

# **Consumer-Driven Racial Stigmatization: The Moderating Role of Race in Online Consumer-to-Consumer Reviews**

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## **Abstract:**

Marketing studies highlight the importance of recognizing different cultures and suggest that race plays an integral role in the functioning and ideological underpinnings of marketplace actions. Nevertheless, this role remains understudied in research on online consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions. Guided by extant literature and drawing on critical race theory, this study conducts two experimental studies that show how the race of online consumer reviewers influences other consumers' interpretation of the quality of the reviews. This study contributes to the marketing literature by extending the existing knowledge of racial stigmatization and bias found in marketing communications to C2C exchanges. An understanding of the role, scope, and impact of consumer-driven stigmatization is of growing importance due to the growing empowerment of consumers in the business ecosystem. Regulatory frameworks are designed to protect consumers from unfair market practices on the part of firms and businesses. However, C2C interaction is a largely unregulated territory where our study demonstrates that entrenched racial stigmatization may still exist. The study findings reveal important implications and directions for future research.

**Keywords:** critical race theory, C2C, discrimination, online reviews, profile avatars, racial stigmatization, valence

# 1 Introduction

Racism remains prevalent in many sectors of society and represents a form of social harm in the business ecosystem (Huff & Barnhart, 2022). Racial stigmatization in marketing is often thought of in terms of advertisers, brands, and businesses transmitting negative stereotypes through advertising, the development of biased algorithms in dynamic pricing, the disproportionate targeting of Black consumers with promotions for alcohol, tobacco, and unhealthy food, and the lack of representation of people of color in positions of power or high social status (e.g., Cowart & Lehnert, 2018; Crockett, 2017; Davis, 2018; Edelman, Luca, & Svirsky, 2017; Francis & Robertson, 2021; Gilmore & Jordan, 2012; Mitchell, 2020). This paper, therefore, builds on these important expositions of marketplace racism by extending the study of racial stigmatization in marketing to C2C interactions.

Consumers are not simply active co-creators of value; they often use their increasing powerbase—amplified through social technology such as online communities (e.g., Anker, Sparks, Moutinho, & Grönroos, 2015; Azer & Alexander, 2018; Farmaki, Olya, & Taheri, 2021), peer-to-peer platforms in the sharing economy (e.g., Anker, Gordon, & Zainuddin, 2022; Philip, Ozanne, & Ballantine, 2015), and social media (e.g., Azer, Blasco-Arcas, & Harrigan, 2021; Azer & Ranaweera, 2022; Branstad & Solem, 2020; Dedeoğlu, Taheri, Okumus, & Gannon, 2020)—to initiate marketplace actions independently from any direct interaction with brands and businesses. The implications of racial bias and stigmatization within C2C interaction are not merely of individual concern but represent a structural issue that impacts social norms (Timmermans & Tavory, 2020).

The demand for action to tackle racist stereotyping does not emanate only from consumers. In July 2020, for example, more than 1,100 businesses temporarily boycotted advertising on Facebook in a bid to stop the spread and amplification of racism on social media (He, Kim, & Gustafsson, 2021). High-profile brands including Prada, Gucci, Dove,

and H&M have recently experienced significant public opprobrium due to their ill-considered use of racial signifiers (Poole et al., 2021). For instance, in 2017, Dove—a skincare and beauty brand owned by Unilever—released a digital social media advertisement for their body wash that was quickly labeled as racist. The ad, a 3-second gif, appeared to show a Black woman turning into a White woman after using the body wash as if she had cleaned herself of blackness (Mitchell, 2020).

Acknowledging that race is a relevant issue for marketers, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been deployed in marketing, advertising, and various marketing communication activities (Behnken & Smithers, 2015; Davis, 2018; Mitchell, 2020), leading to the identification of four types of harassment: the under-representation in advertising of people of color in social situations (Bristor, 1995; Ward, 2009); discrimination in the marketplace (Gilmore & Jordan, 2012; Ohri-Vachaspati et al., 2015); under-representation in key positions of power (Davis, 2017; Shankar, 2015), and the biased and stereotyped portrayal of people of color in advertising (e.g., Behnken & Smithers, 2015; Crockett, 2017; Mitchell, 2020; Wooten & Rank-Christman, 2019). Edelman et al. (2017) conducted experiments that documented ingrained racial biases in the sharing economy and found that Airbnb hosts tended to reject applications from potential guests with Black-sounding names. Similarly, via Google’s AdSense program, Sweeney (2013) detected that Black-sounding names generate search results such as arrest records. Poole et al. (2021) exposed widespread and persistent racial bias and discrimination among consumers on prominent digital platforms such as Facebook, Craigslist, Uber, and Airbnb. We extend these findings by further exploring how online C2C product reviews are associated with significant racial bias, which has not been thoroughly researched, although it is an area ripe for investigation (Poole et al., 2021). As indicated, it is of the utmost importance to highlight further evidence of the varied nature of C2C racism,

given that C2C exchanges represent an increasingly important part of the marketplace in terms of scale and impact.

This paper contributes to the understanding of racism in C2C online interactions. Informed by the overarching theory of CRT and two experimental studies, it explains how the racial profile of consumers who post online reviews can influence readers' perceptions of the credibility of the reviews and, as a result, the adoption of such information. The reviewer's race is conveyed by their profile picture or placeholder photo next to a set of identical consumer reviews. By looking at the effects of both positive and negative valence of consumer reviews, we conclude that the reviewer's race has a significant moderating effect on source credibility and information adoption. This study offers a nuanced understanding not only of how race shapes consumers' understanding of marketplace content but also of how it is a negatively charged meaning-maker that lowers the perceived value of consumer reviews by decreasing perceived source credibility and information adoption.

This study also contributes to an emerging stream of research that scrutinizes technologically mediated racial profiling and discrimination (Rhue, 2019) by identifying and analyzing racially biased C2C interactions in the online marketplace. Finally, the article makes an empirical contribution to CRT by documenting how existing racial biases in wider society are enacted on C2C platforms where the adverse impact on societal norms is compounded by a lack of regulation because C2C communications are not recognized as forming part of marketing communications (Ferguson, Sanders, Meyers, & Chenevert, 2020; Poole et al., 2021).

