Park and Lee 2009a). To circumvent the problem of information overload, many review websites have invested in peer-rating systems that enable consumers to vote on whether they found a review useful in their decision-making process. These votes serve as an indicator of review diagnosticity and are used as a signalling cue to filter relevant opinions more efficiently (Ghose and Ipeirotis 2008).

Customer loyalty

OCRs have both direct and indirect relationship with loyalty intentions (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu 2008). Gauri, Bhatnagar, and Rao (2008) used panel data to show that over a period of time, positive OCRs have the greatest impact on repurchase intention. Further

research can look into modeling the impact of different kinds of OCRs on loyalty and repurchase intentions.

Attitude towards product

Extant literature has shown that OCRs model receiver's attitude towards the product, which is moderated by valence, ratings, and sidedness of argument presented in the OCRs (Lee and Youn 2009; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008).

Price/value perceptions

Few studies have attempted to estimate the relationship between OCR ratings and price/value perceptions (De Maeyer 2012; Kostyra et al. 2016). Pavlou and Dimoka (2009) explain that the success of e-commerce mainly depends on the textual reviews (versus star ratings) to differentiate among sellers. However, immense scope exists to further the understanding of how different OCR characteristics moderate the price/value perceptions and affect the product choice and channel (offline vs. online). Table 2 lists a summary of the gaps that exist in understanding the receiver outcome better.

How does OCR-seeking influence firm outcomes?

Recent literature has looked at the impact of OCRs on firm performance. While some studies show that it strongly affects the retailer performance (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Clemons, Gao, and Hitt 2006), others have shown the effect to be unimportant (Duan, Gu, and Whinston 2008), vague (Chen, Wu, and Yoon 2004) or context-specific (Li and Hitt 2008). Thus, there exists some degree of ambiguity around the impact of OCRs on firm performance. Most of the previous literature has studied firm outcomes either from brand-equity or economic perspective. In addition, limited research has focused on the marketing implications of OCRs (Chen and Xie 2008). The findings on brand and economic effects are discussed in detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

TABLE 2:
How Does OCR-Seeking Influence Receiver/Audience Outcomes?
Scope for Future Research

1. Can a direct relationship of OCRs be established with actual buying?
2. How do the credibility perceptions of OCRs evolve over time?
3. What strategies/heuristics can be employed by consumers to identify and mitigate fake reviews?
4. How do the different OCR characteristics moderate the value/price perceptions?

Brand equity related effects

Brand equity is defined as "the financial and marketing values connected to the brand in the marketplace" (Pride and Ferrell 2003, 299). It consists of brand name, brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand association, perceived quality and brand assets (Aaker 1992). Studies have shown that eWOM can raise brand awareness (particularly for unknown brands) and brand association, and thereby affect consumer behavior like purchase intention and brand satisfaction (Naylor, Lamberton and West 2012; Page and Lepkowska-White 2013; Schivinski and Dabrowski 2016). Studies have also looked at the role of OCRs in raising customers brand loyalty (Sweeney, Soutar, and Mazzarol 2008). Severi, Ling, and Nasermoadeli (2014) show that brand association mediates the relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty. Wu and Wang (2011) show that a positive OCR message with higher source credibility leads to a better brand attitude. Further studies can look into the moderating role of other message characteristics (like volume, variance, and argument quality) and receiver characteristics (like expertise) on brand-related effects.

Economic effects

The majority of prior research on firm outcomes is on the economic impact of OCRs on firms. Some of the most commonly researched economic effects include sales prediction, increase/decrease in firm's economic value, and profitability.

Sales rank/prediction

Researchers have conducted a number of empirical studies and shown that OCRs are an important driver of sales of products such as movies, books, television shows, and video games. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) analyzed book sales data from Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com and found that more positive online reviews improve the relative sales rank of books. In addition, research shows that changes in sales rank are a function of product categories, product lifecycle (new vs. established) and tie strength (Zhu and Zhang 2010). While it has been established that OCRs are a driver of sales, some scope for further understanding exists. First, most studies have looked at entertainment, experience or electronics product categories. However, studies have not really looked at the influence of OCRs on categories like daily groceries, education, automobiles, medical; and others. These categories form a substantial part of consumption basket and hence it may be of merit to study them. Second, researchers can look at the interaction between offline WOM and OCRs to explain the sales rank better.

