THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE PRODUCT REVIEWS ON PROSPECTIVE ONLINE SHOPPERS' PURCHASING DECISIONS

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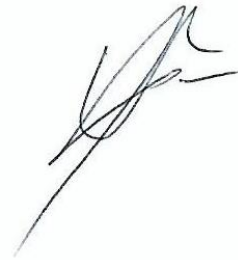
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DECLARATION

We, Courtney Jade Borgelt and Jason Donovan Voges, hereby declare that,

- The content of this treatise, entitled "The influence of online product reviews on prospective online shoppers' purchasing", is our original work;

- All sources used or quoted have been acknowledged and documented by means of complete references; and

- This treatise has not been previously submitted by us for a degree at any other tertiary institution.

Courtney Jade Borgelt   **Jason Donovan Voges**

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of electronic commerce has radically changed the retail industry in the global economy (Chen & Chang, 2003:556). The technological advancement of smartphones and other devices have contributed to the development of electronic commerce in retail, as customers have the ability to conveniently access applications and purchase goods without having to go into a store (McKee, 2014:12). Online shopping provides consumers with unlimited access to making purchases and the ability to retrieve information and compare offerings of sellers worldwide (Ozen & Engizek, 2013:78). However, consumers may choose not to purchase goods online as a result of the lack of trust, privacy and security concerns of shopping by means of the internet (Chen & Chang, 2003:558). This leads prospective customers to read the reviews of other customers' experiences before making a purchasing decision (Malik & Hussain, 2017:2).

A gap exists in the literature as little is known about how online customer reviews influence prospective customers of products such as electronic goods, with particular focus on digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras. The main objective of the study, therefore was to identify possible factors of online reviews that influence a prospective customer's purchasing decisions.

The study was conducted in Port Elizabeth focusing on individuals who read online customer reviews to assist them in their online shopping and/or purchasing decisions, have previously made purchases of products and/or services online and lastly, that they are considering the purchase online of a DSLR camera. The researchers conducted a quantitative research methodology, by means of a self-administered questionnaire, through using convenience sampling. Once the primary data had been collected, it was captured into a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet. The researchers then made use of descriptive statistics to analyse the captured data in order to make accurate conclusions based on the findings.

The researchers identified three main factors of an online review that are seen to have an influence on prospective online customers purchasing decisions. The first factor concerns the perceived value of the review to the prospective customer, in the sense of whether the review is helpful or provides a sense of usefulness. The second factor of whether an online review is influential depends on the degree to which the prospective customer has internet experience. The third factor is the credibility of the website on which

the review is posted, and therefore relates to whether the website has a good reputation and the prospective customer's trust in the website.

It was found that the *Reputation of the website* and *Reviewer helpfulness, Rating and Timeliness* are the two major factors of an online review to have an influence on prospective customers' purchasing decisions when buying a DSLR camera.

The researchers recommended that future research to be conducted on a broader scope, using a larger sample size and respondents from various geographical areas. This will allow for the respondents to generalise findings as the sample will be a true representation of the population of the study. Future research studies could make use of a qualitative approach, by means of interviewing respondents in order to obtain a more in-depth discussion on the influence of online reviews on purchasing decisions. This study focused on online customer reviews on DSLR cameras, however for future research general electronic products should be investigated, as DSLR cameras can be considered an expensive product and not generally purchased by the average consumer.

The researchers recommend that websites should provide more interactive guidelines to the reviewer when writing an online review. This could include prompters, which indicate to the reviewer what they should include in order to provide sufficient information, so that prospective customers can make their necessary purchasing decisions.

The study aims to contribute towards the limited body of knowledge on the topic and to provide conclusions and recommendations based on the findings. This aims to assist those who post online product reviews, in which factors are the most influential to prospective online customers in their purchasing decisions.

Keywords:

- Online shopping
- Online review
- Traditional word-of-mouth
- Electronic word-of-mouth
- Shopping good
- Digital single-lens reflex camera
- Prospective online customer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE ON THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE PRODUCT REVIEWS ON PROSPECTIVE ONLINE SHOPPERS' PURCHASING DECISIONS

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Page

LIST OF ANNEXURES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

It was revealed that 92 percent of prospective online customers look at the reviews of previous customers before making their own purchasing decisions and are believed to have 23 times more trust in content created by other customers than in marketing communications (Liu, Ozanne & Mattila, 2018:403). The rapid growth of electronic commerce (e-commerce) has radically changed the retail industry in the global economy (Chen & Chang, 2003:556). The technological advancement of smartphones and other devices have contributed to the development of e-commerce in retail as customers have the ability to conveniently access applications and purchase goods without having to go into a store (McKee, 2014:12). Furthermore, the advancement of the internet's infrastructure presents new opportunities for businesses to identify niches and acquire competitive advantages (Chen & Chang, 2003:556). Kavitha (2017:38) indicates that a form of e-commerce can be identified as online shopping, thus enabling consumers to purchase goods and services from businesses via the internet. Nagaraj (2018:401) reports that the expansion of the internet has resulted in several businesses adding an electronic method of selling goods and services to an already existing traditional offline method.

The main reasons consumers may decide to purchase online can be seen as the ease of access to the global market and that consumers can purchase goods at any time of the day or night (Nagaraj, 2018:401). Ozen and Engizek (2013:78) concur that online shopping provides consumers with unlimited access to making purchases and the ability to retrieve information and compare offerings of sellers worldwide. Chen and Chang (2003:558) insinuate that consumers may shop online due to the lower prices offered online than in stores and the convenience of having goods delivered to the customer's front door. A consumer may choose not to purchase goods online as a result of the lack of trust, privacy and security concerns of shopping by means of using the internet (Chen & Chang, 2003:558). These concerns are often referred to as online fraud and identity theft, which are the most common crimes in online shopping (Yu, 2018:770).

E-commerce provides platforms for customers to share their knowledge, experiences and opinions regarding products and services (Malik & Hussain, 2017:1). Previous customers

can give an overall rating for products, generally on a scale of 1 to 5, as well as provide a more in-depth description of their experience which is seen as more informative to prospective online customers (Utz, Kerkhof & Van Den Bos, 2012:50). Online customers perceive in-depth customer reviews as more helpful, especially in the search for appropriate products and customer reviews have been reported to be of a greater influence than that of expert reviews (Utz *et al.* 2012:50). The identification of a product's quality before purchasing is challenging because customers are unable to physically assess the product, thus prospective customers could read the reviews of other customers' experiences before making a purchasing decision (Malik & Hussain, 2017:2).

Online reviews can be identified as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is increasing in popularity among prospective customers when making purchasing decisions regarding products and services (Filieri, 2015:1261). A positive or negative statement made by a customer concerning a product, made available to people via the internet, can be viewed as eWOM (Filieri, 2015:1262). Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to the experiences of a brand, product or service that is communicated from person-to-person for non-commercial related purposes (Sivadas & Jindal, 2017:120). Purchasing decisions of customers are influenced by online reviews, on condition that they are factual and are perceived as more credible than those that are brief descriptions of the product provided by previous customers (Filieri, 2015:1263). The contribution of information by prior customers regarding their experiences and opinions of a product's quality and value can reduce the choice risk prospective consumers could be subjected to (Kostyra, Reiner, Natter & Klapper, 2016:11).

1.2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Online shopping is growing at a rapid pace and so has consumers' concerns for the retailers' ethics as electronic transactions are known to have several perceived risks (Vos, Marinagi, Trivellas, Eberhagen, Giannakopoulos & Skourlas, 2014:171). There are various elements of risk that an online customer is exposed to. Vos *et al.* (2014:171) identified these risks as the security of the financial transactions, privacy of all personal information regarding the customer, deceptive practices of online retailers to persuade consumers and the accuracy of the product description and delivery time. Zhao, Wu, Hua and Fang (2019:130) propose that online customer reviews can offer the necessary information to prospective customers, which is seen as imperative to reducing the risks

involved when making purchasing decisions and they verify that what the retailer has stated, is correct. Zhu and Zhang (2010:133) add that there is a risk regarding online reviews as a result of businesses having the ability to manipulate reviews in order to influence consumers purchasing decisions by anonymously posting reviews in which they praise their products or services.

The influence of eWOM on prospective consumers purchasing decisions are exponential to whether products or services of businesses are purchased, therefore businesses are fearful of negative eWOM as it has the ability to deter sales of products and affect their reputation (Tantrabundit, Phothong, & Chanprasitchai, 2018:732). Businesses often attempt to respond to negative online reviews to resolve customer's complaints and limit the potential damage that these complaints have on prospective customers purchasing decisions (Tantrabundit *et al.* 2018:732).

Past studies have indicated that 90 percent of the respondents' buying decisions are influenced by positive online reviews and that negative online reviews influence 86 percent of respondents' buying decisions (Peng, Cui, Zhuang & Li, 2016:269). As a result of the growing importance that online reviews have, businesses have started to monitor the online product reviews on both third-party websites and their own website in order to make relevant adjustments to improve their products (Peng *et al.* 2016:269). It is argued that there are some firms that take a more unethical route and manipulate the quantities of positive and negative reviews either by removing negative reviews or posting positive reviews to influence the perceptions of consumers with regard to their own products and services (Peng *et al.* 2016:269). Reviews can be provided on a business' website for products; however, customers may be doubtful about the authenticity of the review and whether they can trust the reviewer's opinion (Grabs & Sudhoff, 2014:186-188). This leads to prospective online customers searching for reviews created by other users of the product or service, which is often found on third-party websites (Grabs & Sudhoff, 2014:186-188).

When prospective online customers are searching for information regarding desired products and services there are multiple sources that can be used to look at online reviews before making purchasing decisions. Some of these sources include retailers' websites, personal blogs, video sharing platforms and third-party websites. Belarmino and Koh (2018:2732) define third-party review websites as platforms that are independent

of the firm's' own websites and a place where customers can either post or read reviews on. Malbon (2013:143) identifies various third-party platforms as a place where online reviews can be posted, namely eBay, Amazon, Booking.com, TripAdvisor and alternative social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram.

A number of studies have been conducted relating to the influence of online customer reviews on the purchasing intentions of prospective online customers in a general context (Dai & Jiang, 2016; Von Helversen, Abramczuk, Kopeć & Nielek, 2018; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). However, a gap exists in the literature as little is known about how online customer reviews influence prospective customers of specific classifications of products such as electronic goods, with particular focus on digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras. This study will be focusing on DSLR cameras as a result of the wide variety of product offerings that businesses provide customers with. Over time electronic goods, such as cameras, become outdated especially with the introduction of new models and generations which meet the ever-changing wants and needs of consumers. Consumers may become overwhelmed as to which product to purchase, thus potentially looking at what other customers have said regarding their experience with similar purchases (O'Reilly, MacMillan, Mumuni, & Lancendorfer, 2018:381). Other customers can assist potential customers in the narrowing of product choices and the avoidance of incorrect product purchases (O'Reilly *et al*. 2018:381).

It is of growing importance that researchers identify the factors of online reviews that influence consumers when making an online purchase. In addition, it has been noted that customer online reviews have a great impact on a prospective customer's purchasing decisions (Von Helversen *et al*. 2018:1). Possible factors of online reviews that could have an influence on consumers purchasing decisions, include the value of the review in the context of helpfulness and usefulness, the prospective customer's internet experience and the consumers trust in the website in relation to the online store's reputation.

In conclusion, it can be deduced that online shopping is growing rapidly and potentially conveying a variety of risks to customers. Some of these risks can be eliminated by means of reading previous customer online reviews which assist in the narrowing of product choices and the needed information to make purchasing decisions. A gap exists in the literature as little is known about how online customer reviews influence prospective customers of products such as electronic goods, with particular focus on DSLR cameras.

Thus, it is the main objective of the study to identify possible factors of an online review that influence a prospective customer purchasing decisions.

1.3   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The section to follow will discuss the primary objective, secondary objectives, methodological objectives and the research questions of the study.

1.3.1   Primary objective

In line with the problem statement, the primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence that online customer product reviews have on prospective online customers when making purchasing decisions of electronic goods such as digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras.

1.3.2   Secondary objectives

SO^1)   To investigate the influence of the reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO^2)   To investigate the influence of the length and readability of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO^3)   To investigate the influence of the quality and quantity of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO^4)   To investigate the influence of valence of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO^5)   To investigate the influence of prospective customer's internet experience on their online purchasing decisions.

SO^6)   To investigate the influence of prospective customer's trust in the website on their online purchasing decisions.

SO^7)   To investigate the influence of the reputation of the website on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

1.3.3 Methodological objectives

In order to achieve the above mentioned primary objective and secondary objectives the following methodological objectives need to be implemented.

MO[1]) To conduct a literature review on the nature, importance and influence of online product reviews on prospective online customers purchasing decisions.

MO[2]) To determine the appropriate research methodology to address the identified research problem and research objectives.

MO[3]) To develop an appropriate measuring instrument to collect primary data from a predetermined sample of prospective online customers and to descriptively analyse the data.

MO[4]) To provide conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the study, which could assist those who post online product reviews, in which factors are the most influential to prospective online customers in their purchasing decisions.

1.3.4 Research questions

i) Will the reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness of online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

ii) Does the length and readability of online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

iii) Is the quality and quantity of online reviews influential on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

iv) Does the valence of online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

v) Will prospective customer's internet experience influence their online purchasing decisions?

vi) Will the prospective customer's trust in the website influence their online purchasing decision?

vii) Is the reputation of the website influential on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

1.4   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to fulfil the objectives of this study, the research will be divided into two areas: a literature review (secondary research) and the empirical investigation (primary research).

1.4.1   Literature review

Secondary data is information that has been previously made available by other authors (Struwig & Stead, 2013:270), and is reused in order to answer new questions developed by researchers in which they gather and analyse information to draw conclusions (Martins, da Cunha & Serra, 2018:2). Researchers can source this data from government sources, private entities, databases and websites (Martins *et al*. 2018:3).

A comprehensive literature review will be conducted in order to identify the possible factors of how online reviews influence prospective online customers. An in-depth literature search will be conducted to identify books and journal articles that are appropriate to this study by consulting the university's library and online databases including: EBSCOHost, Emerald Insight, Google Scholar as well as external databases including ResearchGate. During the search for information only reliable and credible sources and authors will be made use of to ensure absolute accuracy.

1.4.2   Empirical investigation

The primary research of this study consists of four subsections namely: the research design and methodology, data collection deemed appropriate for this study, the design of the measuring instrument to be used and the identification of the data analysis methods that will be used throughout this study.