## **2 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses**

### *2.1 Valence, credibility, and adoption of online reviews*

Source credibility describes the judgments made by receivers of information regarding the believability of those communicating that information (Visentin, Pizzi, & Pichierri, 2019).

Source credibility is particularly important in online travel and tourism reviews due to the intangible nature of these services (Azer & Alexander, 2018). The extant research confirms that perceived source credibility in online consumer reviews significantly influences readers' perception of the quality of the reviews (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015). For instance, perceived reviewer credibility positively impacted perceived review credibility in an online discussion forum, directly increasing purchase intention (Xie, Miaob, Kuoc, & Leec, 2011). Similarly, reviewer source credibility moderated the effects of persuasiveness and completeness in product recommendations on perceived recommendation credibility via an online consumer discussion forum (Reichelt, Sievert, & Jacob, 2014). Prior research has also related source credibility to the valence of reviews, showing that positive reviews have greater credibility for readers, as a positive reviewer is considered fairer and more believable (Lin & Xu, 2017; Wei, Miao, & Huang, 2013). In contrast, negative reviews are seen as a means of venting anger and frustration rather than simply a desire to warn others (Azer & Alexander, 2020b), resulting in a lower credibility level (Wei et al., 2013).

The level of information adoption from online reviews may vary between readers; the same content can engender different responses in different recipients (Azer & Alexander, 2020a; Chang & Wu, 2014). Consumers adopt information that helps them make better purchase decisions. Specifically, the quality, accuracy, and relevance of the shared information affect its adoption (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Filieri, 2015; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Consumers who adopt information from online reviews incorporate it into their mental calculations and subsequently take action, following the advice or recommendations received from these reviews (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). As with source credibility, prior research has explored the relationship between information adoption and review valence. However, this research stream offers contradictory results, with some findings suggesting that readers adopt information more readily from negative reviews than

positive reviews, as negative reviews are more diagnostic and informative (Azer & Alexander, 2020b; Berezina, Bilgihan, Cobanoglu, & Okumus, 2015; Racherla & Friske, 2012). Conversely, other studies have found positive reviews to be more valuable and associated with higher levels of information adoption in consumers because negative reviews are often thought to exaggerate and polarize (Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008; Li & Zhan, 2011; Li & Hitt, 2008).

Unsurprisingly, understanding the impact of review valence has become a key priority for practitioners (Alexander & Azer, 2022). Yet, consumers also use elements not directly related to the focal subject of the review to assess source credibility and decide whether to act on the information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This study sheds light on how nuances associated with the race of reviewers, as revealed in their profile pictures, affect the impact of negative and positive reviews.

## *2.2 Profile Avatars/pictures*

Profile pictures and auto-created avatars are not directly related to the focal topic of the review, yet can influence consumers' perceptions of the review (Liu, Xie, & Zhang, 2019; Zhao, Wang, Guo, & Law, 2015) and have been found to affect the perceived likability and trustworthiness of the reviewer (Park, Xiang, Josiam, & Kim, 2014). Consumers use personal profile information to reduce the cognitive effort required in evaluating or assessing recommendations within a review rather than critically evaluating the quality of the arguments made by the reviewer (Filiari & McLeay, 2014; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Moreover, previous research has related the profile pictures of online reviewers to the impact of the valence of reviews on perceived source credibility and information adoption (e.g., Cheung et al., 2008; Lu, Wu, & Tseng, 2018; Park et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2013; Xu, 2014). Specifically, online reviews with profile pictures had higher perceived review credibility than those without pictures (Park et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2018), because those

willing to disclose personal profile information are considered more likely to be genuine and competent reviewers (Park et al., 2014). Similarly, the effect of a negative review is amplified when the reviewer provides personal profile information (Xu, 2014). Therefore, profile pictures influence perceived credibility and information adoption in both positive and negative online reviews (Cheung et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2013). While image signifiers influence an understanding and interpretation of the wider discourse, according to semiotics theory (Hunt, 1995), prior research has mainly focused on studying the presence and absence of profile pictures (e.g., Nanne et al., 2020; Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015) rather than studying such pictures as an indicator of the race of the reviewer. This study builds on CRT to examine the impact of profile pictures.

### 2.3 *Critical race theory (CRT)*

CRT defines race as a social construct based primarily on physical attributes (Mitchell, 2020). According to CRT, people draw inferences about other individuals based on their race (Poole et al., 2021). CRT seeks to critique and transform the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) by offering an analytical lens to critically explore how racism is produced and enacted through multiple mechanisms across various domains (Francis & Robertson, 2021).

CRT recognizes that racism evolves with societal and technological changes, such as online platforms (Edelman et al., 2017). Recent theorizing suggests that revealing their profile pictures can make online users more vulnerable to racial discrimination (Kahn, Spencer, & Glaser, 2013). Interpretations of physical characteristics based on skin color are specifically used to validate the assertion of White superiority over Black and other people of color (Davis, 2018; Francis & Robertson, 2021).

According to the CRT framework, the practice of racism relates moral and mental qualities to physical characteristics (Puzzo, 1964). The evaluation of the source, according to

the literature, involves the recipient's judgment of source credibility based on the characteristics of the source, while the adoption of shared information relies on the competence of that source (Park et al., 2014). Credibility refers to the degree to which the communicator is seen as unbiased and telling the truth (moral), while competence reflects the communicator's perceived capacity to provide valid and accurate information (Rofianto, Kornelys, & Rifkhansyah, 2017). Race affects how individuals perceive the opinions of those belonging to a particular race (BBC, 2018; Crockett, 2017; Francis & Robertson, 2021). While prior research on online reviews has not studied source credibility or information adoption from this perspective, parallel streams of marketing research suggest that people of color are not well represented in public relations work as organizations fear a perceived *lowered* credibility if they are represented by a person of color (Edwards, 2011). These distorted perceptions may find people of color to be trustworthy or caring (moral), but not intellectually competent (Spence, Lachlan, Westerman, & Spates, 2013). Therefore, revealing the reviewer's race in their profile picture may affect how readers assess the reviewer's moral qualities, hence their overall credibility, also their mental qualities, hence, the extent to which the shared information is adopted.

**H1:** The race of the reviewer, as revealed in their profile picture, will moderate the impact of their positive and negative reviews on readers' (i) perception of source credibility and (ii) information adoption, having a negative impact compared to using no profile picture.

