

CONSUMER TRUST IN ONLINE REVIEWS

– A COMMUNICATION MODEL PERSPECTIVE

Bachelor's Thesis in
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Abstract

Increasingly, consumers are using and relying on the opinions of others posted on online review sites. However, recent scandals has brought attention to the existence of review manipulation and questioned the credibility of online review sites. Furthermore, previous research has shown conflicting findings on whether or not consumers trust online reviews. Exploring these matters becomes important since marketers need to be able to understand consumer trust in online reviews as it then can be used as a powerful marketing tool and as a new element of the marketing communication mix. The aim of this study is to explore consumer trust in online reviews by investigating why people trust online reviews, and what makes an online review trustworthy. This is accomplished using a modified version of the Shannon and Weaver communication model which is structured around the elements *message*, *sender*, *receiver*, *channel* and *feedback*. The study employs a qualitative method using semi-structured interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the interviewees. The findings indicate that consumers do not put their trust in individual reviews, but in the online review system as a whole; the number of reviews posted was mentioned as the most influential factor for creating trust. The study shows that readers of reviews primarily use the *message* to determine whether a review is trustworthy or not. Because of the lack of information about the person writing the online review, it is the only thing the reader can truly evaluate.

Keywords: online reviews, consumer trust, eWOM, communication model

Abstract in Swedish

Konsumenter använder och förlitar sig i allt större utsträckning på andras åsikter som lagts upp på recensionsidor på nätet. Nyligen har dock skandaler uppmärksammat förekomsten av manipulation av recensioner vilket lett till att recensionsajters trovärdighet kan ifrågasättas. Tidigare forskning har också gett tvetydiga svar på huruvida folk litar på recensioner eller inte. Att utforska det här ämnet är viktigt eftersom marknadsförare måste förstå sig på konsumenters förtroende för onlinerecensioner då dessa kan användas som ett kraftfullt marknadsföringsverktyg och som ett nytt element i marknadsföringsmixen. Den här studien syftar till att utforska konsumenters förtroende för onlinerecensioner genom att undersöka varför man litar på recensioner och vad som gör en onlinerecension pålitlig. Genom användandet av en modifierad version av Shannon och Weavers kommunikationsmodell, kan en recension struktureras kring elementen *meddelande*, *sändare*, *mottagare*, *kanal* och *återkoppling*. Den här studien implementerar en kvalitativ metod där semistrukturerade intervjuer använts för att få en djupare förståelse för intervjuobjektens känslor och tankar. Studiens resultat indikerar att konsumenter inte litar på individuella recensioner, utan snarare på systemet med onlinerecensioner i sin helhet; antalet recensioner nämndes som den mest inflytelserika faktorn för att skapa tillit. Studien visar också att den som läser recensioner framförallt använder *meddelandet* för att avgöra om en recension är pålitlig eller inte. På grund av avsaknaden av information om personen som skriver recensionen är meddelandet det enda läsaren verkligen kan utvärdera.

Nyckelord: onlinerecensioner, konsumentförtroende, eWOM, kommunikationsmodell

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1 Introduction

This section provides a short background of the subject, to give the reader a basic understanding of central concepts relating to trust in online reviews. This results in a problem discussion and an explanation of the purpose of the study. The research questions are also presented, followed by an outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background

Nowadays, a business does not exist only in an office environment where face-to-face meetings are executed. A business is as much online as offline (Newlands 2011). The advance in communication technology and especially the web 2.0 has produced new possibilities in how organizations work and how information and communication flow (Shultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 1994). These advances have raised questions regarding the praxis of marketing, especially in marketing communications, as consumers are no longer just passive receivers of communication but participants in creating their communication reality (Ozuem 2005).

One kind of communication where consumers are active participants is the Word-of-Mouth communication. Traditional WOM refers to communication between two people about a product, service or brand (Arndt 1967), but the Internet has changed the way we can communicate and a new form of WOM has been born, the so called online word of mouth (eWOM) (e.g. Chatterjee 2001; Brown, Broderick & Lee 2007; Zhang, Craciun & Shin 2010). The sharing of online reviews on the Internet is a kind of eWOM communication and is considered one of the most important (Sen & Lerman 2007). Studies have shown that word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has a greater influence compared to communication via other sources such as advertisement or editorial recommendations (e.g. Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels 2009; Smith, Menon & Sivakumar 2005). This implies that it is of high importance for companies to understand these new flows of communication, especially the ones created by consumers as for example online reviews.

Previous research has taken on different approaches when investigating eWOM, and a classification in two levels has been made: The market-level analysis and the Individual-level analysis (Lee & Lee 2009). Researchers at the market-level analysis have put their focus on market level parameters, such as product sales and/or price. By using data such as the rate and the valence of consumers reviews taken from websites, they examine the impact of online WOM on product sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006; Dellarocas, Zhang & Awad, 2007; Duan, Gu & Whinston 2008). At the individual-level analysis on the other hand, the researchers theorize the online word of mouth as a process of personal influence. What is important here is how communication between a sender and receiver can change the attitude and purchase decision of the receiver. It focuses on the relations between eWOM and purchase intentions, trust etcetera (Kiecker & Cowles 2001; Park & Kim 2008).

1.2 Consumer trust in online reviews

Imagine you are on your honeymoon in the beautiful town of Brixham in the south-west of England. It is your first visit to this amazing city and you want to make a reservation at a restaurant for you and your beloved to spend a romantic evening. Since you have little or no knowledge about which restaurants are good, you take assistance of TripAdvisor, a website

within the travel industry where you can see online reviews of previous customers (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). Among the most highly rated restaurants you find Oscar's, praised by its previous customers for its "mind-blowing", "simply divine", "perfect" and "amazing" culinary creations. Some even suggest it should be awarded with a Michelin star. It is perfect! But when you get there, there is no sight of such a restaurant or that it ever even existed. This could have been a true story in 2013, as this non-existing restaurant and its highly rated "consumer" reviews were a fact on TripAdvisor's webpage (Smith 2013).

Increasingly, consumers are using and relying on the opinions of others posted on online review sites (Malbon 2013; Nielsen Global Company 2013). According to the latest 'Trust in advertising' report from Nielsen Global Company (2013), 68% of the respondents claim to trust opinions posted online, a 7 percent increase from the same survey conducted in 2007. Furthermore, previous research has found that customers perceive eWOM as a reliable source of information (e.g. Bickart & Schindler 2001; Gruen, Osmonbekov & Czaplewski 2006). Surveys have also shown that consumers trust reviews online almost as much as they trust personal recommendations (Anderson 2014; Nielsen Global Company 2013). One study found that a whopping 88% of the consumers trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations (Anderson 2014). Another study also showed that over 73% of the consumers read up to 10 reviews before making their final purchase decision (Anderson 2011). Furthermore, evidence has been found that information deriving from other consumers rather than from a seller may have greater relevance and credibility (Bickart & Schindler 2001). Thus, online consumer reviews can be seen as a tool for gaining consumer trust. We can thereby notice that online word of mouth has been proved to be a powerful marketing tool. Also, as denoted by McKnight and Kacmar (2006), information credibility is one of the most important factors when it comes to the adoption of eWOM. Consequently, it becomes of high importance for an online review site to provide credible consumer reviews in order to ensure success.

