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**PREDICTING HELPFULNESS OF ONLINE CUSTOMER REVIEWS:  
MODERATING EFFECT OF PRODUCT PRICE**

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***Abstract***

*The increasing use of Online Customer Reviews, as a reliable source of information for making purchase decisions, has led to a recent surge in research, related to review helpfulness. Given its limited research in the Indian context, this study aims to determine the factors influencing review helpfulness and investigate the role of product price as a moderator. A total of 1,080 reviews of 36 popular mobile phones, from eight brands, were collected from Flipkart.com, one of the largest online retailers in India. The results revealed high average review rating (4.43 out of 5) where 65.3 percent of reviews contained pure positive content whereas only 30.5 percent contained neutral content, indicating consumers' general tendency to share positive feedback. The reviews of high-priced mobile phones were more systematically evaluated (higher likes, dislikes, helpfulness) and they were also more comprehensive, persuasive and moderate (higher review length, pictures, neutral content). The linear regression analysis found that central review content factors (length, pictures and valence) contribute to review helpfulness rather than peripheral factors (reviewer name, rating inconsistency). Price played a moderating role only in the relationship between review length and helpfulness where longer reviews were found more*

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*helpful for high-priced mobile phones. Based on the study findings, appropriate recommendations are suggested for better design of review systems to accurately capture consumer experiences and make reviews more helpful to consumers and businesses..*

**Keywords:** *Online Customer Reviews, Review Helpfulness, Review Length, Pictures, Valence, Reviewer Characteristics, Product Price*

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## **1. Introduction**

With the continuous rise of digital media and ecommerce, Online Customer Reviews (OCRs) have emerged as one of the most powerful Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) communications. OCRs can be defined as product evaluations, posted by consumers on company or third-party websites (**Mudambi and Schuff, 2010**), which can help future consumers to make better purchase decisions (**Park, 2018**). Industry statistics show that almost 90 percent of online shoppers read customer reviews before making a purchase. OCRs serve as a crucial tool for businesses to earn consumer trust since they are perceived to have greater authenticity than expert reviews and seller information (**Baek et al., 2012**). Hence ecommerce retailers incorporate customer reviews in their websites to enhance consumer perception of credibility and usefulness (**Kwok and Xie, 2016**), besides improving consumer traffic, stickiness and social presence of the website (**Mudambi and Schuff, 2010**).

Hundreds of OCRs are posted every day, especially for popular high-involvement product such as mobile phone (**Ngo-Ye et al., 2017**). Besides, reviews from diverse consumers significantly vary in terms of argument quality and usefulness (**Cheung and Ho, 2015**). Hence many retail websites provide feedback mechanism, which allows their shoppers to vote if the review was helpful. This review voting

system can enable consumers to efficiently access helpful reviews and skip unnecessary information while making a purchase decision. Reviews, with higher number of votes, are considered most popular and featured on the product front page because they have higher visibility compared to reviews with fewer or no votes (**Kwok and Xie, 2016**). Since these reviews have significant impact on consumer attitude and purchase behaviour (**Cheung and Ho, 2015**), it is essential to investigate what makes a review helpful for consumers.

## **2. Literature Review**

Predicting review helpfulness (% of helpful votes) is an emerging field of study in marketing, big data analytics, information processing and decision support systems (**Chatterjee, 2019**). Past research has primarily adopted the dual process theories; Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), to explain the factors predicting the helpfulness of OCRs (**Baek et al., 2012; Chen, 2016**). According to **Chen and Chaiken (1999)**, both HSM and ELM are the most influential information processing models, explaining persuasion and attitude change through two routes; (1) 'central' or 'systematic' processing where an individual exerts considerable cognitive effort to evaluate the information and (2) 'peripheral' or 'heuristic' processing where minimal cognitive effort involving simple informational cues are used to

comprehend and validate the message. Consequently, the factors affecting the helpfulness of reviews can be broadly classified into two categories: Central or Review content-related factors and Peripheral or Reviewer-related factors (Srivastava and Kalro, 2019).