Earlier research has looked at how online services replicate the discriminatory experiences experienced offline, with Airbnb hosts more likely to discriminate against African-American-sounding names (Edelman et al., 2017). Accordingly, consumers perceive some racial cues to negatively influence source credibility and information adoption; however, it is unclear how this may interplay with the valence of shared reviews. Prior marketing research has demonstrated how middle-class African-Americans use consumer culture to develop strategies to counter the negative impact of stigmatization (Crockett, 2017) and prejudice



toward individuals from certain racial groups (e.g., that African-Americans are aggressive) (Kunda & Thagard, 1996). The findings of this research stream suggest that prejudice against Black consumers, such as regarding them as aggressive (moral) or less competent (mental) than White consumers (Cottom, 2019; Spence et al., 2013), display a greater social distance than those belonging to other racial groups, such as White consumers (Lin & Xu, 2017), reveal the existence of a discriminatory tendency to react defensively to any online comments made by Black users (Edelman et al., 2017), and result in the digital racial profiling of Black-sounding names against arrest records (Sweeney, 2013). Hence, a negative review by a member of a specific racial group associated with negative behaviors such as aggression may not be adopted; nor will the source be perceived as credible. Based on Study 1, below, it is plausible to expect a favorable effect from positive reviews by Black reviewers. Moreover, theoretically, it may be that the explanation for the positive favorable effect can be traced back to expectancy violation theory, suggesting that those who violate expectations of attributions associated with their racial groups will, in all likelihood, be evaluated more extremely on those attributions (Burgoon, 1993). Thus, the confounding of stereotypes leads individuals to appraise more robustly the motivating factors behind the expectancy violation (Spence et al., 2013). Within the current theorizing, if a Black reviewer shared a positive review recommending a service provider, the expectation of aggression would be violated. Review readers might believe that if a Black reviewer, stereotyped with aggression and negativity traits, is taking the time to write a positive review, they must be credible.

Asians are also negatively caricatured in popular media and advertising (Behnken & Smithers, 2015). For example, advertising trading cards used derogatory images and terms such as ‘Chinaman’ to advance anti-Chinese sentiment among Whites (Davis, 2018). Asians were also often presented as minor background characters in advertisements and were rarely shown in familial or social relationships or as involved with social issues (Taylor, Lee, &

Stern, 1995). An evolution of the portrayal of Asians—especially men—over time has presented them as industrious, affluent businesspeople, who emphasize work, technical careers, and high academic performance and presentation. In this sense, Asians were sometimes depicted as closer to Whites on the racial hierarchy scale relative to other non-Whites, such as Blacks (Paek & Shah, 2003). Accordingly, a review by an Asian writer may be perceived more highly and adopted more widely than one by a Black reviewer.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The race of the reviewer moderates the impact of review valence on other consumers' (i) perceived source credibility and (ii) information adoption. As such, negative reviews by Black reviewers will have low levels of credibility and information adoption compared to their positive reviews and other reviews by White or Asian reviewers.

CRT recognizes the existence of White supremacy in the marketplace (Poole et al., 2021). Marketing research suggests that servers with dark skin tones receive significantly lower evaluation scores than those with lighter skin tones (Coward & Lehnert, 2018); Black spokespeople are less credible than their White counterparts (Hong & Len-Riós, 2015); and in online health discussions, Black users are perceived to be less competent than White ones (Spence et al., 2013). Furthermore, research into online reviews suggests that White reviews are seen as more helpful than Asian reviews (Danescu, Kossinets, Kleinberg, & Lee, 2009). Lin and Xu (2017) observe a greater social distance between White reviewers than Asians and Blacks. However, these studies have not examined the moderating role of the reviewers' race but, rather, reported direct causal relationships. Therefore, it is plausible that reviews—whether positive or negative—by White reviewers are well perceived in terms of credibility and adoption compared to those by Asian and Black reviewers.

**H<sub>2a</sub>:** The race of the reviewer moderates the impact of review valence on other consumers' (i) perceived source credibility and (ii) information adoption. As such, both positive and negative reviews by White reviewers will have high levels of credibility and information adoption compared to reviews by Black and Asian reviewers.

### **3 Study 1: The Moderating Role of Profile Pictures as Indicators of Race**

#### *3.1 Design and procedures*

To test hypothesis H1, a 2 (Valence: Positive and Negative)  $\times$  2 (Profile Avatars: Identified [Black race], Unidentified [no profile photo]) factorial, between-subjects design was adopted, resulting in four scenarios (see Appendix A). The stimulus material is a mockup of TripAdvisor hotel reviews, thus bringing greater realism to the study. Specifically, TripAdvisor represents a multicultural online context, operating in 45 countries worldwide, with a total of over 190 million reviews and opinions (Telegraph.co.uk, 2019), of which 59.53% originate in the US (Similarweb.com, 2019), where 26.2% of the population belongs to ethnic minority groups (Gill, Joo Kim, & Ranaweera, 2017). In this study, we used only the Black racial group—compared to no/unidentified profile picture—to detect whether racial cues would be activated influencing consumers' positive or negative perception of the review. Specifically, prior research streams have suggested that prejudiced and discriminatory views of Black consumers result in defensive reactions to any online comments by Black users (Edelman et al., 2017).

All reviews in the scenarios showed the same content for all groups to control for other factors that impact information adoption, such as valence extremity, accuracy, and review length (Cheung et al., 2008; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). To control for reputational cues, the stimulus material showed the same badge for helpful reviews (Filieri et al., 2015; Huang, Chen, Yen, & Tran, 2015). Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010) regarding sample size (i.e., 0.05 alpha, 0.8 statistical power and large effect size), a sample of 200 individuals (cell size=50, females: 35%, average age = 25 years,  $SD = 1.01$ ) was recruited through Prolific, a specialized purchased panel provider, in exchange for a modest payment. This online subject pool is widely used in marketing to gather self-reported data from consumers and offers a source of reliable data representative of the general population using random sampling (Goodman & Paolacci, 2017). In particular, we asked Prolific for a racially

diverse sample to increase the representativeness of the general population. The sample included different racial backgrounds as follows: White (39.5%); Black (20.8%); Asian (19.5%); Caribbean (7.5%); mixed (7%); Hispanic (4%); other (1.7%). Using the randomization option offered by Qualtrics, the respondents were randomly allocated to scenarios. We asked Prolific to ensure that the participants use online reviews on TripAdvisor, and included a screening question regarding TripAdvisor usage, '*How frequently do you use TripAdvisor? (1=Never, 5=Always)*,' which showed a high usage frequency ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ). The scenario realism score showed that participants found the scenarios realistic ( $M=6.05$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ).