However, the credibility of online review sites has been discussed since the given information about a product or service is usually written by other consumers and is therefore not verified through some rigorous process (Johnson & Kaye 2002). Furthermore, recent research has proved the existence of online review manipulation (Hu, Liu & Sambamurthy 2010; Hu, Bose, Koh & Liu 2011) and media has also brought attention to this matter. The recent article "Amazon seeks to shut down paid review sites" (BBC 2015) brings attention to a case where Amazon has sued four firms that pay people to write reviews that are published on their site. Amazon, a world known online retailing site, claims that paid opinions would damage its review system, which is supposed to be based on unbiased sources. As Amazon stated:

"While small in number, these reviews threaten to undermine the trust that customers, and the vast majority of sellers and manufacturers, place in Amazon, thereby tarnishing Amazon's brand..." (BBC 2015)

They thereby highlight the importance of trust when it comes to electronic word-of-mouth and the threat to credibility of the information source as such. In fact, in addition to the many studies and surveys that show how much consumers rely on online reviews, there are a few exceptions. A survey conducted by Maritz Research in 2013 (Ensing 2013) showed that even though many consumers use review sites to gather information, many are far more skeptical of such sites than previously believed. Approximately 25% of the respondents stated that they believe information on review sites is unfair, and most of the remaining 75% admitted that they think reviews can be biased or unfair, but presented their own strategies for determining

whether information is trustworthy or not. A YouGov online survey from last year revealed that while 90% of Americans think consumer reviews are an important part of their purchasing process, equally many believe that businesses manipulate reviews and that other people write reviews about products and services that they have no experience of (Gammon 2015).

These findings indicate a somewhat paradoxical stance towards online review sites and online reviews; while considering them important, consumers seem to be aware that they are not always trustworthy, yet choose to base their decisions on them to some degree nevertheless.

1.3 Statement of problem

Considering what has been mentioned so far about trust in online reviews, we have noticed some problems in this field of research. As explained in section 1.2, previous research has shown conflicting findings on whether or not consumers trust online reviews. Exploring this matter becomes important since marketers need to be able to understand consumer trust in online reviews as it then can be used as a powerful marketing tool (Fruth & Neacsu 2014) and as a new element of the marketing communication mix (Chen & Xie 2008). But the problem does not end here; the notion that consumers are increasingly using and relying on the opinions of others posted online (Malbon 2013; Nielsen Global Company 2013) combined with the fact that recent research has proved the existence of online review manipulation (Hu et al. 2010; Hu et al. 2011) further complicates the matter of trust in online reviews. How can you trust an online review if you know it could be false? Are people aware of possible irregularities, and if so, is this considered a problem at all?

Another issue when exploring consumer trust in online reviews is that there have been many different approaches to, and perspectives on, how to define and measure it (Kumar 2013; Racherla, Mandviwalla & Connolly 2012). Although, as online consumer reviews are a form of communication, eWOM more specifically, we can use a communication-perspective in order to gain a better understanding of the chosen subject and thereby also contribute to the existing research with a new angle of approach. But understanding such a complex phenomenon as communication is not easily done. When exploring such a matter the science researcher can make use of a model which can be used to describe and explain phenomenon that cannot be experienced directly (Science Learning 2015). The most significant and famous model of communication was developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949. Even though it has been criticized to be somewhat limited and simple, it has been used as a general model of human communication (Oxford Reference 2015). The fact that it is simple can also be seen as a benefit since it makes it easier to understand and adapt to many different situations (Ozuem 2005), which is why we have chosen to use it in this thesis as a foundation for the framework we use to analyze online reviews.

1.4 Purpose of the study

In this study we take an individual-level approach and focus on consumer trust in online reviews. We have chosen to put our focus on the direct reviews, which are reviews posted directly on review sites. We chose this focus as direct reviews is the fastest way for consumers to give reviews and since it is the most likely place that other consumers will search for them (Fruth & Neacsu 2014).

Since online reviews are a form of eWOM communication, we use a modified communication model as a tool to explore consumers' trust in online reviews. The use of such a simple model

can be seen as a benefit in this study as it makes it easier to understand the complex phenomenon of eWOM communication. The aim is to better understand consumers trust in online reviews.

1.5 Research questions

Since previous research indicates that people tend to trust online reviews even though review manipulation is a fact, the first question this thesis aims to answer is:

- *Why do people trust online reviews?*

The second research question means to explore:

- *What makes an online review trustworthy?*

The questions will be answered using a model of communication to separate different elements of the review.

1.6 Thesis outline

Section 1 - Introduction

The first section covers the introduction of this thesis which consists of the background, statement of problem, purpose of the study, research questions and thesis outline.

Section 2 - Theoretical framework

This section provides the reader with an understanding of the chosen theory and explains key concepts which are relevant for this study.

Section 3 - Research method

In the third section we present the chosen research strategy. After reading this part it should be clear how the study was executed and which methods were chosen and why.

Section 4 - Results and analysis

In this section we present the reader with the empirical findings and the analysis of these, structured around the different parts of the communication model.

Section 5 - Discussion

In this section present our conclusions and we present suggestions for further research.

Bibliography

In this section we present all the sources used for collecting the theoretical data.

Appendix

In this section we provide the reader with the interview guide used during our semi-structured interviews.

2 Theoretical framework

This section provides the reader with an understanding of the chosen theoretical framework, and explains key concepts that are relevant for this study. The communication model that is used throughout the empirical and analytical sections is also presented and explained.

2.1 Word-of-mouth communication

Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) is an informal exchange of information. It is a process which allows consumers to share opinions and information about product, services and brands. This information can be positive or negative and therefore help other potential buyers in their buying process (Hawkins, Best & Coney 2004).

The Internet has changed the way consumers and providers can share word-of mouth information. The Internet has enabled a new platform of communication for the sharing of opinions and information, both from a business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer perspective. Electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) is all the negative or positive information given by actual, former or potential customers about a product, brand or service, communicated throughout the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004).

2.2 Online consumer review

eWOM can be divided into different types, where online consumer review is one of them (Jalilvand, Esfahani & Samiei 2011). In a recent study by Fruth and Neacsu (2014), several classifications of the different online consumer reviews are proposed, where one of the classifications is based on the place of publication. The aforementioned authors make a distinction between *direct reviews*, which are reviews posted directly on the product's page. This kind of online consumer review makes it possible for customers to post a review directly on the product page and is offered by almost all leading online stores. It is the fastest way for customers to give a review but also the most likely place that other consumers will search for them. The second type of review is the *reviews on specialized sites and blogs*, which are reviews posted on personal blogs. This kind of reviews are usually viewed as objective and well documented due to the authority in the field that the author usually claims to possess. The third type of reviews is the ones *published on social networks*. Social networks are interactions between people through the Internet. By creating a profile people can communicate with friends and/or strangers via the Internet. *Reviews published in the local search directories* is the fourth way of posting reviews, where searches are made in a directory, for example "Bars close to me". The search will produce a result together with the ratings of former customers and usually an invitation to write a review as well.

