

Online Reviews in Romania: Motivations, Perceptions, and the Impact of the J-Shaped Distribution on Consumer Behavior

Ionuț Tănase

Lucia Nicoleta Barbu

Elena Florentina Grejdan

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

ionut.tanase@mk.ase.ro

lucia.barbu@mk.ase.ro

elena.grejdan@yahoo.com

Abstract

Online reviews are an important and powerful element of digital marketing, influencing consumer decisions and the reputation of products and services. This study analyzes the behavior of Romanian consumers in writing online reviews, with a particular focus on the "J shaped distribution", characterized by the preponderance of extreme ratings (5 stars or 1 star) and a limited representation of moderate reviews (2, 3 or 4 stars).

The results provide valuable insights into the motivations and preferences of Romanian consumers, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of online reviews. The study also highlights the role of moderated reviews in strengthening consumer trust and supporting informed decision-making. These conclusions address both the academic literature and digital marketing professionals, providing practical directions for effectively managing online reviews and increasing consumer engagement.

Key words: online reviews, consumer behavior, e-commerce, digital marketing.

J.E.L. classification: M31

1. Introduction

With the evergrowing digital space of e-commerce, online reviews quickly became a one of the biggest elements in the consumer decision-making process, having a significant impact on the perception of the quality of products and services. In this online and non-tangible space, user's reviews act as a credible source of information for consumers. This is also true for Romanian consumers, as online reviews have a major influence on buying behavior, especially in the most popular e-commerce platforms on a national scale.

However, when analyzing the distribution of these reviews, we can observe a very interesting phenomenon, known in the literature as the „J-shaped distribution”. This implies that most of these reviews are on the extremes of the rating spectrum, either very positive reviews, with a 5-star rating, or very negative ones (1 star), while moderate reviews (2,3,4 stars) have a smaller number. This form of distribution rises questions about the motivations behind writing reviews and their relevance as objectively representing consumer experiences.

The goal of this research is to explore the various factors that can influence the Romanian consumer's decision on writing online reviews, with an emphasis on their perceptions and motivations. It also aims to underline the importance of moderate reviews for a realistic and balanced image of various products and services. With the help of a questionnaire, this research analyzes the behaviors and preferences of Romanian consumers, aiming to offer an empirical perspective on this phenomenon and contribute to the digital marketing and consumer behavior literature.

2. Theoretical background

Online reviews are an effective form of electronic consumer-to-consumer communication, having a profound influence on the decision-making process. They are perceived as more authentic than traditional advertising messages, being considered a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, 2003). Consumers turn to online reviews to evaluate the quality of products and services, especially in the e-commerce environment, where there is no direct interaction with the product before purchase. In this context, reviews function not only as sources of information, but also as factors that influence trust and perception of risk associated with a purchase (Park & Lee, 2009).

The "J-shaped distribution" is a widely spread phenomenon in online reviews analysis and is characterized by a preponderance of extremely positive or extremely negative reviews, with a few occurrences of moderate ones. This pattern is explained through consumer's motivations behind those reviews. Research shows that consumers who experience exceptional experiences, whether positive or negative, are more inclined to share them compared with those who experience neutral or average experiences (Anderson, 1998). This fact can be attributed to the desire to reward an extraordinary experience or to express dissatisfaction with an experience perceived as unacceptable. Similarly, studies imply that moderated reviews are less common because they do not provide a compelling or memorable enough story for authors to consider them worthy of publication (Hu et al., 2009). In consequence, their absence can affect the perception of a product or service, creating a distorted image of its quality.

The actual motivations of consumers to publish reviews are influenced by several factors, from extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction, ease of publishing process, the existence of incentives and the desire to help other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Also, their curiosity to see companies' response and direct requests from them can increase the likelihood of a review being published (Sparks & Browning, 2011). The importance of available time and external influences such as social pressure or cultural trends can also play a significant role in this process (Berger, 2014).

Moderated reviews are considered an important piece of for a balanced and genuine perspective of products and services. They provide a realistic image on strengths and weaknesses, reducing the polarization induced by extreme reviews (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). More so, research indicates that moderated reviews help can increase consumer trust by providing a more complete framework for informed decisions (Liu, 2006).

3. Research methodology

Our study was designed to analyze the behavior of Romanian consumers in relation to online reviews, with a specific focus on their "U" shaped distribution. For this purpose, a quantitative approach was used, based on the collection of data through a structured questionnaire. This method allows for a systematic and comparable examination of participants' responses, thus providing a solid basis for interpreting the results. The study used a questionnaire developed based on the specialized literature, including closed questions and a Likert scale to assess consumer attitudes and behaviors. The questions in the questionnaire addressed the following aspects:

- Determinants in the decision to publish a review (eg extreme satisfaction, incentives, company request).
- Likelihood to write reviews for experiences of moderate intensity (eg acceptable but not outstanding experiences).
- Opinions about the relevance of moderated reviews in creating an objective image of products/services.

The questionnaire was distributed online, on social media platforms, chatting servers and forum boards in order to reach a diversified sample, representative of the active online population in Romania.