1.4.2.1 Research design, paradigm and methodology

Research can be categorised into quantitative and qualitative research (Amaratunga, Baldry, Sarshar & Newton, 2002:19). Amaratunga *et al.* (2002:19) describes quantitative research as an approach that places emphasis on trusting numbers to represent opinions or concepts, whereas qualitative focuses on observations and words. Qualitative research provides rich data and reveals complexity and is thus suited for exploring new literature and testing hypotheses (Amaratunga *et al.* 2002:21-22). Quantitative research uses objective measures to conduct an analysis and is known for distinguishing between justified belief and opinion (Amaratunga *et al.* 2002:22).

A research paradigm can be identified as a perspective, a way of thinking or set of beliefs that provide clarification on search data and what research methods can be used to analyse and interpret information (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:26). Positivistic paradigms adopt that notions are discovered through scientific and conventional procedures, which are of a quantitative manner (Shah & Al-Bargi, 2013:254). Interpretivism allows the respondents to express themselves and provide the researcher with their interpretation of how they view concepts by means of qualitative methods (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim & Martin, 2014:87).

The quantitative research method corresponds with the positivistic paradigm and focuses on the collection of new data from a large population that relates to the problem (Rahi, 2017:2). The method then analyses the data and ignores the individual's feelings and emotions or environmental context (Rahi, 2017:2). The primary aim of quantitative research is to test an idea or hypothesis regarding the relationship between two or more variables (Struwig & Stead, 2013:4). There are various approaches to quantitative research namely; exploratory research; descriptive research; and experimental and quasi-experimental research (Struwig & Stead, 2013:6-8). The approach that is most suited to the study is descriptive research as it attempts to provide an accurate description of the situation, through which it describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as: age, gender, education and monthly income bracket (Struwig & Stead, 2013:7).

1.4.2.2 Population, sampling and data collection

A research population is known as all the potential respondents that are applicable to the study (Struwig & Stead, 2013:268). For the purpose of this study, the research population consists of consumers who have previously made an online purchase, are considering purchasing a DSLR camera and those who read online customer reviews of products during their decision-making process. However due to the inability of researchers to test the influence of online reviews on every prospective online customer a sample of 40 respondents will be selected. A sample is seen as a representation of the research population and data is therefore obtained from this group of respondents (Struwig & Stead, 2013:270). A sampling unit comprises of those individuals that are the focus of the study (Struwig & Stead, 2013:114). For this particular study, the sampling unit are those

prospective customers who read reviews written by prior customers before making their purchase decision and whether those reviews influence their decision.

Once the appropriate population for the study has been identified, researchers will choose between two sampling methods, namely probability and nonprobability sampling. A probability sampling technique assumes that every element in the population has a known probability of being included in the sample, which can be chosen using the following methods: random probability sampling, stratified random sampling, cluster sampling, systematic sampling and multi-stage area sampling (Struwig & Stead, 2013:118-120). A non-probability sampling technique identifies that the probability of a particular member of the population being chosen is unknown and the selection of the sample relies on personal judgement (Struwig & Stead, 2013:116). There are various ways in which a sample can be selected: convenience sampling, judgement sampling, quota sampling and snowball sampling (Struwig & Stead, 2013:116-118). The best technique for this study is convenience sampling as the sample is chosen based on the availability and ease of access of the respondents (Struwig & Stead, 2013:116).

1.4.2.3 Design of the measuring instrument

A measuring instrument can be identified as a tool that is used to collect thorough and logical information, which is then used by researchers to make contributions towards the development of their study (Singh & Smith, 2006.494). Measuring instruments ensure that information obtained is reliable and valid (Singh & Smith, 2006.494). A measuring instrument will be developed for the study and areas included will be sourced from recent studies with a similar research topic or secondary information, which would have already been measured for validity and reliability. The respondents will be required to complete a structured questionnaire consisting of mainly close-ended questions, which will be used for empirical data collection, as well as five open-ended questions. Respondents will be required to evaluate their responses using an intensity rating scale, namely the Likert scale. Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin and Zikmund (2015:293) identify that the Likert scale is popular and easy to administer as respondents simply select their attitude towards a statement by how strongly they agree or disagree. Respondents have the choice of five different responses including strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:293).

The questionnaire will be accompanied by a cover letter highlighting the research topic, the objective of the research, as well as the promise of confidentiality of all information obtained. Instructions for the completion of the questionnaire will be included, as well as details pertaining to Nelson Mandela University and the department responsible for the research and details of the supervisor overseeing the study. Lastly, the researchers will thank the respondents for their participation and assisting in the completion of the study. The questionnaire will consist of three sections, section A of the questionnaire will include general information pertaining to the demographics of the respondents. Section B focuses on factors of the online review that could potentially influence a prospective online customer, then lastly section C is an open-ended question which asks the respondent to indicate to the researcher's factors of an online review that they consider to be of importance.

1.4.2.4 Data analysis

Data analysis is the process of evaluating data using analytical and logical reasoning to examine each component of the data provided (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:317). Data is gathered in a quantitative, qualitative or mixed approach, with various collection methods such as interviews or questionnaires (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:317). There are also different methods that can be used to analyse data including: business intelligence, data mining, data visualisation and text analytics (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:317).

For the purpose of this study, the primary data collected from the research questionnaire will be captured in Microsoft Excel 2016. Once the data has been captured, the researchers will analyse the captured data and make sense of the results. Reliability refers to the accuracy, consistency or stability of data collected (Struwig & Stead, 2013:138). Validity refers to whether the research design is conducted in an appropriate manner and is scientifically sound (Struwig & Stead, 2013:143).

Descriptive statistics is the process of summarising data by means of a numerical measure, these measures can include measuring central tendency (mean, median and mode) (Janes, 1999:405). Secondly, is the measurement of the spread of the data which is the difference between the highest score and lowest score as well as the standard deviation (Janes, 1999:407-408).

1.5   SCOPE AND DEMARCATION OF THE STUDY

The scope of this study will include those who could be identified as prospective online customers in South Africa.

The geographical scope of this research study will be conducted in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape in South Africa. As a result of a need for the identification of the influence that customer online reviews have on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers. The sampling technique for this research study is non-probability convenience sampling. The researchers identify this technique as the best route to follow as respondents are chosen based on their availability and ease of access. The researchers do not have a database at their availability to identify respondents suitable for the study.

1.6   CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study aims to expand on the limited body of knowledge that exists on how online customer reviews have an influence on the purchasing decisions of prospective customers buying electronic goods such as DSLR cameras. The factors which influence prospective customers will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Furthermore, this study aims to provide greater insight into the factors of an online review that positively or negatively influence customer's purchasing decisions. This research could assist those who post online product reviews, in which factors are the most influential to prospective online customers in their purchasing decisions.

Since previous research has mainly focused on the general understanding of how online reviews influence prospective customers in their purchasing decisions as well as specifically relating to electronics and hospitality in various countries such as China, United States, Australia and Finland. The body of knowledge pertaining to the research topic in South Africa is largely unexplored. The research findings will help bridge the gap and the limited literature in this field in the South African context.

1.7   DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

This study focuses on the influence of customer online reviews on prospective online customers purchasing decisions. The definitions of key terms relating to the study will be discussed below:

1.7.1 Definition of online shopping

Online shopping is the process through which consumers have the ability to buy products and services directly from the seller by means of an online store via the internet using a web browser and is seen as a form of electronic commerce (Ogbuji & Udom, 2018.23). The process of shopping online is considered to be of relative ease and convenience as customers can choose the products they desire by means of a click of a mouse and can compare the selling price, size, colour and quality of products of different retail outlets (Kavitha, 2017:38).

1.7.2 Definition of word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as the opinions made by customers regarding how they experienced the product or service, provided by a business, to a large number of people (Naz, 2014:1). Uen, Peng, Chen and Chien (2011:240-241) identify that WOM is the exchange of information by means of having conversations with family members, friends, acquaintances and work colleagues. WOM is not directly controlled by businesses and has the ability to convey positive or negative influences over prospective customers purchasing decisions (Uen *et al.* 2011:240-241).

1.7.3 Definition of electronic word-of-mouth

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is defined as the comments left by previous customers which are posted on platforms via the internet regarding products and services offered by businesses (Dai & Jiang, 2016:207). eWOM can be further classified as having a number of different media forms, namely: online reviews, online recommendations and online opinions (Dai & Jiang, 2016:207).

1.7.4 Definition of DSLR camera

A digital single-lens reflex camera (DSLR), is a camera which includes a mirror that reflects the light from the lens to the optical viewfinder (Bradford & Burgett, 2019). When the shutter is pressed the mirror rotates and the shutter opens allowing the light from the lens to capture the image onto the sensor whereby the photograph is produced (Bradford & Burgett, 2019).

1.8   STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

This section provides an insight into what each chapter of the study will entail and is structured in the following manner:

Chapter One provides an introduction and background to the study, followed by the presentation of the purpose of the research by means of the problem statement. The research objectives will be identified, including the primary, secondary and methodological objectives. A brief research design and methodology will be presented. The demarcation of the field of the study will be discussed, definitions of important terms used, followed by an overview of the structure and study time frame of the treatise.

Chapter Two will provide a literature review which will include the nature of marketing and concept of WOM. The methods for product classification and the consumer buying decision model and process for a shopping product will be discussed. This will be followed by the nature of online reviews by means of the motivation for customers to write a review and the various review platforms. Lastly, the factors of an online review that influence a customer's purchasing decisions will be discussed in detail.

Chapter Three will provide an understanding on the nature of research for the study, however primarily focus on the research design and methodology to be used in this study and the rationale behind the selected methodology. The data collection process for secondary and primary data will be elaborated on and includes the population, sample frame, sample, sampling techniques and research measuring instrument. Lastly, the researchers will discuss the data analysis used in this study.

Chapter Four will include how the researchers will conduct the data preparation and analysis. The researchers will then present the demographic and empirical results of the study. In addition, the important online review factors as perceived by the respondents will be analysed and interpreted.

Chapter Five will conclude the study by providing a brief overview of the preceding chapters, together with the results of the main findings. Based on the findings of the literature review and the empirical investigation conclusions will be drawn. Furthermore, the contributions and limitations of the study will be explained and recommendations for future research will be proposed. Lastly the researcher's self-reflection from what they learnt from the study.

1.9 STUDY TIME FRAME

The study will be taking place during the course of the 2019 academic year. The study commenced in February 2019 and is scheduled to be completed in October 2019. During the period of February to May, the researchers will be collecting and analysing information that will be used in the completion of the chapters regarding the research proposal and literature review. The questionnaires established will be handed out over a period of two months namely: July and August. Once the data has been collected the researchers will commence the empirical analysis and develop the chapter discussing the results of the study. The researchers will start to finalise the study which is to be submitted on the 28th of October 2019.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE ON THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE PRODUCT REVIEWS ON PROSPECTIVE ONLINE SHOPPERS' PURCHASING DECISIONS

2.1   INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One an introduction of the study and problem statement were provided, together with the primary, secondary and methodological objectives and research questions in relation to the study. The scope and demarcation of the study, followed by the contribution and key definitions were indicated. Lastly, the structure and time frame of the study was identified.

In Chapter Two literature will be provided on concepts relating to the study as well as concepts focusing directly on how online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers. Firstly, by providing a brief overview of the nature of marketing and how word-of-mouth (WOM) relates to marketing. Then the researchers will expand on the concept of word-of-mouth and present the sub-divisions, being traditional and electronic word-of-mouth. The parties involved in both sub-division and the influence it has on a prospective customer will be revealed. Two methods used for product classification will be provided and a camera will be classified according to both methods and the one most prevalent to the study will be made known of. The consumer buying decision model and process for a shopping product will be analysed. In addition, the researchers will explore the motivations of prior customers to write reviews and the various review platforms available in which reviews can be left on. Lastly the various factors of an online review that could influence prospective online customers purchasing decisions.

2.2   A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE NATURE OF MARKETING

Marketing as a concept was initially defined as the distinction of business philosophy and organisational culture with the customer in the centre of the operations and strategies of the firm (Fernando, Saad & Haron, 2012:31). More recently, marketing is defined as a process that creates, communicates, delivers and exchanges offerings that have value for stakeholders, such as customers, partners, clients and the community at large (Fernando *et al.* 2012:31).

The co-creation of value by the customer has been a growing focus in marketing as customers have become less attentive to traditional marketing strategies (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013:1860; Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol, 2012:237). Customers have assumed an active role in the marketing process through the power of word-of-mouth and have influenced the buying behaviour of prospective customers (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013:1860).

Customers seldom make purchasing decisions on their own, and usually make use of other customer's experiences to make their final decision (Blazevic, Hammedi, Garnefeld, Rust, Keiningham, Andreassen, Donthu & Carl, 2013:295). This usually occurs either through verbal interactions or by reading customer reviews (Blazevic *et al.* 2013:295). The quantity of online word-of-mouth increases the awareness of products to prospective customers, which can lead to an increase in sales for the firm (Hong, Xu, Xu, Wang & Fan, 2017:31). The ease of accessing reviews and information in an online environment has made word-of-mouth a powerful tool in a firm's marketing strategy (Hong *et al.* 2017:31).

2.3 THE CONCEPT OF WORD-OF-MOUTH

Word-of-mouth can be separated into two categories, namely traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The focus of this study revolves around eWOM as online reviews fall within this category. A comprehensive explanation of both forms of word-of-mouth will be provided in the section to follow.

2.3.1 Traditional word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth is information that is transferred by customers and is known to be an influential source for prospective customers (Keiningham, Rust, Lariviere, Aksoy & Williams, 2018:3). WOM is known to disrupt the communications between the firm and prospective customers regarding their products and services (Blazevic *et al.* 2013:294). It disrupts the communications as previous literature has indicated that personal interactions have a greater effect than advertisements or personal selling strategies that the firm employs (López & Sicilia, 2013:1089).

Through WOM, previous customers share their experiences with the product and as a result, this influences prospective customers' purchasing behaviours and attitudes towards the product, which is known to be a customer-to-customer interaction (Blazevic

et al. 2013:294; Becker & Pizzutti, 2017:398). The customer-to-customer WOM occurs between family members, co-workers, friends, or just a customer sharing their experiences during a conversation (Becker & Pizzutti, 2017:398). Face-to-face conversations with trustworthy individuals regarding the referral of products through traditional means of WOM, are identified as having a higher perceived level of credibility and a stronger influence on purchasing decisions than alternative means of advertising (Abălăesei, 2014:136). Keiningham *et al.* (2018:3) argue that 78 percent of both customers and prospective customers believe WOM and find the information to be trustworthy.