The study takes on a communication perspective to see how consumers feel about trusting online reviews. An online review is definitely a type of communication that takes place between consumers, so using a communication model to describe the different elements of a review can help gain understanding of what effect these elements of communication have on consumer trust.

2.3 Shannon and Weaver's communication model

The classical communication model of Shannon and Weaver has been around for over 65 years, but is still used as a foundational basis for the study of communication theory. The model describes communication as a linear process with a sender-receiver setup and originally consisted of six different factors; five of the factors are functions to be performed and the sixth is an obstacle of communication called *noise*. The model has been criticized for being too simple (e.g. Craig 1999), but this particular attribute may also be part of its appeal since it makes it easy to understand and adapt to other scientific disciplines. Many researchers have since tried to develop and describe the model in different ways, sometimes adding or changing one or more of the components; however, the single most important modification is the addition of a *feedback* mechanism (Ozuem 2004). The original model is presented in Figure 2.1.

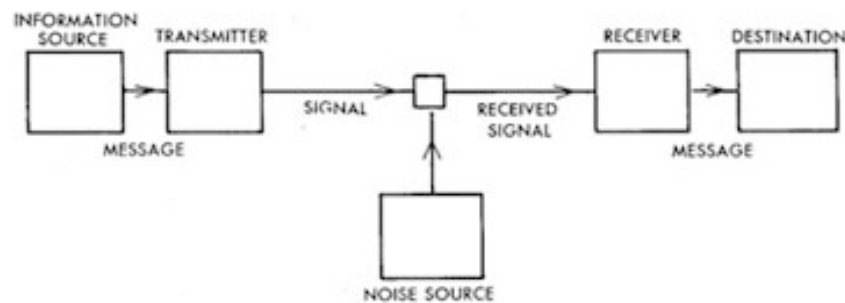


Figure 2.1 Communication model of Shannon & Weaver (1949, p.7)

First, the *information source* is what produces the actual message, and then a *transmitter* encodes the message into signals which are then sent through some kind of *channel* or medium. A *receiver* reconstructs the message which then arrives at its *destination*. The *noise* element of the model represents any interference with the message that may occur during the travel along the channel, like static or the absence of a signal. The model was originally developed as a theory of signals transmission, specifically related to transmission through telephone and the factors in the model were of a technical character (Shannon & Weaver 1949).

2.4 Communication model of online reviews

When applying the communication model to online reviews, some difficulties occur. Since Shannon and Weavers' model originally concerned signals transmission in telephone lines, some of the elements included are less relevant to model human interaction. In the review case, the information source would be the writer of the review, and the message to be sent is the actual review. As this person writes and sends the message it is transmitted into a signal that fits the channel. In this case, the review is coded into zeroes and ones so that it can be sent through a network and posted on the internet. The channel can be interpreted on different levels; it can represent the review site on which the review is posted, but it can also represent different types of pages where opinions are posted. On an even higher level, it may also represent whether the WOM information is transmitted online or face-to-face, or it could represent the internet and networks as a physical channel. The destination of the message represents the person who reads it. It first has to be decoded and put together again to show up on a computer screen. The noise symbolizes interruptions or static that disturbs the

transmission of the review. Some of these steps are of a purely technical nature, especially the transmitter, receiver and noise, and do not relate in an obvious way to trust and communication between people. In many other efforts to model communication (e.g. Berlo 1960; Schramm 1954), the information source and transmitter are combined to form a sender entity; in a similar fashion, receiver and destination make up one receiver element. The message does not make up an element of its own in Shannon and Weaver's model even if it is included as a part of the communication. However, other researchers have highlighted it as an important entity with implications of its own since it can be seen as at some point being fully separated from both the sender and receiver ends of communication (Schramm & Roberts 1971).

With these changes in mind we propose a modified communication model that is better fit to model online reviews and in line with the purposes of this study, described in Figure 2.2.

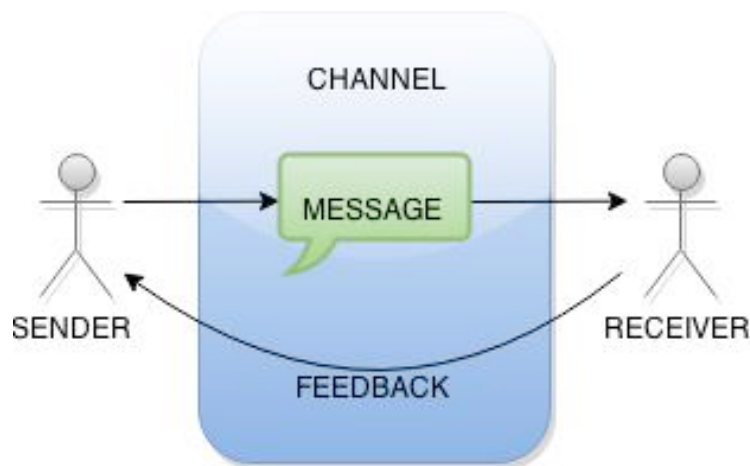


Figure 2.2 Modified communication model

- The *sender* is the writer of the review.
- The actual review is the *message*.
- The *channel* is the medium through which the review is sent. As previously mentioned, the channel can be interpreted on different levels; we have chosen it to represent the review site on which the review is posted so that different sites can be compared, but also different types of pages where reviews are posted. On a higher level, it also represent whether opinions are transmitted online or face-to-face.
- The consumer who seeks information is the *receiver* of the message.
- Any kind of *feedback* from the receiver is also sent back through the channel; some review sites gives businesses this option, to have a chance to respond to reviews that are posted about their products or services

2.5 Trust

Trust has been defined and described in many ways over the years, and researchers have chosen different strategies to deal with this issue; some have gone with a single definition and some have just concluded that the subject is difficult to define, while others have chosen simply to not define it at all. Especially online researchers seem to avoid using a specific definition (McKnight & Chervany 2001). This is problematic in the sense that it limits the possibilities to compare results and methods between studies and interpret results across scientific disciplines.

One of the main reasons for the difficulty of settling on one definition is that researchers of different disciplines all view trust quite differently; it is an important construct in for example psychology, economy and sociology but bears a host of different properties depending on the discipline (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer 1998). In an attempt to develop and validate a cross-disciplinary typology of trust constructs that can be used in a Web context, McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar (2002) stress that trust is of a complex, multidimensional nature which cannot easily be measured. However, one often cited definition is:

“[Trust] is the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.” (Mayer, Davies & Shoorman 1995, p. 712)

This definition goes well in line with the purposes of this study, for several reasons. The willingness of a party to trust others can be seen as either a long-term personal trait or a decision taken in that specific moment. People tend to trust others to different degrees depending on their previous experiences, personalities, cultural backgrounds and other personal traits (Hofstede 1980). Individuals' propensity to trust - their intrinsic willingness to trust - will affect how likely they are to trust someone or something, especially when they know nothing about that someone or something (Mayer et al. 1995). Consumers who read online reviews have no or very little information about the reviewers' actual intentions or motives, which forces them to make decisions based on the scarce information at hand (Racherla et al. 2012). This is represented in the definition by the notion that the trustor may have no ability to monitor or control the other person. Also, since the main purpose of consumer reviews is to guide potential buyers of products or services to make informed decisions, it is ultimately important to the trustor that reviews are trustworthy, and since purchasing decisions may be a result of reading reviews, consumers are vulnerable to the actions of the reviewers.

