

Sad Cows and Empty Pockets:

How Reviews, Recommendations, and Word-of-Mouth Can Affect Your Life

Abstract: The opinions of others, be they in-person or in print, play an integral role in determining how we spend our money, which in turn determines every aspect of how we live our lives. In this paper, I explore the ways in which external factors influence internal decisions, from a video game review's affect on my priorities to who we do or do not trust and why. I investigate how the approval of others, even in the anonymity of the internet, can sway an undecided mind. In addition, I look at how a number of these factors – first impressions, written testimonies, visual cues – play into online dating, and how families and companies compel people to stick with what they know. I also examine how small costs can become big expenses and how bargains and deals can be anything but what they seem.

About the Author(s): Kevin Hartford is a student in Dalhousie University's Master of Library and Information Studies program. He has a BA in English from the University of Calgary and a journalism diploma from Niagara College in Ontario. He wrote "Sad Cows and Empty Pockets" as part of his coursework for his Information in Society class.

Introduction

The opinions of others, be they in-person or in print, play an integral role in determining how we spend our money, which in turn determines every aspect of how we live our lives. In this paper, I explore the ways in which external factors influence internal decisions, from a video game review's affect on my priorities to who we do or do not trust and why. I investigate how the approval of others, even in the anonymity of the internet, can sway an undecided mind. In addition, I look at how a number of these factors – first impressions, written testimonies, visual cues – play into online dating, and how families and companies compel people to stick with what they know. I also examine how small costs can become big expenses and how bargains and deals can be anything but what they seem.

Personal Taste

I generally avoid reviews until after I have finished reading a book, watching a film, or playing a video game, at which point I am eager to find out how other people felt. Recently, I finished the popular game *Grand Theft Auto IV* and its expansion title, *Grand Theft Auto IV: The Lost and the Damned*. I was interested to see what the critical consensus on *Damned* was, as I felt it did not hold a candle to the original game.

I started with a review aggregator, Metacritic.com, and checked one of the most favourable reviews *Damned* received, which was from the online version of the British newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*. Even before I had delved into what the *Telegraph* had to say, my eyes were drawn to a sidebar providing links to related articles. One of these links advertised the “weirdest games in the world,” which appealed to me, as after more than two decades of console and computer gaming, I am constantly on the lookout for something new.

One of the “weirdest games in the world,” was a game entitled *Pathologic*. The article described it as “set in a timeless Russian village,” having a “sprawling metaphor-filled story,” containing “imaginative art design,” and possessing “some of the most stifling and morbid atmosphere ever conjured up by a game” (Telegraph, 2011, image 4). The photo accompanying the article was of two sad-looking cows milling about in a field in front of a bizarre, fortress-like barn.

I enjoy cows, farms, philosophy, an atmosphere of dread and, especially, video games of which nobody else has ever heard. I checked the internet for more reviews of *Pathologic*. The scant reviews I was able to find all said the same thing: the mechanics of the game were terrible, but the story was so compelling it stuck with you long after you quit playing. I was intrigued, but, noting the warning of broken gameplay, told myself I wouldn't purchase the game unless it was in the \$10 range. Considering how unpopular *Pathologic* was, I did not imagine it would be too hard to find for that price.

Not only was it hard to find for that price, it was hard to find at all. Even the game's official website did not provide links for purchase. I searched the internet for video game retail websites that offer *Pathologic*, but came up empty-handed. I considered torrenting it, but the file was too big and my internet connection was too slow. I finally stumbled upon a site called Direct2Download, affiliated with the popular review site IGN, that accepted a payment format (PayPal) that would minimize my financial risk in case the site was not legitimate. Final cost to me: \$15.

This happened on a Friday night - the same Friday night I had declined to join my friends at a downtown pub because the cover price was \$7. I felt that \$7 was a bit steep for the privilege of ignoring a band and paying even more money to the establishment for overpriced beer. I have always felt that quality time with loved ones was something that could not be measured or have a price placed upon it, but here I was, foregoing it simply to save \$7. Yet I did not hesitate to drop \$15 on a game I had never heard of or played before.

