



iLLUminate Blog Transcript: Rebecca Wang on How Salience Shapes Judgement in Online Reviews

(OR Rebecca Wang on Brand-Sourced Reviews Versus Third Party Reviews)

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- ANNOUNCER: 00:02 This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh Business Blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
- STEPHANIE VETO: 00:13 Welcome to iLLUminate, the podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. I'm your host, Stephanie Veto. Rebecca Wang is with us to talk about her research on how salience shapes judgment with online reviews. Rebecca is an associate professor in the Department of Marketing, and her research in marketing, data science, and technology delves into the digital and mobile channels, social media dynamics, and data-driven marketing strategies. Hi, Rebecca. Welcome to the podcast.
- REBECCA WANG: 00:42 Thank you for having me.
- VETO: 00:44 Your current research is about how salience shapes judgment in online reviews. To start, what is salience?
- WANG: 00:52 That's a great question. So salience is a very fancy way of saying how noticeable or top-of-mind some information or perspective is when we make our judgments and decisions. This is different from information being available, because information can, in fact, be available without being salient, right? We may technically know something or be aware of something, but we're not actively thinking about it at the moment when we make a decision. So in that sense even knowing something may actually have little influence on that decision. So that's what we mean by salience.
- WANG: 01:34 And we also make the connection to what psychologists typically refer to as system one versus system two thinking, or heuristic versus deliberative thinking. So a lot of times when consumers, when we make very quick decisions, we rely on these easy cues. So in online reviews, for instance, we see five-star reviews, right? We see a large number of reviews or maybe reviews of a familiar brand, and then we make a very quick judgment, right? If it's 4.8 stars out of 5, it must be a good product, right? And we all do it, right? We all use shortcuts. That's how humans have survived thousands and thousands of years, right?
- WANG: 02:16 But that's that might not be the right way to make decisions in certain circumstances, right? So that's essentially what we're studying. The broader question we're interested in is what happens when we take information and think about the context surrounding that information and bring it more salient, right? Bring it forward as part of our decision-making.
- VETO: 02:42 I find myself falling for online reviews and stuff through social media more and more than ever, and I used to be the ultimate skeptic. And even if I know it's snake oil, it doesn't work or whatever for my face or my hair or what have you, or this perfect makeup, and I'm like, "Oh, it has 4.8 stars." I've fallen for a few things, and I've actually found myself now trying to be more skeptical. And we'll talk about what your research is searching at, and through reviewing your work, I'm like, "Yes, yes, I have to go to other sources," or I'll even jump on Reddit to see if people are talking about it. But I cannot believe lately how I have fallen for a few things. So anyway, [laughter] I'll



be honest. You first looked at whether brand-sourced and third-party reviews actually differ. What did you find?

WANG: 03:38

Oh, yeah. This is actually very interesting. So this is not a study on salience per se. It's more a precursor study. So all we want to know is, for the same set of products, right, on average, what do brand-sourced reviews say versus third-party reviews? So brand-sourced reviews are reviews that were collected by the brand themselves. So, for instance, you go to clinique.com, or you bought a lipstick, and the reviews left on clinique.com is a brand-sourced review versus third-party reviews are reviews collected by third parties. For instance, Reddit, right, would be one example. Or let's say a retailer, sephora.com, for instance, right? So we're just saying just same product.

WANG: 04:27

The mere fact that the platform is different, are reviews actually different? And the answer is yes. And we look at this across three very different contexts. We look at beauty products. We look at apparel, clothing, athletic wear, and also healthcare providers. So even in services. And repeatedly, we find that brand-sourced reviews or first-party reviews are more positive than third-party reviews. They're more positive in terms of the texts, how the words and phrasings are used in the review text, as well as the review ratings. This is pretty consistent, right? So specifically, we did look at Clinique, right? It was across the same 70 products with 134,000 reviews.