2.6 Trust in expert systems

Although we have now arrived at a basic definition of trust, it is also imperative that we outline some of the contextual issues concerning trust in online reviews. The trust that users choose to put in reviews cannot merely be described as focused on one review at a time, but is also dependent on trust in the review system as a whole. Giddens (1990) suggests that trust in *expert systems* is replacing the personal trust we have previously put in each other and experts. Experts systems are described as “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today” (Giddens 1990, p. 27). Just by driving cars, living in houses and boarding planes, people all over the world rely on these diffuse systems of expertise where the

actual social relations between trustee and trustor are taken out of the immediate context. Trust is a fundamental prerequisite of these systems, but it is vested in abstract capacities rather than in individuals. Online review sites are expert systems if any; for example, when an independent traveller chooses to read reviews online before booking a hotel instead of visiting a travel agent for advice, their trust is not placed with the traditional intermediary – the agent – and also not dependent on the interaction with, and reliability of, that one person. The traveller's trust is instead placed with the expert system accessed through the internet (Jeacle & Carter 2011).

3 Research method

This section provides an explanation of the chosen research approach and method, which lies as the foundation for this study. We also present a method reflection and discuss the credibility, relevance and replicability of the study.

3.1 Research design

This study aims at gaining a better understanding of trust in online reviews as seen through a communication perspective. Since the focus lies on the respondents' thoughts and feelings about trust in online reviews and not on numbers and statistics, this study employs a more qualitative research method than a quantitative. A qualitative research method was therefore chosen because it aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the chosen subject (Bryman & Bell 2011).

To fulfill the aim of this study, we needed different kinds of material. One part consisted of theory where we took use of a theoretical framework - the Shannon and Weaver communication model - which was modified to better fit the context of this study. The other part was the empirical material extracted from semi-structured interviews.

We took use of the different elements in our modified communication model to form the interview guide and to further analyze and put the empirical material in different "bins" i.e. elements to enhance the comprehensibility of communication when exploring trust in online reviews. We focused on the elements sender, receiver, message, channel and feedback.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

We conducted seven semi-structured interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' thoughts and feelings about trust in online reviews. When conducting semi-structured interviews the researcher take use of an interview-guide which includes themes that will be discussed which enables the researcher to be adaptable. This is an important feature of the semi-structured interviews as the researcher search to get information about the interviewees' perception of their own world (Bryman and Bell 2011). Therefore, when formulating the interview questions, we tried not to be so specific, as this could hinder the emergence of alternative ideas and point-of-views during the empirical data collection (Bryman & Bell 2011). In this way, the interviewees could elaborate their answers in their own way and we as researchers influenced the respondents less by not asking specific questions.

All seven interviews were held at the University of Borås. We booked study rooms in advance, in order to have access to a quiet environment and thereby decrease the possibility of any disturbance. All the interviewees were selected through convenience sampling, as explained below in section 3.2.1. All interviews were recorded with dictation machine and then later also fully transcribed. In the beginning of each interview, a few personal questions were asked, such as "name", "profession" and "age" and then we asked one control question, if the interviewee read online reviews. The control question was important as it determined if the interviewees read reviews or not. People who do not read reviews cannot be expected to have any opinions on the subject either. We then asked them if they write reviews as well, as

we felt that it could be linked to the element ‘information source’ in the communication model and therefore of importance to the analysis of this study. Then we listed a couple of questions to discuss where the interviewees could elaborate their answers in their own way. We used follow-up questions and we tried to not ask any leading questions in order for the interviewees to express their thoughts and feelings without too much bias from us researchers. Questions of interpretation were used in order to confirm what the interviewees meant. We conducted all our interviews in Swedish, using an interview guide written in Swedish since the native language of all the interviewees is Swedish. This was done so that the language as such would not be an obstacle for the interviewees to express their feelings in a natural way. Afterwards we translated the interview guide into English, which is the version that can be found in its entirety as an appendix.

The details of the interviews that were held are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Interviews

| Interviewee Name | Duration | Date |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| Interviewee A | 40 min | 28/4-15 |
| Interviewee B | 22 min | 28/4-15 |
| Interviewee C | 20 min | 29/4-15 |
| Interviewee D | 22 min | 29/4-15 |
| Interviewee E | 20 min | 29/4-15 |
| Interviewee F | 20 min | 30/4-15 |
| Interviewee G | 21 min | 30/4-15 |

3.2.1 Sampling

We applied convenience sampling for our semi-structured interviews. According to Bryman and Bell (2011) it is defined as a sampling method that is used because it is simply available to the researcher. In practice, this meant that we went to library at the University of Borås, where a large amount of people walk in and out, and explained to random by-passing students what kind of study we are writing and the aim of it and then asked them if they wanted to participate. The convenience sampling was mainly chosen as a method for this study because of the lack of time and resources. Sample size is usually also limited by considerations of cost and time (Bryman & Bell 2011), which was the case in this study. All of the respondents are currently students at the University of Borås and within a range of 22 to 30 years old.

3.3 Implementation and theoretical data collection

We started out with a literature review in order to collect relevant material, improve our knowledge in the chosen research field and to narrow down our research focus. We mostly used books and journal articles from journals published online through Summon, a search engine available through the University of Borås. Common search words were: online reviews, consumer reviews, consumer trust, communication, communication models, word-of-mouth, eWOM etc.

Based on the collected theoretical data we chose to use our own modified version of the communication model, in order to better fit the scope of this particular study. After that, we

went on to find people to participate in the interviews and then we conducted these, as explained more in detail in section 3.2 and 3.2.1. After collecting the information from our seven interviewees we went through what they have said. When this was done, we felt that we achieved a saturation of information, i.e. no new data seemed to emerge regarding each element (Bryman and Bell 2011) and so we decided that more empirical material was not needed to fulfill the aim of this study.

Based on the collected theoretical data and the empirical material gained through the semi-structured interviews, we could see connections and find differences between theory and empirics so that conclusions could be drawn.

3.4 Data analysis

By using the theoretical framework - our communication model and its elements - we could structure the analysis accordingly. Using a model helped us to better analyze the gathered material and enhance the comprehensibility. From our observations and notes from the interviews we started to go through what each of the interviewees had said and for each of the elements in our communication model we could gather and connect relevant information. As explained by Strauss and Corbin (1990), this can be seen as a kind of selective coding due to the fact that we already had selected the core category, i.e. trust, and then systematically related that to other categories, i.e. the chosen elements of the communication model.

We have chosen to present the empirical material and the analysis of this in one section called results and analysis, instead of presenting these as two separate sections. This was decided upon since we felt that presenting the results and analysis of each of the interviews separately would not give the reader a good view of what kind of information that emerged since we already had a model through which to structure the information.

3.5 Method reflection

According to Bryman and Bell (2011) interviews is one of the most used methods in qualitative research. This study employed semi-structured interviews since the aim was to explore the thoughts and feelings regarding trust in online reviews. Since semi-structured interviews have the advantage of being flexible and emphasis is put on the interviewees own perspective we felt was the right choice for this study. One problem that can occur with semi-structured interviews is that the researcher can influence the interviewees by his or her direct participation. This was dealt with by not asking any leading questions that could have influenced the interviewees' way of answering, and dressing neutral during the interviews.

