Societal Influences of Manipulating Customers by Faking Reviews in the Movie Industry

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Going to a movie is one of the most common leisure activities for the current society. The population statistics analysis for the United States has shown that the second most popular activity for both women and men is to attend a movie (Bogue, Anderton, & Barrett, 2010, p. 437). With the existence of the Internet, people are able to learn about the new releases right after the movie trailers come out and can even read about what others' thoughts are before seeing the show in person. People are able to predict their opinions on a movie based on how similar audiences view this work. According to a 2018 survey of US adults, 10 percent of them always read a movie review before going to the movies, and approximately 20 percent said that they read such reviews most of the time (Watson, 2019). Therefore, a large number of American adults frequently rely on online movie reviews to help them decide which movie to see, or whether they should watch a certain movie. Easy access to the internet has allowed people to obtain information quickly; however, new issues may arise with its wide use. The abusive use of technology in manipulating consumer activities is becoming more and more common; therefore, discussions of the issues should be taken into consideration. Film reviews' credibility and objectivity will be important factors influencing social trust and overall market fairness in the movie industry. This paper will talk about the historical development of reviews in the movie industry and how the environment of reviews has been impeded by the inappropriate and selfish usage of technology. In order to further analyze the problems and possible solutions of the technology advance concerning different groups of people, this paper will use the well-known

Science, Technology, and Society theory called Social Construction of Technology to help explain its successes and failure.

Transformation of Movie Reviewing History

Decades ago, when technology was less mature, the film industry operated differently from nowadays. In order to advertise, the movie production team might hang posters all over the city, praying that pedestrians would look at the posters and realize that a new show has just come out. This advertising approach was generally not very efficient. Another way people were able to get to know a new leased movie was by hearing from someone else, which is also called word-of-mouth information. Word-of-mouth information could be extremely influential because aside from objective characteristics of the movies, such as genres, plots, and leading actors/actresses, people often made their decisions about whether to see a movie based on their friends' and family's opinions. When a newly released film received some attention and word of mouth spread among a community, more people might choose to check out the movie. Therefore, one strategy which movie companies used to boost their ticket sales was to keep their films in theatres as long as possible, hoping audiences would eventually learn about the movie and decide to go watch it. There were also a number of professional critics that were well-known across the country, who wrote reviews for movies. These professional critics generally post on newspapers that paid them for writing the specific section on the newspapers. Each newspaper might only buy articles from a few specific critics so if someone wanted to see reviews from a large number of critics, the person had to go and buy newspapers from different companies to receive more information.

There was no one aggregated source of critics reviews back in the time. However, things have changed. With the internet, there are many different marketing strategies for movie studios. For example, they can take advantage of new technologies in their marketing strategies, such as pop-up banners and teaser videos on different websites. Most importantly, the old-style, physical word-of-mouth method has gone electronic, for reviews from both regular audiences and professional critics. Because a large number of audiences depend on those ratings and reviews to decide whether to see the movie, one thing that a lot of movie production teams aim to do is to establish a good reputation during its opening weekend, specifically the online ratings and reviews. Rotten Tomatoes is a website that aggregates critics' reviews for movies and TV shows, generating a score to indicate the overall performance. Since its 2000 launch, millions of people have been using Rotten Tomatoes to find movie reviews(Wilkinson, 2018). There is no need for buying different newspapers to read more information from different professional evaluators and therefore people can easily choose to read on specific critics from all over the world with focuses and styles of writings that are most consistent with their own interests on online review websites such as Roger Ebert, PopMatters, and IMDb. With a few simple clicks, the reviews will be displayed on the screens of laptops, tablets, or handphones. Additionally, some websites are made for the public to comment on films, which allow people to learn information from a wide range of audiences, who may discuss the films in a simpler and more straightforward way. These aggregated sources of information even contain metadata about genres, leading actors/actresses, directors, and so on, which greatly help audiences in learning about the coming up events around the world and choosing the best movie they want.