WANG: 05:19

So the average rating on Clinique's own website was 4.35 versus Sephora was 4.13, right? And then we'll also look at REI. So REI actually has review syndication, which basically means that some of the reviews they show on their website actually came from the manufacturers, the brands that REI sells. So if we look at the syndicated reviews versus the organic reviews that REI customers left on their own website. Again, brand-sourced syndicated reviews have higher ratings. And then we see the same thing in healthcare as well, which is a little bit alarming, right? And some of these differences are quite large.

VETO: 06:02

Why might brand-sourced reviews be more positive?

WANG: 06:08

Yeah. So I think there are many reasons one of which is selection, right? So consumers who are loyal to the brand, they might buy from the brand directly, and then they might leave feedback directly on the brand's website. So one could simply be a very innocent kind of reasoning, right? The other one is probably active management. Brands, sometimes they solicit reviews. They also control how reviews are displayed. And they also do review syndication, right? Which should be a random selection, but it probably isn't, right? It should be a random selection based on how helpful, how descriptive the review is, but we may or may not be able to prove that objectivity, right, so we don't know. And then also, people might feel somehow less comfortable criticizing a company directly on their own website, right? So there could be that as well.

VETO: 07:13

It's funny. If you look at restaurant reviews and I know that this is different from what your research focuses on, but personally, if you look at-- if I look at restaurant reviews and I see all these negative reviews and some positive, I'm like, well, people are only reviewing because they, they didn't like it or they're in a bad mood and nobody's leaving positive reviews. And then when it comes to products, again, I have fallen for, like, "Wow, there's so many it has to work," right? Holy cow. And you forget to dig



into, like, the one-star reviews or whatever. There's just this different-- it's very tricky. And so that leads to my next question, maybe not for me, but do you think consumers recognize that difference in brand-sourced reviews?

WANG: 08:01

So interestingly, not necessarily. You might think consumers would automatically say, "Well, these reviews are from the company," so a website where at least they recognize that. So maybe I should discount them a little or anything like that. But no, our results show that by default, consumers often do not do that. In our experiments, actually, people exposed to first-party or brand-sourced reviews actually are more likely to buy, or they form more positive evaluations of the service provider or the product. So I think this is where heuristic processing comes into play, right? When you are exposed to a review, especially for first-party review, without thinking about it, you automatically trust it. And you automatically trust that 4.8 stars, right? But then we also show that just by pointing out this is first-party, that's it. And we are not even saying any other cues or any other information. We're just, "Hey, this is actually from the brand itself." People are actually now more deliberative, and their evaluation would then drop.

VETO: 09:12

You mentioned early on system one and system two thinking. Can you describe what that is?

WANG: 09:18

System one, or heuristic processing, is very simply-- we use peripheral information to make our judgment. We look at 4.8 stars, for instance, thousands of reviews, maybe a familiar brand. And those are all very accessible cues to drive a judgment, right? You don't think about what's behind them. You don't think how they were being formed. You don't think about alternative cues that you may be missing. So that's what we mean by system one processing. You just take things as granted. And typically, you do that to form very quick judgments. System two, or deliberative processing, especially when sources are made salient, that prompts you, triggers you to shift to that kind of thinking mode. So you might stop and ask, "Where did the reviews come from? Are there any other sources? Should I interpret this rating differently because of what the source is, right, who collected it?" So in that sense, salience acts like a trigger to shift from system one to system two.

VETO: 10:30

And how can you make the source of a review more salient? And what happens when you do? I feel like we talked about this already a little bit, but dive a little deeper.

WANG: 10:38

Yeah, a little bit. Yeah. But more formally, we look at three types of salience. So the first one is platform salience. That's what we talk about brand's website or first-party website versus third-party website. So that's simply making it obvious. We're reminding the consumers that the rating, the review you are seeing, is coming from the company's own platform versus a third-party platform. So that's what we mean by platform salience. The other one we coin alternatives salience. It's simply reminding consumers that there are other review sources available. So if you're seeing a five-star rating on one website, we simply tell you that there are other reviews available elsewhere. And then last but not least, we look at provenance salience. So this comes into play with review syndication, for instance. So when reviews, they are posted or travel across different websites, right, you might be reading a review on a retailer's site and assume that it's the retailer or someone objective that collected it, when in fact, the review actually was posted on the



