



**Differences and special features of online compared to offline
recommendations**

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This Independent study has been approved to be partial fulfillment of the requirements for Degree of Master in Business Administration International Program.

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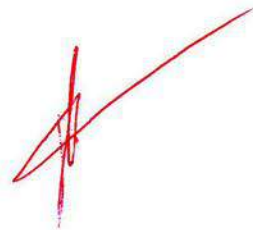
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Abstract

The following work gives an overview of the differences and peculiarities of the online and offline recommendations and answers the question which form is more effective. Due to today's sensory overload, classic advertising media are no longer effective. Instead, recommendations are increasingly influencing consumer behaviour. Therefore the central aspects of both types of recommendation were worked out by means of an intensive literature search in combination with the consideration of several studies. In addition, the motives for selecting the respective form as well as their credibility were examined. While there are large differences in the general characteristics and credibility, a large overlap was found in the motives. Online recommendations are more consistent, searchable and, above all, can be disseminated more quickly than offline recommendations. In contrast, offline recommendations are more direct and personal and therefore more credible than online recommendations. The credibility of a recommendation is the central trigger for a purchase decision. In general, recommendations are made mainly for reasons of satisfaction/discontent, self-portrayal and need for communication, as well as altruism. In some cases, especially with online recommendations, a provider-initiated stimulation also plays a major role.

Keywords: Recommendations, Online-Marketing, Word-of-Mouth



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1 Introduction

1.1 Relevance of the recommendation for the marketing industry

The fact that there are numerous possibilities and places to place advertising means that advertising is omnipresent. Nobody seems to be able to avoid advertising any more. Whether you are at home in your own four walls or on the road in the city is irrelevant. At home there are, among other things, the possibilities to get in touch with advertising in the form of TV advertising, advertisements in magazines or on websites. The latter has also been a constant companion on the road for some years now, as smartphones are becoming more and more popular and the number of users is constantly increasing. While in 2011 an average of 17% of website users also accessed the content with their smartphone, according to a study by Allensbach computer and technology analysts in 2013 the figure had already risen to 25% (Schneller 2013, p. 12). In addition, there are the classic advertising possibilities in the form of posters or billboards to name a few.

It is estimated that every consumer is confronted with up to 5,000 advertising messages per day in these different ways, which would mean that every ninth minute of one's life is spent on advertising, consciously or unconsciously (Langner 2009, p. 13). This omnipresence of advertising is of course associated with high costs and in Germany alone 26.7 billion euros were spent on advertising messages in 2013 (Nielsen Media Research 2014).

Despite or precisely because of this downright flood of advertising messages, classic advertising is no longer being successfully received by consumers. Expenditures in the millions as well as the occupation with world stars are sometimes of little use if consumers find advertising annoying and ignore it or avoid it (Fink 2013, p. 1). An example of this is the 90 million euro campaign of the electricity company Eon, which advertised its product "MixPower" with the commercial "Mix it, Baby" with Arnold Schwarzenegger, for which less than a thousand consumers decided in the end (Langner 2009, p. 14). This is not an isolated case and billions of euros are wasted every year. Not least because of the enormous sums involved, much research is being done in the marketing sector.

Over many years and in a large number of papers, the importance of recommendations has been worked out and a large majority agree that recommendations are particularly effective and efficient (McKenna 1991, p. 89; Helm 2000, p. 3; Friedrich 2004, p. 8; Meffert/Bruhn 2006, p. 134f.).

1.2 Questions and objectives of the study

Recommendations have also found their way into the Internet as technology advances. While some papers only refer to offline recommendations, others deal exclusively with online recommendations. Some papers, on the other hand, combine online recommendation and offline recommendation to form a construct and consider the recommendation as a whole.

But what are the differences between online recommendations and offline recommendations? What distinguishes one from the other and enables this categorization? Are online referrals really more effective at attracting new customers when they are expected to have a greater reach?

The aim of the study is to answer these questions by investigating characteristics and motives.

1.3 Procedure of the examination

The structure of the study is based on the identified questions and the objectives and is divided into four chapters. After the introduction in Chapter 1, the second chapter deals with the definition of the term (Section 2.1) and explains the general characteristics of the recommendation (Sections 2.2 to 2.5).

