

Chinese Dianping App Users' Perceptions of Inauthentic User-Generated Information on the Platform: Exploring Attitudes and Behaviors

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Abstract: Third-party review platforms have revolutionized consumer decision-making in the digital age, with (Dianping) serving as a notable example in China. Dianping, which was established in 2003 and offers user-generated content (UGC) on a variety of businesses, has emerged as a key player in the Chinese consumer experience. However, with its popularity, Dianping has also become a battleground for inauthentic information, including incentivized reviews and manipulated rankings. This research investigates Chinese Dianping app users' perceptions of inauthentic information on the platform. This study investigates ten participants' understanding of inauthentic content, their reactions to creating it, and the variables influencing their continued use of Dianping through semi-structured interviews. Participants recognize inauthentic content as containing elements of truth but with exaggeration and bias. They present contradictory attitudes toward generating this kind of content, motivated by individual benefits and explained cognitive dissonance. Despite concerns about authenticity, most participants maintain a level of trust in the platform due to its extensive content repository and a lack of superior alternatives. This study's findings are consistent with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, revealing that users prioritize platform gratifications over authenticity concerns. The fact that Dianping can meet users' informational, convenience, and communicatory needs outweighs the existence of inauthentic information. Despite its limitations, this research explored the complex attitudes and behaviors of Dianping users in navigating a platform where misinformation is pervasive and offers useful insights into how users interact with online review platforms.

Keywords: inauthentic information, online reviews, consumer perception, consumer behaviors, social media, misinformation, uses and gratification theories, user generated content

1. Introduction

In the modern era of digital connectivity, the way consumers make decisions has undergone profound transformations. Third-party review platforms emerged as powerful media, revolutionizing the way individuals choose products and services. One such prominent platform, 大众点评 (Dianping), has become an integral part of the Chinese consumer experience.

Dianping was established in 2003 focusing primarily on food-related content, and gradually expanding the market to other fields of entertainment, for example, performances, salons, hotels etc. As of December 2015, the transaction volume of the Dianping.com platform exceeded 50 billion yuan, and has expanded its branches to cover more than 250 cities in China. Dianping operates on the UGC model, a feature that lends its user-generated reviews a higher degree of trustworthiness, as they were established from real consumer experiences. The reviews could be published in the form of text, videos, and images, and they not only encourage consumers to analyze personal experiences but also encourage other users' consumption choices. Dianping provides users with information about merchants from several perspectives, including individual ratings for taste, ambiance, and service, creating an average score commonly seen by users when viewing an establishment.

Dianping's mechanism prioritizes high-quality reviews with long comments and well-structured photographs, further enhancing consumers' reliance on these reviews. According to a report from Zhongtai Securities, up to August 2018, Dianping had more than 60 million active users per month, covering 900 and more cities outside of China [1].

In the present day, the alliance between Dianping and Meituan, a Chinese group-buying website, has resulted in market consolidation. As a result, Dianping's ratings and rankings are having a wider influence, becoming the major source for users' grasp of information and their consumption psychology and behavior. The appearance of the "Must-Eat List" on Dianping has again solidified its position in consumer choices. The "Must-Eat List" is China's first authoritative culinary ranking based on massive and real user review data.

Dianping's authoritative rankings extend beyond the "Must-Eat List." Unlike the down-to-earth and cost-effective nature of the "Must-Eat List," the "Black Pearl List", which was launched in 2018, gathers authoritative rankings for "high, refined, and avant-garde" establishments, and restaurants featured on this list must undergo evaluation by professionals. Dianping again catches the current trend where consumers are inclined towards niche and specialized experiences. The newly released Hurun Most Valuable China Brands 2019 ranked Dianping 64th with a brand value of 28.5 billion yuan, with a 90% increase ratio [2].

As Dianping's popularity soars, so too does the challenge of misinformation within its rankings and ratings. Businesses, to maintain their impact on the rankings, are offering more incentives to induce consumers to high ratings and reviews, which include but are not limited to giving discounts and free products for exchange. In other words, it's similar to a click-farming process generated by consumers. It becomes fertile ground for fabricated reviews and manipulated ratings, potentially skewing the credibility that users place on these platforms. In a landscape where consumers are seeking accurate and authentic information, the prevalence of misinformation raises significant questions about the integrity of these rankings. Consumers, in this case, are trapped in a complex situation of realizing the inauthenticity of the information but still relying on it, either because of habit or the fact that there are minimum sources of trustworthy information.