### 3.2 Manipulation check and measurements

The experimental manipulations were tested in the pre-test and the main study using the following items to ensure the participants' understanding of the review valence: '*This review is about a.... a) positive experience b) negative experience*,' and '*The race of this reviewer seems to be...a) Black b) unknown*.' The results of the manipulation checks show different answer patterns between manipulations for valence  $\chi^2(1, N=200) = 200, p < .001$ . This is also the case for profile picture  $\chi^2(2, N=200) = 400, p < .001$ . After reading the scenarios, participants completed a questionnaire that comprised items to measure two dependent variables, source credibility and information adoption (both adapted from (Wu & Shaffer, 1987)), manipulation checks, and demographic items. Research shows that forum credibility and recipient utilitarian values influence the persuasiveness and adoption of reviews (Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013; Perez-Vega, Taheri, Farrington, & O'Gorman, 2018). Therefore, we controlled both attitudes toward checking online reviews (utilitarian value) (adapted from (Donthu & Gilliland, 1996; Qiu, Pang, & Lim, 2012)) and perceived TripAdvisor credibility (adapted from (Qiu et al., 2012)).

Tests were undertaken to confirm that the convergent ( $AVE > .5$ ) and discriminant validity (maximum shared variance and average shared variance) were both less than the value of the AVE validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). As shown in Table 1, the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than the correlation between it and all other constructs. Factor loading and reliability of scales are above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010)(Appendix B).

**Table 1: Correlation Matrix and AVE**

	<b>SC</b>	<b>IA</b>	<b>Conf1</b>	<b>Conf2</b>
<b>Source Credibility (SC)</b>	<i>.88</i>			
<b>Information Adoption (IA)</b>	.501	<i>.80</i>		
<b>Attitudes toward checking online reviews (Conf1)</b>	.202	.140	<i>.85</i>	
<b>Perceived TripAdvisor Credibility (Conf2)</b>	.078	.120	.137	<i>.88</i>

*Note: Italicized diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between the constructs*

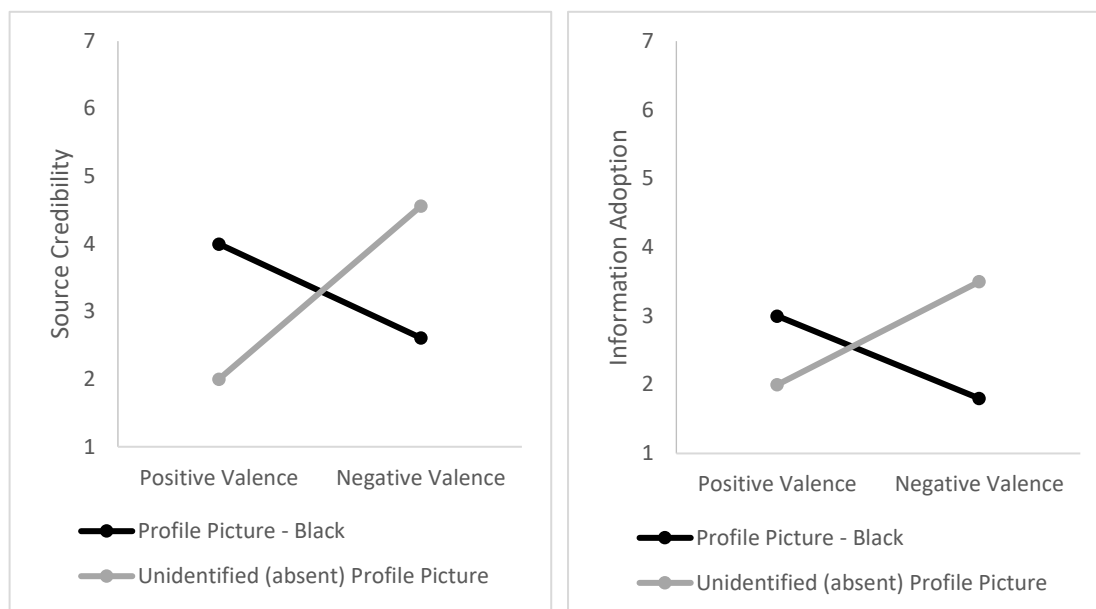
### 3.3 Results

After satisfying preliminary checks on the assumption of homoscedasticity (Levene's Test  $p > .05$ ) for both dependent variables, and the equality of the entire variance-covariance matrixes (Box's Test  $p = .820$ ), a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The results reveal significant interaction effects for valence and reviewer profile picture (Wilks' lambda = .833,  $F(2,122) = 10.160$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The interaction was significant for both perceived source credibility and information adoption ( $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2), which have been plotted for each of the dependent variables (see Figure 1), showing the strong moderating effect of profile pictures on online consumer reviews and, thus, confirming H1.

**Table 2: Interaction effect on dependent variables ( $p < .001$ )**

	Profile Pictures	Valence	Mean
Source Credibility	Black Reviewer	Positive	4.00
		Negative	2.61
	Unidentified	Positive	2.00
		Negative	4.56
Information Adoption	Black Reviewer	Positive	3.00
		Negative	1.80
	Unidentified	Positive	2.00
		Negative	3.50

As shown in the plots, readers perceived the credibility of reviewers with identified profile pictures reflecting Black race as more favorable when they posted positive reviews compared to negative reviews ( $M_{black,pos}=4.00$ ,  $M_{black,neg}=2.61$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Conversely, the credibility of reviewers with no profile picture was perceived as higher when they posted negative rather than positive reviews ( $M_{un,pos}=2.00$ ,  $M_{un,neg}=4.56$ ;  $p<.001$ ). In terms of information adoption, the mean scores show that readers unfavorably adopted the Black reviewers' positive and negative reviews ( $M_{black,pos}=3.00$ ,  $M_{black,neg}=1.80$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Although prior research had indicated that the negative effect of negative reviews is amplified in the presence of the reviewer's profile picture (Park et al., 2014; Xu, 2014), this is not seen in the results of this study, where the negative review of a Black reviewer was not well-received either in terms of credibility or adoption. Conversely, the unidentified reviewer's negative review was better adopted than a positive review despite the absence of a profile picture, which implies that the profile pictures were racially signified, influencing consumers' positive or negative perceptions of the review.