We used the convenience sampling with the understanding that this sampling method could not represent all students but only the interviewees' perspective. Although, the data generated could provide a spring board for future research and/or contribute in other ways together with other already existing findings in some field of study (Bryman and Bell 2011). Also, convenience sampling is for a fact a very common sampling method in the field of business and management (Bryman 1989).

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues are an important part of a research paper as they relate to the integrity of the study (Bryman and Bell 2011). In this study we have taken into account the following ethical considerations: confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent. The latter principle means that as a researcher you should give as much information as needed for the prospective participants to make a decision whether or not they wish to participate in the study. It can also mean that the participants are aware of the purpose of the study. This was done by giving an explanation about the subject and the purpose of the study when asking them to participate. The criteria confidentiality and anonymity means maintaining the information gathered about the participants confidential and anonymous. These two criteria were maintained by keeping the collected empirical material where no one else could get access to it, and by not mentioning any of the participants' real names (Bryman and Bell 2011). We asked the interviewees if they wanted to be anonymous, and since they wanted to we mention them by letters A-G instead of their real names in this thesis.

3.7 Credibility, relevance and replicability

Bryman and Bell (2011) discuss different criteria that can be used when ensuring a good quality of a qualitative research. Reliability and validity are the most common used criteria when it comes to quantitative research but their relevance has been questioned when it comes to qualitative research. Some researchers have even suggested that qualitative studies should be evaluated differently than quantitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) provide two alternative criteria to reliability and validity, namely trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness is further divided into four criteria, where credibility is one of them. Credibility refers to how believable the findings are and is very important when it comes to qualitative research as the perception of the social reality can differ. The aim is to ensure that the research is carried out according to the principles of good practice and that the researchers make sure that they have fully understood the social world of the participants in the study by confirming the research finding together with them. Bryman and Bell (2011) suggests the use of respondent validation in order to ensure the credibility of a study. The process of respondent validation means that the researchers present the participants with their findings in order to confirm that these represent the same view as when interpreted by the researchers. This was done by us as we presented each of the participants with their respective full transcription in order for them to confirm that their view has been interpreted in the right way by us (Bryman & Bell 2011). Consequently, this ensured that we got a true picture of the empirical material to base our analysis upon. Moreover, by presenting a clear understanding of the chosen methods for this study we demonstrate that already established methods were employed in order to reach the conclusions.

Relevance refers to how well the study contributes to the existing research within that particular field of study. Relevance was ensured as an extensive literature review was done before the actual study began, and we made sure that to our knowledge, there was no identical study done which makes it a contribution to existing research.

Replicability is the extent to which another study has been made possible to repeat the same findings from the information given by an initial study. This was done in this study by providing an extensive and detailed description about used methods.

4 Results and analysis

This section presents the empirical findings gained through our seven semi-structured interviews and the analysis of these. The analysis is based on our communication model, and so the results are presented according to each of the elements included: sender, receiver, message, channel, and feedback. The interviewees' views on trust in online reviews in general are also presented. The interviewees are referred to with a letter A to G, in order to preserve their anonymity. The section concludes with an analytical summary of the findings.

4.1 Channel

The interviewees argued that it does not matter if the review site on which they read reviews is well-known or not, as long as there are more than a few reviews posted there. It seemed to be of little significance to them whether they had heard about the site before, if it seemed legitimate enough. As two of the interviewees put it:

I check different [sites] actually, because I think... To me, it's important so see what other people think. It doesn't have to be big sites; it can be big or small.
– Interviewee C, Borås 2015-04-29

No, it doesn't matter [what site it is]. I don't think so. I've never thought so, anyway. – Interviewee F, Borås 2015-04-30

However, when asked what review sites they turn to for information, three of the respondents described that they use a search engine (Google, in this instance) to make a general search for reviews of a product, then visit the pages that rank highest in the search results. According to the interviewees, this often results in some of the main review sites appearing in the top search results, so usually that is where they go for information. In some cases, if searching for a specific type of product or service, the respondents mentioned favorite sites they visit; for example, TripAdvisor was mentioned for hotels and IMDB for movies.

Even though it seemed to matter little what specific site a review was posted on, there were differences in what kind of site the reviews are posted on. The interviewees agreed that there is a difference between sites that require the user to log in and those that do not. For example, users can post their opinions about businesses and services on Facebook, which means that they write their reviews in their own name (given that they use their own identity on Facebook, which most people do). On the other hand, on many of the most well-known review sites, people can just fill in their own name or leave it blank when posting a review. The interviewees all considered reviews that were written anonymously as less serious:

"Of course, you take someone less seriously, or value their opinions less, when it's anonymous." – Interviewee A, Borås 2015-04-28

"Yes, if you have to sign with your own name, then it feels like, it should be a lot more trustworthy." – Interviewee F, Borås 2015-04-30

When asked on what sites they prefer to read reviews, the interviewees' answers often included sites that are not actual third-party review sites, but companies' own sites. Two of

the interviewees expressed concerns that companies may delete comments that are negative, making the reviews less reliable, but mentioned that on the upside, there are usually lots of comments on the company sites that include the possibility to rate or review products. It seemed like the convenience of reading reviews without having to search for them was of importance:

"I think they're really good, because you're already on that page, looking at a product, and there are reviews right there. You don't have to work hard for it. But then... you never know if they have removed the bad reviews." – Interviewee E, Borås 2015-04-29

Another type of site that was frequently mentioned was price comparison sites. This kind of sites often double as review sites; in addition to comparing prices of products and services from different online shopping sites or companies, they give visitors the possibility to comment on products and/or businesses and sites. Since they are also third-party sites, they fill the same purpose as pure review sites.

The interviewees were asked to describe the difference in trustworthiness between reading opinions in reviews that unknown people have written, and hearing opinions in 'real-life', either from people in a physical store or from people they know. The answers differed a lot between the respondents; where some answered that they would much rather listen to someone they know, others said they prefer to gather information from many different sources before making a decision. The interviewees opinions seemed to be grounded in *who* shared an opinion rather than *where* (in what channel on a higher level; online or in real life), so it will be further discussed in section 4.2.