My rationale went something like this: there would be other times to hang out with friends, but there is only a limited time to acquire this rare video game. While I enjoy the company I keep, keeping their company in this circumstance would come with some significant drawbacks – cover charge, noisy atmosphere, potential hangover, at least \$40 missing from my wallet, and walking. Walking in cold, wet, nighttime Halifax. Playing a game, on the other hand, seemed like a gift that would keep on giving: hours of entertainment, relaxation on the couch, and an excuse to procrastinate doing anything that resembled schoolwork.

It wasn't that the game looked interesting or that it inspired compelling reviews that made me willing to spend money on it. I have seen tons of highly-praised, intriguing-looking games that I never felt particularly motivated to purchase. It was that *Pathologic's* reviews promised the game would change my life *and* frustrate me in terms of gameplay mechanics. This meant there was a reason people stayed away from the game in the first place and would continue to stay away from it in the future – it offered a poor experience for the user. Why did that appeal to me?

It meant I did not have to share.

There's something inherently cool about discovering something others are unaware of, whether by seeing a band play in a bar before they hit it big, or reading a short story in a literary magazine by an author who would later become a *New York Times* bestseller. You can take pride in knowing you had your finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist before your friends and the rest of the world had a chance to catch up to you. However, the appeal is not just bragging rights – anybody can say they have been to Woodstock – it is more internal. It is me, and many

others, convincing ourselves that the things we surround ourselves with reflect who we are or who we want to be. Surrounding ourselves with stuff that is cool means we are cool as well.

In the article “What drives immediate and ongoing word of mouth?” (2011) Jonah Berger and Eric Schwartz write:

(There's the) notion that consumers talk about things that provide social currency. When sharing word-of-mouth, consumers communicate not only information but also something about themselves. Most people want others to think highly of them, and talking about something interesting, versus boring, things should facilitate this goal. Stated another way, people may talk about interesting products, more than less interesting ones, because it makes them seem interesting. (p. 870)

Personal history influences decision-making as much as culture influences our tastes. One concept directly influences another, with the whole process functioning as a set of psychological dominoes set in motion by any number of external and internal factors. These factors determine what information a person considers or disregards when making a purchase, how much they value their own opinion or the opinions of others, and how, in turn, these purchases determine every other facet of a person's life: what food they eat, where they live, and how they get from Point A to Point B. Word of mouth can motivate an unmotivated person to take a particular course of action (buy this, go here). Had I never seen that *Telegraph* article with the sad-looking cows, I would not have been inclined to dig up reviews on *Pathologic*, and I would not have spent \$15 on something I had never seen before while trying to convince my friends that I could not come out due to financial reasons.

Trust

It is strange to think that the reason you ask your friends and family which doctor they would recommend is the same reason grocery stores can get away with charging a dollar more for Rice Krispies than they can for generic “puffed rice.” The same reason you ask a friend or a family member which dentist they prefer is the same reason Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* can go from selling thousands to hundreds of thousands of copies because of an Oprah's Book Club sticker on the front cover. The same reason you ask a friend or a family member who to pick as a lawyer for your upcoming court case for fraud is the same reason your scams worked in the first place: trust. In the article, “The effects of perceived risk on the word-of-mouth communication dyad,” (2006) Tom Lin and Cheng-Hsi Fang write that “word of mouth is believed to be more trustworthy than any other influence, mainly because the communicators are independent in the market, and are usually our friends and family, that is, the people we trust” (p. 1207).

Trust works because your brother is not earning a commission by recommending a doctor, your best friend's stock portfolio is not going to improve if you go to see his dentist, and your

mother's lawyer is not giving her a percentage of his court fees. With certain segments of the population, we are convinced their motives are genuine and that we can understand their reasoning. After all, why would your own parents lie to you? We would not go up to a total stranger on the street and ask what the best home remedy for a sore tooth would be. We would not ask the guy in line next to us at Canadian Tire the best way to cheat on our spouse. We are not going to confide in the girl taking tickets at the movie theatre or the guy in the bathroom stall next to ours. We don't know these people. We don't know what they will do with the information we give. We don't know their histories, what kind of decisions they have made in life, what's driving them, or what they will try to do to us. That is why we stick with what we know, even if it is to our disadvantage.