Economic value

OCRs influence receiver's perceived value of a company's products (Dwyer 2007). Wu et al. (2015) modeled economic benefits and found that OCRs from Dianping generate value for both consumers and restaurants because they reduce the uncertainty associated with consumption decisions. Similarly, Neirotti, Raguseo, and Paolucci (2016) argue that OCRs result in greater economic value due to enhanced transparency, reduction in search costs, and superior capability to use the information.

Profitability

While several studies have looked at the impact of online reviews on sales, similar research on profitability is missing. In a first of its kind study, Neirotti, Raguseo, and Paolucci (2016) show that OCR ratings on TripAdvisor have a greater negative effect on gross profit margins as compared to positive growth in revenues. However, this

particular field can benefit from further research.

One additional domain that lacks an understanding is the research on the effect of OCRs on product returns. According to a wall street journal article, nearly 30% of products are returned in the US (Banjo 2013) and this has a significant bearing on the profitability due to reverse logistics costs. Thus, examining how seeking OCRs reduce/amplify post-purchase issues/dissonance and influence decisions like returns, can significantly help firms better manage the overall economic impact.

TABLE 3:
How Does OCR-Seeking Influence Firm Outcomes?
Scope for Future Research

1. How do offline and online WOM interact to determine sales rank and performance?
2. How do OCRs reduce/amplify post-purchase issues and influence decisions like product returns?
3. How can firms drive generation/transmission of favourable OCRs for their brands?
4. What are some of the strategies that firms can adopt to identify fake reviews and mitigate transmission and adoption?

How do message, audience and source characteristics moderate OCR outcomes?

While looking for reviews, one comes across numerous recommendations about the product within and across websites and online forums. However, not all are equally effective in providing information and helping us make a better decision. This is because the embedded information and message features vary across reviews. In addition, the people writing the reviews differ in their style, expertise, knowledge, and communication.

Finally, the audience themselves have different socio-demo-psychographic characteristics. A highly skeptical reader may process the best of information with a pinch of salt as compared to others. These have been corroborated by extant literature that has shown that OCR message features, audience characteristics, and source attributes shape the consequences of OCRs on receivers and firms. We discuss below the salient features of OCR message, source and receivers; and how they moderate OCR outcomes.

Message characteristics

Most researchers agree that three online review characteristics are most important: i) valence of OCRs, ii) variation within the review set, and iii) volume. While there is a consensus on the role/impact of volume, findings on valence and variation are mixed. In addition, few studies have also looked at factors like argument quality, message length, endogeneity, message format, review rating, and platform dispersion. We synthesize the literature on these variables.

Valence/sidedness

OCRs can be positive (one-sided), negative (one-sided), or neutral (two-sided) (Cheung et al., 2009). Studies show that valence affects OCR outcomes. Liu (2006) shows that valence impacts consumer attitude towards the product. Similarly, Chintagunta, Gopinath, and Venkataraman (2010) find evidence of a positive relationship between valence and product sales. Muralidharan et al. (2014) show that online shoppers find two-sided reviews to be most informative, contradicting the commonly held assumption that negative reviews were more informative and diagnostic. Cui, Lui, and Guo (2012) confirm the negativity bias in their study by proving that the percentage of negative reviews has a greater effect than that of positive reviews. However, Cheung et al. (2009) show that valence and sidedness are not a determinant of OCR credibility and outcomes. Hence, the findings are non-conclusive and need additional research.

From a firm's perspective, previous research has shown that valence plays a very important role in moderating the influence of OCRs on firm performance parameters (Öğüt and Tas 2012; Ye et al. 2011). Some studies report that negative reviews have a greater impact than positive ones (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Cui, Lui and Guo 2012). However, others show none or even a positive sales impact of negative eWOM (Floyd et al. 2014; Liu 2006). This essentially means that there is (are) some other interacting variable(s) that is influencing the role of valence.