manufacturer's website or collected by the brand and then syndicated, right? So we're not even talking about syndication. We basically just provenance. Like, "Look, this might happen, and what you are seeing might be this," right? So that's it, right? Just reminding people the ecosystem of reviews, if you will, online. Yeah. So those are the three things that we look at: platform, alternatives, and provenance. Across these studies, we show that, yes, making a source more salient, right, whether it be provenance, alternatives, or platform, leads consumers to become more critical of brand-sourced information.

- VETO: 12:36 I have to say for our listeners that, Rebecca, when you sent me your current presentation that you're working on about this, your slide deck, I'm like, "This is going to be easy. It's going to be all broken down." And I just kept going through and through, and there's well over 100 slides in here because you have, what, like five studies within this research to break down? I mean, that's incredible. And I think at one point you described it as a stream of studies. You did a lot of studies in here, which is--
- WANG: 13:11 This is all with my colleagues. Just one small part. It's with my colleagues Katie and Matt from Seattle University, as well as Nevena from the same department as me. So my friend and colleague, Nevena Koukova, from Lehigh Marketing, so.
- VETO: 13:28 Excellent. You've also studied salience in healthcare AI. How does that earlier work connect to this project? It all sort of comes together in an interesting way.
- WANG: 13:42 Yeah. Yes. Yes. So I really like this idea of salience. So just a little bit off-topic, I still am doing a lot of work on technology. So previously, I worked on mobile app, a lot of what happens when consumers adopt mobile app shopping, and how does that affect their loyalty and shopping behavior and all of that. And I'm still in that space, right? And I'm still doing a lot of machine learning, causal inference statistics, and AI type of work. But I'm also very interested in looking at consumer salience from more of a consumer behavior and consumer psychology kind of perspective. So yeah. So connecting to the previous project that I worked on, healthcare AI. So there we look at bias salience. I mean, AI has been around for a long time, but because of LLMs and how accessible LLM makes technology, are to all of us, right, I think people are now becoming more aware of what AI is and how AI affects our lives. So we're interested in, well, if healthcare providers are using AI, how do patients feel about that? And there's a previous paper, a previous research that shows people are actually against it. This is what we mean by algorithmic aversion in medical care. In this research, though, we basically said, "What if we make bias salience?" So what if we remind people that humans are valuable, and physicians and nurses and health providers are humans, so they might make biased decisions. For instance, maybe because you are of certain age or certain gender, so they think you may be diagnosed or not diagnosed with this condition, right?
- WANG: 15:50 So that's what we try to address. And then we find that by simply making people more salient about know, biases that humans make in general, they're now more acceptable. They're more receptive to medical AI.
- VETO: 16:10 Overall, what should consumers do differently when reading online reviews?