2. Literature Review

Dianping is not the only platform that has users facing the problem of misinformation, and, in the realm of online content, credibility has emerged as a paramount concern, with user-generated content (UGC) often at the center of debates regarding its reliability. In one study, Ayeh investigated the credibility perceptions of user-generated content (UGC) in the context of online travel planning. This study analyzes how these perceptions affect the attitudes and intentions of the users toward UGC utilization in the travel planning process. The result shows source credibility has a strong influence on attitude but a weak direct effect on behavioral intention, and evidence in favor of perceptual homophily as a significant factor in determining both credibility and attitude [3]. Studying the bigger picture, Peng researched how consumers perceive instances of deception in online reviews and how

these perceptions impact their subsequent purchasing decisions. The research focuses on examining aspects such as consumers' levels of awareness, suspicion, and ability to identify deceptive practices. The study's findings reveal that the extent of negativity differs among various manipulation tactics, and distinct types of manipulative practices exhibit variations in terms of perceived level of deception, ease of identification, and their influence on consumers' purchase intentions [4].

Li in another study used a three-phase methodology in his research to detect traditional click farming that targets content-generated social networks. Click farming is the practice of artificially generating clicks, views, likes, shares, or engagement on online content through fraudulent means to boost the apparent popularity or visibility of content. His findings detected that click-farming groups have generally close user relationships, and higher-ranked stores have a higher percentage of phony reviews [5]. Though traditional click farming differs from the types of misinformation that this research will be discussing, they still share similarities in characteristics. Wang in another study worked on the effects of consumers' review credibility perception caused by online review fraud on product sales [6]. In a broader context, countless research about false information has been done. For example, Zannettou studied the public perception of false information, its propagation, and its influence on the political stage [7]. In Guo's research, perspectives and trends of false information detection on Social Media have been discussed to deal with the situation [8].

Different from all previous research, the misinformation that this research would focus on was neither click farming nor any kind of malicious control of consumer reviews. It's a kind of relatively mild way of implanting information that could potentially direct what users think. Consumers are themselves involved in the process of giving out inauthentic reviews due to the inducement of businesses. Consumers likely recognize the reviews as doing the businesses a favor, or simply a process for exchange of extra goods. Furthermore, the reviews written under this process are not completely made up, but an exaggeration of reality. A high rating and glowing comments would also have an impact on an operation's ranking on Dianping. Since the situation of positive reviews in exchange for incentives has become a norm on Dianping, a research gap appears in learning a consumer's perception of this kind of inauthentic information. The aim of this research, therefore, is to study Chinese Dianping app users' perceptions of inauthentic information on the Platform.

3. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews serve as a crucial data collection method for this research to delve into the perceptions of the participants. The aim is to gain in-depth insights into their attitudes, experiences, and opinions concerning the presence of misleading or deceptive content. Interviews were chosen as the data collection method because of their ability to provide direct and contextualized information. Furthermore, interviews go back and forth between the participants and the research. This flexibility enables immediate modifications and allows for more efficiency and a deeper understanding of the situation. The participants in this research are active users of the Chinese Dianping app who have engaged with content suspected of being inauthentic and become the users who generated that content. The interviews are conducted with participants who are between 18-40 and are familiar with the functions of Dianping and the process of writing reviews.

The interview guide comprises a comprehensive set of open-ended questions designed to explore users' experiences and perceptions of encountering inauthentic information on the Dianping app. The interview would begin with more general questions that could trigger the memories of participants and allow them to recall any related incidents or details. For example, the interview would begin by asking participants to recall their experience of using the app and writing reviews, whether the information on it matches reality or not. The interview would gradually deepen into more specific questions that could further investigate the feelings and inner thoughts of participants. For example, asking the participants to describe their feelings when they were asked to generate content that went

against their original intention and the reason they felt that way. Eight participants were interviewed until the study saturated the richness of the data, but the study stopped at 10 interviews to ensure that no vital data could be collected.

The interview process included conducting face-to-face or online interviews with participants. Interviews are scheduled at mutually agreed-upon times, ensuring minimal disruption to participants' routines. Since the study required participants to be users in the region where Dianping is familiar, all participants have Chinese as their first language, therefore the interviews are conducted in Chinese. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, allowing for accurate transcription and analysis. All of the verbatim transcription from the interviews was translated and provided to the interviewee for confirmation by their side. In such a transcription methodology, the reliability and validity of the qualitative data could be guaranteed. Only one participant replied to the transcript with a small clarification. The current study used a manifest analysis approach in addition to thematic content analysis (TCA). In a manifest analysis (semantic level), the researcher describes the data acquired as the text indicates, rather than attempting to decipher the text's hidden meaning as in latent analysis [9].