The central factors consist of review content characteristics such as word count or length, number of images, review rating, message valence and readability as determinants of review helpfulness. Past research indicated that longer reviews contain more information and hence are perceived to be more helpful (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010; Baek et al., 2012; Chen, 2016). Likewise, reviews with images are deemed more helpful (Cheung and Ho, 2015; Srivastava and Kalro, 2019; Wu et al., 2021). The effect of review/star rating remains largely inconclusive where some studies indicated that higher ratings increase helpfulness (Yin et al., 2016), while others confirmed the negativity bias, suggesting greater effect of negative ratings (Cui et al., 2012). Few studies substantiated the effect of review extremity, indicating a positive and non-linear relationship with helpfulness (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010; Chen, 2016; Srivastava and Kalro, 2019). Message valence represents the evaluative direction of a review content which can be positive, negative or neutral. While some researchers found positive reviews to be more helpful (Salehan and Kim, 2016; Pentina et al., 2018), few others suggest negative content as more impactful, confirming the negativity bias (Kwok and Xie, 2016).

The peripheral factors consist of source or reviewer-related characteristics such as reviewer name (identity disclosure), expertise, number of followers and contribution in terms of number of reviews. Past studies have found that when readers perceive the reviewer to be

trustworthy and knowledgeable with strong social presence, their reviews are considered more helpful (Baek et al., 2012; Cheung and Ho, 2015; Chen, 2016; Kwok and Xie, 2016; Lee and Choeh, 2016; Srivastava and Kalro, 2019; Chatterjee, 2019). Besides the central and peripheral factors, past research has also investigated the direct and moderating effect of product type by exploring the differences in predictors of review helpfulness for different products (Park, 2018) or broadly categorizing them as search and experience products (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010; Baek et al., 2012; Chen, 2016). Baek et al. (2012) analysed the effect of product price on review helpfulness which emphasizes the need for in-depth investigation of the role of product price in review helpfulness literature.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Since Online Customer Reviews significantly influence consumer purchase behaviour and product sales, it is imperative to understand the factors that make a review helpful. For a constantly evolving and high-involvement product like mobile phone where consumers largely rely on Online Customer Reviews to make a purchase decision, investigating the various factors influencing review helpfulness is important for ecommerce retailers and mobile phone brands. In the present hyper-connected world where everyone shares the information through online community sites and provides feedback, a single review can create a massive impact on sales and brand image, making it essential to investigate the factors driving consumers to provide Online Customer Reviews. Failure to analyse the factors, driving consumers to provide Online Customer Reviews, could lead to lower brand image and lesser customer turnover rate. Hence this problem area has been taken up for the study.

#### 4. Need for the Study

The literature review on the Customer Online Reviews revealed that there is limited research on review helpfulness in the Indian context and none of them focused on mobile phone reviews specifically. Besides, very few studies analysed the combined impact of central factors (Length of the Online Customer reviews, Pictures involved in the reviews, Valence), peripheral factors (Name of the Reviewer and rating consistency) and product price on review helpfulness. These research gaps inspired this study.

#### 5. Objectives of the Study

This study explores the factors influencing the helpfulness of mobile phone reviews in India. The specific objectives are:

1. To assess the effect of central factors (review length, pictures, valence) and peripheral factors (reviewer name, rating inconsistency) on review helpfulness;
2. To examine the differences in review helpfulness and its predictors based on product price;
3. To analyse the moderating effect of product price on the relationship between review helpfulness and its predictors.

#### 6. Hypotheses of the Study

H<sub>1</sub>: The review length has significant effect on review helpfulness.

H<sub>2</sub>: The presence of picture in the review has significant effect on review helpfulness.

H<sub>3</sub>: The presence of pure positive content increases review helpfulness compared to pure negative content.

H<sub>4</sub>: The presence of neutral (both positive & negative) content increases review helpfulness compared to pure negative content.

H<sub>5</sub>: The disclosure of reviewer's name has significant effect on review helpfulness.

H<sub>6</sub>: The rating inconsistency (difference between review rating and product average rating), has significant effect on review helpfulness.

H<sub>7</sub>: The effect of central factors on review helpfulness is stronger for high-priced products while the effect of peripheral factors is stronger for low-priced products.

### 7. Research Methodology

#### 7.1 Sample Selection

The data sample for this study comprised the customer reviews of 36 popular mobile phones on Flipkart.com, belonging to seven different brands (Redmi, Samsung, realme, POCO, OPPO, Infinix and Apple), in the price range of Rs. 6,999 to Rs. 41,999. A systematic random sampling technique was used to select the reviews based on the brands purchased, price range, customers with large review responses etc. For every mobile phone, the reviews were sorted out, based on 'most helpful' option and top 30 reviews were selected. Overall, a total of 1,080 reviews were collected. For every review, details such as mobile phone model, price, overall average rating, reviewer name, review rating, content, pictures, number of likes and dislikes were collected. The reviews, with less than 10 likes, were eliminated because the helpfulness (likes/total votes) derived was not meaningful (Baek et al., 2012). Thus, 944 reviews were used for further analysis.