As Franz Neyer and Frieder Lang write in the article, "Blood is thicker than water: kinship orientation across adulthood" (2003), there is a widely-accepted psychological concept that "blood is thicker than water, implying that kin are generally favoured over non-kin" (p. 310) and that "research on personal relationships over the life course has consistently shown that kin relations, if available, remain relatively important as stable sources for emotional and instrumental support until late in life" (p. 311).

The downside to sticking with what we know is that our friends and family do not always make the right decisions. They can be just as ill-informed as we are. It is easy to stay in a comfortable, unfulfilling relationship, rather than start over with someone new. Tide laundry detergent keeps our socks white, so why change to a cheaper brand that probably will not do as good a job? Who cares if Tide is corrosive and will cost you more in new clothes than you could have saved by switching to a cheaper brand (that works just as well)? That stranger on the street *could* be a doctor for all we know. There is nothing preventing the wealthy elite from dressing up as hobos and spending their days begging for change.

Reviews

If the above examples of doctor, dentist, and lawyer show us anything, it is that for the things that affect our immediate physical well-being and our immediate financial security, we put personal recommendations, or trust, above all else. Internet testimonials, bench ads, space in the Yellow Pages, and other reviews take second place to your brother or sister or favourite uncle saying, "This is the guy you should go to." As Lin and Fang write in their article:

When people face a high-risk buying situation and as the difficulty of the task and the number of information sources increase, they depend heavily on word-of-mouth messages. In fact, risk reduction is the most important motive for people to seek word of mouth communication. Much research has found the higher the perceived risk of buying a product the higher the effect of word of mouth information the receiver's buying decision. (p. 1207)

For matters that are not life-or-death, such as where we dine or drink, what albums we put on our iPods, what books we read, and what we give away as gifts, our first stop is usually reviews, primarily from the internet. “The increasing popularity of blogs, discussion boards, online rate-and-review web sites and other social media now enable thousands of consumers to post frequent reviews of products and services, which many more potential customers read before making purchase decisions” (Khare, Labrecque & Asare, 2011, p. 111). Sites like Yelp can tell us what other users thought of the service, food quality, and prices of a particular restaurant, and Amazon.com can tell us how many users gave the latest Stephen King novel a five-star review.

In his *New York Times* article, “In a race to out-rave rivals, 5-star web reviews go for \$5” (2011), writer David Streitfeld says, “As online retailers increasingly depend on reviews as a sales tool, an industry of fibbers and promoters has sprung up to buy and sell raves for a pittance” (para. 2) He notes that there are people on websites like Fiverr and Craigslist offering to give good reviews for a price. He mentions a freelance writer hired by a “review factory” (para. 5) to write dozens of “must read” (para. 5) reviews for \$10 apiece on Amazon.com. He quotes Trevor Pinch, a sociologist at Cornell University, who published a study on Amazon.com reviews:

Mr. Pinch's interviews with more than a hundred of Amazon's highest-ranked reviewers found that only a few ever wrote anything critical. As one reviewer put it, 'I prefer to praise the ones I love, not damn the ones I did not!' The fact that just about all the top reviewers in his study said they got free books and other material from publishers and other soliciting good notices may have also had something to do with it (para. 19-20).

Hard statistics can buttress the weakest argument (9 out of 10 people would agree with me on this), but statistical shorthand like star ratings and numerical rankings are not necessarily accurate. Reviews on Amazon.com could be written by book-company publicists, the author's friend, or the author himself. Similarly, are reviews from disgruntled customers on Yelp to be trusted? Satisfied customers are more likely to walk away from a pleasant dinner and enjoy the rest of their evening than they are to run home and take to the internet to express their distaste. The subjectivity of personal taste calls either end of the review spectrum (positive and negative) into question.