**Figure 1: Interaction Effect on Dependent Variables**

Study 1 shows that racial cues inferred from profile pictures of reviewers (compared to absent profile pictures) influence other consumers' positive or negative perceptions of the

review. While Study 1 documents the impact of race, it did not compare inferences between different races. Consequently, Study 2 specifically manipulates three race groups (Black, Asian, and White) to show whether race is a negatively charged meaning-maker that detracts from the perceived value of consumer reviews by decreasing perceived source credibility and information adoption.

## **4 Study 2: The Moderating Role of Online Reviewers' Race**

### *4.1 Design and procedures*

To test hypotheses H2 and H2a, a 2 (Valence: Positive and Negative) × 3 (Profile Avatars: White, Black, and Asian), between-subjects factorial design was adopted, resulting in six scenarios (see Appendix A). As with Study 1, the stimulus material was a mockup of TripAdvisor hotel reviews, thus bringing greater realism to the study. The content was the same for all groups and reputational cues. To control for facial expressions within profile pictures, the pictures used in the experiment had the same neutral facial expression. Additionally, to test the equality of these pictures and avoid the inference of any effect rather than racial difference, we showed the three profile pictures to 20 participants (females: 20%, average age=38 years, SD=1.10) before the experiment was conducted. The participants were asked two questions using a Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree). First, they were asked whether they thought *the three pictures have the same facial expression* and the results strongly confirmed this (M=6.50, SD=.927). Second, they were asked whether they thought *the only difference among those pictures is the race of those appearing in the pictures*, and the results also strongly confirmed this (M=6.57, SD=.879). Finally, the participants were asked to comment on the pictures in response to an open-ended question about the gender, age, and race of the people in the three pictures. The results reveal that the 20 participants agreed that the pictures are of three men (100%) of approximately the same age (96.7%) and differing only in race (98.5%).

Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010) regarding sample size (0.05 alpha, 0.8 statistical power, and a large effect size), a sample of 300 individuals (cell size=50, females: 40%, average age=26 years,  $SD=.10$ ) was recruited through Prolific, using the same procedures as for Study 1 to ensure a representative sample of the general population. The sample was racially diverse, as follows: White (38.3%); Black (29.5%); Asian (19.7%); Pacific islander (6.5%); Latino/Hispanic (4.7%); mixed (1%); others (0.3%). TripAdvisor's usage screening question showed a high usage frequency ( $M=4.16$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ), showing that participants found the scenarios realistic ( $M=6.00$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ).

#### 4.2 Manipulation check and measurements

The experimental manipulations were tested in the pre-test and the main study using the following items to ensure participants' understanding of the review valence: 'This review is about a.... a) positive experience b) negative experience' and 'The race of this reviewer seems to be...a) White b) Black c) Asian.' The results of the manipulation checks show different answer patterns between the manipulations for valence  $\chi^2(1, N=300) = 300, p < .001$ . It was a similar case for race  $\chi^2(4, N=300) = 600, p < .001$ . The same dependent and control variables were considered as in Study 1. Moreover, tests were undertaken to confirm convergent ( $AVE > .5$ ) and discriminant validity (see Table 3). The factor loading and reliability of the scales were above the recommended threshold of .7 (Hair et al., 2010) (see Appendix B).

**Table 3: Correlation Matrix and AVE**

	<b>SC</b>	<b>IA</b>	<b>Conf1</b>	<b>Conf2</b>
<b>Source Credibility (SC)</b>	.88			
<b>Information Adoption (IA)</b>	.208	.80		
<b>Attitudes toward checking online reviews (Conf1)</b>	.155	.185	.85	
<b>Perceived TripAdvisor Credibility (Conf2)</b>	.084	.054	.211	.83

*Note: Italicized diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs*



### 4.3 Results

After satisfying preliminary checks (Levene's Test  $p > .05$ ; Box's Test  $p = .850$ ), a MANOVA was conducted. The results reveal a significant interaction effect between valence and reviewer race (Wilks' lambda=.944,  $F(4,584) = 8.895, p < .001$ ). The interaction was significant for perceived source credibility and information adoption ( $p < .001$ ) (see Table 4 and Figure 2).

**Table 4: Interaction effect on dependent variables ( $p < .001$ )**

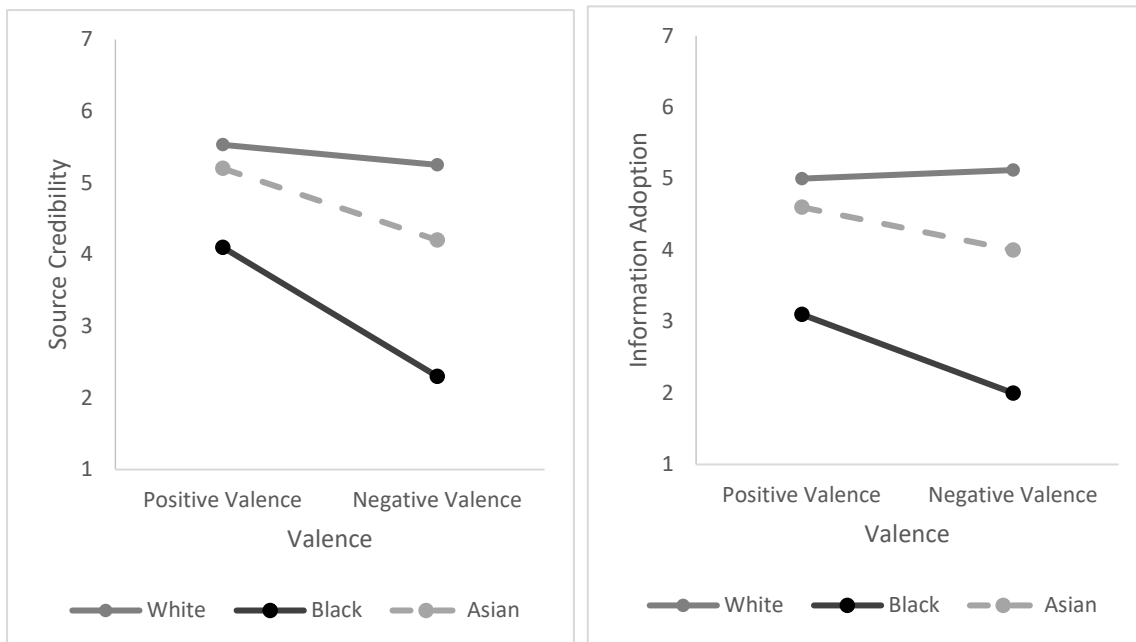
Dependent Variables	Valence	Race	Mean
Source Credibility	Positive	White	5.53
		Black	4.10
		Asian	5.20
	Negative	White	5.25
		Black	2.30
		Asian	4.20
Information Adoption	Positive	White	5.00
		Black	3.10
		Asian	4.60
	Negative	White	5.12
		Black	2.00
		Asian	4.00