#### 7.2 Source of Data

The source of data for this study was Flipkart.com, which is one of the largest online retailers in India. Specifically, the data were collected from online reviews hosted by Consumers, who recently purchased mobile phones through Flipkart.com.

### 7.3 Period of Study

The reviews were collected from E-commerce website Flipkart.com, from 01<sup>st</sup> November 2021 to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

### 7.4 Tool used in the Study.

Descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis, in SPSS version 26, were employed to achieve the research objectives. The frequency distribution of the respondents was analysed, using the descriptive statistics, based on the review variables, as mentioned in **Table 1** and the linear regression analysis was performed to identify the significant predictors of review helpfulness, as described in **Table 2**.

## 8. Data Analysis and Interpretation of Predicting Helpfulness of Online Customer Reviews

The results of descriptive statistics of the collected reviews are presented in **Table 1**. The helpfulness of reviews ranged from 29.78 to 100 percent with a high mean of 78.85 percent, for the total number of reviews collected. The results of descriptive statistics were analysed, on the basis of review rating, review length, likes, dislikes, helpfulness, overall average product rating and price. Price of the mobile phone has been found to have the highest mean value when compared to other variables. Hence it was analysed in detail in the next table, by testing the differences in review variables based on product price. It was noted that reviewers for high priced mobiles reported the highest mean value and the rating inconsistency (Review Rating-Overall Average rating) reported the lowest mean value. Review Valence was also analysed as a part of the descriptive statistics. Comparison of review factors, based on price (**Table 2**) revealed that reviews of high-priced mobile phones received significantly higher review rating, with the mean value of 4.50 when

compared to low priced mobile, higher review length, with the mean value of 80.0, higher likes, with the mean value of 1264.6, higher dislikes, with the mean value of 237.1, higher helpfulness with the mean value of 81.7 and higher overall product rating, with the mean value of 4.45. The price of high priced mobile is directly related to the importance or the weightage one attributors towards the products. Value is always the benefit that a customer perceives about the product, and the price is expected to be a good indicator of product quality.

The linear regression results, presented in **Table 3**, show that the four hypothesized central factors were found to be significant predictors of review helpfulness since their corresponding p-values were less than the threshold of 0.05. The message valence emerged as the most important determinant and the presence of positive and neutral content in reviews enhanced its helpfulness. Positive content had reported the highest significant positive effect on review helpfulness, with the regression co-efficient ( ) of 15.215. In other words, if the review consists of positive phrases or sentiments, the review helpfulness could increase by 15.2%. Hence hypothesis **H<sub>3</sub>** i.e., 'The presence of pure positive content increases review helpfulness compared to pure negative content', was validated. Likewise, neutral content also had significant positive effect, with a regression co-efficient ( ) of 13.387. This indicates that if the review comprises both positive and negative information and sentiments (i.e., neutral content), the review helpfulness could increase by 13.4%. Thus, hypothesis **H<sub>4</sub>** i.e., 'The presence of neutral (both positive & negative) content increases review helpfulness compared to pure negative content,' was validated.

The review length had significant negative effect on review helpfulness, with a regression

co-efficient ( ) of -0.04. In other words, long reviews, with more content could reduce its helpfulness i.e., an increase of one word in the review reduces its helpfulness by 0.04%. Generally, customers do not read the reviews that are too long since it is time consuming and it is perceived to have low credibility as the existing users may not take much time to write unless they have higher degree of brand loyalty. Thus, the hypothesis **H<sub>1</sub>** i.e., ‘The review length, has significant effect on review helpfulness was validated. Finally, the presence of pictures had significant positive effect on review helpfulness, with a regression co-efficient ( ) of 1.718. In other words, if the review has pictures, then its helpfulness could increase by 1.7%. Thus, the hypothesis **H<sub>2</sub>** i.e., ‘The presence of picture in the review has significant effect on review helpfulness, was validated. Regarding the peripheral factors, both reviewer name and rating inconsistency (difference between review rating and product average rating) did not have significant effect on review helpfulness since their p-value was above 0.05 thresholds. Hence the hypothesis **H<sub>5</sub>**. ‘The disclosure of reviewer’s name has significant effect on review helpfulness’ and **H<sub>6</sub>** ‘Rating inconsistency has significant effect on review helpfulness,’ were rejected.