WOM is three times more likely to be positive rather than negative and positive WOM generally involves some form of product recommendation and negative WOM usually involves a customer trying to convince prospective customers or current customers to not purchase the product or service (Sivadas & Jindal, 2017:121).

2.3.2 Electronic word-of-mouth

Customers can post their experiences with products or services in the form of a review using numerous online platforms which can be viewed by anyone around the world, and this is known as electronic word-of-mouth, or simply as eWOM (Matute, Polo-Redondo & Utrillas, 2016:1090). Online reviews can be posted by any customer on the internet and viewed by prospective customers when looking for information, regardless if they know the reviewer personally or not (Chen, 2016:316). It is becoming increasingly popular for consumers to make use of the online environment when making purchasing decisions as countless information is available on the internet (Matute *et al*. 2016:1090). However, in the online environment the reader of the review, being the perspective customer, is unable to use communication cues to verify the credibility of a source, generally done in a face-to-face conversation (Filieri, 2015:1263). However, Filieri (2015:1261) identifies that customers continue to rely on online reviews as they have been identified as the most trusted source of information after the advice from friends and family. Through research it has been discovered that online customer reviews exert a strong influence on purchasing decisions of prospective customers (Filieri, 2015:1261). Matute *et al.* (2016:1091) proposed that 72 percent of prospective customers trust online reviews as much as they do in personal recommendations.

Lui *et al.* (2018:404) formulated that prospective customers may trust online reviews of customers more than content that was generated by the firms, because these customers can share their consumption experiences. When a customer posts a review of their experiences with a product they are known as an active customer and those that seek information to assist in a purchase without sharing their own experience post-purchase are known to be a passive customer (Matute *et al.* 2016:1091).

Lui *et al.* (2018:403) suggests that eWOM expressed in a subjective manner that makes use of subtle linguistic variations when posting the review tend to affect the customers' purchasing decisions either in a hedonic context for men and a utilitarian context for women. Hedonic consumption is characterised by a rich experience which provides excitement pleasure, fun and fantasy and is argued that if a review has these characteristics, it tends to increase the purchasing intention of men (Lui *et al.* 2018:404). Utilitarian is characterised as being cognitively and instrumental driven, which achieves a practical or functional task (Lui *et al.* 2018:404). It is also argued when a review incorporates utilitarian consumption, the purchasing intention of females are likely to increase (Lui *et al.* 2018:404).

Online customer reviews relating to products such as cameras are seen to be more helpful to prospective customers than seller created information (Zhang *et al.* 2013:1118). Seller created information includes the technical specifications of the product, for example the number of pixels, the size of the LCD screen and optical zoom number (Zhang *et al.* 2013:1118). Knowledgeable customers could potentially leave reviews which are read by those prospective customers who may lack expertise about the product and may benefit from reviews (Zhang *et al.* 2013:1118). Zhao, Wang, Guo and Law (2015:1344), add that prospective customers often rely on the information regarding the product in a customer review, thus indicating that online reviews can be very influential to the purchasing decision process.

2.4   THE METHODS FOR PRODUCT CLASSIFICATION

Zhang, Ma and Cartwright (2013:1117) suggest that products are categorised into experience goods and search goods. The evaluation of experience goods is completed in a subjective manner and requires sampling or purchasing to determine the quality of the product, whereas search goods are completely objective oriented during evaluation and does not need a physical interaction (Zhang *et al.* 2013:1117). One of the products

that fits into the search goods category are cameras, where online customer reviews are known to have a bigger influence than information that was generated by the seller (Zhang *et al.* 2013:1117-1118).

Kotler and Armstrong (2015:227) proposes another model that classifies consumer products into categories namely, convenience, shopping, specialty and unsought products. Customers' buying behaviour for convenience products involves frequent purchases and little planning as these products tend to have a low price associated with it (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015:227). Shopping products have a higher price and are usually less frequently purchased with a lot more planning (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015:227). For the next product category, namely specialty products, purchasing intention usually involves strong brand preference and loyalty (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015:227). Products in this category have a high price attached to it and are bought on a less frequent basis than its counterparts (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015:227). The final category is known as unsought products, because there is little product knowledge and awareness for these products, and prices for this category vary (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015:227).

For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on Kotler and Armstrong (2015:227) product classification model. The product being a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera is categorised as a shopping product, as the prices are generally high with a lot of planning before making the purchase.

2.5   THE CONSUMER BUYING DECISION MODEL AND PROCESS FOR A SHOPPING PRODUCT

Electronic and high technological markets usually operate under rapidly changing conditions, which results in products with shorter life cycles and the need for consumers to make rapid purchasing decisions (Boonlertvanich, 2009:57-58). Online reviews can be valuable for prospective online customers during the purchase decision process (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010:186). The general process includes the recognition of need, searching for information, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, purchase and post purchase evaluation (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010:186; Boonlertvanich, 2009:58). Once prospective customers have recognised the need, they could use reviews to search for information and evaluate alternatives, assisting customers to make better choices (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010:186). Once the purchase has taken place, the customer can

then return to the website and post a review, thus the process is in full circle (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010:186).

Figure 2.1: The Consumer Buying Decision Model

Field 1: The consumer attitude based on the firms' messages
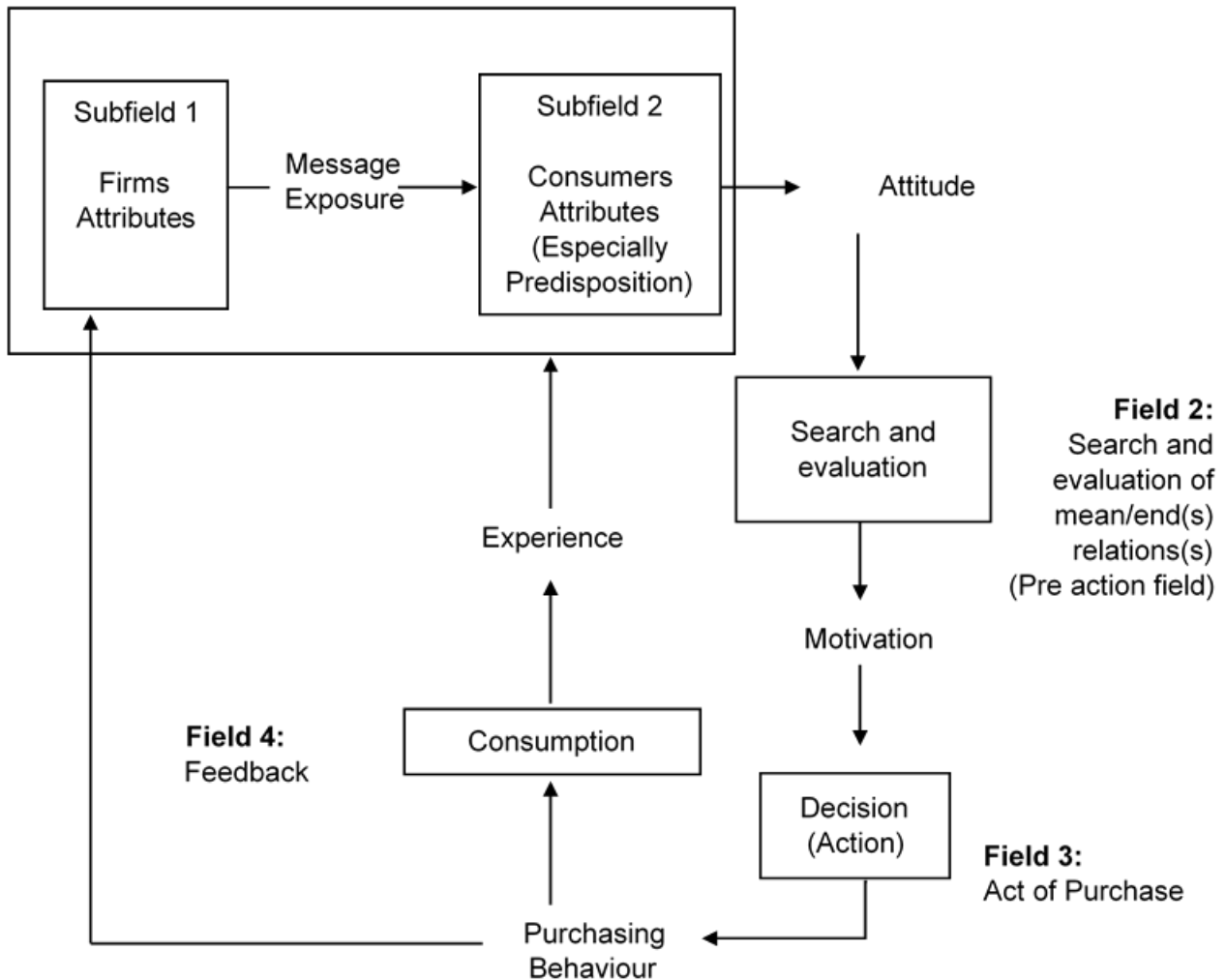
(Source: Adapted from Prasad & Jha, 2014:338)

In Figure 2.1, The Consumer Buying Decision Model focuses on prospective customers' buying decisions for new products (Prasad & Jha, 2014:338). The focus is on the relations that exists between the prospective customer and the firm (Prasad & Jha, 2014:338). The model consists of four fields.

The first field is the prospective customers' attitude towards the message of the firm, which consists of two subfields (Prasad & Jha, 2014:338). Subfield one looks at the communication efforts and marketing environment of the firm that influences prospective customer attitudes, target market characteristics and the competitive environment and

20

subfield two specifies the characteristics of prospective customers (Prasad & Jha, 2014:338).

The second field is called the search and evaluation, which is where the prospective customer starts searching for alternative products to compare them with that of the firm's current products (Prasad & Jha, 2014:338). The third field is the act to purchase the product where prospective customers are motivated by firms to purchase their products (Prasad & Jha, 2014:339).

The fourth field analyses both customer and firm feedback after the product has been purchased (Prasad & Jha, 2014:339). The customer uses their experience with the product to assist prospective customers in their future buying decisions, and this is known as word-of-mouth (Prasad & Jha, 2014:339).

2.6 THE NATURE OF ONLINE REVIEWS

The participation of customers in posting reviews online is essential in making product information available for everyone. Customers have a variety of motivations for sharing their experiences with a product. There are various online platforms for customers to post their reviews, such as business websites, third-party websites, personal blogs and social media platforms. The section to follow will have a comprehensive explanation of motivations for posting reviews and various platforms that they can be posted on.

2.6.1 Motivation for customers to write a review

Product reviews give the prospective customer a better understanding of product information and the personal experiences of previous customers, to which this knowledge is used to make purchasing decisions (Chen & Huang, 2013:1759). This indicates that reviews are seen as a powerful tool for a company, as they have a direct influence on the sales of a firm (Zhang & Wang, 2019:1609). In response to this, firms have actively started to engage with their customers by sending them e-mails and messages to try and motivate them to post a review (Zhang & Wang, 2019:1610).

Posting reviews are not mandatory and the customer can decide not to continue at any point throughout the process, yet there is usually a continuous flow of reviews being posted (Chen & Huang, 2013:1759). Online reviews are generally posted without having any economic incentives and therefore motivations for posting reviews vary between customers (Chen & Huang, 2013:1760). According to Kim, Maslowska and Tamaddoni

(2019:114), customers can be motivated to write reviews as firms offer compensation in the form of coupons, discounts and free samples, these are seen as sponsorship reviews. Firms provide these incentives to generate a large number of reviews in hope customers write positive reviews which then increase sales (Kim *et al.* 2019:114). Reviews can also be organic where customers do not receive any type of compensation as an incentive (Kim *et al.* 2019:114).

Some customers post reviews to assist prospective customers to make the best choice possible when deciding on what the best product is, as they have a desire to make an impact in the world (Chen & Huang, 2013:1761). Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004:44) proposed several other motivations for customers to post reviews. The motivations are the concern for prospective customers, the desire to assist a company, to receive social benefits, to exert power of the company, for self-enhancement, to express their positive emotions and finally to vent about their negative emotions (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004:44).

2.6.2 Various review platforms

The increase in the number of businesses that have their own websites and that of third-party websites indicating the growing importance of online reviews (Peng *et al.* 2016:269). Businesses have their own websites where customers can leave a review of their experience with the product, whether it be positive or negative (Peng *et al.* 2016:269). Third-party websites are independent platforms to that of any firm where customers post or read reviews (Belarmino & Koh, 2018:2732).

Grabs and Sudhoff (2014:186) argue that prospective customers would rather want to look at reviews generated on third-party websites than that of the firm, as they may not trust the authenticity of reviews on the business' website due the control a firm has to manipulate the reviews. The firms that decide to take this unethical route does so by either posting their own positive reviews anonymously or by removing any negative reviews (Peng *et al.* 2016:269).

Some third-party websites that prospective customers can use to look at reviews are eBay, Booking.com, Amazon or any social media platform namely YouTube, Instagram and Facebook (Malbon, 2013:143). Another method for customers to share their experiences of products would be personal blogs, which is a platform created by the customer that any prospective customer can read to gain insight knowledge of a product

(Malbon 2013:143). No one except for the customer that created the personal blog has the necessary access to post a review of products making it a reliable source to gain product information (Malbon 2013:143).

2.7 FACTORS OF AN ONLINE REVIEW THAT INFLUENCE PURCHASING DECISIONS

Several factors have been identified to present the influence that online reviews have on prospective online customer's purchasing decisions. The first factor concerns the perceived value of the review to the prospective customer, in the sense of whether the review is helpful or provides a sense of usefulness (Lee & Choeh, 2017:685). The second factor of whether an online review is influential depends on the degree to which the prospective customer has internet experience (Zhu & Zhang, 2010:137). The third factor identified by Wen, Prybutok and Xu (2011:16) is the credibility of the website in which the review is posted on, which relates to whether the website has a good reputation and the prospective customer's trust in the website.

2.7.1 The perceived value of the review

The perceived value of a review to a prospective customer is seen in the context of the review's helpfulness and usefulness (Lee & Choeh, 2017:685). Websites measure helpfulness by including a dialogue box after each review asking whether the review was seen as helpful to the prospective customer (Lee & Choeh, 2017:683). Prospective customers can indicate "yes or no" through selecting either of the two options and the review with the highest selection of yes' will appear more predominantly on the website's page (Fang, Ye, Kucukusta & Law, 2016:499). The usefulness of a review is determined by the review's ability to assist the prospective customer in making their purchasing decision regarding the product (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1346).