Specifically, while the credibility of the three reviewers is still higher when they post positively, they do not carry the same weight. White reviewers had higher perceived credibility than either Black or Asian reviewers, while Black reviewers had lower perceived credibility than Asian reviewers ( $M_W=5.53, M_A=5.20, M_B=4.10; p < .001$ ). When posting negative reviews, Black reviewers had lower perceived source credibility than either White or Asian reviewers ( $M_W=5.25, M_A=4.20, M_B=2.30; p < .001$ ). Overall, these results reflect the existence of White supremacy in the marketplace (Poole et al., 2021) and the proximity of Asians to Whites on the racial hierarchy scale relative to other non-Whites, such as Blacks (Paek & Shah, 2003). Importantly, the observation that the perceived credibility of Black reviewers was favorable only when they posted positively implies the expectancy violation of

aggression (Spence et al., 2013). The review readers likely believe that if a Black reviewer stereotyped with aggression is taking the time to write a positive review, they must be credible. However, in terms of information adoption, the Black reviewer's positive and negative reviews were adopted less than those of the Asian and White reviewers ( $M_W=5.00$ ,  $M_A=4.60$ ,  $M_B=3.10$ ;  $p<.001$ ). This is consistent with prior research suggesting that Black people can be found credible (moral) but not competent (perceived mental capacity to provide valid and accurate information) (Rofianto et al., 2017; Spence et al., 2013).

Readers tend to adopt White reviewers' opinions more than those of Asian and Black reviewers when they post negative reviews ( $M_W=5.12$ ,  $M_A=4.00$ ,  $M_B=2.00$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Specifically, both positive and negative opinions of Asian reviewers are favorably adopted, although not to the same degree as those of White reviewers. There is also empirical evidence of the theoretical assumption depicting Asians as closer to Whites on the racial hierarchy scale compared with Blacks (Paek & Shah, 2003).

Therefore, the race of the reviewer moderates the impact of review valence on how readers perceive the reviewer's credibility and how they adopt the information they share in their reviews. It is clear from the results that negative reviews by members of a specific race group (Black) were not well-received compared to their positive reviews and to those of White and Asian reviewers, which confirms H2. Moreover, the reviews of White writers, whether positive or negative, were well-received compared to those of Asian and Black reviewers, confirming H2a.



**Figure 2: Interaction Effect on Dependent Variables**

## 5 Discussion

This study offers a nuanced understanding not only of how race shapes consumer understandings of marketplace content but also how race is a negatively charged meaning-maker that detracts from the perceived value of consumer reviews by decreasing perceived source credibility and information adoption. Prior research has focused primarily on the relationship between consumers' trust in online reviews and the presence or absence of reviewers' profile pictures (e.g., Nanne et al., 2020; Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015). While such research shows that profiles with a picture have greater perceived review credibility than those without (Lu et al., 2018; Park et al., 2014) and that the negative effect of a negative review is amplified when the personal profile information of the reviewers is provided (Xu, 2014), these studies have not investigated the impact of the race of the reviewer as revealed in their profile pictures. This study advances extant knowledge by studying profile pictures in online reviews as a source of racial bias.

To reveal potential unconscious racial bias, Study 1 of this paper relied on a comparison between consumer responses to reviews with a profile picture of a Black reviewer and consumer responses to the same reviews presented next to a blank image. The study reveals favorable (unfavorable) information adoption of positive (negative) opinions of Black reviewers while noting the favorable perceived source credibility when they share positive rather than negative reviews. Such results are consistent with prior advertising and marketing research suggesting prejudiced views of Black consumers associated with aggression. The existence of discriminatory practices leads to defensive reactions to any online discussion from users belonging to the Black racial group (Edelman et al., 2017; Fiske, Xu, & Cuddy, 1999; Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Readers may view their negative reviews as excessively angry or critical. However, the effect is reversed with positive reviews. This is a novel insight that can be explained (as indicated earlier) by the expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 1993). Accordingly, these new insights are expected to enhance the literature on online reviews, especially in terms of the contrast with the extant findings regarding the influence of review valence and peripheral cues such as personal profile information.

Extending the results of Study 1, Study 2 specifically shows that race is a normatively charged meaning-maker that either enhances or diminishes the perceived quality of consumer reviews by increasing or decreasing source credibility and information adoption. Study 2 thus reveals that, although Black reviewers are perceived as credible when posting positive reviews, their overall source credibility is significantly lower than that of White and Asian reviewers. Similarly, when consumers post negative reviews, Black people are associated with a lower level of credibility than either White or Asian people. Regarding information adoption, positive reviews posted by Black, White and Asian consumers were all favorably adopted by their readers, albeit not equally. Negative reviews were more polarizing, and readers tended to adopt opinions expressed by White reviewers more than those of Asian or

Black reviewers. In particular, Black reviewers prompted the least information adoption by readers when the review valence was negative.