In Chapter 3, online and offline recommendations are directly compared in terms of characteristics (Section 3.1), motives (Section 3.2) and credibility (Section 3.3).

Chapter 4 concludes the study with a summary of the results (Section 4.1) and the reasoning (Section 4.2).

2 Recommendation

2.2 Definition

Although there is agreement in their meaning and effectiveness both for companies and consumers, there are a large number of different definitions of recommendation in the literature. Even though these differences may seem minor at first glance, a closer look reveals different understandings.

While Arndt defines recommendation as "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale" (Arndt 1967, p. 195), Helm describes recommendation as "negative, neutral or positive reporting by a customer about the objective and/or subjective perceived characteristics of a provider's service or of the provider itself in the private and/or business environment of the customer" (Helm 2000, p. 7). On the one hand it is noticeable that Helm designates the sender of the recommendation as the customer and on the other hand the recommendation can be positive, negative or even neutral. Arndt, on the other hand, assumes that the sender of the recommendation is not a customer. In addition, according to Arndt's definition, the recommendation is made verbally, while the definition of helmet does not deal more precisely with the type of transmission. In order to demonstrate this variety of the definitions and thus the possibility these differently to understand, follows now a further definition, which refers besides explicitly to on-line further-recommendation. Accordingly, Hennig-Thurau et al. define recommendation as "any positive or negative statement by potential, actual, or former customer about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). With this definition, it is striking that the sender of the recommendation can be both a customer and a non-customer.

Since a definition is required for the further course and the investigations, which refers both to online recommendations and offline recommendations and the majority of the literature deals with positive recommendations, in this work recommendation is defined as "the personal, verbal or written transmission of the positive assessment of a company, an employee, a brand, a product or a service to a person or group of persons with the aim of bringing about psychological and behavioural effects in the recipients of the assessment with regard to the object being assessed and/or the sender" (Markert 2008, p. 14).

2.3 Effectiveness of the recommendation

As mentioned at the beginning, referrals are particularly effective. This is based on the fact that referrals are superior to classic advertising in terms of interactivity, liveliness and credibility, as Figure 1 illustrates.