The helpfulness or usefulness of the review can be further measured based on a number of elements including the rating that has been assigned to the review as well as the length of the review (Lee & Choeh, 2017:685). In addition, the timeliness and recentness of the review and the number or quantity of reviews provided on the specific product (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1347).

2.7.1.1 Rating

A product's rating is often displayed in the form of a star alongside the product picture and a customer's review (Filieri, 2015:1264). The rating of a product refers to a reviewer's overall evaluation of that product (Filieri, 2015:1264). Review ratings are the customers' experiences regarding the quality of the product (Ghasemaghaei, Eslami, Deal & Hassanein, 2018:545). The Likert scale format is often used for ratings using numerical values and is usually on a 1 to 5 scale, which reflect a negative, neutral or positive evaluation (Ghasemaghaei *et al.* 2018:545). Ghasemaghaei *et al.* (2018:545) propose that with the current literature, review ratings are very influential in customer purchasing decision making process. However, Filieri (2015:1264) argues that customers tend to make use of an overall rating less and prefer a more in-depth description of the product before making purchasing decisions. Prospective customers can filter potential product choices using the ratings which will assist in the evaluation process as it reduces alternatives, the prospective customer can then read reviews for further assistance (Filieri, 2015:1264).

2.7.1.2 Length and readability

The length of the review is a contributing factor to the perceived helpfulness and usefulness of an online review in the purchasing decision process. Online reviews that are seen helpful are those that include a more in-depth description and are thus seen as high-quality reviews by the reader (Lee & Choeh, 2017:687-688). The length of the review needs to be of certain criteria, it should not be too short as it may appear as unclear and vague and a review that is excessively detailed could be overwhelming for a prospective customer (Banerjee & Chua, 2014:636). The readability of a review is based on the writing style and how easily the content of the review could be understood by the prospective customer (Fang *et al.* 2016:500). Readability will depend on how the review was written, which is as a result of the social status and education level of the author of the review (Fang *et al.* 2016:500). Online reviews with a higher level of readability are more influential to a prospective customer's purchasing decisions, as they are considered to be more credible (Fang *et al.* 2016:500).

2.7.1.3 Timeliness

During the process whereby prospective customers are searching for information to make purchasing decisions, a vast amount of information associated to the product will be

presented, however only those reviews that are recent or timely are seen as helpful (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1347). If a review is considered to be of timeliness or recentness it suggests that the review is current, up-to-date and can be regarded as relevant (Zhiming, Li & Lu, 2014:445). It is imperative that firms keep their websites up-to-date in order to continuously provide their customers and prospective customers with valuable information (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1347). From a customer's viewpoint the helpfulness of a review decreases as time passes (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1347).

2.7.1.4 Quantity

Prospective customers consider the opinions of others in order to reduce the uncertainty surrounding the notion of purchasing online (Dai & Jiang, 2016:207). Researchers have indicated that a positive correlation exists between the number of reviews for a product and product sales, thus confirming that the quantity of reviews for a product has a positive influence on customer purchasing decisions (Dai & Jiang, 2016:207). Zhao *et al.* (2015:1348) concurs that higher volumes of reviews, whether they are positive or negative, are likely to be influential to prospective online customers. Filieri (2015:1264) indicates that the greater the number of reviews available, the higher the chance that prospective customers will find the information they consider to be helpful for acquainting themselves with a product, its performance and quality.

2.7.1.5 Valence and quality

Valence is seen as the positive or negative attributes of the online review (Lo & Yao, 2019:45). The increase in the number of negative reviews could result in prospective customer having a more unfavourable attitude towards the product (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1348). An online review conveying a negative message is seen as more useful for prospective customers during their purchase decision making process and message valence is believed to have a stronger effect on the purchasing decisions for beginner camera users, than the more expert users (Lin & Xu, 2017.364). Negative reviews are written as an outcome of the customer's dissatisfaction and it is believed that customers regard negative reviews are more credible and respond more prominently to them than to positive ones (Lo & Yao, 2019:45). However, Dai and Jiang (2016:208) argue that the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers are influenced by online reviews that are of a positive nature from previous customers. Positive reviews concentrate more

on the appraisal of the quality of the product and forming recommendations in order to assist prospective customers in their decision making (Zhao *et al.* 2015:1348).

The quality of a review is another determining factor on whether the review is perceived as helpful or useful to the prospective customer. A review's quality refers to the content within the review and whether the content is believable, objective, timely and appropriate (Zhiming *et al.* 2014:443). A review's believability is whether it can be regarded as valuable and true to the prospective customer; objectivity is the extent to which the review is based on facts and not influenced by personal feelings; timeliness is the degree to which the review is up-to-date and the appropriateness of a review is the degree to which it is relevant for a prospective customer's decision making (Zhiming *et al.* 2014:443).

2.7.2 The prospective customer's internet experience

A prospective customer who has a great deal of internet experience is more likely to make use of online review platforms when collecting product information before making their online purchasing decision (Zhu & Zhang, 2010:137). Having internet experience enables the prospective customer with the ability to analyse and evaluate the information in order to make sense of it and determine its credibility (López & Sicilia, 2014:34). This can be done by finding reviews on the same product from a variety of different review platforms to ensure validity (Zhu & Zhang, 2010:137). Even though having internet experience may result in an online review to be influential in the purchasing decisions of a prospective customer, the experience permits for identifying that the content of a review may be deceptive as a result of an unreliable source (Zhu & Zhang, 2010:137). Lower levels of internet experience results in a search for product information in an inefficient manner and leaves naive customers unaware of the ability of firms to manipulate online reviews (López & Sicilia, 2014:34).

2.7.3 Credibility of the review's website

The concept of credibility focuses on the content communicated and is influenced by aspects of the source, receiver and message conveyed (Lo & Yao, 2019:43). In terms of an eWOM perspective, credibility relates to elements of trustworthiness and perceived similarity (Lo & Yao, 2019:43). Trust has been identified as a crucial factor in terms of the practice of purchasing products and services online, due to the high levels of uncertainty regarding the process, and is considered an important factor in attracting and retaining customers (Xiao, Guo, D'Ambra & Fu, 2016:434). If firms violate the consumers' trust

during the online buying process this will result to negative WOM (Wen, Prybutok & Xu, 2011:16). The credibility of the website in which a review is posted on has a great influence on purchasing decisions of prospective online customers (Wen *et al.* 2011:16). Filieri, (2015:1263) agrees and adds that a source's credibility and trustworthiness are likely to result in the review influencing a prospective customer's purchasing decisions.

A prospective customer will more likely be influenced by a review when the website is seen to be more trustworthy and have a good reputation (Wen *et al.* 2011:16). Regardless, a prospective customer is unable to use communication cues to verify the credibility of the source of the review as they are often written by unidentified individuals who have no relationship with the prospective customer and thus evaluating the credibility may be difficult (Filieri, 2015:1263).

2.7.3.1 Customers trust in the website

A prospective customer's trust in a website contributes to whether online reviews have the ability to influence their purchasing decisions. The business who owns and runs the website is more knowledgeable about the quality of their products than the prospective customer (Utz *et al.* 2012:50). Prospective customers depend on signals or cues exhibited by a business to judge whether products are of quality as this can not be observed prior to purchasing (Xiao *et al.* 2016:436). This concept relates to the signalling theory, which explains how customers assess a products quality or a business' credibility during instances where it may be difficult to physically observe or identify this factor (Xiao *et al.* 2016:435). Businesses make use of the signalling theory, by using their website as a signal for customers to trust in their online platform (Xiao *et al.* 2016:436). A business controls the signals relating to how their websites are portrayed, but customer reviews are not within their control (Utz *et al.* 2012:50). It has been noted that prospective customers identify reviews, written by prior customers, to be of more importance than the trust signals exhibited by businesses or their website characteristics (Utz *et al.* 2012:50).

2.7.3.2 Reputation of the website

Reputation is an important asset for a business as it ensures their sustainability and the retention of good customer relationships (Utz *et al.* 2012:51). The ability of a business to develop a good reputation is seen to have a greater influence on a customer's trust than the assurance of privacy or security, which is crucial in an online environment (Utz *et al.* 2012:51). The reputation of a business can be developed by delivering quality, customer

service and their product offering (Utz *et al.* 2012:51). Focusing on that of the reputation of an online store, reputation is built on prompt and correct shipping and handling of customer complaints (Utz *et al.* 2012:51).

2.8 SUMMARY

Customers are seen to play an active role throughout the marketing process by means of word-of-mouth, which consequently influences prospective customers purchasing decisions. Prospective customers often make use of online reviews to aid their online purchases. Online reviews are recognised as a form of eWOM which is perceived as a powerful tool in marketing, alongside the traditional WOM. Traditional WOM consists of customers sharing their experiences with the product to other prospective customers including, family members, co-workers and friends.

This study specifically looks at Kotler and Armstrong's method of product classification, where the DSLR camera was identified as a shopping product. The consumer buying decision model was used to identify the process involved in purchasing. Customers have many different motivations for writing a review and there are a variety of platforms available for customers to write reviews on. Many retailers of products have the service available for customers to leave a review on their website. In addition, third-party websites, which are independent platforms to that of the retailer, allow customers to leave reviews which are unable to be altered.

Several factors of an online review have been identified to be influential to a prospective customer's purchasing decision. Firstly, in relation to the reviews perceived value, in the context of helpfulness and usefulness. Secondly, the prospective customer's internet experience. Lastly, the credibility of the review's website can have a great influence on prospective customers' purchasing decisions, especially in terms of the customer's trust in the website and whether the website has a good reputation.

The following chapter will discuss the study's research design, methodology, data collection methods and data analysis process. This includes the secondary and primary data collection, in terms of population, sample frame, sampling techniques and research instrument. The chapter will conclude with a chapter summary.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1   INTRODUCTION

The literature review in Chapter Two addresses the concept of word-of-mouth and the strength it had on the purchasing decisions of prospective customers in the online marketplace. The researchers identified the various methods for the product classification of a camera and the one most suited, followed by a discussion of the consumer buying decision making model. The nature of online reviews was discussed, specifically looking at the motivations for customers to write a review and the various platforms available in which reviews can be written on. However, the main focus was that of the factors of an online review that could potentially be influential in the purchasing decisions of prospective customers. The factors were identified as the perceived value of the review, the prospective customers internet experience and the credibility of the website in which the review was written on. The purpose of this study is to identify, investigate and empirically test the factors having the greatest influence on prospective customers.

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the research design and methodology to be followed in order to conduct the study. The chapter begins with the provision of the understanding of the nature of research, and specifically looking at that of scientific research and the purpose of research in this study. Data collection methods be discussed, namely that of secondary and primary data collection. Lastly, the data analysis process will be explained.

3.2   THE NATURE OF RESEARCH

Research can be identified as a process of searching and examining information in order to increase knowledge (Collis & Hussey, 2014:2). In addition, academic research can be defined as the process of gathering, analysing and interpreting data in order to understand a concept and answer a specific research question (Williams, 2007:65). Struwig and Stead (2013:3) recognised that there are three approaches when conducting research, namely quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Williams (2007:65) further explains this by adding that quantitative research is best used regarding numerical data, qualitative research is used for textual data and mixed methods is a combination of both.

Through research, researchers can gain the ability to think logically and become more critical regarding issues of importance (Bist, 2014:35).

According to Kumar (2019:46-50), the research process consists of three phases and includes eight steps:

i)   Phase one: Deciding what to research

The first step includes the formulation of a research problem, which can be seen as the most important step, as this identifies what is being researched as well as the design, measurement, sampling and analysis methods to be followed.

ii)   Phase two: Planning a research study

The second step is the conceptualising of a research design which discusses how the researchers are going to answer the research question. The third step is the construction of an instrument that enables data collection, which includes a tool that is used by the researchers to collect information and could range from interviews to questionnaires. Step four is the selection of a sample, which could be done through probability sampling or non-probability sampling. Step five is the writing of a research proposal, thus providing information about the research which tells the reader about the research problem and the manner in which the researcher is going to investigate the problem.

ii)   Phase Three: Conduction of the research study

The sixth step is the collection of data from the sample using the various collection methods. Step seven is the processing and displaying of the data, thus communicating and reporting on the findings. Lastly, step eight is the writing of the research report which informs the reader what the researcher has done, found and concluded based on the findings.

Research relates to this study as the researchers will conduct a search for information relating to the influence that online reviews have on prospective customers purchasing decisions. The researchers will then proceed to analyse the data found and make sense of it by means of writing up a literature review. This will be followed by conducting a primary search for data on the study.

Scientific research can be identified as the process of solving a problem by means of following logical and rigorous methods of gathering and analysing data and making accurate conclusions (Sekaran, 2000:20). Marczyk, DeMatteo & Festinger (2005:4) add by defining scientific research as a manner of acquiring knowledge and includes a set of principles and guidelines for gathering, evaluating and reporting information that is valid and reliable in terms of the context of the study. Scientific research is comprised of elements such as: an empirical approach, observations, questions, hypotheses, experiments, analysis, conclusions and replication (Marczyk *et al.* 2005:5). Three general goals can be identified as being, description, prediction and explanation (Marczyk *et al.* 2005:16). Thus, it can be deduced that the main goal of scientific research is to acquire information and a better understanding of the research question. This can be achieved by conducting research enabling the depiction of the conclusion regarding the relationship between two or more variables (Marczyk *et al.* 2005:16). This study will be using elements of scientific research, such as the various guidelines on how to gather and analyse collected data in order to make use of the information to draw accurate conclusions.

The purpose of this research is to expand on the knowledge about how online customer product reviews influence prospective online customers purchasing decisions of digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras. Online reviews can be helpful in the purchasing decisions of prospective customers as the process can be overwhelming due to the various options available to choose from, thus reviews can assist through seeing how other customers experienced the product. The researchers will also provide and explain concepts relating to the study.

3.3   RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design is the strategy followed by a researcher in an attempt to solve a research problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:85). The process provides a framework for collecting and analysing the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011:40). The main function of research design sets out the approaches of the researchers in finding the information needed to solve the problem (Kumar, 2011:41).