In the article, “The effects of consumer knowledge on message processing of electronic word-of-mouth via online consumer reviews” (2008), Do-Hyung Park and Sara Kim write that “by showing the average star-rating score and the number of reviewers, review readers, especially those with a low level of expertise, simply can infer the value of the product. This star system is widely used [by online retailers]” (p. 408).

If a user does not know how to spot a fake, they will likely trust whatever information is presented to them, especially if that information is presented to them with convincing supporting evidence. As Kim and Park discuss, the seller rankings and evaluations on eBay can determine the success or failure of a potential sale:

Reviews about a seller mainly mean the reviews on transactions such as product delivery or product placement. These reviews may be critical at the time when consumers make a final buying decision. The common finding of these studies is that the seller's reputation can become an important factor in the bid, and this indicates that there is a strong impact of the seller's reputation on the willingness of buyers to bid on items sold via internet auctions. (p. 408-409)

Dating

Consider the case of a young fictitious woman named Loveless Lucy. Lucy was a mid-twenties student attending NSCAD. While her artistic specialty – clay sculptures of headless birds – gave her some sense of fulfilment, she felt there was something missing from her life: love. Lucy wanted a boyfriend. She did not want to date an artist because the straight boys at school were moody, high maintenance, wore scarves in the summer, and had weird facial hair. Lucy wanted something different, though she was unsure if she wanted to date someone who was a businessman or someone who was more blue collar.

Her first problem was where to meet these people. They did not come to art openings and they were not students. There were no designated blue collar- or business-oriented bars that she knew of, as she knew little about the bar scene. She had difficulty thinking of a particular band either demographic would enjoy, as she knew little about music, so bumping into a date-able stranger at a rock show seemed unlikely. She wanted to avoid online dating out of fear of looking desperate.

In their article, “Online dating in Japan: A test of social information processing theory” (2009), James Farrer and Jeff Gavin state:

There is still some stigma attached to online dating, however, even among our sample of online daters, thirty-two percent of informants said they had not told any of their friends or family about their participation in online dating. Some explained that this was because it “embarrassing.” (p. 409)

Lucy decided to meet a guy through friends. One of her friends had a brother who was a corporate lawyer, which appealed to Lucy because, unlike the guys she knew at NSCAD, a lawyer would be likely to own a home rather than rent a ratty bachelor apartment decorated

with a bare mattress on the floor. Lucy took the lawyer to a suitably upscale martini bar she found on Yelp. The bar was fine, though overpriced, and while the lawyer was well-groomed, amiable, and eloquent, he had the personality of toast.

A coworker of Lucy's introduced her to a friend that was a heating, ventilation, and air conditioning repairman. He did not seem like her type at first, but they shared a few laughs, and Lucy decided that perhaps a sense of humour was an appropriate basis for a relationship. Lucy's friend invited her and the HVAC repairman to a party that weekend. While Lucy was delighted to find him more down-to-earth and personable than the lawyer, the HVAC repairman got drunk way too quickly and smelled vaguely of motor oil. So much for friends' recommendations.

Lucy decided that getting to know someone on an intellectual level might be a better way to go about finding a mate, so she took to the internet. At first she was unsure of which site to choose. Plenty of Fish was a popular site, but though it was free to join, many of the men featured on the site seemed interested in physical relationships only. Match.com, on the other hand, charged users a fee to join. Lucy decided that if users were willing to pony up the \$20 entrance fee, they were probably interested in more than just a physical relationship. "Informants perceived (Match.com) as trustworthy because it is a brand-name company and did not seem to have employees paid to pose as members. Because the site charges a member fee, it excluded people who were not serious about finding a partner" (Farrer & Gavin, 2009, p. 409).

Unfortunately, every guy on Match.com was a dud. None of them looked like their picture, and after a month Lucy cancelled her membership and switched to Plenty of Fish. There she met her future husband, a stevedore with a passion for oil painting and fine wine.