### *5.1 Theoretical Implications*

Our study adds important nuance to the existing knowledge of marketplace injustice and CRT by illuminating the vague, subtly engrained, and pervasive nature of consumer-driven racism. Marketplace racism is usually thought of in terms of direct aggression between consumers on social media (Poole et al., 2021), racist stereotypes in advertising (Davis, 2018), or rejection and other prejudiced treatment of consumers with Black-sounding names (Edelman et al., 2017). These forms of racism can be explained as the expression of irrational anxieties about out-group consumers. What is novel and deeply worrying in our study is the epistemic nature of racism: consumers carry deep-rooted racialized assumptions about the epistemic status of other consumers and adopt and justify knowledge by reference to these assumptions. Importantly, such covert racism does not only exist in online reviews but also social media. Social media users with visible profile pictures and names often share brand and product opinions. Here, racism is neither an expression of direct aggression nor an indirect microaggression that could be explained by reference to out-group aversion: it is a deeply embedded epistemic filter that consumers use to interpret information as trustworthy or not. Consumers do not wholly dismiss Black reviewers but filter information from them in stigmatized ways that lead to marketplace inequality. As such, consumers are significant agents of the enactment of engrained racial bias in the epistemological structures of society.

This paper contributes to the understanding of racism in C2C interactions. Specifically, it contributes to an emerging stream of research that scrutinizes technologically mediated racial profiling and discrimination (Rhue, 2019) by identifying and analyzing racially biased C2C interactions in the online marketplace. The focus on C2C communication is a unique contribution of this paper, which documents how existing racial biases in wider society are

enacted on C2C platforms. Informed by the overarching theory of CRT and two experimental studies, we explain how the racial profile of consumers who post online reviews can influence readers' perceptions of the credibility of these reviews and their information adoption. This paper also contributes to CRT by empirically addressing issues of race in marketing research, which has not previously been sufficiently researched (Poole et al., 2021), thereby revealing how CRT supports an understanding of the role of race (Ferguson et al., 2020). Drawing on CRT, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the role of race in shaping consumers' perceptions of source credibility and information adoption within C2C online interactions.

Finally, this study responds to recent research calls to explain how race may impact consumers' evaluations in a diverse cultural online context, especially in online reviews, to help leverage positive interaction opportunities as a way of building bridges between ethnic communities (Edelman et al., 2017; Floyd & Stodolska, 2019; Gill et al., 2017; Kim, Jun, & Kim, 2018; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014). Although marketing research suggests the importance of race as a moderator of consumer behavior (Donthu & Cherian, 1995), its impact on online reviews and how that affects readers' behaviors has not been studied.

Furthermore, while the operationalization of race using profile pictures is new to the literature, it differs from that of using Black-sounding names (Edelman et al., 2017); digital racial profiling in online ad delivery (Sweeney, 2013); and race-targeted websites (Appiah, 2010). The extant studies predominantly explain racism in the marketplace by reference to traditional out-group exclusion. For instance, prior racial studies in advertising have mainly focused on minority viewers' use of racial cues and suggest that a Black (vs. White) model's race positively influences Black participants' thoughts about the product (e.g., Cagley & Cardozo, 1970; Kerin, 1979; Qualls & Moore, 1999; Whittler & Spira, 2002). Similarly, Johnson and Grier (2015) focused on consumers' responses to diverse cultural advertising

suggesting the fundamental role of consumers' congruence judgments. Our results advance existing knowledge by extending traditional explanations of marketplace racism as forms of aggression, stereotyping or out-group aversion with a view of racism as an engrained form of epistemic bias that consumers use to filter and evaluate information. This does not shift the focus of the study of marketplace racism away from one area onto another. Rather, it demonstrates that marketplace racism is not only a social and psychological category, but also a deeply philosophical one that calls into question how consumers acquire, process, and justify knowledge.

## 5.2 *Policy Implications*

This paper suggests the need to invest heavily in consumer education. Whilst it is unlikely that this would have any effect on individuals who self-identify as racist and knowingly and willingly post racist content, a very significant proportion of consumers would likely be receptive. Studies such as the present article and the findings of Edelman et al. (2017) indicate that consumer-driven racism on peer-to-peer platforms and in the wider sharing economy is often an expression of unconscious bias. As with microaggressions, it is reasonable to assume that unconscious bias is often *not* an expression of individuals' values, but of their prejudice. This has proven to be the case in other settings such as social work and health care where unconscious bias training has been used effectively to elicit and correct misperceptions (Fisher, Moore, Simmons, & Allen, 2017; Ogunyemi, 2021).

Unconscious bias training has generally been found to be effective in raising awareness of hidden prejudice and reducing implicit biases (Atewologun, Cornish, & Tresh, 2018). This indicates that consumers who unknowingly and unwillingly express racist behaviors due to unconscious bias may self-correct their behavior as they become critically aware of the trigger points of unconscious bias in the online marketplace. However, a word of caution is necessary: the evidence on the effectiveness of implicit bias training is conflicting and some

attempts at correcting unconscious biases (e.g., racial and gendered biases) have been found to be either ineffective or to compound existing biases (Atewologun et al., 2018; Williamson & Foley, 2018). Therefore, we recommend the development of consumer education programs to make consumers aware of the main trigger points and enable self-correction of biased behaviors. This is likely to reduce racial bias and, as such, is an important tool that should be used at scale in connection with a raft of other measures to address racism in society.

### 5.3 *Managerial Implications*

While this study provides insights into the moderating role of race in online review platforms, these consumer reviews concern products and services. Accordingly, product and service firms and managers should be made aware of the potential impact of race in online reviews and integrate corresponding factors, such as the race of the reviewers, in any measurement procedures beyond the valence of reviews. For instance, while the perceived credibility of Black reviewers is still high when they post positively, it does not carry the same weight as White and Asian reviewers. It is recommended, therefore, that managers, in their responses to these reviews, advocate the positive reviews and confirm their content so that other consumers can see that this is a typical consumer experience and any negative racial stigmatization effect will be countered (Crockett, 2017). Such positive interactions and perspectives need to be proactively encouraged in virtual spheres to resist the reinforcement of broader marginalization patterns (Young, 1990) that are also apparent in online contexts.

The current study also shows that, in the case of negative reviews, readers tend to adopt White reviewers' opinions more than those of Asian or Black reviewers. In particular, Black reviewers prompted the least information adoption by readers when the review valence was negative. Therefore, managers should respond with the same care and attention given to other reviews of a critical nature, thus reinforcing their credibility and importance.