Variation

Variation in reviews is "the extent to which the current eWOM recommendation is consistent with other contributors' experiences concerning the same product or service evaluation" (Zhang and Watts 2003). For example, a low variance would imply that the last 50 reviews (or previous one-month reviews) for a restaurant are consistent with parameters like rating, food, ambiance, value and other service features. The greater imbalance would suggest dissonance and thereby have a lower impact on decision-making. Lee, Park, and Han (2008) show that as the percentage of negative OCRs increase, high-involvement consumers adopt the viewpoint, moderated by the argument quality. Purnawirawan, De Pelsmacker, and Dens (2012) provide evidence of wrap effect: starting and concluding (wrapping) a set with positive (negative) reviews biases recall and impression towards the positive (negative) direction.

From a firm's perspective, there exist limited studies with non-conclusive results on the impact of review variation on firm performance. For example, Ye et al. (2011) find that review variation has a negative impact on hotel sales whereas Chintagunta, Gopinath, and Venkataraman (2010) show that review variation does not explain movie revenues. Zhu and Zhang (2010) show that this variation has a positive impact on consumer decision-making and firm performance since it signals both high risk and reward. Thus,

further research is needed to resolve these mixed findings.

Volume

Most previous studies have unequivocally established the influence of volume of OCRs on receiver consequences (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Wu et al. 2013). Greater the volume of OCRs, higher will be the consumer awareness (Liu 2006) and search and purchase behavior (Huang, Lurie, and Mitra 2009). Cui, Lui, and Guo (2012) show that review volume has a significant effect on new product sales in the early period. However, skepticism, product type, reviewer expertise and involvement levels of consumers moderate the impact of OCR volume on purchase intention (Park and Kim 2009). Research shows that low-involvement consumers are affected by the quantity rather than the quality of reviews, but high-involvement consumers are affected by review quantity mainly when the review quality is high (Park, Lee and Han 2007).

Similarly, past research has unequivocally shown that the volume of online postings significantly influences firm performance and is a good predictor of sales (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014). The rationale being that increased volume results in greater awareness and signals popularity.

Review rating

Review rating has been defined as the overall rating given by the reviewer along with the message recommendation (Cheung and Thadani 2012). People use review ratings as heuristics to conserve cognitive resources and facilitate their purchase decision process (Fang 2014). The role of review rating on perceived helpfulness has been well documented in the extant literature (Liu and Park 2015; Huang et al. 2015; Baek, Ahn and Choi 2012). Mudambi and Schuff

(2010) and other researchers show that there is a non-linear relationship between review rating and helpfulness. Similarly, review ratings can affect the perceived credibility (Cheung et al. 2009) of online reviews.

From a firm's perspective, most studies show that higher ratings lead to higher sales (Öğüt and Tas 2012; Archak, Ghose, and Ipeirotis 2011) and that bad ratings hurt sales (Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid 2003).

Argument quality

Argument quality refers to the persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message (Bhattacherjee and Sanford 2006). Previous research has measured information quality based on characteristics such as relevance, accuracy, objectivity, timeliness, and comprehensiveness/sufficiency (Park, Lee, and Han 2008; Cheung et al. 2009). Quality of information from OCRs has now become extremely crucial as it has positive effects on consumers' purchase intentions (Lee and Shin 2014). Several recent studies have highlighted the importance of the sentiments and information embedded within the review text as compared to rating since they provide more context-specific explanations of the experiences, and emotions about the product or service (Hu, Koh and Reddy 2014).

High-quality reviews exert greater influence on product evaluation (e.g., Lee, Park, and Han 2008), purchase intention (e.g., Park, Lee, and Han 2008), and evaluation of the website (e.g., Awad and Ragowsky 2008), compared to low-quality reviews that simply reiterate the reviewers' subjective feelings and opinions. For search goods, review quality has a positive indirect effect via product evaluation, whereas for experience goods, review quality has both direct and indirect effects (Lee and Shin

2014). In addition to the content, research shows that factors like the style of expression and semantics also play an important role in influencing eWOM outcome and helpfulness (Cao, Duan, and Gan 2010). However, empirical research with argument quality is limited due to the constricting nature of coding the argument quality, and cost and effort issues. Studying the role of argument quality on OCR outcomes in conjunction with other message/source factors can undoubtedly provide most interesting insights for managers and academicians alike.