4.2 Sender

When asked directly whether they consider who has written a review they read, all respondents stated that they are more concerned with the content of the review than who wrote it. Two of the interviewees even answered that they had never thought of it at all. However, during the rest of the interviews, the subject often touched upon the writer of the review, and the respondents gave a more nuanced picture of the importance of the sender. The following quotes illustrate a certain ambiguity in the interviewees' views:

"To me, it doesn't matter who the person is, it just really doesn't. It's the comment itself that is important. Sure, some people are not serious, and then I don't listen. But those who are serious, who write a lot, I listen to them." – Interviewee C, Borås 2015-04-29

"No, I've never [considered who writes the reviews], actually. But then, I mean, you'll notice who is serious and who's not. I think I notice... I understand who knows what they're writing about and who doesn't." – Interviewee F, Borås 2015-04-30

"You can tell if it is Adam, 14, who wrote it. Or, I mean, if it is well written and all that it feels more sensible... if [the writer] expresses him or herself well." – Interviewee E, Borås 2015-04-29

"I don't [think about who wrote a review] so much actually, it's more about the feeling you get from it, if it is someone who writes something reasonable, sort of... but well, of course it could be someone from the company who wrote that comment, so you can get fooled... but I actually pretty much trust reviews." – Interviewee G, Borås 2015-04-30

It seemed like the interviewees do not attribute too much importance to who the sender is, since they think they can sort out the irrelevant or untrustworthy writers themselves just by the quality of the review content. One thing that appeared to impact how much it matters who writes a review is if this person is an expert, which was mentioned in several of the interviews. If the person writing a review has owned the product for a long time, or is an expert in that particular field, his or her opinions are considered much more important. How the interviewees know which reviews are written by experts followed the same reasoning as mentioned above; in many cases it is impossible to prove, but they try to evaluate the quality of the review.

"Usually it's just some random person that you don't know at all, but if it's someone who is an expert within the area or works in that field... Then it gives it another position, I definitely think so." – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

As discussed in the previous section 4.1 on the channel element, the respondents stated that it could matter if they know who the person sharing his or her opinions is. However, the interviewees had many different opinions on what it means; some stated that they value their friends' opinions higher than those of anonymous strangers online, others that it depends on what friend it is and what product or service their opinion is about. In essence, the interviewees gave the impression that if they know from whom the information comes, they can evaluate it based on what they know about that person, but when reading reviews from random people online the sender becomes irrelevant and the review itself has to provide all the information on which their decision to trust it or not is based.

The interviewees were asked in the beginning of the interviews whether they write reviews themselves or only read them. Three people answered that they had written a review on one occasion, and the others had never written one. They were all interviewed in their role of receivers, and it was interesting to find that none of them are active senders. A general discussion about who writes reviews - and why - took place in most of the interviews. The interviewees then reasoned that they think people write reviews to help others make better decisions, and that it is a contributing factor to why they feel that they can trust most reviewers:

"I believe that when people take the time to write reviews, they want to give a fair assessment." – Interviewee A, Borås 2015-04-28

"I think they want to help. If I write 'this product is really bad', then I don't want anyone to buy it. If they are trying to cheat you, or something like that." – Interviewee C, Borås 2015-04-29

Another matter that was thoroughly discussed during the interviews was how differences in personality and preferences between people can influence the reviews they write and read. What is considered terrible service by one person may be perfectly acceptable to another; the same goes for attributes like quality and affordability, for instance. Two of the interviewees

mentioned that the consumers' *expectations* strongly affect how they experience a product or service. They argued that high expectations can lead to a negative experience, compared to someone who expected less and thus is happy with what he or she got:

"Like, even if many people think it's bad, maybe I think it is what I expect it to be, what I want. Then like if it is something cheap, and people say it's not the best, but maybe it's just what I pay for. There is that aspect too." – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

The interviewees all agreed that since all people are different, online reviews are sometimes confusing or misleading. They mentioned that the quality and richness of a review can give a hint to who wrote it - and what expectations he or she had on the service or product - but their overall solution to this problem seemed to be to read lots of reviews. The interviewees made the case that a great number of reviews would statistically contain both the overly negative and overly positive opinions, so the extremes would be balanced out against each other. This notion of the *number of reviews* impacting the trustworthiness was repeated frequently through the interviews, and so it will be further discussed in section 4.7.

4.3 Receiver

In this study, the receiver element in the communication model differs from the other elements, in that the interviewees themselves act as receivers. In that sense it is difficult to ask them directly about their role in the communication, but when analyzing their answers it is possible to notice some interesting findings. The semi-structured interviews left a lot of room for open discussions on the topic, and the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely about their thoughts and feelings, which revealed that even though they all had similar knowledge and experience of online review sites they brought up different reasons for using them. Three of the respondents stated that they used them mainly to find additional information about products they already intended to buy, especially to learn about possible problems, while two others said they read reviews primarily to compare products. One interviewee stated that she read reviews just for fun sometimes, and to discover new products. The kind of products and services that the respondents read reviews about also varied a lot; six of the interviewees mentioned electronics, three mentioned hotels and three mentioned clothes. Travel-related services were also mentioned, as were movies, and two of respondents mentioned that they read reviews about businesses or sites to see if they are trustworthy and safe to order from.

Taking into account the varying reasons for reading reviews, it is unquestionable that the identity of the receiver has an influence on how a review is perceived. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate exactly how the different personality traits and behavior affect consumer trust in online reviews.

4.4 Message

The message represents the actual review, which naturally is an important factor concerning whether readers trust reviews or not. The interviewees expressed surprisingly similar opinions on how the contents of a review affect their trust, and how a review should be composed to be as useful as possible. The length – or rather the richness – of the review was considered very important. Many online review sites give reviewers the option to write about a product or service, or to just rate it; for example, sometimes a scale of 1-10 is used, or 0-5 stars. The interviewees all thought that written reviews are more useful than just rating, but also that

they are more likely to trust a written review, as long as it contains some sort of explanation for the reviewers opinion:

"Then there are those who write two hundred words, and of course, those who write longer and in greater detail, you value them much higher than those who only write one word." – Interviewee A, Borås 2015-04-28

"As long as they give a good reason [for their opinions]. A concrete answer to why it is bad or why it is good, then well... I trust that review much more." – Interviewee B, Borås 2015-04-28

"If someone just writes 'very good', I mean, I don't get it at all, it doesn't help me a lot. But if someone goes into details, 'this is really good because of this and that', then there is a greater chance that I agree." – Interviewee C, Borås 2015-04-29

"If you write something you get to know more, if someone just rates it then I don't know if they thought it was good or bad. But if someone says why, then I get a better picture of what I could think about it." – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

Two of the interviewees specifically mentioned that a really useful review should contain both positive and negative feedback on the product or service in question, and that if it does it is more trustworthy than other reviews:

"Detailed... precise and that, but both positive and negative, because there is always both. Nothing is perfect, sort of. There is always something. [...] Detailed. Well written. It feels much more trustworthy then." – Interviewee E, Borås 2015-04-29

"I've got more trust in comprehensive comments, especially if they contain both positive and negative [feedback]. If it just says 'really good product, period' then it doesn't tell me very much." – Interviewee G, Borås 2015-04-30

Even though written reviews with rich explanations were deemed the most trustworthy by the interviewees, there seems to be a line. Three of the interviewees mentioned that reviews could also be too long, in which case they don't bother to read it, but it did not appear to be a frequent issue.

Another very interesting finding from the interviews was that most of the interviewees stated that their interest in a review, and how much a review affects them, is partially based on whether it was positive or negative. All but two respondents revealed that they let negative reviews affect them much more than positive reviews. This does not essentially mean that they trust negative reviews more than positive ones, but at least that they have a greater influence. One interviewee said that if he read one negative review about a product, it would take many more positive ones to cancel out the effect of the negative one. This is how another of the interviewees put it:

"I'd say negative reviews [affect me the most]. Because if it is something that I've decided I want to buy, then I've come pretty far in my process. And then I'm already pretty positive. And then, of course, the positive reviews, they keep my

positivity up... but if there is something negative then suddenly I may change my mind, or even refrain [from making the purchase].” – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

Since none of the interviewees actively wrote reviews themselves, they were instead asked to discuss what it would take for them to write reviews, and what motives they think other people may have to write reviews. The respondents confessed that they think they are most likely to write a review if they are really unhappy with a product or service, and thought this to be the main reason for others to share their opinions as well. This had also been the case for the few interviewees who had written a review at some point; they had been really disappointed and frustrated with the service or product they had purchased.