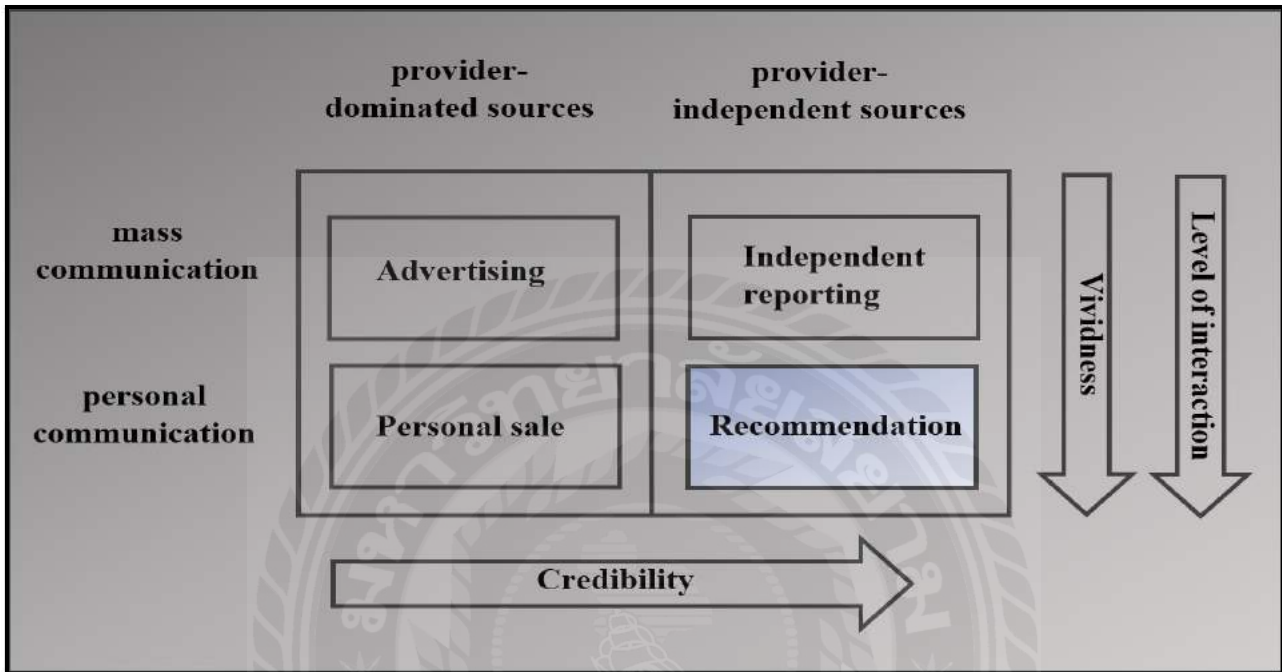


Fig. 1: Reasons for the effectiveness of recommendation

Source: According to Garnefeld 2008, p. 2.

Here the messages were assigned to either mass or personal communication and classified as a vendor-dominated or a vendor-independent source.

As you can see, the more personal and independent a message is, the more interactive, lively and credible it becomes. In fact, classical advertisements are not interactive, because mass communication only conveys a uniform message to which the recipient cannot react, in the form of specific questions, for example, what is possible at any time in personal communication (Reichelt 2013, p. 2). Since credibility plays an essential role, especially in the transfer of information and decision-making, Section 2.3 deals with this in more detail.

In addition to the effectiveness of the recommendation, its efficiency must also be taken into account. Recommendations are particularly efficient because, from the consumer's point of view, they greatly reduce the effort involved in searching for information and making decisions through the targeted transmission of purchase-relevant information (Markert 2008, p. 5) and, from the compa-

ny's point of view, they are inexpensive because little has to be invested in advertising measures (McConnell/Huba 2007, p. VII).

2.4 Relevance of credibility

Credibility is the main reason why referrals are more effective than traditional advertising. A study by Nielsen Media (Figure 2) also confirms that credibility is generally low among provider-dominated sources.