While this paper helps managers develop a nuanced understanding of the interplay between reviewers' race and the valence of online reviews, technological interventions could also be made to affect how general audiences and managers specifically perceive reviews, independent of their actual content. Thus, when gleaning insights from reviewers from different racial groups, the influence of underlying algorithms of platforms such as TripAdvisor—and of the broader web analytics tools (e.g., Google Analytics, Chartbeat, Optimizely) used to measure online source credibility, reliability, and information sharing—should be considered.

Similarly, technological interventions are recommended to implement the measurement of discrimination based on perception, using a privacy-centric methodology that would determine the race that might be associated with a profile photo to identify and measure discrepancies in people's experiences (if any) on the platform that could be a result of discrimination and bias.

Perhaps the most effective measure in fighting online racial bias, as has happened with other review sites, would be to stop using profile pictures on such platforms and instead offer the option of adding generic, landscape, system-provided profile pictures for users to choose from and add (if they choose) to their profiles. While we acknowledge that avatars may help attenuate face-based discrimination, many people of color would still prefer race-specific avatars as a meaningful identity marker. Accordingly, it is recommended that, when using platforms that currently use avatars with racial markers, businesses should consider additional metadata about interactions with these reviews (e.g., dwell time, engagement) to determine the additional impact that bias may have on their platforms. This would avoid reinforcing existing racial biases and bubbles (Floyd & Stodolska, 2019).

Finally, it is important to stress that neither technological nor educational approaches alone will resolve racial bias. Whilst it would be preferable to live in a world where posting

profile pictures did not result in discriminatory practices, a combined approach as part of broader societal shifts on issues of race would weaken negative associations.

#### *5.4 Limitations and further research*

As with all academic research, the current study is not without limitations, and these open pathways for new research. First, it was advantageous that the reviews used in the experimental conditions did not show the reviewers' age, social status, education, or personality type, as this eliminated any confounding through homophily. Future research could consider manipulating these factors and testing their impact as moderators and mediators. Second, research on the source credibility of filtered results by shared review reader and reviewer attributes and its effect on racial stereotypes would also be beneficial. Finally, we only used one gender (male) for the reviewers' avatars in the experiments and one facial expression (neutral). Future research may use avatars of female and/or male gender with different facial expressions.

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## Appendix A – Scenarios

### Study 1 Scenarios

*You are planning a vacation and while checking Hotels at the planned destination on TripAdvisor, you came across this review*

 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Everything was awful!!”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>We were disgusted at the service and rooms. The food was dirty, very poor service staff, and a location so far away from everything! The hotel is very appalling. I totally advise avoiding it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>	 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Everything was awful!!”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>We were disgusted at the service and rooms. The food was dirty, very poor service staff, and a location so far away from everything! The hotel is very appalling. I totally advise avoiding it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>
 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Good Value and Location”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>Had a very good stay here, it is of a good value. The hotel is very close to the city center with buses available to the city center. Great food and clean room. Very friendly service staff. I totally recommend it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>	 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Good Value and Location”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>Had a very good stay here, it is of a good value. The hotel is very close to the city center with buses available to the city center. Great food and clean room. Very friendly service staff. I totally recommend it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>

### Study 2 Scenarios

 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Good Value and Location”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>Had a very good stay here, it is of a good value. The hotel is very close to the city center with buses available to the city center. Great food and clean room. Very friendly service staff. I totally recommend it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>	 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Everything was awful!!”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>We were disgusted at the service and rooms. The food was dirty, very poor service staff, and a location so far away from everything! The hotel is very appalling. I totally advise avoiding it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>
 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Good Value and Location”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>Had a very good stay here, it is of a good value. The hotel is very close to the city center with buses available to the city center. Great food and clean room. Very friendly service staff. I totally recommend it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>	 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Everything was awful!!”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>We were disgusted at the service and rooms. The food was dirty, very poor service staff, and a location so far away from everything! The hotel is very appalling. I totally advise avoiding it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>
 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Good Value and Location”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>Had a very good stay here, it is of a good value. The hotel is very close to the city center with buses available to the city center. Great food and clean room. Very friendly service staff. I totally recommend it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>	 <p>Anonymous 1 Reviews Hotel reviews Helpful Reviews</p> <p><b>“Everything was awful!!”</b> <span style="float: right;">NEW</span></p> <p>We were disgusted at the service and rooms. The food was dirty, very poor service staff, and a location so far away from everything! The hotel is very appalling. I totally advise avoiding it.</p> <p>Helpful? <input type="button" value="Thank Anonymous1"/> <input type="button" value="Report"/></p>

## Appendix B

### Factors Loading and Reliability of Scales

Constructs and Items	Factor Loadings & $\alpha$ /CR			
	Study 1		Study 2	
<b>Source Credibility (Wu &amp; Shaffer, 1987)</b> This reviewer is credible This reviewer is reliable This reviewer is knowledgeable in evaluating quality of service in this hotel	.91 .90 .90	.90/.90	.90 .80 .82	.90/.85
<b>Information Adoption (Wu &amp; Shaffer, 1987)</b> You closely followed the suggestions of this reviewer You agree with the opinion suggested in this review You will adopt the suggestions in this review	.80 .85 .90	.81/.91	.87 .88 .84	.83/.90
<b>Attitude toward Checking Online Reviews (Donthu &amp; Gilliland, 1996; Qiu et al., 2012)</b> Online reviews are helpful for my purchase decision making If I do not read online reviews prior to purchase, I am worried about my decision I want to be sure about my purchase decisions	.90 .85 .88	.80/.92	.90 .88 .78	.80/.89
<b>Perceived TripAdvisor Credibility (Qiu et al., 2012)</b> In general, I think TripAdvisor is trustworthy In general, I think TripAdvisor is reliable In general, I think TripAdvisor is credible	.88 .90 .92	.95/.92	.90 .94 .92	.95/.91
<b>Scenario Realism (Gelbrich, G�athke, &amp; Gr�egoire, 2015)</b> I believe that such scenarios are likely to happen in real life I think the online review is realistic	-	.90		.85

*Note: All items were anchored on 7-point strongly disagree/strongly agree Likert scale. <sup>1</sup> Standardized Loadings: all loadings were significant at  $p < .001$*