Review length

It is the total number of type characters in the message. Studies have shown that the length of review has an impact on its effectiveness. Chevalier and Mayzlin's (2006) study on review lengths suggests that consumers actually read and respond to written reviews, not merely the average star summary statistic. Similarly, length of the review has a positive correlation with its adoption and perceived helpfulness (Sen 2008). However, Huang et al. (2015) show that word count has a threshold in its effects on review helpfulness. Beyond this threshold, its effect diminishes significantly or becomes nearly non-existent. Further investigation into the length of review on review helpfulness can enrich the OCR literature immensely.

Message format

Until recently, most reviews were textual in nature, occasionally supported with a few images. However, with the growth in multimedia technology and faster internet speeds, newer review formats are emerging. Research findings show that presentation with peripheral visual cues attracts attention and can be more persuasive in e-commerce. In the OCR context, very few studies have looked at the effectiveness and influence of reviews depending on the format (visual vs. text). Xu, Chen, and Santhanam (2015) show that video online reviews by consumers are perceived to be more helpful and persuasive and this effect is moderated by product type. The OCR world is likely to move towards more visual format. Immense scope exists to understand the differentiating influence of seeing a visual/video review over the traditional textual OCR. Will the features that mattered in textual OCRs still be equally important? How can firms and third-party websites alter their strategy and interface to allow for a seamless shift towards more visual reviews? What will motivate reviewers to invest additional time and resources in providing these reviews?

Platform dispersion

Godes and Mayzlin (2004, 546) define platform dispersion as "the extent to which product-related conversations are taking place across a broad range of communities". For example, the same restaurant is usually reviewed across different delivery platforms and review websites, and often not consistently. King, Racherla, and Bush (2014) show that there are two specific implications of platform dispersion: a) the nature of the platforms could have a significant impact on the incidence and evolution of reviews; and b) from a measurement perspective, it is difficult to narrow down which platforms to target and measure. This poses interesting research question to delve into further detail, though with measurement challenges.

Endogeneity

Unlike traditional WOM, OCRs are present in public domain for much longer (Dellarocas and Narayan 2006). Thus, the influence is more pervasive as it not only affects weak ties but also is easily available. Prior studies have shown that future reviews influence

currently posted reviews (Moe and Trusov 2011). However, since the valence, volume, message bias of reviews evolve over time (Godes and Silva 2012), there exists a dynamic and non-linear relationship between OCR adoption and market performance (Duverger 2013). Going ahead, researchers must look at appropriate models to explain the effects of endogeneity on firms' performance as well as on motivation to adopt and provide OCRs.

Audience (receiver) characteristics

Similar information may have a varied impact depending upon the recipients' experience, involvement, and the need for information (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Consumers' characteristics, such as expertise and involvement, play an important moderating role in determining the impact of review content on purchase intention (Park and Kim 2009). Previous studies have also looked at other characteristics like gender and consumer skepticism in understanding the impact of OCRs on receivers. These variables can be grouped into three categories: socio-demographic, personality-driven and event/product based.

Socio-demographic attributes

A large and growing body of evidence shows that socio-demographic factors like age, culture, gender and socioeconomic status (SES), such as income and education, can influence OCR outcomes.

Gender differences in the Internet activity are due to the fact that men and women process information differently (Kempf and Palan 2006); women being comprehensive information processors, whereas men are selective processors (Zhang, Cheung, and Lee 2014). Kim, Mattila, and Baloglu (2011) showed that men

and women have different motivating factors for reading reviews. Women are more likely to read reviews for the purpose of convenience and for risk reduction, as compared to men. However, the effect of argument quality on trust and online shopping decision is stronger for men than women (Awad and Ragowsky 2008). Zhang, Cheung, and Lee (2014) found that female consumers are more responsive to a mix of positive and negative reviews. However, researchers must conduct further study to understand the interaction of gender differences with outcomes like trust and purchase behavior.

Though limited in number, studies show that culture has an important bearing on both attitude toward OCRs like trust, sharing of negative information and the outcome of OCRs like purchase intention (Tsang and Prendergast 2009; Goodrich and de Mooij 2014). However, these studies have looked at country-of-origin cultural dimensions like Individualism-Collectivism and have not explored individual cultural orientations of the sender and the receiver (King, Racherla, and Bush 2014). People with different cultural orientations write and seek OCRs differently, thereby impacting its persuasiveness. Hence, it is particularly critical from a marketers' perspective to understand how individuals with different cultural orientations write and seek OCRs.