Participants have consent before participating in interviews, ensuring that they are fully aware of the research's purpose and their rights. Participants' real names, appearance, and voices will not be exposed unless asked for.

4. Result

All participants were Chinese citizens, seven were female, and three and male, ranging between 18-40. 70% of participants chose to do an online interview. All of the participants have experienced being asked by businesses to generate positive reviews and ratings without the original intention to do so, either in exchange for a discount, free products, or just doing the business a favor. After a thorough analysis of the statements, around 250 codes are labeled. These codes are classified into four major themes to address the research question.

4.1. Theme One: General Perception of Dianping Users Regarding Inauthentic Reviews on Platform

The initial theme summarizes participants' responses regarding their understanding of inauthentic information and how it differs from conventional fake reviews on the platform.

Understanding Inauthentic Information

Participants in this study shared their insights into what they consider inauthentic information on Dianping. They distinguished it from conventional fake reviews, and recognize inauthentic information contains elements of truth but is often exaggerated and biased.

"Inauthentic information is, for me, not completely false or faked. Many times when I was asked to write a nice review, I wrote parts of the business which I really few good, but only in an emotional way. It's not like the paid posters, which they have never been to in person. It's not genuine, I never feel good enough about those restaurants that initiate me to write a comment that praises them. It's guided afterward" (Female, 20 years old)

4.1.1. Detecting Inauthentic Information

Most participants expressed confidence in their ability to identify reviews written by paid individuals, but they found it more challenging to distinguish between reviews generated by genuine consumers. Some factors that contributed to the confusion included high ratings, lengthy reviews, and the inclusion of pictures.

“It is very confusing. High ratings, long reviews, and pictures are also related to the ranking of a business, which means the influence (of this kind of information) is bigger. Other participants further pointed out different situations. For example, consumers would rather copy the text generated by businesses so that they wouldn’t bother to write themselves.” (Female, 26 years old)

“Sometimes the restaurant requires a word limit in the comment and three pictures to get a discount. Most of the time I don’t know what to say, so I give my phone to the staff and let them write it for me. Other times they have pre-edited text that I could copy and paste. These comments are easier to be identified and less persuasive, I think.” (Male, 19 year old)

4.1.2. Attitudes Towards Inauthentic vs. Fake Comments

Participants’ attitudes varied when asked about the distinctions between inauthentic and fake comments. Some participants reported treating these two types of information differently, while others considered them equivalent in their impact and purpose.

“There’s a big difference. One is made out of nowhere and one has at least some real thing in it. Almost all businesses do it (bribed reviews) now, so it’s not a big deal to me.” (Male, 21 years old)

“...there’s no difference to me. People are paid to generate good things about a place, even if they are not paid they do it as a favor for the business, which makes it even less reliable. They all aimed to confuse me and attract me, to build pretty data, it’s the same initiative and serves the same purpose.” (Female, 19 years old)

“I think this situation (bribed reviews) is because big businesses, especially chained businesses, cannot buy reviews blatantly, so they instead pay the money to consumers and let them do it in a less obvious way. So I see paid posters in tiny restaurants sometimes, but not in big businesses.”

4.1.3. Expectations of Growth

All participants have observed the increasing prevalence of inauthentic information on the platform, and most expressed concerns about it. Many believed that businesses were finding new ways to incentivize customers to leave positive reviews.

“...when I came back to China, almost every restaurant I went to had signs that told you about free snacks for comments. I only left for half a year, and it seems like the business has made a lot of progress.” (Female, 20 years old)

4.2. Theme Two: Consumer Response and Sentiments Regarding the Presence and Creation of Inauthentic Information

4.2.1. Perceptions of Inauthentic Information

Participants in this theme shared their perceptions and reactions to the presence of inauthentic information on the Dianping platform. Without exception, they expressed discomfort and annoyance when approached to write reviews, but some also showed empathy toward businesses and their staff.

“The waitress stood right next to me and stared at my phone, I didn’t know how to reject her request. There was one time that this staff stopped twice at my table to ask me if I finished writing the comments, and I didn’t even finish my food. Even though I was told that they have a job target to meet, it still gives me pressure.” (Female, 19 years old)

“...if I really feel great about the service or experience, I would automatically make note of something. It’s rude for them to ask so directly, but I never say no to it. Businesses are hard to run these days, and I understand.”

Contradictingly, most participants do not reject the idea of being a part of creating ingenuine content and do not decline involvement in such a process overall. The explanation appears to be that users take only what they need from the process, and show accustomed to this group behavior.