”Yes, I think it is [more likely that I write a review when I’m displeased than when I’m pleased]. The emotions are much stronger when you’re displeased than when you’re pleased.” – Interviewee E, Borås 2015-04-29

”Unfortunately, I think it’s more [likely] if you’re displeased. Perhaps you feel cheated, or something like that. I think it’s easier to write about that.” - Interviewee F, Borås 2015-04-30

”I think, as a consumer, you feel that... this is what I paid for. I have the right to get this product within three days, and when I get it, well then I’m happy. But it’s not like I’ll go online and write about it or anything.” – Interviewee A, Borås 2015-04-28

Even if this does not relate specifically to the content of the message - the review itself - it makes for an interesting result when considered together with the fact that negative reviews have a greater impact. With the interviewees reasoning, people are more likely to write negative than positive reviews, which implies that the distribution of reviews and ratings is somewhat unfair; still, they choose to ascribe more weight to those negative reviews.

4.5 Feedback

When asked about how important feedback - that the company can write replies to customer reviews - is for the trustworthiness of the company there were only two respondents who claimed that it is not important to them. Of these two, one said that the answers often are too generic, that it seems like default responses:

“I have seen it in a couple of places, but it is just so generic. Like oh what a pity, what can we do... you do not get a good perception there, it is often just default answers” – Interviewee G, Borås 2015-04-30

The other one stated that it is a good way of communicating, but that it is not so important and will not affect the trustworthiness at all.

“To be honest, I don’t think it matters at all. I think like, if you come in and see that it is mainly negative comments and that people have had a really bad perception about the company, it doesn’t matter if they write like yeah but give us another chance, so if you notice that they seem to have bad service or so I think it

doesn't matter even if the company says they're sorry and that it was bad of them, I really do not think it matters." – Interviewee A, Borås 2015-04-28

The other five respondents all answered that it is important for the trustworthiness of the company. One of these five respondents even said that it could make him/her feel less scared of buying from that company if he or she sees a response to a review.

"Yes I do [believe that it increases the trustworthiness], or yeah... you don't get....or I feel that you don't get so scared to buy. Then they try to help and find a solution, maybe you get to return stuff or that they can change it or whatever it can be" – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

With five out of seven people answering that feedback is important for the trustworthiness of the company, it seems like it is an important part of the communication although not vital to them. Since none of the respondents brought up the importance of the feedback by themselves but only when asked, it implies that it is not such an important matter to them.

4.6 General trust

When the interviewees were asked pretty early on in the interviews whether they trust online reviews or not, everyone responded that they do, at least to some extent, and that they think online reviews are useful tools. Three of the interviewees were very positive and said they do trust reviews overall, while the others were a little more hesitant, but still positive. One interviewee said he felt he could trust reviews to 80%, another that:

"Well, you can't trust everything you read. And you know that some people are always unhappy and some are very happy and everything in between. You just have to take it with a grain of salt, really. But still, I think you can get a good picture." – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

Later in the interviews, the interviewees were asked if they think there are a lot of false or dishonest reviews online; the examples covered if they think companies write false positive reviews about themselves or negative reviews about others businesses, or if people review products that they have not tried. Two of the interviewees admitted that they had never considered that, but that they think it very possible that it occasionally happens. The others said they think it happens, and one of the interviewees even said he knows well that it does happen.

"You want to believe that businesses don't do that, but there is nothing that... Ethically, it's obvious that they shouldn't write bad stuff about others, but if it's a tough market... then I don't know... they probably do." – Interviewee A, Borås 2015-04-28

"I'm sure it happens sometimes. I don't know, I don't see it that way. I believe them anyway..." – Interviewee C, Borås 2015-04-29

"No, I usually don't think about that... but in theory, it could be like that. And even employees going online and writing great reviews." – Interviewee D, Borås 2015-04-29

The interviewees also confessed that they have no idea how to detect what reviews are false and not:

"I've never really thought about it, but... I think it can happen. Absolutely. But I have no idea how to detect it, unless it's generic copy-paste every time. I just don't know." – Interviewee B, Borås 2015-04-28

4.7 Analytical summary

When attempting to interpret the answers from the interviews, it was difficult at times to make a clear and definite distinction between the sender and channel elements of the communication model. As discussed in section 2.3, the *channel* can be viewed on different levels, and while the distinction on a lower level (different sites of the same kind) was very clear, it became vaguer as we discussed higher-level differences. Some channels give readers of reviews more access to information about the reviewers than others; the least information is provided on anonymous review sites, some more information on social media like Facebook, and most information in real life where someone's identity is known. The interviewees stated that the channel itself is of little importance, but since the information about the sender - who *has* an impact on the trustworthiness - varies between channels, the channel element has some indirect influence anyway, as a conveyor of sender identity.

Concerning the importance of the *sender*, the interviewees attributed little importance to who the writer of a review is when asked directly, but as mentioned in the analysis section they made a lot of references to the sender when discussing other questions in the interviews. A person's level of expertise and experience of a product or service seemed to be of great importance to the interview participants, both when it comes to anonymous online reviewers and family, friends and other acquaintances. When we discussed how they deal with tips and opinions from family, friends, or other people they know, the interviewees were a little hesitant to trusting them uncritically, but stated that it rather depends on who the person is. This means that in real life, it is first when the receiver knows the identity of the sender that he or she can make a decision about whether that person is trustworthy. This is interesting, because online, a reviewer's true identity is often hidden so the receivers cannot judge his or her authority by their identity. Even so, the interviewees did confess to pretty much trusting reviews written by anonymous writers. The interviewees described how they instead use the contents of the reviews to assess the reviewer's trustworthiness. This confirms the earlier findings that that trust in reviews can be pretty much as high as trust in personal recommendations (Anderson 2014).

Neither the receiver element nor the feedback element could give any clear results in the study. The interviewees were interviewed in their roles of receivers, and the *receiver* in the communication model is the trustor, the person who is forced to place his or her trust in another person. Research on antecedents to trust have found that peoples' different traits and personalities doubtlessly have implications for how likely they are to trust (e.g. Mayer et al. 1995), and we found that the interviewees had many different reasons and motivations for reading reviews. However, exploring how the interviewees' personalities affected their trust in online reviews is immense work and would have taken a whole other study. The attitudes towards the *feedback* element were overall very positive, but the advantages of having a feedback mechanism affected the company image rather than the actual review, and so it also falls outside the scope of this study and will not be further discussed.