Collis and Hussey (2014:97) identified a number of characteristics of a good research design. The first characteristic is that there should be a good fit between the research paradigm and methodology that will be accepted by readers. The second characteristic is that it should have a fundamental framework that acts as a guide for the research. The

third is that appropriate methods should be used in the study. Another characteristic is that the design allows for knowledge claims that are consistent strategy of inquiry. The final characteristic of a good research design is that the researcher should be able to address the research questions and meet the objectives.

The research design has a number of tasks. Colton and Covert (2007:34-36) outline the following tasks as the main steps of research design:

i)   Identify the purpose of the study. The purpose usually forms the title of the study and involves reading past literature and finding the gaps in previous studies. The purpose can either be stated as a question or statement.

ii)   Formulate the research questions for the purpose of the study. These questions are used to create the hypothesis which determine the needed variable to be tested. It will dictate the data necessary for the research.

iii)   Choose the research methodology. Researchers have a choice between quantitative research and qualitative research, and in some cases, the researchers combine the two methods.

iv)   Designing the measuring instrument. When designing the questionnaire, maximum focus and consideration is required to ensure it is constructed in a manner that allows the required data to be collected from respondents.

v)   Analysing the data. The primary data needs to be captured and analysed through means of numerical representations and statistical methods.

vi)   Reporting the data. After analysing and interpreting the data, the findings of the study are reported.

The problem statement of this study is that there are several perceived risks that online customers are exposed to, and that these risks are reduced with customer reviews as it provides the necessary information to the prospective customer to assist with their decisions.

The problem statement leads to the objective of this study. The research design plan includes both the primary objective and all the secondary objectives. The research objective of the study explains the purpose of the study and what it wants to achieve. The primary objective of this study is to measure the influence that online customer product

reviews have on prospective customers when making purchasing decisions of electronic goods, such as cameras.

The approach used in this study is quantitative research which collects data and expresses it in numbers with a large sample size (Struwig & Stead, 2013:6). The quantitative research is a positivistic research paradigm that measures or counts objectives (Seers & Crichton, 2001:487). This paradigm evaluates all the causes that would influence the outcomes of the research and the data (Creswell, 2009:7).

A questionnaire will be used to collect the desired data from the respondents. The data for the quantitative research will be captured on programme known as Microsoft Excel. After analysing the data, the findings will be reported.

3.4   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Marczyk *et al.* (2005:22), research methodology are the procedures, practices and principles that govern research. Methodology is the approach to the process of research, which includes a wide variety of methods (Collis & Hussey, 2014:59). To ensure a reliable and valid study, this process must be effectively managed and controlled. The research process is managed effectively by only including a limited number of variables that will be tested (Kumar, 2011:8). The research methodology provides the reader with a structured process of how the research will be conducted and the philosophical assumptions (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:143).

Leedy and Ormrod (2005:94) explain that the nature of research can be divided into qualitative or quantitative research, and these approaches govern how the research will be carried out.

Qualitative research focuses on collecting non-numerical data by making words the main focus (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:399). This method makes use of data that involves understanding the complexity, context and detail of the research subject and uses the research to generate a theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011:386; Hox & Boeije, 2005:593). The researcher identifies themes and describes findings from observations or interviews when using the qualitative research method (Kumar, 2011:36).

Qualitative data collection methods are generally flexible and sensitive in a social context, and the most common method can be identified as interviews, where the researcher meets with interviewee to discuss their experiences relating to the purpose of the study

(Hox & Boeije, 2005:595). This method does not put an emphasis on a large sample size as in quantitative research, but can work with a rather small size (Kumar, 2011:38).

Quantitative research is known as the collection of numerical data and gives insight regarding the relationship between the research being conducted and the theory related to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011:150). Testing an idea or hypothesis regarding relationships between variables is the main aim of quantitative research (Struwig & Stead, 2013:4). These characteristics make it best suited when the aim of a study is to quantify the data to provide solutions to the formulated questions.

The quantitative research method is associated with the positivistic paradigm that focuses on collecting data that relates to the problem from a large population (Rahi, 2017:2). The positivistic paradigm uses research as an approach to create knowledge with the use of the model of natural science, which puts an emphasis on facts (Noor, 2008:1602).

There are a number of approaches for quantitative research, such as descriptive research, exploratory research, and experimental and quasi-experimental research (Struwig & Stead, 2013:6-8). Descriptive research is used to describe something, such as the demographics of the respondents, which include age, income and gender (Struwig & Stead, 2013:7). Exploratory research is used to formulate an idea and a research question, and investigates a problem in an area where little is known (Struwig & Stead, 2013:7). Experimental and quasi-experimental variables are used to identify to what extent independent variables influence dependent variables (Struwig & Stead, 2013:8).

Quantitative data collection methods include interviews, surveys, observations and most commonly questionnaires (Struwig & Stead, 2013:89). Questionnaires can consist of various types of questions. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to express themselves and answer freely in their own words (Struwig & Stead, 2013:95). Multiple-choice questions consist of a number of choices where the respondent chooses an answer (Struwig & Stead, 2013:96). Multiple-choice questions are better suited for data collection than open-ended questions. Questionnaires also have scaled-response questions which is used to gather data relating to the respondent's attitudes regarding the topic and is known to provide ordinal data (Struwig & Stead, 2013:98). An example of scaled-response questions would be the Likert-type scale.

The study makes use of the quantitative research methodology to plan the steps needed to acquire the necessary data. The steps include a number of tasks such as identifying

the population, sample and sample size of the study. It also includes the gathering of data through the means of a questionnaire, followed by the data being analysed and made sense of. The positivistic research methodology was used in this study as it is suitable when data needs to be quantified in a structured process.

3.5   DATA COLLECTION

The process of data collection is seen as a technique that is used to collect data or information, through conducting empirical research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010:298). In the following section the researchers will discuss the two main techniques which includes primary and secondary data collection. Secondary data collection consists of the collection of information sourced from that of another researcher, and primary data collection includes questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observations (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010:298).

3.5.1   Secondary data collection

Secondary data can be defined as existing data which is examined to extract information that is relevant to the study (Kumar, 2011:24). McGinn (2012:804) defined secondary data as data that previous researchers collected for a different purpose. Kumar (2011:24) identified previously researched information, handbooks and information collected from libraries such as journals as secondary data. Researcher-contributed databases, institutional records, government agencies, and private or public archives are all sources when looking for secondary data (McGinn, 2012:804).

An important secondary source is the internet, which contains a vast number of published research articles, but the researcher should be careful when collecting data from the internet (Kumar, 2011:154). Kumar (2011:154) identified issues associated with using the internet when looking for information and these include:

i)   Validity and reliability: The validity and reliability vary between sources as data obtained from personal diaries tend to be more unreliable than those collected from a census.

ii)   Personal bias: Information in newspapers, personal diaries and magazines are very subjective and are thus bias information, whereas research reports are objective information and better for research purposes.

iii)   Availability of data: Before the researchers continue with the study, it is important to make sure the necessary data to complete the research is available.

iv)   Format: Researchers need to make sure that the available data follows the required format before using it.

Secondary data will be examined and processed to withdraw the information that is relevant to the study. For the purpose of this study, the researchers consulted journals, previously conducted research, library books, the internet and NMU's online databases, which includes Emerald Insight and EBSCOhost, to gather secondary data. When the study made use of Google Scholar, it was reviewed to make sure the data is credible and reliable. It is also possible to gain access to both national and international libraries by making a library loan, but this study did not require this method of data collection. The researchers used the data they gathered to construct Chapter One, Chapter Two and Chapter Three. The data was also used in the construction of the questionnaire, by using the relevant data to create statements. The researchers also made use of primary data which will be discussed in the section that follows.

3.5.2   Primary data collection

Primary data signifies the data that researchers collect in order to solve the problem of the study and answer the specific research questions (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:663). Primary data can be collected using many different methods, the method of choice will depend on the study's aims, purpose as well as whether the study conducted requires qualitative or quantitative empirical research to be done (Struwig & Stead, 2013:102). Qualitative data collection methods include that of open-ended interviews, focus group interviews and observations (Struwig & Stead, 2013:102). Quantitative data collection methods include, interviews and questionnaires (Struwig & Stead, 2013:89-90).

Primary data is collected once the appropriate population has been selected, along with the sampling technique most suited to the study and once the measuring instrument has been designed. Each of these aspects will be discussed further in the sections to follow. For this study, primary data will be collected by means of a questionnaire which consists of the elements that were investigated in the literature review. The questionnaire will be distributed to 40 respondents to complete, thereafter the researchers will analyse the data, display the findings and draw conclusions.

3.5.2.1 Population, sample frame and sample

A research population is known as all the potential respondents that are applicable to the study (Struwig & Stead, 2013:268). In order to make generalisations regarding the study, it is important that the sample chosen is one that is a representation of the total population (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018:187-188). This notion is important as the aim of processing data is to develop conclusions about the general population, from which the sample is drawn (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018:188). For the purpose of this study, the population can be defined as those consumers who have previously made an online purchase, are considering purchasing a DSLR camera and those who read online customer reviews of products during their decision-making process.

A sample frame is a listing of all the members in the population from which the sample will be selected (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018:188; Struwig & Stead, 2013:270). For the purpose of this study there is no list available of the total population for the researchers to draw a sample from. This being said the researchers will have to choose their respondents based on their availability or accessibility, this is known as convenience sampling.

Due to the inability of the researchers to test the influence of online reviews on every perspective online customer, a sample from the population will be selected. A sample is a segment of the population that is selected in order to carry out the investigation (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:665). There are two main sampling techniques, which includes probability and non-probability sampling, which will be discussed further in the following section (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018:188). For the purpose of this study, the researchers will select a sample of 40 respondents who will be chosen from within the area of Port Elizabeth and specifically focusing on those online customers purchasing electronic goods such as DSLR cameras.

3.5.2.2 Sampling techniques

Sampling procedures are used to obtain accurate information, as information obtained from an entire population may provide inexact information (Struwig & Stead, 2013:114). Leedy and Omrod (2005:199) identify two categories of sampling techniques namely; non-probability sampling and probability sampling.

i) Non-probability sampling techniques

When researchers use this sampling technique, the selection of their sampling units are arbitrary because they rely on personal judgement, but the probability of a specific member being selected is unknown (Struwig & Stead, 2013:116). Quinlan *et al.* (2015:180) indicate that in non-probability sampling, the sample does not represent the population in any statistical sense. The types of non-probability sampling are as follows:

a) Convenience sampling which is when the sample is selected purely on the basis of availability. The selection is made on both the cooperation and how accessible the respondents are. This method should be used when the target population have a lot in common (Struwig & Stead, 2013:116). The advantage of this technique is that there is no need for a list of the population, but the drawback is that the variability and bias of estimated cannot be controlled or measured (Struwig & Stead, 2013:120).

b) Judgement sample is when an expert in the field of research, where the survey is being conducted, selects what they believe would be the best possible sample for a specific study. The selection of respondents is thus dependent on the judgement of the researcher (Struwig & Stead, 2013:116). The advantage of judgment sampling is that the sample is guaranteed to meet the specific objective. The disadvantage of this method is that the sample may be unrepresentative because it may be bias as a result of the experts' beliefs (Struwig & Stead, 2013:121).

c) Quota sampling involves developing a sample based on different quota criteria set forth by the researchers (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:181). These quota criteria can be age groups, gender, socio economic groups, ethnicity or region (Bryman & Bell, 2011:193). Respondents are only included if they meet the criteria and the researchers decide which characteristics are most important (Struwig & Stead, 2013:117). An advantage of this technique is that it introduces stratification of population, but unfortunately it also has a drawback as error from the population cannot be estimated due to the non-random selection within classes (Struwig & Stead, 2013:121).

d)   Snowball sampling is when the researcher identifies one respondent to conduct the research with, then the current respondent recommends the next respondent (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:181). This technique works best to locate members that are part of rare populations through the use of the referral process (Struwig & Stead, 2013:118). The advantage of this technique is how useful it is to locate members of rare populations, but the main disadvantage is that there are high levels of bias as sample units are not independent (Struwig & Stead, 2013:121).

ii)   Probability sampling techniques

When researchers use this sampling technique, every element included within the population has a known non-zero probability of inclusion in the sample (Struwig & Stead, 2013:118). Quinlan *et al.* (2015:178) identify that in probability sampling, the sample that the researcher selected is representative of the population. The types of probability sampling are as follows:

a)   Random probability sampling requires the researcher to complete an accurate list of all the items that are included in the population. The list will be used to draw the random sample and can be completed using tables consisting of random numbers or the researcher can make use of statistical computer programmes (Struwig & Stead, 2013:118). A great advantage of this technique is that it requires minimal advance knowledge of the population and a major drawback is that the respondents might be dispersed which results in a higher cost (Struwig & Stead, 2013:122).

b)   Stratified random sampling selects a pre-established number of items from a group or stratum rather than selecting from the population as a whole (Struwig & Stead, 2013:119). The advantage of this sampling technique is that the sample size variability is reduced. The disadvantage is that it can be costly if the stratified lists are unavailable (Struwig & Stead, 2013:123).

c)   Cluster sampling is used when the people in the population are found in clusters and then the researcher picks groups at random (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:179). The advantage for cluster sampling is that it can identify the cluster and population characteristics, but a drawback for this technique is the larger error associated with samples compared to other samples of similar size (Struwig & Stead, 2013:123).

d)   Systematic sampling is when the researcher selects from the sampling frame at regular intervals after selecting an initial starting point (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:178). The advantages are that it is easy to check and the selection of samples are simple. The disadvantage is that variability may occur if the intervals are closely related to the populations' periodic ordering (Struwig & Stead, 2013:122).

e)   Multi-stage area sampling the researcher combines two or more sampling techniques (Struwig & Stead, 2013:120). The advantages and disadvantages of this technique depends on what techniques the researcher combined (Struwig & Stead, 2013:123).

The chosen sampling technique for this quantitative study is convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, as the sample is chosen based on the availability and ease of access of the respondents. The cost of using this sampling technique is very low. The researchers argue that the selected sample represents a diverse view on the topic. Once a sample is drawn, a research instrument needs to be developed. The section that follows will provide more insight into this process.

3.5.2.3 Research measuring instrument

This section will include a discussion on the research measuring instrument that will be used for this study. The researchers will provide a detailed description of the composition of the instrument, including the covering letter, instructions and contents. In addition, the scale development and operationalisation of the variables as well as the administration of the measuring instrument.