Households with high-income levels are more likely to use the Internet and perceive it to be more helpful (Porter and Donthu 2006). Engelbertink and Hullebusch (2013) show that income level only seemed to have an influence on the dissonance reduction and risk reduction motive of OCR-seeking.

While Manner (2018) show that age has an influence on the valence of online reviews posted, similar study is

missing on how age determines the OCR consumption outcomes.

Personality-driven
A number of personality-driven factors, including motivation levels to process information, the degree of scepticism and cognitive resonance with the message, moderate how consumers seek and utilize online information.

Motivation to process information: Consumers who have a high motivation to process information tend to engage in the opinion-seeking behaviour while making a purchase (Chu and Kim 2011). When the motivation to process information is high, people are more likely to refer to OCRs as an additional source of argument (O'Reilly and Marx 2011). On the other hand, in case of low motivation, OCRs are often used just as a heuristic or not referred to at all (Gupta and Harris 2010).

Consumer scepticism: Consumer scepticism can be defined as the consumer's tendency toward disbelief (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Lee and Youn (2009) show that purchase intention of consumers with high scepticism is not influenced by argument quality and quantity of OCRs; however, those with low scepticism are influenced by the OCR content.

Cognitive personalization: Xia and Bechwati (2008) define it as self-referential thinking that occurs as a result of emotional resonance with a message (Xia and Bechwati 2008). They show that the level of cognitive personalization is a function of the nature of the product, the content of OCR, and the reader's level of affect intensity. For positive OCRs, a higher level of cognitive personalization influences greater purchase intentions, mediated by perceived usefulness.

Overall, the literature shows that personality factors moderate OCR consequences. Future researchers can further add nuanced understanding of the role of different personality factors in explaining the motivation, adoption and consequences of seeking OCRs.

Event/product based
Consumers have different degree of psychological and affective ties with a stimulus or stimuli (for example, in the OCR context, it can be a message, product or the review topic itself) (Cheung et al. 2009). Prior research has shown that these event/product based ties can moderate the adoption and outcome of online reviews, and include factors like level of involvement with the category, confirmation of prior belief about the product, prior knowledge about the product and degree of search.

Prior knowledge: Prior knowledge, defined as the existing knowledge about the review topic and the platform (Cheung and Thadani 2012) and product preference (Lee, Park, and Han 2008) has been found to moderate OCR influence like purchase intention.

Focused search: Zhang and Watts (2008, 74) define focused search as 'the extent to which members have specific information needs in mind during their active search for on-topic information'. They show that higher level of focused search increases the effect of a message's argument quality, and decreases the effect of source credibility on information adoption.

Level of product involvement: Product involvement is defined as a consumer's enduring perceptions of a product category's importance based on the inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky 1994). Studies have shown that OCR information is more

likely to influence high-involvement products' purchase decisions (Floyd et al. 2014). Involvement has also been found to moderate consumer attitude towards OCRs and the impact of product involvement is moderated by message characteristics (Doh and Hwang 2009). Studies have also found that highly involved customers are usually opinion leaders, buy new products and influence other people's behavior (Xue and Zhou 2010). Hence, for high-involvement products, identifying key individuals with fewer but tight connections in the network can allow firms to prompt the messages that will be widely distributed (Katona, Zubcsek, and Sarvary 2010).

Confirmation of prior belief: Extant literature has defined prior belief as the level of confirmation/disconfirmation between the received information and the former beliefs relating to the reviewed product/service (Cheung and Thadani 2012). WOM literature has shown that when consumers receive information that is in accordance with their existing belief/knowledge, they are more likely to trust it and use for their purchase decisions. Similarly, in the online context, confirmation with receiver's prior belief can significantly influence perceived OCR credibility (Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn 2008).

Source/reviewer characteristics

The communicator/sender refers to the person who transmits the communication. Traditional WOM primarily emanates from a sender (source) who is known to the receiver of the information, thereby ensuring credibility and trust. In the context of online communication, consumers exchange opinions and experiences to unknown people, usually in an anonymous environment. This has the potential to raise receivers' concerns about the credibility of these reviews. Not surprisingly, source credibility is a widely researched area in the OCR domain.

