What Happens in Vegas Stays on TripAdvisor?

A Theory and Technique to Understand Narrativity in Consumer Reviews

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Review writers play a vital role in consumer behavior. They can persuade consumers with their story. Based on these reviews, consumers decide whether they visit a restaurant, attend a performance, or play a game. Yet, what does a review need to captivate and persuade consumers?

More specifically, what criteria should a captivating story meet? Or why do consumers lose themselves in such stories? The researchers argue that this “transportation” experience depends on the degree of narrativity: what story is being told and how that is being transferred. They theorize that the same elements that apply to novels and other fictional stories also apply to reviews, because reviews can be short stories.

To test their theory, the researchers develop a new computerized technique and apply it to measure texts’ degree of narrativity. For this technique, the researchers develop different dictionaries of words or sequences of words, such as all words that indicate an event (e.g., “arrive”, “car”) or the writer’s feeling (“cried”, “happy”).

STUDY 1

The researchers sample the first 190,461 English reviews in the “things to do in Las Vegas” category posted on TripAdvisor. These reviews are then analyzed on a word level. Consumers can rate TripAdvisor reviews on helpfulness. With the new computerized
technique, the relationship between different combinations of words and the helpfulness of the review becomes visible.

A story gives consumers insight into what its writer feels and thinks. Consumers get a glimpse into the writer’s mental state. The more a review shows its writer’s emotional and rational state-of-mind, the more helpfulness increases.

The researchers also look at the use of words that tell us something about the place the review is about. Additionally, they focus on the sequence of events: an indication of where a story is going. The more a review describes what is to be seen and chronicles and narrates the events, the more helpfulness increases.

With the computerized technique, the researchers also check per review how many positive and negative emotion words it contains and in which sentence. This analysis tests the effect of the emotional line in stories. If the storyline is progressive, events continuously improve for the writer. Yet, a story can also go downhill or remain stable. The emotional storyline can also change: what started out as a fun experience can turn into a negative experience or vice versa. Reviews, which have emotional transitions in their storyline, are rated as more helpful than reviews that remain progressive, regressive, or stable throughout.

The researchers look furthermore at the location of the climax: the most dramatic moment of the story. Stories can be told chronologically. The climax is then toward the end. However, stories can also open with the climax and stimulate consumers to find out what happened. Reviews, which have their climax at the beginning, are rated as more helpful than reviews which have their climax toward the end.

**STUDY 2 AND 3**
In study 2, 304 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers rate reviews. Each participant sees ten reviews. After reading each review, they indicate to what extent it is transporting and helpful. The more transporting the review, the more it is helpful. Here too it turns out that the more the narrative elements are present, the more the reviews are rated transporting and helpful.

In Study 3, 156 students read one of two reviews about a trip to Agra, India and then answer questions about that review. As before, the participants indicate to what extent the review is transporting. They also indicate to what extent they find the review helpful, how much they like the review, and how much they want to travel to Agra. Therefore, the researchers also find out how persuasive each review is.

Thanks to the study design, the researchers gain even more insight into which of the two climax locations works best. The review that opens with the climax is more transporting, helpful, and liked. The intention to travel to Agra is also greater for that review than for the chronological review.

The researchers conclude: “Captivating reviews tell who did what, where, when, and why, but with emotional transitions and climaxes at the beginning they are clearly more transporting and persuasive than without.”

**IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMERS AND PROFESSIONALS**

This research is important for consumers, social media influencers, professional reviewers, software developers, event managers, advertisers, and social networking managers. The results show that what story is being told as well as how it is being transferred affect consumers. If consumers are aware of this influence, they can make more conscious choices. Social media influencers and professional reviewers now know that they are better
off investing in creative writing or storytelling courses than choosing to analyze experiences very factually. Software developers can structure platforms in ways that make writing transporting, helpful, persuasive reviews as easy as possible. Event managers of attractions, hotels, restaurants, tours and other activities can structure their customer experience likewise. Additionally, the computerized technique can help predict which reviews will score high on helpfulness and thus notify advertisers or social network managers of their future impact.

In the words of the researchers, “We explore an extensive range of reviews, ranging from minimal stories to brighter manifestations of the same narrative light. Our findings demonstrate that narrativity should be thought of as a continuum, a dimmer switch as it were, rather than an on/off switch of story versus not, as previous research has indicated.”

**MEDIA ENQUIRIES**

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The full academic article is available at [https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy067](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucy067).