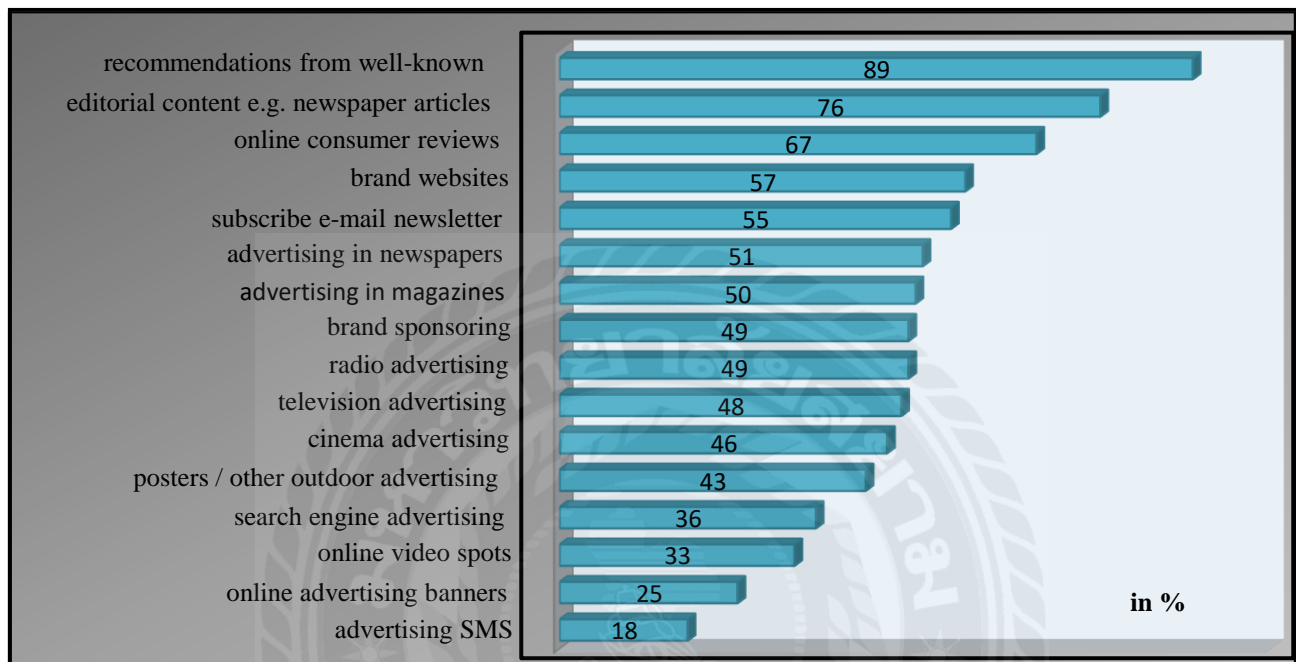


Fig. 2: Trust in different forms of advertising in Germany

Source: According to Nielsen Media 2009, S. 3.

As can be clearly seen, vendor-independent sources such as recommendations from acquaintances, editorial content and online consumer ratings were rated as highly credible. While 89% of the 502 respondents trust the recommendations of acquaintances, only 48% trust the content of television advertisements.

Independent sources are more credible because, unlike provider-dominated sources, no commercial interests are attributed to them (Howard/Sheth 1969, p. 369). Thus one expects falsified information from classical advertising measures, since enterprises communicate exclusively positive characteristics to the outside (Reichelt 2013, p. 2). From acquaintances one expects truthful information, no matter whether it is positive or negative towards a provider or a product, because it is not on the payroll of the respective company (Langner 2009, p. 16f). Therefore, recommendations are more effective than classical advertising.

2.5 Basic motives

There are many reasons that motivate someone to make recommendations. One could, like Lovett, Peres and Shachar (2013, p. 429), classify these individual motives in categories such as "social, emotional and functional drivers". In the following, those are listed that are mentioned most frequently in the literature and are therefore of particular importance, without, however, being assigned to a specific category:

- Satisfaction: Recommendation as an expression of one's own satisfaction with a product or service.
- Self-elevation, self-affirmation: This includes aspects such as presenting oneself as an expert through competences perceived by oneself or signaling a certain social status.
- Altruism: This means helping others to find information and make decisions.
- Need for communication: The need to have a conversation in order to exchange thoughts and opinions.
- Involvement: The personal interest or commitment to intensively deal with a product or service.
- Supplier-initiated stimulation: Recommendation based on the expectation of a premium from the supplier of the product or service.

These motives are the object of investigation in Section 3.2.

But first the comparison of online recommendation and offline recommendation with regard to the characteristics follows.

3 Comparison of online and offline recommendation

3.2 Attributes

3.2.1 Transmission of information

The essential differences between online and offline recommendations are already noticeable in their form. Offline recommendation takes the form of direct and oral communication in person between a sender and a recipient (Arndt 1967, p. 3). In contrast, online recommendation takes the form of an indirect and predominantly written expression of opinion on the Internet and usually without a specific addressee (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). Offline recommendation thus offers a higher degree of interactivity, since questions can be asked and answered immediately at any time within the communication (Dressler 2008, p. 5), whereas the recipient of an online recommendation may not receive an immediate answer to his question because the sender is not online and the recipient has to wait until the sender reacts to it. Lovett, Peres and Shachar call this phenomenon synchronicity. Accordingly, offline recommendations, in contrast to online recommendations, take place synchronously (Lovett/Peres/Shachar 2013, p. 430) and are characterized by greater flexibility (Kroeber-Riel/Weinberg 2003, p. 511). In addition, oral communication allows a change in the intensity of the recommendation through gestures and facial expressions, which is not possible with written communication (Markert 2008, p. 11). This makes communication more lively, more authentic and thus more convincing (Garnefeld 2008, p. 2). Online communication tries to counteract this with emoticons (emotion + icon) such as smileys (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 19), but this is rather questionable, since one cannot be sure whether the sender of a smiley actually feels as indicated at the moment.