Source credibility is the message source's perceived ability (expertise) or motivation to provide accurate and truthful information (Cheung and Thadani 2012). Research suggests that the source must both have the expertise (Park and Kim 2009) and be trustworthy (Cheung et al. 2009). Whenever a consumer is faced with an online opinion, they tend to actively evaluate the source trustworthiness (Pan and Chiou 2011). Studies have shown that source credibility is dependent upon expertise, socio-demographic factors, and attributes like ability, benevolence, and integrity of the sender (Armstrong and Mcadams 2009). Chen and Huang (2013) empirically show that review ratings, length, reviewer disclosure, and other review characteristics shape reviewer behavior (review frequency and continuity) and in turn OCR outcomes. In a recent qualitative study, O'Reilly et al. (2016) show that persona similarity and usage similarity, apart from source trustworthiness and expertise, also impacts OCR outcome. Research suggests that the main outcome of source credibility is effectiveness or helpfulness of the message (Martin and Lueg 2013). Researchers have also looked at the role of experts and opinion leaders. While a few studies find that reviews by consumers (as compared to experts) are more credible and hence have a greater impact (Huang and Chen 2006), others show that opinion leaders and reviewers with greater exposure are more effective than regular consumers (Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Apart from these, research shows that gender, cultural orientation, the age of the

the reviewer, the degree of the social tie and source type (i.e. expert vs. consumer) moderate the influence of source credibility (Fang 2014; Kim, Matilla and Baloglu 2011; Huang, Lurie and Mitra 2009).

From a firm's perspective, reviewer characteristics, particularly those that help establish their credibility, play a key role in moderating the effect on sales (Zhu and Zhang, 2010). Forman, Ghose, and Wiesenfeld (2008) show that presence of identity disclosure variables like name, location and others results in an increase in online sales. However, more in-depth research is further required to understand the antecedents and consequences of source credibility in the firm context.

While most studies connect these factors to one or the other consequences, some limitations remain. First, it is important to acknowledge that no two OCRs are similar. The intrinsic characteristics of the message, senders, and receivers make the consumer impact different. Some studies show that one must consider these OCRs in disaggregation (Chen, Dhanasobhon, and Smith 2008). However, the analyses in most studies assume aggregate effects. Second, disproportionate focus has been given to valence, volume and source credibility. However, there are multiple other socio-demographic and message-related attributes that are under play. It may be difficult to perform this holistic exercise due to computational limitations, but it can add abundantly to the existing findings. Table 4 gives a summary of areas that can benefit from future research.

TABLE 4:
How Do Message, Audience & Source Characteristics Moderate OCR Outcomes?
Scope for Future Research

1. How does OCR adoption vary with socio-demo-psychographic factors like cultural orientation of sender/receiver?
2. What role do receiver's personality traits play in motivation to seek OCRs?
3. How does OCR-format (text vs. visual vs. video) impact OCR effectiveness?
4. How does the OCR endogeneity influence OCR-seeking and associated consumer- and firm-related outcomes?
5. How is a firm's profitability/margins affected by OCR and its attributes?

Additional deliberations on OCR influence

Is OCR influence product-type agnostic?

Products differ in the way they are used and the needs they fulfill. Huang, Lurie, and Mitra (2009) show that information processed from OCRs for different product types is different. Park and Lee (2009b) show that OCRs for experience goods are more persuasive and effective than search goods. Studies have found that the product type (experience vs. search; hedonic vs. utilitarian) moderates the impact of valence and length on the helpfulness of a review (Pan and Zhang 2011; Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Cui, Lui, and Guo (2012) show that valence of OCR has a higher sales impact for search products than for experience, whereas the volume of reviews has a greater sales impact for experience products. Cheema and Papatla (2010) show that OCRs are more effective for highly differentiated or niche products as they inform about the unique attributes. Park and Kim (2009) show that when a product is new to the market, consumers focus more on product attributes mentioned in reviews, whereas for established products, it is more on product benefits. Finally, Thoumrungroje (2014) show that OCRs mediate the role of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption of luxury products. Daugherty and Hoffman (2014) further demonstrate that positive OCRs are more effective at gaining attention for luxury brands than non-luxury brands.