Comparison Shopping

Though Lucy had tremendous difficulty focusing on more than one task at a time, she might have benefited from joining both Plenty of Fish *and* Match.com and choosing from the combined pool of dating possibilities, making an informed decision from all available options. Though it is easy for a woman in a television commercial to line up two shower doors and compare Leading Brand to Brand X, real-life shoppers cannot load their carts with two of everything like Noah's Ark. Budgets restrict you to buying one bottle of ketchup, one box of laundry detergent, and one bag of plastic cups.

In shopping scenarios like this, away from the handy reference power of the internet and apart from opinionated friends or family members, sticking with what is familiar and what is recommended become one and the same due to the influence of advertising. You have seen Leading Brand advertised on television, in print, or on the radio. You have never heard of

Brand X. Sticking with what you know becomes sticking with what is popular. The familiarity of Leading Brand's name serves as its own endorsement, whereas the unfamiliarity of Brand X functions as a potential red flag.

In the article "Resistance to brand switching when a radically new brand is introduced" (2010), Son Lam, Michael Ahearne, Ye Hu, and Niels Schillewaert argue: "Following the long tradition of viewing possessions as the extended self. . . . Customers may develop customer-company identification, or customers believe that they share the same self-definitional attributes with a company" (p. 129). In the same sense that surrounding yourself with cool music and cool people theoretically makes you cool as well, people will seek out the most popular brands of clothing, automobiles, and food in hopes that it will reflect positively on themselves.

"As concrete actualizations of otherwise abstract companies, brands can represent self-relevant social categories with which customers can identify. Identification has important implications for maintaining relationships" (Lam et al., 2010, p. 129). In other words: brand loyalty. Brand loyalty is an attitude of "this has worked before and that is why it will continue to work" or "this is the best and that is why I use it." In the former case, there is a fear that switching to something different will produce lesser quality results. In the latter case, there is a fear that using an inferior product will make the user look inferior. Sticking with a smart, successful brand means a consumer will not risk looking foolish for trying, and failing, with an untested brand. As Lin and Fang write in their article:

People will try to defend their self-image when making a decision. The most important consideration is to avoid the feeling of regret that may result from a poor decision, because it can lead people to question the wisdom of their original decision. (p. 1209)

People are willing to spend a little extra to stick with what they know or what they know will impress. That is brand loyalty.

Hidden Costs

Is spending a little extra money really that big a deal? Are frivolous costs as small as they seem? You may think that going to your neighbour's mechanic is a good idea, but there is a possibility your neighbour has money to burn, knows little about cars, and has never had his or her car fixed by anyone else. Getting a car fixed is a big cost. Big costs need careful consideration. As Lin and Fang write in their article:

People might take more risks when advising or deciding for others, rather than for themselves, as they do not have to suffer directly the possible negative consequences, such as fear of rejection. However, this difference only occurred for low life-impact decisions (e.g., should I give her/him my phone number?) but did not occur when the decisions had particularly serious potential consequences (e.g., should I have sex with her/him?). When making a high-risk

decision, either for themselves or others, people are more likely to consider the potential negative outcomes. (p. 1210)

The problem with this logic is that low-risk decisions seem innocuous at first glance, but over time accumulate into high-risk decisions. Much in the same way a single ocean wave is not enough to wear down the angles on a jagged rock, but enough waves over enough years can wear that rock down into a smooth pebble, the tiniest decision can have tremendous impact on the bigger picture.

Imagine you are a graduate student attending a prestigious East Coast university. Getting quesadillas at your sister's favourite Mexican restaurant is not a very big cost to you – maybe \$15 – nor is having a slice of pizza (\$5) at the new Italian place around the corner from your apartment. A couple of beers on a Friday night (\$15) is not terribly expensive, nor is a cheap bottle of wine on a Saturday night (\$10). A \$45 entertainment budget is fairly modest, but there is a quick lunch (\$10) here and there, a movie (\$10), a used book (\$10) spread throughout the week in addition to your other costs. Now you are at \$75, expanding your entertainment budget to \$300 a month. We will factor in some additional unexpected costs, too – a prescription (\$100), a new pair of shoes (\$100), and a speeding ticket (\$150). Factor in grocery costs, internet and telephone bills, rent, and gas and insurance for your car, and your monthly expenses could be hovering somewhere around \$1200.