Offline referral is more interactive and lively than online referral, but it is more short-lived. It exists practically only at the moment it is pronounced. Online recommendation is characterised by its longevity, because it is stored on the Internet for an indefinite period of time from the time it is put out to tender and could therefore be accessed even years later (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p. 312). The following figure provides an example of the longevity of online recommendations.



Fig. 3: Customer reviews of Beats Headphones

Source: Amazon 2018.

As you can see, the customer reviews were created in 2014 and are still available after several years in 2018. As a result, online recommendations are also less susceptible to deviations, since the statements can be read word for word, while offline recommendations can lead to slight changes in the statement.

Another special feature of online recommendations is their targeted searchability. This means that anyone can search the Internet at any time for customer reviews and include them in their purchase decision (Lis/Korchmar 2013, p. 2). In relation to the above example with the Beats Headphones, this would mean that when recommending a product offline, you would first have to meet someone who can give you information about the product. When and where this takes place would probably be more or less left to chance. The online recommendation, however, makes it possible to obtain information at the time you want it.

3.2.2 Sender and receiver group and their identity

Significant differences are not only noticeable in the transmission of information, there are also differences with regard to the senders and recipients of online and offline recommendations.

While offline recommendations are aimed at a close social environment such as friends and acquaintances (Reichelt 2013, p. 3), there is no social bond between the sender and recipient of an

online recommendation (Lis/Korchmar 2013, p. 2). A social bond between the sender and recipient of an online recommendation is nevertheless possible and conceivable, since the Internet enables communication between friends and acquaintances through social networks such as Facebook or MySpace or online communities (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p. 311). This has two different effects on the reach of the respective recommendation. Offline recommendations reach only a limited circle of people (Lis/Korchmar 2013, p. 12) because they are exchanged in a narrow social environment and are also bound to a specific location. In contrast, online recommendations can reach an unlimited circle of people, since they are generally accessible to everyone and are not bound to one place by the possibilities of the Internet (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 24). Accordingly, it can be said that online recommendations spread much faster than offline recommendations because the possibilities of the Internet allow this (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 132; Langner 2009, p. 33). Figure 4 shows an example of the distribution of online and offline recommendations.