Finally, hypothesis **H<sub>7</sub>** postulated the moderating effect of product price on the relationship between four central and two peripheral factors. Regarding review helpfulness of these six relationships, price was found to be a significant moderator only in the relationship between review length and review helpfulness, with a regression co-efficient of 0.023 and p-value being less than 0.05. In other words., higher the price of mobile phone, greater the positive relationship between review length and review helpfulness i.e., an increase of one word in review results in an increase of 0.023% in its

helpfulness, in the case of high-priced phones. But price did not have any moderating effect on the relationship between other five factors and review helpfulness. Hence the hypothesis **H<sub>7</sub>** was rejected. Overall, the linear regression results revealed that four hypotheses **H<sub>1</sub>**, **H<sub>2</sub>**, **H<sub>3</sub>** and **H<sub>4</sub>** postulating the effect of four central factors on review helpfulness, were found to be significant whereas the two peripheral factors were not significant predictors of review helpfulness.

## 9. Findings of the Study

This study, exploring review helpfulness in the context of mobile phones, validates few existing findings as well as offers new insights into relation between its predictors and the moderating effect of price. The higher review rating and majority of reviews (65.3 percent) containing pure positive message, suggest that majority of consumers tend to share positive feedback, under normative pressure (**Baek et al., 2012; Chen, 2016**). The results revealed that reviews of high-priced mobiles were more systematically evaluated (higher likes, dislikes, helpfulness) and they were more comprehensive, persuasive and moderate (higher review length, pictures, more neutral content).

The emergence of positive content in reviews as the most important predictor of helpfulness, discounts the negativity bias (**Kwok and Xie, 2016**) and validates prior findings that positive reviews are found more helpful than negative reviews (**Salehan and Kim, 2016; Pentina et al., 2018**). The neutral content also positively influenced review helpfulness, which confirms past findings that a review, containing both positive and negative arguments, is more trustworthy and helpful (**Salehan and Kim, 2016**). Consumers tend to perceive reviews, that confirm their prior beliefs to be more helpful (**Yin et al., 2016**). Assuming that consumers

generally read reviews of products they intend to know and purchase, these findings suggest that positive or neutral reviews confirm their choice and beliefs, increasing their perceived helpfulness.

The results further validated the claim that a picture is worth a thousand words (**Cheung and Ho, 2015; Srivastava and Kalro, 2019; Wu et al., 2021**) since images in reviews make them more helpful. It also revealed that lengthy reviews reduce their helpfulness, which is in contrast to past findings that longer reviews are more informative and useful (**Baek et al., 2012; Chen, 2016**). However, for high-priced mobiles, review length had reported positive effect on helpfulness, indicating that consumers adopt the systematic processing route by investing more cognitive effort and seeking more information from reviews when they plan to purchase high-priced products. This finding supplements the dual process theories; HSM and ELM by validating that central factor 'review length' did exert stronger effect on helpfulness in cases of high-investment purchase. The results also showed that peripheral factors like 'reviewer name' and 'rating inconsistency' did not influence review helpfulness, contradicting few prior studies (**Baek et al., 2012**) and establishing the dominance of central factors in predicting helpfulness.

## 10. Suggestions

This study provides crucial insights into consumers' perception of helpful reviews. The website administrators can utilize the regression results, to build a review ordering algorithm, to identify helpful reviews and push them to top to facilitate better decision-making. Since central factors determine review helpfulness, online retail and review websites can streamline content creation by incorporating a section for overall feedback and separate sections for

important product attributes so that consumers can enter attribute-specific ratings and feedback. Similarly, sections for pros and cons can facilitate balanced feedback. This can improve review content organization, comprehensiveness and readability which can enhance review helpfulness. The websites can also feature ratings and sort out reviews based on product attributes (For instance; attributes such as processing speed, camera, battery, display, storage and price for mobile phones). To make reviews more helpful to consumers and sellers, the review systems must be effectively designed to accurately capture consumer experiences.

## 11. Conclusion

This study is the first to investigate review helpfulness, based on mobile phone reviews from Flipkart.com, which is in contrast to previous studies that used Amazon, Yelp or Trip Advisor as data source. Consumers can rate and comment on products based on their attributes on online retail and review websites, simplifying content creation and increasing conversion rates. The study found that central or review content factors (length, pictures and valence) contribute to review helpfulness rather than peripheral or reviewer-related factors. Feedback can be balanced if there are sections for positives and negative aspects of the product. A review can be more helpful if the content is organized, comprehensive, and easily readable. Price played a moderating role in the relation between review length and helpfulness. Longer reviews were found more helpful for high-priced mobile phones.