Additionally, these internet reviews carry a greater impact on consumers' behaviors than consumers themselves may realize. According to a research study done by Cone, 89 percent of customers confirmed their purchase decision after reading positive reviews, and approximately 80 percent of customers reversed their decisions after reading negative reviews (Komornicki, 2011). Therefore, as soon as these reviews reach the internet, the future box office takings of the films can be greatly impacted. Because of the availability of reviews on the internet, movies have received substantially more attention than in the past, within the same length of time; at the same time, audiences are able to make their decisions based on various sources of opinions in a convenient way.

Consumers choose to believe online reviews from either other consumers or some professional critics, since they trust that the reviews are based on the reviewers' own feelings, without biased sentiments or intentions. However, this is not always the case, and "tricks" are applied to manipulate customers' activities increasingly. Back in the days when reviews were posted on newspapers and each review was hand-written or typed by individuals, it was quite hard to produce fake reviews, especially to produce a lot of them. However, the action is possible now because of the new technology. The new technology enables people to produce a massive number of fake reviews and ratings without manual efforts. The original purpose of online reviews is to help consumers make decisions about an unobserved product; however, their usefulness has been impeded by the existence of fake reviews, or promotional advertisements strategically placed by the production company itself (Mayzlin, Dover, & Chevalier 2014).

Social Construction of Technology

The Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) is an STS framework that analyzes the connections of the technology's relevant social groups with its social contexts and evaluates the technology's success or failure. To understand how the framework is placed in the context of online movie reviews, it is important to list all the relevant social groups (Figure 1). As mentioned above, the movie review websites have three main relevant social groups: people who write the reviews, including professional critics and consumers; review readers, mostly composed by consumers; and the movie companies and production teams. Two more relevant social groups that may come into sight are online review platform developers and the government.

When using SCOT to analyze a technological artifact, it is also critical to understand the interpretive flexibility of technology in its context. Interpretive flexibility denotes the different meanings that can be attached to the same technological artifacts, including the usefulness and relevance of the technology to the relevant social groups (Meyer & Schulz-Schaeffer, 2006). For people who read the reviewing websites, in other words, the customers of the movie industry, online reviews are useful and applicable to them because based on the comments from others, they are able to filter out films they are not interested in and make better buying decisions by reading reviews beforehand. For professional critics, it is their job to write reviews for these online websites. Moreover, for production companies such as Hollywood and Marvel, movie reviews serve as a great marketing strategy aid since when the reviews are manipulated by software, the companies can intentionally produce reviews that positively influence the box