The research instrument used for this research study will be a self-administered questionnaire as the researchers will be conducting quantitative research. According to Bird (2009:1307), a questionnaire is a tool that is used to acquire data regarding the respondent's demographics as well as behaviours, attitudes and beliefs with respect to the particular topic being studied. The design of the questionnaire is imperative to obtaining the needed information for the study, thus the formatting, wording, ordering and length of questions need to be taken into consideration (Bird, 2009:1310). The researchers need to ensure that the respondents understand the meaning of the questions and that they flow in a logical manner (Bird, 2009:1310).

i)   Covering letter and instructions

A covering letter's purpose is to provide the respondent with an introduction to the study, objectives of the study, promise of confidentiality regarding information collected, use of data and motivations for completing the questionnaire (Colton & Covert, 2007:283). For the purpose of this study, a covering letter will be developed and attached to the questionnaire stating the topic of the research, the main objective as well as the purpose of the study. In addition, it will provide the respondent with details regarding the institution through which the study is being conducted, being Nelson Mandela University and the details of the supervisor overseeing the study. Respondents will be assured and guaranteed that all their personal data will be kept confidential and only used for the purpose of the study as well as their identity to remain anonymous. Lastly, the covering letter will express the researcher gratitude and appreciation to the respondents for participating in the study and completing the questionnaire to the best of their ability in order to assist in the research project.

ii)   Questionnaire content

When designing a questionnaire, the researchers can make use of open-ended or close-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to freely express their own opinions and feelings without being influenced by a predetermined set of answers (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec & Vehovar, 2003:161). These questions are useful when researchers need further clarification and knowledge on a particular concept, however, they can be problematic as it can result in the interviewer being bias and is very time consuming to analyse (Struwig & Stead, 2013:95-96). Alternatively, researchers can make use of close-ended questions which offer respondents a limited number of alternatives when answering a particular question (Reja *et al.* 2003:161). Close-ended questions are commonly used in order to collect numerical or quantitative data, whereas open-ended questions collect qualitative data (Williams, 2007:70). For the purpose of this study, the researchers will make use of predominantly close-ended questions when constructing the measuring instrument, however a section of the questionnaire will ask the respondent to answer an open-ended question.

As a result of the researchers making use of manly close-ended questions to compile their research instrument, respondents will be required to indicate their feelings and attitudes towards a particular question by means of using an intensity rating scale, namely

the Likert scale. The use of a Likert scale is popular and easy to administer as respondents simply select their attitude towards a statement by how strongly they agree or disagree (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:293). An example of a Likert scale could include the following continuum of responses: 1) not at all; 2) slightly; 3) somewhat; 4) highly; 5) extremely. For the purpose of this study, a five-point type Likert scale with the following responses will be presented: 1) strongly disagree; 2) disagree; 3) neutral; 4) agree; 5) strongly agree. This Likert scale will be used as the researchers are identifying the influence of certain factors on a prospective customer's purchasing decisions.

The measuring instrument for the study will be comprised of three sections as well as provide the respondent with instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Section A commences with a question stipulating the criteria which need to be adhered to in order for the respondent to participate in the study and complete the questionnaire. The respondent would need to read online customer reviews which assist them in their online shopping, previously made an online purchase of a product and or service and is considering the online purchase of a DSLR camera. In addition, questions pertaining to the general and biographical information of the respondent. These questions include areas relating to: gender, age, population group, highest level of education and other monthly income. Section A will also include questions regarding the respondent's online activities such as how often they shop online, how much they spend per online transaction, which platforms do they read customer online reviews from prior to making the online purchase, the last electronic purchase made and their main reason for shopping online. Section B of the questionnaire consists of questions that relate to the factors which were seen to have an influence on prospective online customers purchasing decisions. The respondents will make use of the Likert scale to indicate the extent to which they are influenced by certain elements that make up the various factors. Section C is an open-ended question which asks the respondent to indicate to the researcher's factors of an online review that they consider to be of importance.

iii)   Scale development and operationalisation

Operationalisation is the process of converting literature concepts into variables that allow for researchers to measure or quantify those factors (Sarantakos,1993:46). The purpose of this is to allow for empirical research to take place and to measure the frequency, strength and occurrence (Sarantakos,1993:46). Jonker and Pennink (2010:51) concur

and add that operationalisation enables theoretical notions to be changed into a measurable concept so it can be used for empirical research.

The current study will not include dependent and independent variables; however, the researchers have identified factors, through literature, of an online review that are able to influence prospective online customers when making their purchasing decisions. The operationalisation of each factor is explained in the following table along with the number of items of those factors that will make up the questions within the questionnaire:

Table 3.1: Factors of an online review that influence purchasing decisions

Factor	Operationalisation	Number of items
Reviewer helpfulness, Rating & Timeliness	The extent to which the online review left by a previous customer will assist the prospective customer in making their purchasing decisions. This specifically looks at the reviewer's overall evaluation of their experience with the product represented by means of a rating and the degree to which the review is seen as recent or up-to-date in terms of its timeliness	7
Length & readability	The length of the review considers whether the reviewer wrote an in-depth or a short and to the point description of their experience. Readability refers to the style of writing and whether what was written is understood by the prospective online shopper.	7
Quality & Quantity	Quality refers to the content of the review and whether it is believable, appropriate and objective. Quantity refers to the volume or number of reviews available for the given product.	4
Valence	Valence is the positive or negative attributes of the online review.	7
Prospective customer's internet experience	The internet experience of a prospective customer enables them to analyse and evaluate information on the internet in order to make sense of it, determine the credibility and if it is from a reliable source.	8
Prospective customers trust in the website	A prospective customer's trust in a website depends on whether they feel secure in making transactions via the online store, providing private information and consider the content on the website as reliable.	9
Reputation of the website	The reputation of a website is established and developed by delivering quality product offerings, customer service, prompt and correct shipping.	4

iv)   Administration of the measuring instrument

The questionnaire will be distributed to 40 prospective online customers within Port Elizabeth, in the period of August 2019. A non-probability sampling technique will be used, specifically the convenience sampling method, where the researchers will identify respondents who are able to complete the questionnaire. The researchers will ensure that the chosen respondents are able to meet any predetermined criteria before the completion of the questionnaire. The questionnaires will be personally distributed by the researchers and collected once they have been completed. Once the researchers have collected the questionnaire, they will be briefly inspected to confirm that the questions have been answered correctly and in a way that is able to aid in the research study.

Certain ethical guidelines and considerations need to be followed by students when conducting research and collecting data (Driscoll, 2011:155). Firstly, researchers need to ensure that the participation in their research instrument is voluntary and to first receive the permission of the respondent before involving them in the study (Driscoll, 2011:155). Secondly, confidentiality and anonymity are essential, thus the researchers need to guarantee that their respondents' information is kept private as it could be personal or damaging (Sarantakos, 2013:20). Lastly, the researchers must withhold expressing any preconceptions when collecting data, because there is little point in conducting the study if the researcher already believes they know the answers (Driscoll, 2011:159). A researcher can be biased through the way in which questions are asked or when conclusions are drawn from the collected data (Sarantakos, 2013:20).

3.6   DATA ANALYSIS

In order to make sense of the raw data collected it needs to be summarised through entering the data on a word processor, a spreadsheet or database file, which is then saved and analysed using a statistical or qualitative programme (Struwig & Stead, 2013:156). Cooper and Schindler (2014:86) further define data analysis as a process of reducing the collected data into a manageable size by means of summarising it, followed by recognising patterns, examining the relationships between variables and applying statistical techniques. Through analysing data, researchers can interpret their findings to answer the research question as well as reveal whether the results are in correlation to what was hypothesised or speculated (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:86). For the purpose of this study, once the primary data has been collected by means of a questionnaire it will

be captured into a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet. This will be followed by analysing the captured data in order to make accurate conclusions based on the findings.

Qualitative data analysis is based on data expressed in the form of words, through the individual describing their opinions, feelings and accounts of certain events (Walliman, 2011:130). Quantitative data analysis deals with data in the form of numbers and uses mathematical operations to investigate the properties of the data set (Walliman, 2011:113). Researchers are not required to perform these calculations as computer software is available, however, it is important that the researchers are able to understand the results and convey them for the reader (Walliman, 2011:114).

Descriptive statistics is defined as a method of quantifying the characteristics of numerical data such as the dispersion and the measurement of central tendency which includes the median, mode and mean (Walliman, 2011:170). Struwig and Stead (2013:165) describe that descriptive statistics provides summaries for the collected data in order to provide a complete and straightforward illustration of a large amount of data. The median is the value that is directly in the middle of a data set; the mode is the value that occurs most frequently in the data set; and the mean is the average value of the data set (Struwig & Stead, 2013:165). The simplest measure of dispersion is the range of the data, which is the difference between the highest and the lowest score (Janes, 1999:407). A more challenging measurement of dispersion is the standard deviation which measures the deviation of each value from the mean (Janes, 1999:408).

Inferential statistics is a method of analysis that goes beyond describing the characteristics of the data but rather explains the correlation of the variables in order to produce forecasts on the data and test statistically based hypotheses (Walliman, 2011:172). Plichta and Garzon (2009:3) concur that inferential statistical techniques allow conclusions to be made about the relationship between the variables in a population sample. Inferential statistical techniques include that of chi-square test and the t-test (Plichta & Garzon, 2009:3).

Descriptive statistics will be utilised to analyse the data collected by means of conducting a quantitative study. This will include identifying the mean, mode, median and standard deviation of the collected data. These statistics will be used in making conclusions and recommendations regarding what was found during the primary data collection in relation to the secondary data.

Reliability is the degree to which the results of the study are consistent and are an accurate depiction of the views of the total population that the study is focusing on (Golafshani, 2003:598). A measuring instrument is considered reliable if the results can be reproduced using a similar methodology (Golafshani, 2003:598). Validity determines whether the research truly measures what it is intended to measure and the extent to which the results are truthful (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008:2278). Researchers will determine validity by posing a variety of questions and searching for those answers through looking at the research of others (Golafshani, 2003:599). Kimberlin and Winterstein (2008:2278), propose that validity requires that an instrument is reliable, but an instrument can be reliable without being valid. In this study, the researchers have ensured validity and reliability through making use of accurate and credible journal articles and books when conducting their research and the development of the instrument for data collection.

3.7   SUMMARY

Academic research involves gathering data, where it is then analysed and interpreted in such a manner that it assists researchers in understanding the concept to answer a specific research question. There are three approaches when conducting research namely qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Qualitative research is used for textual data, quantitative research is better suited to numerical data and mixed methods is a combination of the two research methods. This study makes use of quantitative research to express the data collected from a large sample size in numbers.

To ensure a good research design, there should be a fit between the methodology and the paradigm. Paradigms can be positivistic or interpretive. This study is a positivistic paradigm which focuses on the collection of new data from a large population and this paradigm also corresponds with the quantitative method. The large population consists of consumers who have previously made an online purchase or are prospective online customers who make use of online reviews during their decision-making process. To collect the data from the population, the respondents will be required to complete a questionnaire, which consists of scaled-response questions.

The two main techniques for data collection include that of primary and secondary methods. Secondary data collection is the collection of information sourced from that of another researcher, whereas primary data collection includes questionnaires and

interviews. For the purpose of this study, the researchers collected and analysed information that was relevant to the study, through consulting journal articles found on Nelson Mandela University's online database which consist of Emerald Insight and EBSCOhost. The data was also used in the construction of the questionnaire, by using the relevant data to create statements. For this study, primary data is collected by means of a questionnaire which consists of the elements that were investigated in the literature review. The questionnaire was distributed to 40 respondents to complete, by means of convenience sampling. Once the questionnaires were completed the researchers analysed the data utilising descriptive statistics.

Chapter Four will primarily contain the findings of the demographic and empirical results of this study obtained from the self-administered questionnaires distributed to the respondents. In addition, the data preparation and analysis process followed by the researchers.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter discussed the research design and methodology that will be used in this study. The research design is the plan that would be followed for the study and the research methodology explains how that plan would be executed. The paradigm used in this study was identified as the positivistic paradigm with a quantitative research method, and discussed in detail. The measuring instrument for the investigation consisted well-structured, self-administered questionnaire which was used to collect data from prospective online customers of digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras.

In this chapter, the data collected from the measuring instrument will be presented. The chapter begins with preparing the data by capturing it in a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet, where it will be analysed. Afterwards, the demographic results of the respondents, being prospective online shoppers, will be presented. The remainder of the chapter will consist of the empirical results of the study concluded by a summary of the chapter's information.

4.2   DATA PREPARATION

A number of steps need to be followed before the collected data can be captured. Goddard and Melville (2007:33) identified four steps that need to be followed in order to prepare the data. The steps are as follows:

i)   Number the questionnaires;

ii)   Checking for the completeness in questionnaires;

iii)   Coding the questionnaire statements and their statements;

iv)   Capturing the data from the questionnaires onto a suitable spreadsheet.

For the purpose of this study, the above-mentioned steps were carried out as follows. Each questionnaire was assigned a number after the respondent completed the questionnaire. Comprehensive checking was required to verify completeness, as the researchers left the questionnaires with the respondents for a couple of days before collecting it. The researchers post-coded the questionnaires, which means they coded

the sections after the respondents completed the questionnaires. Coding involves assigning symbols and numbers to the categorised groups. The coding of the sections ensures that the data could be captured in a statistical manner using tables and is also convenient as it saves time. This process of first capturing the data assists in making the data analysing process easier.

Once the researchers coded the questionnaire, data was captured into a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet. Excel is a Microsoft Office program that enables the respondents to prepare the data for analysis. The data processes used in the study includes spreadsheets, percentages and statistical formulas. Statistica was not used to perform statistical tests as this study does not have independent and dependent variables. It is not necessary to measure the validity and reliability of the data collected as the measuring instrument was compiled using reliable information from trustworthy and reputable sources.

After these steps were followed, the data was ready to be analysed, which will be discussed in the sections that follow.

4.3   DATA ANALYSIS

Cooper and Schindler (2014:86) define data analysis as a process of reducing the collected data into a manageable size by means of summarising it, followed by recognising patterns, examining the relationships between variables and applying statistical techniques.

For the purpose of this study, the data was recorded on a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet to ensure accuracy when doing any statistical calculations and to check for any incomplete sections. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A measured the respondents' demographic characteristics as well as general questions pertaining to the respondents online shopping activities, regular online review platforms viewed, last electronic purchase made and reasons for shopping online. Section B measured the various factors which are seen to have an influence on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers and Section C consists of open-ended questions to determine what factors the respondents considered as important when shopping online.

A Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet was sufficient for analysing all the sections in the questionnaire. The data in Section A and Section B were captured and analysed using statistical formulas and percentages where the results will be presented in the sections to follow, along with the conclusions drawn from the open-ended questions in Section C.

4.4   DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH FINDINGS

A total of 40 questionnaires were randomly distributed, by means of convenience sampling, to various individuals within Port Elizabeth, who can be seen as prospective online customers of DSLR cameras. From this distribution, all 40 questionnaires were returned. Unfortunately, the researchers did not achieve a 100 percent response rate as many respondents did not complete Section C.

The items listed under the demographic or general section of the questionnaire, this being section A, were captured and analysed. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 provide a summary of the data collected, which will be further discussed in the paragraphs to follow.

Table 5.1 includes the demographic data collected from the 40 respondents and comprises of information regarding their gender, age, population group, level of education and monthly income.

Table 5.1: Frequency distribution of the demographic information collected from the respondents

Variable	Respondents	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Requirements		
Yes	40	100
No	0	0
Total	**40**	**100**
Gender		
Male	16	40
Female	24	60
Total	**40**	**100**
Age category (years)		
20-29	13	32.5
30-39	10	25

Age category (years)		
40-49	6	15
50-59	7	17.5
60-69	3	7.5
70+	1	2.5
Total	**40**	**100**
Population group		
Black	6	15
Coloured	4	10
Indian/Asian	1	2.5
White	28	70
Not willing to say	1	2.5
Total	**40**	**100**
Highest level of education		
Grade 11 or less	0	0
Grade 12 or equivalent (matric)	14	35
National Diploma or equivalent certificate	13	32.5
Bachelor's Degree	8	20
Postgraduate Degree (e.g. Honours/Masters/MBA/Doctorate)	5	12.5
Total	**40**	**100**
Monthly income		
Less than R10 000	12	30
R10 001-R20 000	13	32.5
R20 001-R30 000	5	12.5
R30 001-R400 000	4	10
R40 001-R50 000	0	0
More than R50 000	2	5
Prefer not to say	4	10
Total	**40**	**100**

All of the respondents who were selected met the requirements for participation in the study, namely, that they do read online customer reviews in assisting their online shopping and or purchases, they have previously made purchases of products and or services online and lastly that they are considering the purchase online of a DSLR camera.

As seen in Table 5.1, 40 percent of the respondents in this study were male and 60 percent were female. This indicates that there is a slight domination between the two genders by means of a 20 percent difference. Most of the respondents were aged between 20 to 29 years (32.5 percent) and 30 to 39 years (25 percent) respectively, indicating that younger people shop online. The rest of the respondents age categories are as follows, 40 to 49 years (15 percent), 50 to 59 years (17.5 percent), 60 to 69 years (7.5 percent) and lastly 70+ years (2.5 percent). The majority of the respondents in this study were from the population group classified as White (70 percent), the remainder of the respondents are as follows, Black (15 percent), Coloured (10 percent), Indian/Asian (2.5 percent) and 2.5 percent of the respondents were not willing to provide us with their appropriate population group.

The highest level of education acquired by the respondents was Grade 12 or equivalent (matric) (35 percent), followed by a National Diploma or equivalent certificate (32.5 percent), Bachelor's Degree (20 percent) and a Postgraduate Degree (12.5 percent). The monthly income earned by most of the respondents in the study was R10 0001 to R20 000 (32.5 percent) and less than R10 000 (30 percent). The remainder of the respondents earn as follows R20 0001 to R30 000 (12.5 percent), R30 001 to R400 000 (10 percent) and more than R50 000 (5 percent). Some of the respondents (10 percent) decided that they prefer not to indicate their monthly earnings.

Table 5.2 consists of information pertaining to the respondents online shopping activities including how often they shop online, how much is spent per online transaction, platforms they used to read or watch reviews from prior to making an online purchase, the last electronic purchase made and main reasons for shopping online.

Table 5.2: Frequency distribution of information regarding the respondent's online activity

Variable	Respondents	
	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
How often you shop online		
Less than three times per month	34	85
Approximately 3-9 times per month	6	15
Approximately 9-15 times per month	0	0
More than 15 times per month	0	0
Total	**40**	**100**
How much you spend per online transaction		
Less than R1 000	23	57.5
R 1 000-R 4 999	16	40
R 5 000-R 9 999	1	2.5
R10 000-R14 999	0	0
More than R15 000	0	0
Total	**40**	**100**
Platforms you have read online reviews from prior to making an online purchase		
The online retailer you intend making a purchase from	13	10.2
YouTube	16	12.6
Amazon	12	9.5
Takealot	32	25.2
Facebook	21	16.5
Hellopeter	5	3.9
eBay	7	5.5
Booking.com	4	3.2
TripAdvisor	7	5.5
My Broadband	6	4.7
TechCentral	0	0
BandWidth Blog	0	0
Other. Please specify (e.g. Bid or Buy)	4	3.2
Frequency	**127**	**100**

Last electronic purchase made only after reading/watching online reviews		
Cell phone	8	14.0
Tablet	3	5.3
Laptop / notebook / desktop	7	12.3
Gaming	9	15.8
Gadgets	4	7.0
Cameras	7	12.3
Photographic equipment	3	5.3
Printer	3	5.3
Printer consumables, e.g., ink	1	1.7
Scanner	0	0
Television	2	3.5
Audio	2	3.5
Other. Please specify (e.g. Kitchen appliances)	8	14.0
Frequency	**57**	**100**
Main reason for shopping online		
Convenience	30	27.5
Product only available online	15	13.8
Better price	22	20.2
Time saving	23	21.1
Quick comparison of sellers' offerings	17	15.6
Prefer not shopping in a bricks and mortar store	2	1.8
Other. Please specify	0	0
Frequency	**109**	**100**

As shown in Table 5.2, which considers how often the respondents shop online, the majority shop online less than three times per month (85 percent) compared to the minority of the respondents who only shop online 3 to 9 times per month (15 percent). In terms of how much is spent per online transaction, more than half of the respondents (57.5 percent) spend less than R1 000 per online transaction, followed by those who spend between R1 000 to R4 999 (40 percent) and lastly those who spend R5 000 to R9 999 per transaction (2.5 percent).

When analysing the following elements respondents were allowed to select more than one option which was seen to be applicable to them. Thus, the respondents calculated the frequency to which that particular response was chosen. When reading online reviews prior to making online purchases, Takealot (25.2 percent) was identified as the most popular platform used by the respondents. In addition, 16.5 percent of the responses indicated the use of Facebook to read reviews left by other customers regarding the product desired for purchase. Other major platforms used by the respondents were YouTube (12.6 percent), the retailer in which the respondent intends to purchase from (10.2 percent) and Amazon (9.5 percent). Respondents were asked to indicate to the researchers what their last electronic purchase was and the majority of them indicated Gaming (15.8 percent) followed by Cell phones (14 percent). The other two major categories were Laptops/notebooks/desktops (12.3 percent) and Cameras (12.3 percent).

Lastly, the respondents were asked to provide their main reasons for shopping online. The researchers found that convenience (27.5 percent) was a major driver for the respondents to purchase goods online. In addition, respondents found online shopping to be time saving (21.1 percent) and even found better prices (20.2 percent) online. A reason for online shopping was also reported that of allowing the respondent to do a quick comparison of the seller's offerings (15.6 percent) and that the products may have only been available online (13.8 percent). Only a few respondents indicated that they prefer not shopping in a brick and mortar store (1.8 percent).

4.5   EMPIRICAL RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Descriptive statistics is a method of quantifying the characteristics of numerical data such as the dispersion and the measurement of central tendency which includes the median, mode and mean (Walliman, 2011:170). The median is the value that is directly in the middle of a data set; the mode is the value that occurs most frequently in the data set; and the mean is the average value of the data set (Struwig & Stead, 2013:165). A measurement of dispersion can be identified as the standard deviation, which measures the deviation of each value from the mean (Janes, 1999:408).

The results captured from Section B are summarised in Table 5.3 below and as previously mentioned, descriptive statistics was utilised to analyse the data collected by the researchers. This included identifying the mean and standard deviation of the collected

data. The frequency distribution of the various response categories is identified and grouped as follows for the analysis. Firstly, "strongly disagree" and "disagree" were combined to form disagree. Secondly, "strongly agree and agree" were combined to form agree and lastly, "neutral or on opinion" as neutral.

In terms of the factor *Reviewer helpfulness, Rating and Timeliness*, the researchers defined it as the extent to which the online review left by a previous customer will assist the prospective customer in making their purchasing decisions. This factor specifically looks at the reviewer's overall evaluation of their experience with the product represented by means of a rating and the degree to which the review is seen as recent or up-to-date in terms of its timeliness. This factor reported a mean score of 4.007, indicating that the vast majority of the respondents (82.5 percent) agree that reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness influences their online purchasing decisions. Respondents are seen to agree with the statements that online reviews make it easier for them to shop online and those reviews that include up-to-date information are more valuable. However, respondents are less inclined to be influenced by the rating left by a previous reviewer regarding the desired product.

The factor relating to *Length and Readability*, was defined as whether the reviewer of the product wrote an in-depth or short review relating to their experience with the product, the style of writing and if the prospective customer was able to understand what was written. This factor reported a mean score of 3.346, showing that the majority of the respondents (65 percent) are neutral or have no opinion on the length and readability of an online review on their purchasing decision. The respondents did agree that detailed reviews would influence their purchasing decision but were neutral to whether summarised online reviews would be sufficient in their purchasing decisions. In addition, the respondents were neutral to if the use of slang in an online review would influence their purchasing decision.

Quality and Quantity is referred to as the degree to which the content of an online review is seen as believable, appropriate and objective and the volume or number of reviews available for a given product. The majority of the respondents (77.5 percent) agreed that the quality and quantity of an online review would be influential to their purchasing decision and thus, a mean score of 3.750 was reported for this factor. Respondents agreed that products with a higher number of online reviews, which are also objective,

will influence their online purchasing decisions. In terms of online reviews which are subjective, respondents had no opinion or were neutral towards their influence.

Valence refers to the positive or negative attributes of an online review. This factor resulted in a mean of 3.443, where the majority of the respondents (52.5 percent) expressed having a neutral or no opinion regarding this factor. Respondents are seen to agree that positive online reviews will encourage their purchasing intention and that they pay more attention to products which have positive online reviews. However, respondents are less inclined to be influenced by a single negative online review.

A *Prospective customer's internet experience* enables them to analyse and evaluate information on the internet in order to make sense of it, determine the credibility and if the information is from a reliable source. The mean score for this factor was determined as 3.997, signifying that the majority of the respondents (92.5 percent) agree that having internet experience will affect the extent to which an online review will influence their purchasing decisions. The respondents agreed with all the statements within this factor, however they firmly believe that having internet experience assists them in making online purchases.

A *Prospective customer's trust in the website* depends on whether they feel secure in making transactions via the online store, providing private information and consider the content on the website as reliable. The mean score for this factor was calculated as 3.539, revealing that 57.5 percent of the respondents agree that their trust in a website will influence the extent to which an online review will affect their purchasing decisions. The respondents had neutral feelings towards the majority of the statements making up this factor, however they felt strongly towards the making of purchases from online stores which are deemed honest in their product offerings and payment methods. In addition, finding well-designed websites more trustworthy than those websites that, in their view, are poorly designed.

The *Reputation of the website* is the degree to which the website delivers quality product offerings, customer service, prompt and correct shipping. This factor reported a mean score of 4.156, indicating that the vast majority of the respondents (97.5 percent) agree that the reputation of the website, on which a review is posted, will influence their purchasing decisions. All of the respondents agreed to the various statements within this

factor, however respondents strongly agree with the statement that they prefer shopping from an online store that has a known reputation for delivering quality customer service.

Table 5.3: Descriptive statistics (n=40)

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)
Reviewer helpfulness, Rating & Timeliness	4.007	0.81647	2.5	15	82.5
Length & Readability	3.346	1.03244	2.5	65	32.5
Quality & Quantity	3.750	1.004	5	17.5	77.5
Valence	3.443	1.09264	2.5	52.5	45
Prospective customer's internet experience	3.997	0.88703	0	7.5	92.5
Prospective customer's trust in the website	3.539	1.03888	5	37.5	57.5
Reputation of the website	4.156	0.87987	0	2.5	97.5

4.6 IMPORTANT ONLINE REVIEW FACTORS PERCEIVED BY PROSPECTIVE ONLINE CUSTOMERS

Prospective online shoppers were asked to complete an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire in Section C. They were asked to list the top five factors which they, as prospective online shoppers, considered to be the most important factors of an online review which would influence their purchasing decisions. These answers were imported into a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet where it was analysed and grouped into themes according to the frequency of the responses received from the different respondents. The findings will be discussed in the section to follow.

As seen in Table 5.4, a total of 131 responses were recorded from 40 questionnaires and these factors were also ranked from one to eight in order from which factors were listed and reported on more frequently.

