Chapter 12

Revenge of Cecil the Lion:
Credibility in Third-Party Review Sites

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has seen a proliferation of Third-Party Review Sites (TPRS) that encourage the public to comment and reflect on their interactions and experiences with a retailer, brand, or company. Sites like Yelp build massive audiences based on their credibility as authentic, accurate, external reviewers. This study looks at how the co-opting of TPRS pages by advocates and protesters influences public perceptions of credibility on these sites. Specifically, it explores the public’s reaction to Yelp as a digital space of protest after the death of Cecil the Lion at the hands of a Minnesota dentist. Through focus groups, this study identifies that TPRS audiences look for consistency in reviews to determine credibility; the public sees advocacy as harming the credibility of the overall site; current events play a role in the interpretation of TPRS; and the intentions of users is key to building a reputation as credible in digital media.

INTRODUCTION

As digital spaces proliferate, representing nearly every organization and company, concerns regarding digital credibility and trustworthiness have also grown. An additional challenge originates from user-generated websites that allow the public to report on their interactions and experiences. Sites such as Yelp, Google Reviews, and Peeple serve as a type of contemporary consumer report, except this content is posted with little editing, proofing, or checking for accuracy; therefore, a current challenge in reputation management lies in what occurs in these digital spaces.

One such iteration of this online challenge occurred in August 2015 following the high-profile death of Cecil the Lion at the bow and arrow of Dr. Walter Palmer, a dentist in Bloomington, Minnesota. Following intense media coverage of the lion hunt in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe, Yelp users took to the site to write thousands of scathing reviews of Dr. Palmer and his practice, River Bluff Dental. Rather than focus on his services and medical practice, online commenters used the platform to critique his action, behavior, and non-medical activities. Shortly after, Dr. Palmer closed his practice, citing the

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damage to his online reputation as motivation. Eventually, Yelp released a statement asking users to turn their attention to “Yelp Talk” and leave “Yelp.com” to actual reviews of dental service.

This is one of many instances of Yelp and other Third-Party Review Sites (TPRS) being used for purposes other than actual service/product reviews. Previous scholarship has used this as evidence to question the validity and accuracy of all review websites. However, few studies have explored how events like Cecil the Lion may influence the public’s perception of the helpfulness of TPRS.

This study looks at the public’s views of these TPRS (such as Yelp), specifically investigating the credibility of online reviews in person-to-group communication. Through a series of focus groups, the public is asked to react to the perceived accuracy, trustworthiness, and reliability of online reviews. To achieve this, focus groups will be asked to reflect on examples, such as River Bluff Dental, as well as other (less-dramatized and mediated) cases. Based on the results, a series of criteria will be developed that reflect how the public judges the credibility of online reviews. It specifically answers: how does the public determine if an online review is credible? What factors lead to an online review being accurate, reliable, or trustworthy? This study holds implications for those studying digital credibility, reputation management, and online group communication.

Yelp is an important, yet controversial, platform for public relations because of its ability to provide potential customers with information that is perceived as objective and unbiased (Sher & Lee, 2009). By compiling and averaging reviews from previous customers, users get direct insight into the retail experience (Jensen et al., 2013). However, this means that account managers must continually monitor TPRS to ensure accuracy, clarity, and that negative information is not overwhelmingly obvious (Baek, Ahn, & Choi, 2012). Therefore, management of TPRS is one tenant of digital credibility and reputation management.

**Review of Literature**

TPRS are digital spaces that allow the public to give feedback and assess the success of a business, organization, individual, or brand (Talmage, 2012; Park, Gu, & Lee, 2012). Third-party reviewers are any member of the public who is not employed by the organization, which means that reviewers are often clients, customers, and members from the surrounding community. Sites are run and monitored by an external party to the entity being reviewed. Generally, TPRS offer many entities such as companies, brands, and specific retail locations to review, and the public is encouraged to provide honest, thoughtful feedback regarding recent or past experiences (Park, Gu, & Lee, 2012; Gerhards, 2015).

Previous research has identified a myriad of reasons that the public may visit or contribute a review to a TPRS (Sher & Lee, 2009; Hardey, 2010; Gerhards, 2015). Primarily, users turn to TPRS for accurate and honest reviews on products and businesses they are considering engaging, purchasing, or working with (Hardey, 2010). Hardey’s (2010) work on healthcare review sites found that the public was more likely to trust the content on a TPRS than a review featured on the company’s own website. Users trust the third-party information because they believe the company has less ability to manipulate, edit, or feature positive references on these TPRS (Hardey, 2010). Hardey (2010) also found that users were not only more likely to trust them, but they were also more likely to act upon the information found there, particularly when making a purchasing decision. Users were likely to make purchases or visit a company that had more positive reviews than negative ones, reflecting the ability of third-party reviews to move through the hierarchy effects model from building awareness to resulting in a purchase (Craig et al., 2010).

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