office or negatively impact their competitors. The last social groups represent firms like Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb, which have the movie review system as their focus on the company's core business. When modeling these problems with SCOT, it becomes clear that online reviews and related technology are fairly common in people's daily lives; however, there have not been many discussions about the issues created by this technology, and no "perfect" solution has been proposed. In Figure 1, problems each relevant social group may see and their connections have been listed. Some of the problems from different social groups are connected and the problems may become even more serious if not enough caution is present.
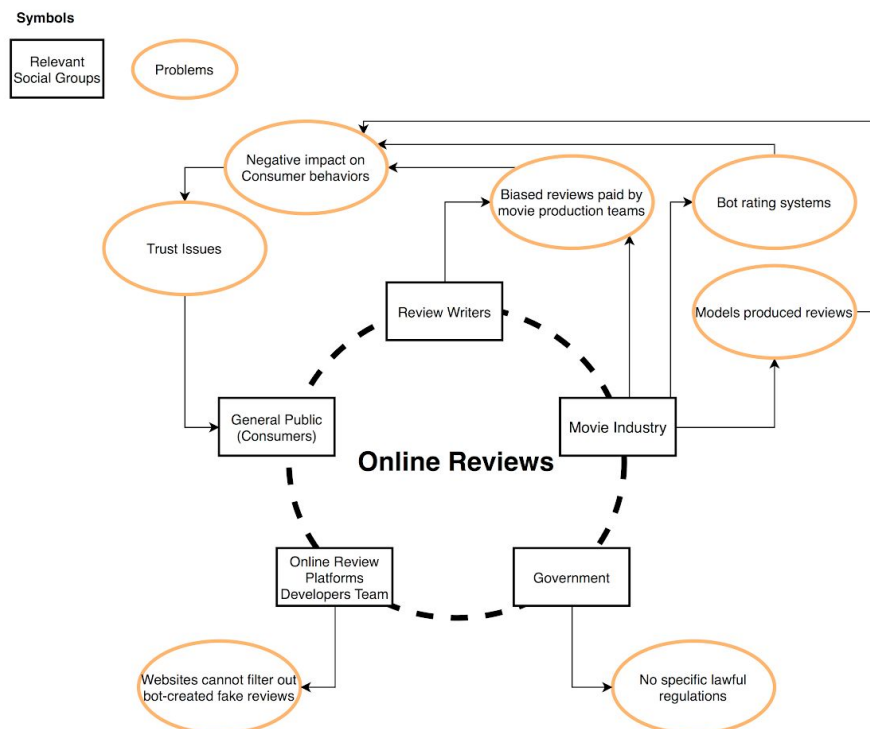
Societal Impacts Brought by Abusive Use of Technology

Technology, specifically speaking of the online reviews system, has offered us great convenience in the process of deciding whether to watch a certain film; however, there are issues when the

technology is being abused like Figure 1 has listed out. The phenomena mentioned below are specific examples of corrupt activities that undermine the credibility of the movie industry and thus lead to social distrust. For example, professional critics may write biased reviews that are favorable for a film instead of expressing their own feelings in a newspaper or on critics' websites, because they are paid by the production company. Alternatively, certain companies may use bot programs that repeatedly rate movies on online review sites, such as IMDb, so the overall average score for a movie will increase significantly and make the movie to the top list of trending films. Furthermore, more advanced bot technologies use machine-learning algorithms and Natural Language Processing techniques to develop models that can create fake reviews, which resemble those of a regular audience; as a result, when other consumers look at the reviews for a movie, they will be deceived by what they can see without realizing. The overall sentiments within the reviews will be shifted favorably towards the film because of the artificial comments. In a worse situation, companies hire people or use bots to criticize competing movies, in order to gain more publicity and win the market, creating ethical issues and possibly breaking the laws. All these are common methods that have been used by some movie production companies to promote their own movies and maneuver consumers' behaviors without customers noticing, which are problematic financial practices.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the manipulation of consumers' behaviors without their consent leads to trust issues among society. When consumers make purchase decisions on movie tickets because of the positive reviews or the high ratings, they will feel disappointed and deceived after watching the film. Consumers will begin to question the credibility of those reviewing websites

and wonder why they continue to use an unreliable source as their purchasing guide. What is worse is that there are no specific and well-defined regulations by the authority to assist in solving the problems, which further diminish the trust between customers and reviews present online. This social distrust will lead to the rejection of technology in the context of film reviews. Additionally, losing trust in online review platforms for movies may lead to a discussion of the overall online review system, creating a problem that extends past the movie market.

Ethical Theories Discussion

Besides the societal problems discussed above using the SCOT framework, the usage of online review systems in the movie industry should also be discussed using ethical theories. The two main ethical discussions that can be applied to this situation are honesty ethics and deontological ethics.