- WANG: 16:16 Yeah. So I think I would tell consumers to still read online reviews, right, including brand reviews. I wouldn't say, don't trust them, right? I think that would be too simplistic and unrealistic, right? Yeah. I don't know about you, but every time when I want to buy something, the first thing I do is I go to amazon.com. I read the reviews, right?
- VETO: 16:40 Yes.
- WANG: 16:42 Right. Yeah. So but I think it's important to read these reviews and consume this kind of information with a grain of-- with a grain of salt, right? I think that's the gist, right? Don't just look at the rating. Think about the context surrounding the rating, right? If you see a product with a 4.8 review rating, right, ask yourself a few additional questions, right? Where did these reviews come from, right? Who are writing these? Who collected these? Are these reviews syndicated? Are they coming up from somewhere else, right? From the brands, from syndication? And are other sources, other maybe like bestbuy.com, also saying good things about this computer, right? Not just amazon.com, right? So do a little bit more research. Yeah. So again, right, provenance, platform, alternatives.
- VETO: 17:38 I like the, "Leave a review and receive a free product or be included in this sweepstakes." It's like that.
- WANG: 17:46 So Nevena and I did a podcast on this a few years ago. We have another paper also published. It's called If You Love Our Product, and it talks about conditional review solicitation. So what if the brand, the retailer, sent you a review request and telling you to leave a five-star review and what happens, basically. Yeah. So just off-topic, we basically say, don't do it because that erodes consumers' trust with you over time, so.
- VETO: 18:25 I've even found myself now because I've been tricked so many times-- it hasn't been that bad. I mean, maybe lately, but if there's something I'm skeptical about, but I really want to believe that it's going to work, I'll even put in AI, like, "Give me a realistic overview of this product," and it will list the pros and cons. And it has saved me from-- because it will aggregate all that information. And you're like, "Oh, okay, this makes more sense. This isn't the perfect item for me." So I'm trying to be more skeptical in shopping.
- WANG: 19:02 You raised a wonderful point. So AI searches are definitely on the rise. In terms of volume, it is still very low compared to organic or paid search. But the conversion rate is shown to be a lot higher, meaning that if AI does recommend something, you typically would listen to it, right? And this is not saying AI is definitely better. I think a lot of times it all depends on the consumer's prompts and also where consumers are in their purchase journey when they're asking AI for help, right, for advice. So they're probably already pretty ready to buy when they use AI. But yeah, but I think AI is actually a good-- it's a good tool. It's a good tool, I think. Yeah.
- VETO: 19:51 Well, to jump back real quick into your research about healthcare and AI, personally, have you noticed a shift in AI being used more or being trusted more for just in general or specifically maybe in healthcare?
- WANG: 20:07 Yeah. So I think as technologies have evolved and matured, yes, people are using AI more both as patients and consumers as well as for the physicians. So I think they did a little survey that says 81% of physicians, they use some form of AI professionally



compared to 38% in just a few years ago, so it is happening, right? And then I think that from patients' perspective, they also recognize that AI is going to be part of their care. So I think the question has now shifted from, can I trust AI instead of human? Or is AI always going to be averted, right, from a patient's perspective? I don't think that is a realistic question to ask anymore. So a more meaningful question is, how should the human and AI work together? And as consumers and patients, the more you are aware of AI and how AI is being used, you can also actively manage your own care process with the help of AI, right, and in the hopes of making that communication with the care provider more seamless and also more symmetric, right? Hopefully, that information is available now to both you and to the physicians for sure, right? Because they went to medical school, but also for you, right? So I think that's the hope.

VETO: 21:41

And finally, is there anything that's surprised you when it comes to your work with salience and judgments or reviews?

WANG: 21:50

I wouldn't say anything surprising, but it's more reminders, right, that yes, information is everywhere. And ultimately, consumers need to be aware of that information difference and make the best judgment available with the information available. From the brand's perspective, though, I think it's important to be transparent, and it's important to be trustworthy, right? So from a brand's perspective, you actually do have the advantage of-- you have a platform that you can manage. You have loyal customers based on your brand marketing, right, so don't abuse that. Make sure that you do what you say, right? And build that trust and continue that trust. From the retailers or third parties' perspective, now it's, like I was joking, I go to amazon.com to read reviews, right? Yeah, precisely. So you do have that edge, right? So you can not just be a retailer in platform or you can actually be a trustworthy kind of platform and maybe incorporate AI into it, so as AI matures, do the summary. This product may or may not be suitable for this kind of customers because ultimately, social proof or online systems, these are tools to provide information for consumers, right? So that's the ultimate goal. Don't forget that goal. Yeah.

VETO: 23:38

Rebecca, thank you so much for being on the show. It was so great talking with you.

WANG: 23:43

Oh, thank you for having me.

VETO: 23:46

That was Rebecca Wang discussing her research on salience and judgment. This podcast is brought to you by iLLUminate, the Lehigh Business Blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business thought leaders or to follow us on social media, please visit business.lehigh.edu/news. This is Stephanie Veto, host of the iLLUminate Podcast. Thanks for listening.