The sample included 100 respondents from Romania, selected through the convenience sampling method. To ensure data relevance, active online consumers who had made purchases of products or services in the last six months were targeted. Respondents were recruited by distributing the questionnaire on social media platforms and through direct emails addressed to users of e-commerce platforms.

The questionnaire was administered online, using a research platform easily accessible to respondents. The questionnaire was distributed over a period of two weeks, providing sufficient time to obtain a representative sample. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their responses were anonymous and confidential. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Frequency distribution was used to identify the most frequently mentioned factors, and Likert score analysis allowed determining trends in responses regarding the likelihood of leaving reviews in different situations. Correlation tests were also applied to examine the relationships between variables, as well as chi-square analysis to assess significant differences between subgroups. One of the main limitations of the study is the use of convenience sampling, which may introduce a degree of subjectivity and limit the possibility of generalization to the entire population. In addition, being a self-report study, there is a risk of social bias in the participants' responses.

The adopted methodology provides a robust framework for investigating Romanian consumers' behavior regarding online reviews. The analysis of the results will allow for a deeper understanding of their motivations and perceptions, contributing to the specialized literature and to the development of marketing strategies adapted to the local market.

3. Findings

Extreme Dissatisfaction (64%) Extreme dissatisfaction is the most common reason consumers choose to write a review. This finding supports the theory that negative experiences have a stronger impact on consumer behavior than positive ones, a phenomenon known as negativity bias (Anderson, 1998). Disappointed consumers are more likely to post reviews to express their frustration, warn other consumers, or draw the company's attention to problems they have encountered.

Available Time (52%) The second most important factor is time available. This highlights the fact that while the intention to leave a review may exist, consumers are constrained by their time resources. Respondents who cited time as a determining factor are likely to be more inclined to leave reviews when the process is fast and efficient.

Extreme Satisfaction (34%) Extreme satisfaction is another important factor that determines consumer behavior. Similar to extreme dissatisfaction, positive experiences are more likely to generate reviews, especially when the product or service exceeds expectations. Satisfied consumers are more likely to express gratitude or recommend the product to others.

Existence of an incentive (32%) Incentives, such as discounts, loyalty points or rewards, were mentioned by 32% of respondents as a reason for writing reviews. This result suggests that such benefits can encourage active review behavior, especially for consumers who would not normally write reviews.

Ease of leaving a review and product/service quality (30%) Ease of posting and product/service quality were mentioned by 30% of respondents, indicating the importance of user-friendly platforms and well-made products in stimulating review behavior. E-commerce platforms that facilitate review writing (e.g., simple and intuitive interfaces) may benefit from a higher volume of user feedback.

Desire to help other consumers (28%) The altruistic desire to contribute to the consumer community is another important reason. This factor shows that a significant segment of respondents perceive review writing as an action of support for others, thus strengthening the dynamic of consumer-to-consumer communication.

External influences and curiosity (4%) External factors, such as social pressure or curiosity to see how companies respond, were mentioned by a small percentage of respondents (4%). This suggests that such motivations have low relevance for the majority of Romanian consumers.

Company request (6%) Direct requests from companies are rarely perceived as a primary reason for writing reviews. This result indicates that such initiatives need to be combined with other strategies (e.g. offering incentives) to become effective.

The survey results show that most Romanian consumers are not very receptive to requests from companies to leave online reviews. Over a quarter of respondents (26%) said they are “not at all likely” to respond to such a request, and another 20% indicated that they are “unlikely.” This reluctance suggests that direct requests from companies are not convincing enough, especially if they do not offer a clear benefit or are not adapted to the consumer’s personal context.

However, the largest segment of participants (28%) adopted a neutral position, indicating that they could be influenced to respond by well-targeted messages or incentives, such as discounts or symbolic rewards. Only 18% of respondents said they were “likely” to leave a review, and a small percentage (8%) said they were “very likely” to respond. This group, likely made up of loyal or highly satisfied consumers, presents an opportunity for companies to create brand ambassadors through strategies that engage them.

Overall, the results highlight that simply asking for a review is not enough to drive a meaningful response. Companies should personalize their messaging, clearly explain the benefits of reviews, and simplify the process of posting. Using moderate incentives can also turn reluctance into engagement, especially among neutral or unlikely-to-respond groups. These measures can not only increase the number of reviews, but also help diversify them, providing a more balanced picture of consumer experiences.

When asked, on a scale from 1-5, how likely would they write a review for a mediocre experience with a product or service, the results show a clear tendency for consumers to avoid writing reviews for products or services that provide a mediocre or acceptable, but not outstanding experience. The majority of respondents (40%) said they are “not at all likely” to write such a review, reflecting the fact that these experiences are not significant enough to motivate action. In addition, 18% of respondents consider it “unlikely” to provide feedback in these circumstances, reinforcing this tendency to avoid.