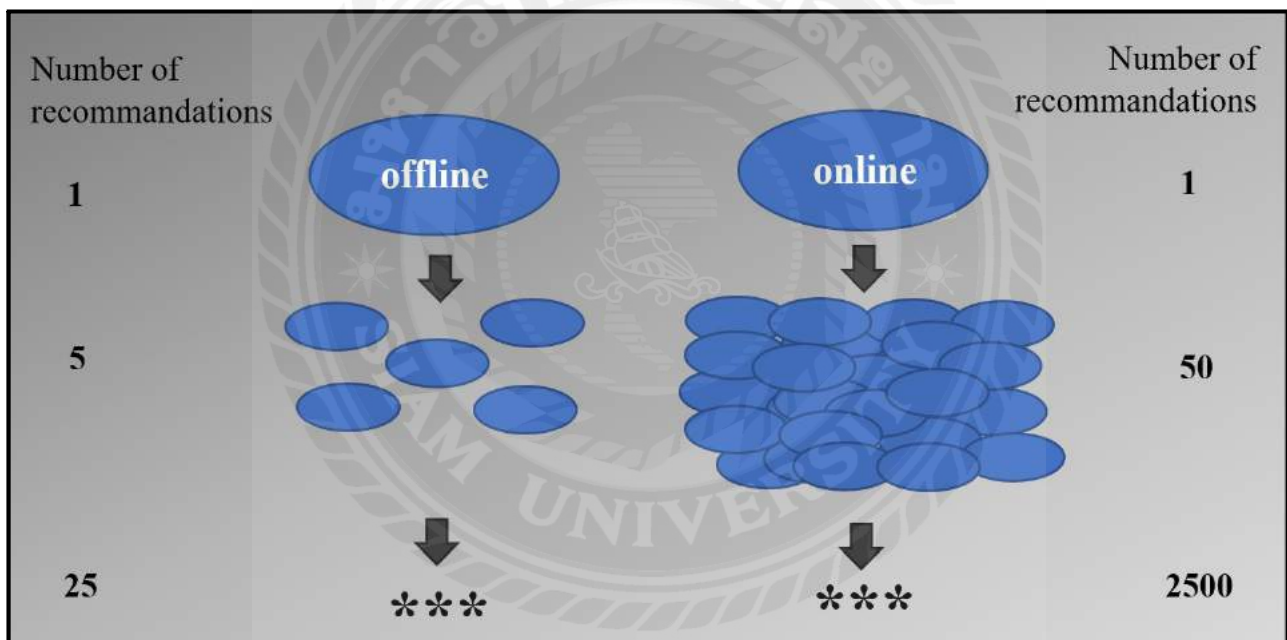


Fig. 4: Dissemination of recommendations

Source: According to Langner 2009, S. 16.

For the offline recommendation, let us assume that one person recommends a product or service to five people and in turn passes it on to five more people in each case. Thus the recommendation in the third step would already have reached 25 people. If you follow this path, there would already be 125 people in the next level (Langner 2009, p. 15).

Since online recommendation can reach an unlimited circle of people through the possibilities of the Internet, we assume that the recommendation of one person is read by 50 people. If these 50 per-

sons in turn tell 50 other persons about it, then the recommendation would have reached 2500 persons in the third stage. Expressed in numbers, the enormous difference in the range of the two types of recommendation becomes clear. One should keep in mind that the offline recommendation takes several days and the online recommendation probably only takes a few hours.

Another special feature of the online recommendation, which is deprived of the offline recommendation, is the possibility of anonymity. Because unlike a direct face-to-face conversation, it is unclear with whom one communicates on the Internet. The sender of a message does not have to reveal his or her identity if he or she does not wish to do so. This enables many people to overcome communication barriers that are discriminated against in the real world, for example because of a disability or their origin (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 19). In this sense, one could assume a completely different identity or only use a simple pseudonym, as in Figure 5.

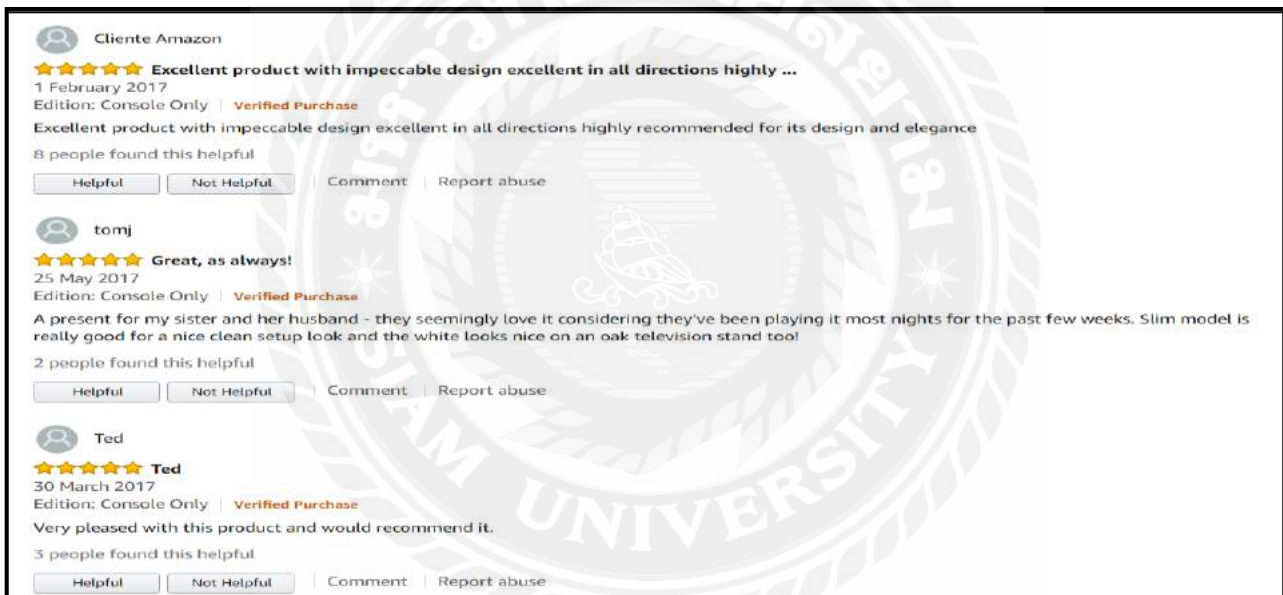


Fig. 5: Customer reviews of Playstation 4

Source: Amazon 2018.