“...I get free food. If what they give matches my taste, I wouldn't be happier to do that. And everyone does the same. I benefit, business benefits, so I can't really be strict about that.” (Male, 21 years old)

“I feel like it's inevitable that this occurs. That's how the platform sets things up, and businesses have to compete and survive. This may sound like an excuse, but I told myself I am following the wave.” (Female, 26 years old)

4.2.2. Impact on Trust

While participants admitted it's challenging for them to feel negatively about the situation when personal benefits are involved, up to 90% of them claimed that if asked to write a review for a business, their trust in all types of information related to that business would decrease. About 50% indicated that they now primarily rely on negative reviews for decision-making, while a few adopted a selective approach when reading comments.

“...the internet is not one hundred percent true, but it feels different when you are involved in it. It's easy to assume that everything is made up. If I want to find a place to relax, I focus on pictures to see the environment. If I'm just hungry, I look for a restaurant with the shortest distance. There must be something true, so skip the words.” (Female, 40 years old)

“I only check negative comments now, they are much more authentic. Negative reviews have a much smaller chance of being made up. I see if I can accept them, as I may still go to a restaurant if people mostly complain about it being overpriced. It's a way that I learn to adapt to the mingling of information.” (Female, 21 years old)

4.2.3. Level of Trust and Influence Remain in the Dianping Platform

Despite the decline in trust for individual businesses, approximately 70% of participants maintained their original level of trust in the Dianping platform as a whole. They attributed this result to two primary factors: the extensive repository of information available on the platform and the absence of alternative platforms for accessing such information.

Furthermore, 90% of participants claimed that despite their awareness of potential inauthenticity, the platform's influence on their decision-making persisted and even increased. Participants shared a common explanation of their pervasive perception that the internet is filled with false and deceptive information. As long as this misleading information remains within a tolerable range, the Dianping platform continues to provide valuable references and guidance.

4.3. Theme Three: Factors Affecting Platform Usage

This theme delves into the factors that influence consumers' continued usage of a third-party review platform like Dianping. Despite recognizing certain authenticity issues, participants actively engage with the platform. All participants report either consistent or an increase in usage in the past year. Several key factors emerge as instrumental in explaining their continued usage: the platform's richness and diversity of information and services, and the exclusive discounts it provides. Authority does not seem to be a determining factor.

4.3.1. Richness and Diversity of Information and Services

Participants highlight Dianping's role as an indispensable part of their lives due to its expansive range of information and services. They appreciate the platform's constant expansion into various domains, such as entertainment and travel, which allows users to find, book, and share a wide array of experiences.

"The reason why I ignored the platform's behavior of pushing consumers to write reviews is because, first, this app is already irreplaceable, and second, it's necessary in my life. I can feel that Dianping is constantly expanding its field and service. You can almost find and book and share everything you could think of as entertainment. They even have travel books for tourists now. They have rankings about everything, taste, environment, the best thin noodles, they even have a classification of a tiny local restaurant." (Female, 21 years old)

4.3.2. Exclusive Discounts and Offers

The attraction of exclusive discounts and offers plays an important role in retaining users. Participants appreciate the cost-saving opportunities provided by Dianping, where they can access discounts on various products and services, such as meals at restaurants.

"I like the discount. They offer you a set of food at a lower price. There was one time that it was up to 50% off. I keep going back on Dianping to check if there are new discount sets. It's a system, they have everything prepared for you, so I just pay." (Male, 19 years old)

Notably, participants have developed a level of tolerance for the occasional emergence of inauthentic content. They recognize that these contents don't significantly affect them from using the platform. The well-established and irreplaceable nature of Dianping's ecosystem outweighs the presence of inauthentic content. Participants seem to understand that, in a digital landscape filled with information of varying credibility, they can still find valuable references and guidance on the platform.

5. Discussion

As technology penetrated into people's daily lives, their dependence on and acceptance of some of its applications has grown, such as third-party review platforms that offer user suggestions and diverse information. Consumers are increasingly convinced of the effectiveness of Dianping and its irreplaceability, as evidenced by the answers of the majority of our participants. The findings revealed that participants have ostensibly conflicting responses towards the process of being asked and generating the content, and have expressed a mixed attitude towards inauthentic and fake comments. However, the issue arises when participants report the increasingly widespread and aggressive behaviors of businesses to gain favorable reviews. The primary reason behind that is businesses have come to recognize the influence of user-generated content on Dianping's rankings and visibility. Furthermore, the Dianping platform has also recognized consumer reviews more persuasiveness than sponsored content on advertising. Accordingly, a study in 2019 pointed out that consumers respond more negatively to a brand if sponsored content is used than user-generated content [10]. Businesses have grown sophisticated in their approach, avoiding the apparent nature of paid writers to be discovered by users. With that encouraged, the competitive nature of the platform drives businesses to engage in such practices. As more businesses offer incentives for reviews, others feel compelled to follow suit to remain competitive in the marketplace.