A low percentage (8%) indicated a neutral position, suggesting limited motivation or lack of a clear drive to document such experiences. In contrast, 18% of respondents say they are “likely” to write a review for a mediocre experience, and 16% say they are “very likely” to do so. These consumers, although fewer in number, represent a valuable segment that could be encouraged to contribute to diversifying reviews through specific strategies. These results confirm observations in the literature that extremely positive or extremely negative experiences are the ones that most frequently generate reviews, while moderate experiences are often overlooked. This dynamic contributes to the J-shaped distribution of online reviews, where middle-of-the-road reviews (2, 3, or 4 stars) are underrepresented.

To incentivize consumers to leave reviews for moderate experiences, companies should implement tactics that appeal to this less motivated segment. Simplifying the writing process, offering symbolic rewards, or emphasizing the importance of moderate reviews in creating a realistic image can be effective solutions. In conclusion, encouraging consumers to document acceptable but unimpressive experiences could help create a more balanced review base that is more representative of the reality of user experiences.

The majority of respondents (74%) believe that moderated reviews (2, 3, 4 stars) are essential for a more accurate representation of reality, underlining their awareness of their value in highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of a product or service. However, 26% of participants do not consider these reviews necessary, likely influenced by the tendency to prioritize extreme experiences, positive or negative.

This discrepancy between the appreciation of the usefulness of moderated reviews and consumer behavior reflects a common problem in the distribution of online reviews. Although moderated reviews are recognized as important, they are often underrepresented. Companies could address this imbalance through strategies that highlight the role of these reviews in informing other consumers and by offering symbolic benefits to encourage their writing.

In conclusion, there is a majority consensus on the need for moderated reviews, but companies must actively intervene to transform this perception into behavior, thus contributing to diversifying and balancing online reviews.

4. Conclusions

The study highlights the complex dynamics of Romanian consumers’ online review behavior and their relevance in the decision-making process. The results confirm the trends observed in the specialized literature, where extreme reviews (positive or negative) are dominant, and moderate ones are underrepresented, contributing to the typical “J”-shaped distribution of ratings.

A key aspect identified is that extreme experiences, either satisfaction or strong dissatisfaction, represent the main motivations for writing reviews, suggesting that only outstanding experiences lead consumers to actively engage. However, moderate reviews, although recognized by 74% of respondents as important to better reflect reality, are rarely written. This difference between perception and behavior reflects a lack of clear motivation for consumers to document average or acceptable experiences.

When it comes to companies’ requests for reviews, consumers are generally reluctant, with nearly half of them considering it “not at all likely” or “very unlikely” to respond to such initiatives. However, a significant segment of neutral or likely-to-responders could be activated through better-tailored strategies, such as personalizing messages or offering symbolic benefits.

Based on these findings, companies can take a more proactive approach to managing online reviews, focusing on reducing polarization and encouraging moderated reviews. This can be achieved by simplifying the writing process, offering incentives for balanced reviews, and promoting their importance in other consumers’ decision-making. By balancing the distribution of reviews, companies will not only build a more authentic and credible image, but will also help build trust in e-commerce platforms and the online review process.

5. References

- Anderson, E. W., 1998. *Customer Satisfaction and Word of Mouth*. *Journal of Service Research*, 1(1), pp. 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109467059800100102>
- Berger, J., 2014. *Contagious: How to Build Word of Mouth in the Digital Age*. Simon and Schuster.
- Chen, Y., Wang, Q., & Xie, J., 2011. Online Social Interactions: A Natural Experiment on Word of Mouth Versus Observational Learning. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48(2), pp. 238–254. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.48.2.238>
- Chevalier, J. A., & Mayzlin, D., 2006. The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book Reviews. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43(3), pp. 345–354. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.43.3.345>
- Dellarocas, C., 2003. The Digitization of Word of Mouth: Promise and Challenges of Online Feedback Mechanisms. *Management Science*, 49(10), pp. 1407–1424. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.49.10.1407.17308>
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D., 2004. Electronic Word-of-Mouth via Consumer-Opinion Platforms: *What Motivates Consumers to Articulate Themselves on the Internet?* *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), pp. 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.10073>
- Hu, N., Pavlou, P. A., & Zhang, J., 2009. Overcoming the J-Shaped Distribution of Product Reviews. *Communications of the ACM*, 52(10), pp. 144–147. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1562764.1562800>
- Liu, Y., 2006. Word of Mouth for Movies: Its Dynamics and Impact on Box Office Revenue. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(3), pp. 74–89. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.3.74>
- Mudambi, S. M., & Schuff, D., 2010. *What Makes a Helpful Online Review? A Study of Customer Reviews on Amazon.com*. *MIS Quarterly*, 34(1), pp. 185–200. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20721420>
- Park, D.-H., & Lee, J., 2009. eWOM Overload and Its Effect on Consumer Behavioral Intention Depending on Consumer Involvement. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 7(4), pp. 386–398. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2007.11.004>
- Sparks, B. A., & Browning, V., 2011. The Impact of Online Reviews on Hotel Booking Intentions and Perception of Trust. *Tourism Management*, 32(6), pp. 1310–1323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2010.12.011>