However, Floyd et al. (2014) argue that product types and differentiation (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian, luxury vs. necessity, experience vs. search) will not moderate the influence of online product reviews on sales elasticity. Additional research can resolve these contradictory findings.

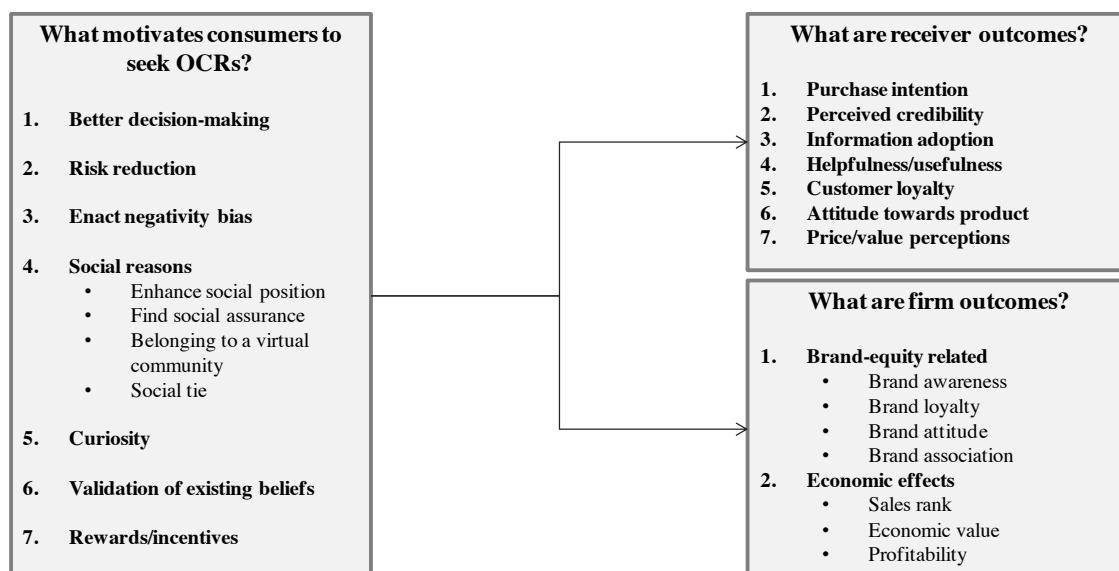### *Can management response be a viable firm strategy to leverage OCR influence?*

Online management responses have evolved as a new kind of customer relationship management (Gu and Ye 2014). Since these responses are visible along with OCRs, both of them often influence purchase decisions (Xie, Zhang, and Zhang 2014). Previous research has shown that a well-devised management response strategy can increase customer satisfaction (Mccoll-Kennedy and Sparks 2003). Li, Cui, and Peng (2017) note that the frequency and speed of management response to OCRs significantly increase travelers' engagement. Guest satisfaction, in turn, positively affects profitability, financial performance, and other economic metrics like revenues per guest and growth rate (Chi and Gursoy 2009). Rose and Blodgett (2016) find that management responses can mitigate the adverse effects of negative reviews when the underlying issue is attributed to controllable factors as compared to uncontrollable ones. However, Mauri & Minazzi (2013) note that management response has a negative impact on purchase intentions. This is conflicting to CRM literature and more work needs to investigate the stand-alone impact of management responses as well as the impact of its interaction with OCRs.

DISCUSSION

This literature synthesis presents interesting differences between motivations to provide vis-à-vis motivations to seek OCRs. While the reasons for providing eWOM are driven primarily by psychological and social factors like self-enhancement/impression management, altruism/concern for others, product involvement, social reasons like bonding, reputation, web-usage habit and incentives (Berger 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004); OCR-seeking is primarily outcome-focused. Consumers mainly seek OCRs for ease of decision-making and reducing associated risks and/or getting social acceptance. Figure 1 summarizes the key findings on motivations to seek OCRs, its consequences and the factors that influence these outcomes. Combining these insights from the literature synthesis, we conclude this article by suggesting two key streams that can benefit from further investigation: Effectiveness and adoption of OCRs; and managing OCRs. These are discussed in detail below:

FIGURE 1: OCR-seeking Framework

What motivates consumers to seek OCRs?