In the second theme, It becomes evident that while users express discomfort and annoyance when asked to compose reviews, they also exhibit a level of acceptance and even engagement in generating such content. The participants' responses, particularly their acceptance of participating in creating inauthentic content, despite the explanation of engaging in personal benefits, can be effectively explained through the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory in psychology. Cognitive dissonance

theory points out that people feel psychologically uncomfortable when they have conflicting attitudes or behaviors that go against their core values or beliefs and might alter their beliefs to lessen this discomfort or look for information that supports their behavior [11]. In the context of Dianping and the creation of inauthentic reviews, cognitive dissonance arises because the behavior of generating reviews contradicts their belief in providing honest and unbiased reviews. In an attempt to balance these conflicting beliefs and behaviors, participants view their behavior as a pragmatic response to a flawed system, and conformity also helps to lessen the dissonance. Considering the trust dilemma, participants are aware that incentivized reviews may not be entirely honest, however with the lack of substitution, some participants adopt a selective approach to taking information in order to minimize the dissonance. Uses and gratification theory also applies in this context. This theory investigates why people actively choose and use media to satisfy particular gratifications and needs. They make use of the platform to meet their informational, recreational, and utilitarian needs, therefore deeply attached to it, and selectively expose themselves to information that is most needed on Dianping. In a study discussing the use of social media from the perspectives of uses and gratifications theory and perceived interactivity, Hsu found out that information-seeking gains a positive influence on human-community interaction and brings satisfaction to individuals [12]. In another research that Whiting has done about social media using the uses and gratification approach, she explores seven themes of the uses and gratifications consumers receive in social media [13]. Among the themes, information seeking, communicatory utility, and convenience utility could be applied to the participants regarding their usage of Dianping. The continuing strong influence of Dianping's information on participants, despite only being perceived to have moderate authority, could be understood through the hypodermic needle model. The Hypodermic Needle Model, also known as the Magic Bullet Theory, contends that media messages are injected like bullets into the minds of passive audiences, influencing their perceptions and actions [14]. Participants trust the platform because it provides them with a wide array of reviews and recommendations, reinforcing the idea that they are receiving collective wisdom rather than relying on isolated opinions. Even though Dianping's authority is not very strong, it might be enough to affect participants' choices. Dianping has the powerful advantage of owning an extensive content repository. Furthermore, without the presentation of superior alternatives, passive audiences are more likely to accept the information given to them.

With the Perception of Widespread Deception on the Internet, uses and gratifications theory could again confirm the factors affecting the usage of Dianping. Participants care mostly about the resources that a platform could provide them while considering authenticity to be a minor issue. As long as Dianping as a third-party review and entertainment information gathering platform satisfies their information, convenience, and communicatory needs, participants are likely to prioritize these gratifications over concerns about authenticity.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study explored the perceptions and behaviors of Chinese consumers using the Dianping platform, discovering their understanding of inauthentic reviews, responses to generating such content, and the factors influencing their continued usage despite authenticity concerns. Participants can distinguish inauthentic reviews from blatantly fake ones. Inauthentic content was seen as containing elements of truth but with significant exaggeration and emotional bias. Most participants report that it is still challenging to recognize such reviews. They displayed a conflicting attitude toward generating inauthentic content. While they expressed discomfort and annoyance when asked to do so, many still engaged in this behavior, mainly driven by personal benefits. Some participants coped with the trust dilemma of Dianping by paying more attention to negative reviews, perceiving them as more authentic. About 70% of participants continued their trust level in the Dianping platform despite doubts about its authority. This was attributed to Dianping's substantial

review archive and the absence of strong competition. Participants also emphasized the larger context of widespread internet deception, which results in an acceptance of a certain amount of false information.

Participants' continued usage of Dianping was influenced by the platform's rich and diverse services, exclusive discounts, and its irreplaceable role in their daily lives. These results are in line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which emphasizes that users put platform gratifications prior to concerns about authenticity. Dianping's ability to meet users' information, convenience, and communicatory needs outweighs the presence of inauthentic content. This reveals the platform's resilience in the face of evolving consumer perceptions and behaviors. Limitations include that despite providing rich qualitative data, the relatively small sample size of only ten participants might not fully reflect the variety of viewpoints among Dianping users. Furthermore, the reliance on participants' recall of past experiences introduces potential recall bias. Self-reported data can also be influenced by social desirability bias, where participants may give answers they think are more likely to be accepted by others rather than those that reflect their true feelings.

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