3.3 Motives

3.3.1 Satisfaction

Recommendation based on satisfaction with a product, service or provider takes place regularly both online and offline. It has been proven in numerous studies that satisfaction is the essential prerequisite for a recommendation (Brown et al. 2005, p. 124; Anderson 1998, p. 6). In a study by

Lovett, Peres and Shachar (2013, p. 439), however, they attribute greater importance to satisfaction with offline recommendations than to online recommendations. They argue that an offline referral in which face-to-face conversation takes place is more personal and intimate, allowing participants to communicate emotions such as satisfaction better (Lovett/Peres/Shachar 2013, p. 439).

3.3.2 Self-expression

The motive of self-portrayal is increasingly present in the online recommendation than in the offline recommendation. While Gscheidle and Fisch (2007, p. 400) name the urge to self-portrayal particularly among young people, Zerfaß and Bogosyan (2007, p. 6) identified the motif predominantly among bloggers. In contrast to offline recommendations, online recommendations do not for the most part know who is the sender and who is the recipient. Thus, the social status of both parties is unknown. Online recommendations can signal a certain status, for example one could signal a high social status not only by consuming luxury goods, but also by just reporting something about it (Lovett/Peres/Shachar 2013, p. 429). Online recommendations are also used to present oneself as an expert to the public and to get self-confidence. If a recipient finds the sender's recommendation helpful in his or her purchase decision and also expresses this feeling, the sender feels confirmed in his or her self-perception as an expert (Garnefeld 2008, p. 18). Due to the anonymity on the Internet, one tries to distinguish oneself from the crowd in this way.

3.3.3 Altruism

The need for assistance is a central motive for both online recommendations and offline recommendations. It can be the case that you want to do your fellow human beings a completely selfless favor and help them make their decisions (Wangenheim 2003, p. 88f.). But it can also be the case that one helps one's fellow human beings by recommending others and in return expects immaterial consideration in the form of gratitude and recognition (Markert 2008, p. 78).

3.3.4 Need for communication

The need to communicate with other people is an important reason, especially for passing on online recommendations. The Internet offers numerous opportunities for communities to exchange information and opinions (Markert 2008, p. 3). As a result, hardly any Internet-savvy person books a trip without first reading comments about the destination on the Internet (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 13).

For example, Lis and Korchmar (2013, p. 16) confirm that the need for social interaction is a decisive motivation for using online recommendations in social networks such as Facebook. The forwarding of successful advertising spots by e-mail is also popular (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 21).

3.3.5 Involvement

Personal interest in a product or service also leads to a recommendation (Wangenheim 2003, p. 93). Persons who are highly involved in a product or service attach great importance to it and regard its recommendation as important (Garnefeld 2008, p. 98). The communication possibilities on the Internet tempt these people to exchange opinions in communities, as it is easier to meet like-minded people here (Reichelt 2013, p. 124). In addition, there are two further reasons that advocate the exchange of opinions between persons involved on the Internet. While newcomers to the communities benefit from the experience and knowledge of the experts, experts can gain respect and influence as a result (Algesheimer 2004, p. 415).

3.3.6 Provider-initiated stimulation

Certainly there are also people who recommend a product to others because they hope that it will bring them material benefits or even because they are encouraged to do so by providers. Wirtz and Chew (2002, p. 151) prove that the higher the premium, the more likely and more positive the recommendation is. Over the years, online referrals have increasingly become the focus of attention in this area (Markert 2008, p. 52). Especially in rating portals, a high influence of premiums on the frequency of recommendations was observed (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 48). This is due to the possibility of anonymity on the Internet, because even if the recipient suspects a material incentive behind the sender's recommendation, this usually has no serious consequences for the sender. However, this is not the case with offline recommendations, where the sender and the recipient are predominantly well acquainted with each other. In this case, it is conceivable that the sender is less interested in a bonus because he fears social sanctions due to his selfish behaviour and does not want to be perceived by the recipient as an untrustworthy and purchased person (Helm 2000, p. 332; Ryu/Feick 2007, p. 85; Schüller 2008, p. 102).