1. **Better decision-making**
2. **Risk reduction**
3. **Enact negativity bias**
4. **Social reasons**
   - Enhance social position
   - Find social assurance
   - Belonging to a virtual community
   - Social tie
5. **Curiosity**
6. **Validation of existing beliefs**
7. **Rewards/incentives**

What are receiver outcomes?

1. **Purchase intention**
2. **Perceived credibility**
3. **Information adoption**
4. **Helpfulness/usefulness**
5. **Customer loyalty**
6. **Attitude towards product**
7. **Price/value perceptions**

What are firm outcomes?

1. **Brand-equity related**
   - Brand awareness
   - Brand loyalty
   - Brand attitude
   - Brand association
2. **Economic effects**
   - Sales rank
   - Economic value
   - Profitability

Message Characteristics

1. **Valence/sidedness**
2. **Variation**
3. **Volume**
4. **Review rating**
5. **Argument quality**
6. **Review length**
7. **Message format**
8. **Platform dispersion**
9. **Endogeneity**

Audience Characteristics

1. **Socio-demographic**
   - Gender
   - Culture
   - Income
2. **Personality-driven**
   - Motivation to process information
   - Consumer scepticism
   - Cognitive personalization
3. **Event/product based**
   - Prior knowledge
   - Focused search
   - Level of product involvement
   - Confirmation of prior belief

Source Characteristics

1. **Source credibility**
   - Expertise
   - Trustworthiness
2. **Socio-demographic factors (age, gender, culture, Internet usage)**
3. **Personality-driven**
4. **Social tie**

How can the effectiveness and adoption of OCRs be enhanced? i.e., identification and optimization of critical intrinsic content and source factors to make OCRs more impactful and credible.

First, extant research across product categories, review websites and different scenarios have shown the pivotal role which OCR credibility plays in their adoption and effectiveness. However, recent studies have raised important questions/issues on OCR credibility: i) the malleability of credibility over time; and how that can influence consumer preferences, and ii) rampant proliferation of fake reviews and its consequences. While extant research on the "gaming" of review sites is primarily anecdotal (Floyd et al. 2014), further research to understand the loopholes in existing OCR mechanisms, and unethical practices, can benefit consumers and retailers alike. Similarly, understanding how consumer perceptions about OCR credibility evolve can be an interesting area.

Second, the role of argument quality and embedded informational and emotional components within the OCR message is grossly under-studied. The review text can explain OCR effectiveness much more as compared to the peripheral or heuristic factors like the length of review and review rating; since they provide more context-specific explanations of the experiences, and emotions about the product or service. However, the computational and coding complexity has resulted in very few studies that capture this aspect.

Last, the influence of OCR's inherent endogeneity on OCR-adoption as well as the effect of its interaction with the other message and socio-psychographic variables needs to be further studied. Unlike WOM, OCR is pervasive and stays for a much longer duration.

What role/strategies can firms play/adopt to manage OCR incidence and outcomes?
A recurring theme across literature is the lack of an understanding of concrete heuristics and strategies that the firms can adopt to manage OCRs; i.e., how can firms increase the incidence of positive reviews, mitigate the consequences of negative reviews and finally, integrate the OCRs within their CRM and broader marketing and strategic initiatives? Majority of research directionally shows that OCRs significantly influence product/brand sales. In addition, they can critically shape or destroy brand equity. Some studies have empirically shown that economic metrics, including market share, profitability, and share prices are directly or indirectly influenced by transmission of OCRs. However, despite the rampant use of OCRs, empirical research analyzing their economic value on businesses is missing (Duverger 2013) and this requires further investigation. These findings highlight the need for retailers to provide quality service and products, have an efficient and responsive system to engage consumers in case of favorable and/or unfavorable experiences/situations, and invest in well-organized service and delivery models to address these issues. In addition, firms must have strategies in place to encourage consumers with favorable experiences to contribute positive OCR, without using unethical means.

As the eWOM literature continues to evolve, investigating these research gaps will help improvise the theory of OCRs to help academicians and managers alike.

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