## 12. Limitations of the Study

The review data for this study were acquired from one popular online retailer website in India, which limits the generalizability of results. Besides, only two peripheral factors (reviewer name and rating inconsistency) were



incorporated in this study, due to unavailability of other reviewer characteristics such as reviewer expertise, contribution, number of reviews and followers on Flipkart.com, which might have emerged significant.

### 13. Scope for Further Research

Future research can focus on exploring differences in helpfulness of various forms of eWOM such as email, blogs, online discussion forums, etc. A cross-country comparison of predictors of review helpfulness can be conducted, to analyse the cultural differences. Researchers can assess the tangible impact of review helpfulness on consumer purchase intention and product sales. A longitudinal study can be undertaken to study the variation in review helpfulness over time.

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**Table-1: The descriptive statistics of the collected online reviews for Mobile Phone purchase**

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Review Rating	1	5	4.43	0.90
Review Length	1	282	51.19	55.39
Likes (Helpful votes)	11	9031	736.97	1111.27
Dislikes	0	1315	176.55	237.04
Helpfulness (Likes/Total votes)	29.78	100	78.85	9.43
Overall Average Product Rating	4.2	4.5	4.39	0.09
Rating Inconsistency (Review rating - Overall average rating)	0.2	3.5	0.72	0.56
Price	6999	41999	13710.82	9136.96
	<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Reviewer Name	808	85.6	136	14.4
Pictures	740	78.4	204	21.6
Review Valence				
Pure Positive Content	616	65.3	328	34.7
Neutral Content	288	30.5	656	69.5
Pure Negative Content	40	4.2	904	95.8

**Source:** Primary Data and Computed using SPSS (2021)

**Table-2: Testing the differences of Customer Review factors of Mobile Phones based on Product Price**

Variable	Reviews for Low- Priced Mobiles (n = 704)	Reviews for High- Priced Mobiles (n = 240)		
Average Price	Rs. 9,386	Rs. 26,394		
	Mean		t-value	Sig.
Review Rating	4.40	4.50	1.561	0.119
Review Length	41.4	80.0	8.290	0.000
Likes	557.1	1264.6	6.250	0.000
Dislikes	155.9	237.1	4.050	0.000
Helpfulness	77.9	81.7	6.055	0.000
Overall Product Rating	4.37	4.45	19.507	0.000
Rating Inconsistency	0.75	0.62	-3.487	0.001
	% of Reviews		Pearson Chi-Square	Sig.
Reviewer Name	85.2%	86.7%	0.301	0.333
Pictures (Yes)	75.6%	86.7%	13.014	0.000
Review Valence				
Pure Positive Content	67.6%	58.3%	6.799	0.006
Neutral Content	27.3%	40.0%	13.675	0.000
Pure Negative Content	5.1%	1.7%	5.241	0.012

Source: Primary Data and Computed using SPSS (2021)

**Table-3: Linear Regression of Central, peripheral factors and the moderating effect of price based on the Review helpfulness.**

Variable		Unstand- ardized Coefficients	Standard- ized Coefficients	Sig.	Hypothesis
	(Constant)	65.86		0.000	
Central Factors	Review Length	-0.04	-0.237	0.000	Supported
	Pictures	1.718	0.075	0.036	Supported
	Positive Content	15.215	0.769	0.000	Supported
	Neutral Content	13.387	0.654	0.000	Supported
Peripheral Factors	Reviewer Name	-0.937	-0.035	0.237	Not Supported
	Rating Inconsistency	0.287	0.017	0.701	Not Supported
Moderating effect of Price	Price x Review Length	0.023	0.218	0.000	Supported
	Price x Pictures	-2.029	-0.207	0.187	Not Supported
	Price x Positive Content	0.925	0.083	0.619	Not Supported
	Price x Mixed Content	1.018	0.054	0.582	Not Supported
	Price x Reviewer Name	1.433	0.147	0.224	Not Supported
	Price x Rating Inconsistency	0.456	0.036	0.441	Not Supported

Source: Primary Data and Computed using SPSS (2021)

Note: Dependent variable - Review helpfulness