3.4 Credibility

Credibility is the essential factor, which is why recommendations are effective. As mentioned earlier (Section 2.3), recommendations are considered highly credible because they come from independent sources (Langner 2009, p. 16f.). According to a representative survey by Nielsen Media (2009, p. 3), offline recommendations are the most credible source. According to the survey, 89% of respondents consider offline recommendations to be credible, while only 67% of respondents rate online recommendations as credible. Kilian and Langner (2010, p. 25) also confirm the statement that recommendations from friends or acquaintances are the most credible. But there are also opportunities on the Internet to receive recommendations from friends or acquaintances, namely on social networks such as Facebook or Twitter to name but a few (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p. 312). However, it should be noted that the majority of recommendations on the Internet generally come from unknown authors (Reichelt 2013, p. 90). It is therefore difficult to correctly assess the intentions and credibility of the sender of a recommendation (Steffes/Burgee 2009, p. 43). In addition, anonymous contributions on the Internet are always at risk of manipulation and open up scope for deception (Reichelt 2013, p. 101f.), since it is not possible for normal users to trace the station, a company employee could hide behind an alleged consumer (Lis/Korchmar 2013, p. 19). Since there are numerous opportunities to get in touch with unknown transmitters of recommendations, there is a very high probability that bad experiences will also be made with them (Zhu/Zhang 2010, p. 137). As Cheema and Papatla (2010, p. 982) prove in a survey, online sources can become less significant over time.

Many authors agree, for example, that online recommendations do not have the same credibility as offline recommendations because the information on the Internet cannot be trusted without hesitation (Shang et al. 2006, p. 412; Henry 2005, p. 356).

4 Conclusion

4.2 Summary of results

On the basis of the findings obtained, it can be said that there are not only differences but also similarities between online and offline recommendations. The clearest differences are to be found on the communication level. This starts with the transmission of information. While offline recommendations are made orally, in person and in a close social environment (Arndt 1967, p. 3; Reichelt 2013, p. 3), online recommendations are made in writing, indirectly and not to a specific person (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). Through personal communication, offline recommendations are more lively, more interactive and therefore run more synchronously than online recommendations (Markert 2008, p. 11; Lovett/Peres/Shachar 2013, p. 430), but spread more slowly (Langner 2009, p. 33). The most significant differences at the communication level, however, are the anonymity and storability of the online recommendation (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 19; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010, p. 312).

With regard to the motives of online and offline recommendation, there are many overlaps, they are basically almost identical. Only the motives of self-portrayal and provider-initiated stimulation predominate in online recommendations. On the Internet, people tend to present themselves because they want to stand out from the crowd and symbolize a certain status (Lovett/Peres/Shachar 2013, p. 429). This is not necessary in offline recommendations because you can see your counterpart. The motive to receive a bonus for recommending a person to another dominates in online recommendations, since fewer consequences of social sanctions are feared if the motive is revealed than in offline recommendations (Helm 2000, p. 332; Ryu/Feick 2007, p. 85; Schüller 2008, p. 102).

A key difference between online recommendations and offline recommendations is their credibility. Offline recommendations are consistently attributed more credibility than online recommendations both in the literature and in numerous studies (Kilian/Langner 2010, p. 25; Shang et al. 2006, p. 412; Henry 2005, p. 356; Lis/Korchmar 2013, p. 19; Nielsen Media 2009, p. 3).

4.3 Reasoning

In conclusion, despite the superiority of offline referral in terms of credibility, online referral plays a very significant role in the marketing industry. In the age of the Internet, it is simply a matter of obtaining information on the Internet. Even if not every sender can be trusted with a recommendation, obtaining different opinions has many advantages and can be a great help in d



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