Of all the communication model elements, the *message* is clearly the element that the interviewees attributed the most weight to. In a way, it is the only palpable piece of information that the receiver can use to evaluate whether a review is trustworthy or not. Some of the other elements may have played a bigger part in creating trust if they were less opaque in character; since for example the sender is often anonymous and the noise element difficult to make out the review readers use the contents of the message to decipher knowledge about these other elements as well. Therefore, the ultimate review - based on the collected ideas of the interviewees - is well written and contains lots of information, detailed information, both negative and positive aspects of the product or service, and - perhaps most importantly - explanations and descriptions of why the reviewer thinks what he or she thinks.

The interviewees in this study seemed to be unaware of the recent scandals involving the discovery about fake reviews on review sites (e.g. Hu et al. 2010; Hu et al. 2011). Even when they were asked about fake reviews directly they did not seem to be bothered much by the fact that it occurs, whether they had considered it before or not. On the other hand, the interviewees recognized that reviews must be taken with a grain of salt, which indicates certain skepticism. These findings do not reject any of the previous surveys on consumer trust in reviews, neither the ones showing that consumers trust in reviews (e.g. Malbon 2013; Nielsen Global Company 2013) nor the ones showing that people are skeptical towards reviews (Gammon 2015; Ensing 2013), since we have found evidence of both. This can be considered as somewhat paradoxical behavior as the interviewees are aware of the existence of fake reviews but still say they trust them. One possible explanation for how the interviewees can justify their trusting behavior is that they make up strategies of their own to make their overall evaluation of online review trustworthiness as reliable as possible. For example, there was one thing that was frequently mentioned in the interviews, by all the respondents, as an answer to many different questions and in relation to almost all of the elements of our analysis model; the *number of reviews*. The interviewees would answer questions about how they judge the trustworthiness of individual reviews, but often added that it is only if the collected body of opinions is large enough that they can choose to trust the reviews. In the interviewees' views, the effect of many of the factors that make reviews unreliable, like not knowing who wrote them, that they can be outright false, that people interpret them differently or have different expectations can be reduced by reading a lot of reviews. The interviewees meant that the sheer volume of reviews can drown out the presumably few reviews that are exaggerated, false or otherwise irrelevant, so that an 'average' can be calculated. This average is then supposedly trustworthy. This attitude reminds to a large extent of Giddens (1990) theory of *trust in expert systems*. Giddens explains that trust in expert systems is replacing personal trust, which goes well in line with our findings that the message rather than the person behind it is scrutinized by review readers in order to evaluate the trustworthiness of an online review. Since readers do not know who is behind individual interviews, they put their faith not in people but in the fact that the number of reviews, the system, will give them trustworthy information. This could also be an explanation to why it seems like consumers nowadays trust online reviews almost as much as personal recommendations (Anderson 2014; Nielsen Global Company 2013); if the trust in abstract systems is strong enough, the element of the sender becomes more and more irrelevant.

5 Discussion

In this section we present the reader with the conclusions we can draw from our study. The section aims to first answer our research questions, and then discuss potential theoretical and practical implications of the findings. The section concludes with a discussion regarding further research.

5.1 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand consumer trust in online reviews. This was explored by answering two questions. The first one was:

- *Why do people trust online reviews?*

Our empirical findings indicate that it is the amount of reviews collected in one place that makes people trust in online reviews. Consumers are more or less aware that reviews may be manipulated, but do not consider it an issue either way because they do not care all that much if some are. They believe that online reviews are unfair in all directions, both overly positive and negative, so that when considered altogether, the average remains unaffected. Furthermore, since an online review site is a kind of expert system with collected ‘consumer knowledge’ which has been approved by the online review site - and consequently is supposed to provide accurate information - people do trust in it.

Previous surveys and studies on whether consumers trust in online reviews have shown somewhat differing results; some state that people do, and more so than ever, while a couple of other studies claim that these findings are wrong and that people are skeptical towards online reviews. When examining how this research was conducted, one can tell that the conclusions vary depending on what questions were asked and how the results are interpreted, and perhaps most obviously on how trust is defined. The same goes for the results in this thesis. It seems like if you ask people whether they trust reviews they will generally give you an affirmative answer, because in general, they do. On the other hand, if you ask them if they think there are any issues like manipulated reviews or low-quality reviews, they will agree that there probably are some issues. Does being a bit suspicious mean that you do not trust in reviews? If yes, then people do not trust online reviews. If no, they do! It all comes down to the definition and understanding of trust. In the definition chosen in this thesis trust is described as the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to another party. Listening to what the interviewees said, it is fair to say that with this definition they do trust online reviews overall, since they actively read them to help them make better decisions.

The second research question was:

- *What makes an online review trustworthy?*

Our empirical findings indicate that it is primarily the content of the review - the message - that makes a review trustworthy, as seen through a communication perspective. Because of the lack of information about the person writing the online review, it is the only thing the reader can truly evaluate. Reviews that contain lots of details are considered more trustworthy than those that are short or comprised of just a rating or score; also, review writers who include not only their opinions but also explanations and reasons for their opinions write the

most helpful reviews. Other elements of the review like what channel it is posted in or whether there is the possibility to leave feedback does not have an explicit effect on the trustworthiness of reviews.

This study contributes to the existing poor knowledge about consumers' trust in online reviews. Taking a communication model perspective has enabled us to compare how different parts of online reviews affect trustworthiness, where our results indicate that the content of the review is the most important. Although our answers should not be regarded as definite, they can be seen as a contribution to the existing research.

With indications that people trust online consumer reviews, it becomes of high importance for companies to understand this consumer trust. This study provides a deeper understanding of how consumers think about trust in eWOM which could help companies better understand their consumers. This study also highlights the existence of fraudulent reviews, which implies that companies should implement more rigorous processes of who can provide a review.

5.2 Further research

Our interviewees recognize that much of the information given in an online review needs to be taken with a grain of salt. This should be of importance when companies are trying to monitor trust in online reviews. Since it also seems that it is the actual message, i.e the information given in the review that is of highest importance, this should be something to focus on in further research.

In this study we have taken into account what our interviewees have said, but this may not be how they really feel and how they really would behave. Therefore it could be of interest to do some experimental research where participants could be monitored directly and thereby “measuring” their true behavior.

Another thing that could be of importance is how much of the information one searches for before making a decision through online reviews. As the amount of reviews written about a product or service seemed important in our study, maybe this could be an interesting topic for further research.

In our research every participant was a receiver, according to our communication model. It could be of interest to take into account different perspectives, as maybe investigating a sender's perspective could give different results.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

First, we give an explanation about the definition of eWOM and Online review sites to the interviewee in order to avoid misunderstandings. The purpose of the study is already explained beforehand.

To think about:

Keep in mind that it is only about review sites and eWOM (not other places where eWOM can occur)

Personal questions

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Control question

Do you read online reviews?

Possible follow-up questions

- a) If yes, how often?
- b) If yes, name some of them?
- c) If yes, some products in particular?

Question regarding sender-element

Do you write online reviews?

Possible follow-up questions

- a) If yes, how often?
- b) If yes, name some of them?
- c) If yes, some products in particular?

Open-ended questions for discussion

What are your thoughts in general when it comes to review sites?

How trustworthy do you consider online review sites to be?

Is a review site more trustworthy if there is the possibility for the company to give feedback to them?

Differences between different sites?

How do you feel about WHO writes an online review?

Negative/positive reviews



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