You are a full-time graduate student and you have got 12 hours of class a week, but those 12 hours are spread out in such a way that you are in school for four out of every seven days, meaning you only find part-time employment to support yourself financially. Your advisor has recommended you work less than 15 hours a week to prevent yourself from falling behind in school. You manage to find a job that offers you 10 hours of work a week for \$12 an hour. You pull in about \$500 a month, \$2000 a semester. Your expenses over four months add up to \$4800. Luckily, student loans covers your tuition costs and a little bit extra for living expenses, but it is still not enough to keep you from racking up massive credit card debt. Your parents are both retired and can offer little in the way of assistance.

So what do you do? You take on extra hours at work to earn more money, which means less time for school. You stay up later to finish your assignments and get up earlier to go to work, which is starting to affect your health. You decide to save money by getting a roommate in a less desirable area of town. You get rid of your car and make use of your free student bus pass. You are saving money, but the stress of work and school and commuting is wearing you down physically and emotionally.

Consumer Reports magazine featured an article entitled “What that car really costs to own” (2008), in which the company examines the hidden costs of buying a new car and how the

original price tag becomes much bigger when costs are tallied over an extended period of time:

In addition to shopping for a good deal, car buyers should also consider how much a model will cost them to own. That includes depreciation, fuel costs, interest, insurance, sales tax, maintenance and repair costs. At about \$17,500, a Mitsubishi Lancer could cost \$4000 less than a base Mini Cooper to drive home, but when you estimate the total costs of ownership for each year, the Lancer would cost you an additional \$5000 over five years. (para. 2-3)

Even relatively minor decisions (“It’s only five bucks...”) can have a tremendous impact. If one person chooses Leading Brand over Brand X, it is only an extra dollar or two of personal expense. If every consumer in the country chooses Leading Brand over Brand X, that is hundreds of millions of dollars of personal expense that may have been spared on a less popular yet comparable-quality products. As Berger and Schwartz (2011) write: Consumers talk about new running shoes, complain about bad hotel stays, and share information about the best way to get out tough stains. Social talk generates more than 3.3 billion brand impressions each day, and affects everything from the products consumers buy to the drugs physicians prescribe. (p. 869)

Conclusion

It is not just shopping patterns that are affected by this way of thinking; if every apathetic Canadian that passed on visiting a poll on election day actually went out and voted, it could change the political future of our country. Who is in office affects the quality of roads, the taxes on the products we buy, the education we receive, and every other aspect of our lives. Politicians and political parties are like brands that we pick and choose depending on what we think they can do for us. A common excuse I have heard from non-voters is “I didn’t feel like I knew enough about the candidates to make an informed decision,” which is absurd considering how many sources of information offer an opinion on which candidate is the most suitable to vote into office: signs on people’s lawns, television coverage, news articles, public forums and live debates, blogs, twitter feeds. The name you mark on your ballot is heavily informed by reviews and recommendations.

Word of mouth and the opinions of others, whether professional opinions or personal opinions, play an integral role in influencing our spending habits, our decision-making process, and our assessment of worth – whether it be self-image, the stock we put into the choices of others, or how we evaluate commodities of various kinds. In turn, this affects our quality of life by determining what we do or do not bring into our lives, be it people or product.

Playing a narratively-dense, atmospheric video game like *Pathologic* could provide me with the inspiration necessary to write a novel, paint a painting, or compose a symphony. Or it could contribute to my long-term financial ruin. Either way, I would not have wound up buying it had I

never clicked on that picture of those sad cows and read the words accompanying that photo.

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