Primarily, the inappropriate usage of technology in promoting movies with online reviews is a violation of the root of ethics: being honest. Honesty, a topic dated back to ancient times, is one of the most important requirements of morality. It represents the behaviors of truthfulness, which is the opposite of lies and deception (Kotlova, 2019). Starting from a young age, people may be taught by parents or teachers about the essentiality of always telling the truth and it has become a common-sense that honesty is a fundamental rule that everyone should follow. Some people may argue that there is a range of exceptions for dishonesty, called "white lies". This argument is valid for the reason that sometimes the truth hurts and telling a petty lie will actually be beneficial for social interactions or protect someone else's feelings (Argo & Shiv, 2012). In this

case, lying is not as evil as what its normal definition has intended to show. However, when discussing online review deceptions brought by new technologies, dishonest behaviors cannot be categorized as acceptable since dishonesty exists because of the companies' self-interest. The companies lie about the real performance of their production in order to gain more profits. The inappropriate usage of technology in counterfeiting movie reviews violates the duty of being honest in this situation, where objectivity is the main point. Review readers expect objective comments and truthful ratings on the online review platforms, which requires transparency in how reviews and ratings are put on the websites. Ensuring the information is true and objective will be the primary focus of the honesty issues.

Additionally, the subject can also be analyzed with another common ethical theory, called deontology. Deontology is an ethical theory that is the contrast of consequentialism theories. The deontological theory focuses on that for some choices, no matter what the consequences or effects can be justified as beneficial, they are not morally acceptable (Alexander & Moore, 2016). In the situation of fabricated reviews, the movie marketing teams may argue that they choose these methods for the good of both the company and the consumers. It is obvious that movie producing companies can earn more profits in this marketing process; at the same time, the consumers are given an opportunity to learn about a movie that they may not know if fake reviews and inflated ratings are not present. Additionally, the company may defend their actions by stating that even though the reviews are not completely objective and honest because of technological intervention, consumers' behaviors may not be influenced at all; thus, there are no harmful effects created by their deceptive marketing strategies. However, none of these

arguments can justify the abusive use of technology in creating untruthful reviews. The untruthful reviews are not what the readers have expected. Although the final consequence is not harmful or can even be seen as beneficial, the actions which have processes that are immoral will still be considered as unethical behaviors.

Solutions and Conclusions

SCOT also requires discussions about the closures and stabilization of a technology, which means that solutions to the current problems caused by technology should be proposed. In discussing the issues with online movie reviews, it is obvious that the most significant problem is that society will lose trust in the reviewing system currently present and ultimately lead to the rejection of technology in this context. To solve this problem, it is important to raise public attention in providing truthful information online. Companies should realize that faking is an inappropriate strategy of marketing and professional critics should reject being paid to write towards a certain movie.

Besides raising the awareness of the public in building a truthful online review environment, the other two relevant social groups should also act accordingly. Actually, all the online review developing teams have already implemented some models or software in identifying bot reviews or unusual behaviors to preserve the fairness of their websites (Martens & Maalej, 2019). However, the implementations have obvious limitations in accuracy and efficiency, and they need improvements. Detecting unusual reviews is not an easy job since human languages are ambiguous and categorization of spam/non-spam has always been an unsolved problem needing

better solutions. Moreover, the government can take a role in regulating the online reviews and business environment. Currently, there are only laws protecting customers' rights to speak out the truth about a certain product but there is ambiguity in how to deal with reviews that appeared because of unethical behaviors ("Consumer Review Fairness Act: What Businesses Need to Know", 2017). With a more detailed and specific regulation, the review platform will be a better place for the public to seek information.

No one can deny the benefits brought by new technology in the recent decades, especially the Internet. People are able to look up information in all areas. Specifically discussed in this paper, the Internet has provided great convenience in helping customers learn about an unseen movie and thus make better buying decisions. However, when the technology is abused by film companies in order to gain more profits, issues about social trust and ethics begin to arise. The practices of faking reviews to promote sales of the movie tickets is a disgrace to the development of technology and if people want to continue using the technology in a positive way, more actions should be taken to help ensure the clearness of online reviews systems. With improved awareness among critics and production companies, more investment in eliminating false reviews from developers, and well-constructed regulations proposed by governments, the problems in online movie reviews should be solved.

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