4.6.1 Quality of the review

From the 131 frequencies, 33 (25.2 percent) listed the quality of the review as an important online review factor. This was the most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to the quality of the review were perceived to be the most influential components of an online review:

i)   Detailed descriptions of the product

ii)   Up-to-date or recent reviews

iii)   Availability of reviews

iv)   Helpfulness of reviews

v)   Grammar and spelling

vi)   Reliability of reviews

vii)   Factual (objective) reviews

viii) Personal (subjective) reviews

ix)   Rating

4.6.2 Product descriptions

From the 131 frequencies, 26 (19.8 percent) listed product descriptions as an important online review factor. This was the second most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to product descriptions were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Quality of the product

ii)   Pricing of the product

iii)   Features of the product

iv)   Value for money the product represents

4.6.3 Previous customer's experience and knowledge

From the 131 frequencies, 17 (13 percent) listed the previous customer's experience and knowledge as an important online review factor. This was the third most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to the previous customer's experience and knowledge were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Previous customer's experience using the product

ii)   Honesty regarding the customer's experience

iii)   Reviews by previous customers who are knowledgeable on the product

iv)   Difficulties experienced when using the product

4.6.4 Safety and design of website

From the 131 frequencies, 13 (9.9 percent) listed the safety and design of the website as an important online review factor. This was the fourth most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to the safety and design of the website were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Reputation of the website

ii)   Ease of use of website

iii)   Design of the website

iv)   Secure payments

v)   Ease of payment system

vi)   Experience using the website

4.6.5 Shipping and delivery

From the 131 frequencies, 12 (9.2 percent) listed shipping and delivery as an important online review factor. This was the fifth most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The

following items related to shipping and delivery were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Delivery of the product on time

ii)   Cost of delivery for the product

4.6.6   Previous customers' expectations and recommendations

From the 131 frequencies, 12 (9.1 percent) listed the previous customers' expectations and recommendations as an important online review factor. This was the sixth most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to the previous customers' expectations and recommendations were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Customers' expectations and whether they were met

ii)   If customers received what was ordered

iii)   Would the previous customer repurchase or recommend the product

4.6.7   Valence

From the 131 frequencies, 9 (6.9 percent) listed valence as an important online review factor. This was the seventh most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to valence were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Positive comments regarding their purchase and usage experience

ii)   Negative comments regarding their purchase and usage experience

4.6.8   Service

From the 131 frequencies, 9 (6.9 percent) listed service as an important online review factor. This was the eighth most listed factor by prospective online customers in the determination of the influence of online reviews on their purchasing decisions. The following items related to service were perceived to be influential components of an online review:

i)   Customer service from the retailer

ii)   After sale service from the retailer

Table 5.4: Factors requested to be listed by prospective customers to measure what is important regarding an online review

Category factors		Specific factors to measure importance	N	Total	%
1	Quality of the review	Detailed descriptions	11	33	25.2
		Up-to-date or recent reviews	5		
		Availability of reviews	4		
		Helpfulness of reviews	4		
		Grammar and spelling	3		
		Reliability of reviews	2		
		Factual (objective) reviews	2		
		Personal (subjective) reviews	1		
		Rating	1		
2	Product descriptions	Quality of the product	15	26	19.8
		Pricing of the product	7		
		Features of the product	2		
		Value for money the product represents	2		
3	Previous customer's experience and knowledge	Previous customer's experience using the product	7	17	13
		Honesty regarding the customer's experience	5		
		Reviews by previous customers who are knowledgeable on the product	4		
		Difficulties experienced when using the product	1		

Category factors		Specific factors to measure importance	N	Total	%
4	Safety and design of website	Reputation of the website	4	13	9.9
		Ease of use of website	3		
		Design of the website	2		
		Secure payments	2		
		Ease of payment system	1		
		Experience using the website	1		
5	Shipping and delivery	Delivery of the product on time	10	12	9.2
		Cost of delivery for the product	2		
6	Previous customers' expectations and recommendations	Customers' expectations and whether they were met	5	12	9.1
		If customers received what was ordered	4		
		Would the previous customer repurchase or recommend the product	3		
7	Valence	Positive comments regarding their purchase and usage experience	5	9	6.9
		Negative comments regarding their purchase and usage experience	4		
8	Service	Customer service from the retailer	7	9	6.9
		After sale service from the retailer	2		
Frequency			**131**	**131**	**100**

4.7   SUMMARY

The empirical results of the sample in this study were presented in this chapter. The data preparation was done by collecting the completed questionnaires from the respondents, checking for completeness, numbering the questionnaires, coding the factors and items in the measuring instrument and capturing it in a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet. From the spreadsheet, the researchers analysed the data and reported on their findings by means of descriptive statistics.

The demographic information of the 40 respondents were summarised by means of a table, together with a discussion on the main findings, which were identified to be of importance. All of the respondents who were selected met the requirements for participation in the study.

The researchers then reported on the findings of the empirical section of the study through calculation of the mean score for the various factors. The results of the descriptive statistics show that the most influential factors of an online review on a prospective online customer purchasing decisions are the *Reputation of the website* and the *Reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness*.

Chapter Five presents an overall summary of the study and final conclusions from the results. The research objective, design and methodology will be included as well as the main findings from the literature review and empirical investigation. The limitations and recommendations of the study will be presented and future research possibilities will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, an overview of the study is provided. Conclusions based on the results discussed in Chapter Four are presented and conclusions are drawn relative to the objectives of the study. A reflection on the learning experience gained from the study is also presented.

This chapter commences with a summary of the problem statement of the study as well as the research objectives, design and methodology. The main findings from the literature review on concepts surrounding online reviews and the factors that influence prospective customers' purchasing decisions, are highlighted, followed by a discussion on the main findings from the empirical results.

The limitations and shortcomings of the study are also discussed and recommendations for future research are suggested. The chapter concludes with a reflection of the researchers learning experience throughout this study.

5.2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Chapter One provided an introduction and background to the topic under investigation, namely the influence of online product reviews. The rapid pace at which online shopping is growing has consequently led to consumers having concerns regarding the ethics of retailers, as electronic transactions are known to have several perceived risks (Vos *et al.* 2014:171). Online customer reviews can be seen to offer prospective customers with information to reduce these risks when making online purchases, as they verify that what the retailer has stated is truthful (Zhao *et al.* 2019:130).

Due to the growing importance that online reviews have on a business' sales, online product reviews are monitored by a business on both third-party websites and their own website (Peng *et al.* 2016:269). Reviews for products provided on a business' website are often doubted by prospective customers, in terms of the authenticity of the review and the trustworthiness of the reviewer's opinion (Grabs & Sudhoff, 2014:186-188). With this being said, prospective online customers then search for reviews created by other users of the product regularly found on third-party websites (Grabs & Sudhoff, 2014:186-188).

The problem statement outlined that despite the many studies relating to the influence of online customer reviews on the purchasing intentions of prospective online customers in a general context, a gap exists in the literature as little is known about how online customer reviews influence prospective customers of specific classifications of products such as electronic goods, with particular focus on digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras. The present study attempted to fill the gap in the existing knowledge on the influence of online customer reviews, concerning electronic goods such as cameras.

Over time cameras become outdated especially with the introduction of new models to meet the ever-changing wants and needs of consumers. Consumers may become overwhelmed as to which product to purchase, thus potentially looking at what other customers have said regarding their experience with similar purchases (O'Reilly *et al.* 2018:381). Previous customers can assist potential customers in the narrowing of product choices and the avoidance of incorrect product purchases (O'Reilly *et al.* 2018:381). The main purpose of the study was to identify possible factors of online customers' reviews that influence a prospective customer's purchasing decisions.

5.3   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following research objectives identified for this study comprised of primary, secondary and methodological objectives.

5.3.1   Primary objectives

As indicated in Chapter One, the primary objective of this research was to investigate the influence that online customer product reviews have on prospective online customers when making purchasing decisions of electronic goods such as digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras.

5.3.2   Secondary objectives

The primary objective was achieved through the completion of the following secondary objectives:

SO[1])   To investigate the influence of the reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO[2])   To investigate the influence of the length and readability of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO[3]) To investigate the influence of the quality and quantity of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO[4]) To investigate the influence of valence of online reviews on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

SO[5]) To investigate the influence of prospective customer's internet experience on their online purchasing decisions.

SO[6]) To investigate the influence of prospective customer's trust in the website on their online purchasing decisions.

SO[7]) To investigate the influence of the reputation of the website on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers.

5.3.3 Methodological objectives

In order to achieve the above mentioned primary objective and secondary objectives the following methodological objectives were formulated.

MO[1]) To conduct a literature review on the nature, importance and influence of online product reviews on prospective online customers purchasing decisions.

MO[2]) To determine the appropriate research methodology to address the identified research problem and research objectives.

MO[3]) To develop an appropriate measuring instrument to collect primary data from a predetermined sample of prospective online customers and to descriptively analyse the data.

MO[4]) To provide conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the study, which could assist those who post online product reviews, in which factors are the most influential to prospective online customers in their purchasing decisions.

5.3.4 Research questions

Based on these three categories of research objectives formulated for this investigation, the following research questions were posed.

i) Will the reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness of online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

ii)   Does the length and readability of online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

iii)   Is the quality and quantity of online reviews influential on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

iv)   Does the valence of online reviews influence the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

v)   Will prospective customer's internet experience influence their online purchasing decisions?

vi)   Will the prospective customer's trust in the website influence their online purchasing decision?

vii)   Is the reputation of the website influential on the purchasing decisions of prospective online customers?

5.4   RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three addressed the research design and methodology of the study. In order to successfully fulfil the objectives of this study, the research design framework and research methodology techniques deemed appropriate for the investigation, were justified. In addition, the data collection process was provided for both secondary and primary data collection methods and the data analysis process was discussed.

5.4.1   Research design

A study's research design refers to the strategy that is followed by the researchers in order to solve a research problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:85). The present study took into account the following tasks proposed by Colton and Covert (2007:34-36) as the main steps of research design:

i)   Identify the purpose of the study.

ii)   Formulate the research questions for the purpose of the study.

iii)   Choose the research methodology.

iv)   Designing the measuring instrument.

v)   Analysing the data.

vi)   Reporting the data.

In Chapter One, the purpose of the study was identified, namely to identify the factors of an online customer review that influence prospective online customers when making purchasing decisions regarding a DSLR camera. The researcher's questions were formulated and can be found in Chapter One. The researchers chose to follow a quantitative research study in which data collected was expressed in numerical terms (Struwig & Stead, 2013:6). A questionnaire was used to collect the desired data from respondents, captured on a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet, analysed and findings were reported on.

5.4.2   Research methodology

Research methodology is described as a structured process of how the research will be conducted and the philosophical assumptions of the process (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:143). Leedy and Ormrod (2005:94) explain that research can be divided into qualitative or quantitative research, and these approaches govern how the research will be carried out. Qualitative research focuses on the collection of non-numerical data by making words the main focus (Quinlan *et al.* 2015:399). Compared to that of quantitative research which is the collection of numerical data which provides insight regarding the relationship between the research being conducted and the theory related to the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011:150). The quantitative research method is associated with the positivistic paradigm that focuses on collecting data that relates to the problem from a large population (Rahi, 2017:2). The positivistic paradigm uses research as an approach to create knowledge with the use of the model of natural science, which puts an emphasis on facts (Noor, 2008:1602). There are a number of approaches for quantitative research, such as descriptive research, exploratory research, and experimental and quasi-experimental research (Struwig & Stead, 2013:6-8). In addition, quantitative data collection methods include interviews, surveys, observations and most commonly questionnaires (Struwig & Stead, 2013:89).

The study made use of the quantitative research methodology to plan the steps needed to acquire the necessary data. The steps included a number of tasks such as identifying the population, sample and sample size of the study. It also included the gathering of data by means of a self-administered questionnaire, followed by the data being descriptively analysed and made sense of. The positivistic research methodology was used in this

study as it is considered as suitable when data needs to be quantified in a structured process.

5.4.3   Data collection

The process of data collection is seen as a technique that is used to collect data or information, through conducting empirical research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010:298). In the following section the researchers will discuss the two main techniques which were used in the study including that of primary and secondary data collection.

5.4.3.1 Secondary data collection

Secondary data can be defined as existing data which is examined to extract information that is relevant to the study (Kumar, 2011:24). McGinn (2012:804) defined secondary data as data that previous researchers collected for a different purpose. An important secondary source is the internet, which contains a vast number of published research articles, but the researcher should be careful when collecting data from the internet (Kumar, 2011:154).

To achieve the primary objective of this study, the researchers consulted journals, previously conducted research, library books, the internet and NMU's online databases, which includes Emerald Insight and EBSCOhost, to gather secondary data. This information was used in order to conduct an in-depth literature review to obtain a greater understanding on the nature of online reviews and identify the factors of online reviews which influence prospective customers' buying decisions. The data collected was also used in the construction of the questionnaire, by using the relevant data to create statements. The researchers also made use of primary data which will be discussed in the section that follows.

5.4.3.2 Primary data collection

Primary data signifies the data that researchers collect in order to solve the problem of the study and answer the specific research questions (Cooper & Schindler, 2014:663). The primary data was collected once the appropriate population had been selected, along with the sampling technique most suited to the study and after the measuring instrument had been designed.

A research population is known as all the potential respondents that are applicable to the study (Struwig & Stead, 2013:268). For the purpose of this study, the population consisted

of those consumers who had previously made an online purchase, were considering purchasing a DSLR camera and those who had read online customer reviews of products during their decision-making process. Due to the inability of the researchers to test the influence of online reviews on every perspective online customer, a sample from the population was selected. However, as there was no list available of the total population for the researchers to draw a sample from, the researchers choose their respondents based on their availability or accessibility, therefore making use of convenience sampling. The researchers selected a sample of 40 respondents who were chosen from within the area of Port Elizabeth and specifically focused on those online customers purchasing electronic goods such as DSLR cameras.

The research instrument which was used for this research study was a self-administered questionnaire as the researchers were conducting quantitative research. According to Bird (2009:1307), a questionnaire is a tool that is used to acquire data regarding the respondent's demographics as well as behaviours, attitudes and beliefs with respect to the particular topic being studied. The questionnaire included a covering letter, stating the topic of the research, main objective and purpose of the study. In addition, providing the respondent with important details of the institution and promise of confidentiality. Lastly, expressing appreciation to the respondent for participating in the study. The questionnaire mainly consisted of close-ended questions, whereby a Likert scale was used and respondents simply selected their attitude towards a statement by how strongly they agreed or disagreed. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A comprised of general and biographical information of the respondent as well as questions regarding the respondent's online activities. Section B consisted of the questions relating to the factors which were seen to influence a prospective online customer's purchasing decisions. The respondents made use of the Likert scale to indicate the extent to which they were influenced by certain elements making up the various factors. Section C was an open-ended question which asked the respondent to indicate to the researcher's factors of an online review that they considered to be of importance.

5.4.4 Data analysis

In order to make sense of the raw data collected, it needs to be summarised through entering the data on a word processor, a spreadsheet or database file, which is then saved and analysed using a statistical or qualitative programme (Struwig & Stead,

2013:156). In terms of this study, once the primary data had been collected, by means of the questionnaire, it was captured into a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet. This data was then analysed and the findings were reported on. Descriptive statistics were utilised to analyse the collected data, through identifying the mean, mode, median and standard deviation. The researchers ensured validity and reliability through making use of accurate and credible journal articles and books when conducting their research and the development of the instrument for data collection.

5.5   MAIN FINDINGS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

In Chapter Two, it was identified that marketing is a process which creates, communicates, delivers and exchanges offerings that have value for stakeholders, such as customers, partners, clients and the community at large (Fernando *et al.* 2012:31). The concept of marketing was discussed at it was found that customers have assumed a more active role in the marketing process through word-of-mouth, which is seen to have an influence on the buying behaviour of prospective customers (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013:1860). In addition, customers are often seen to make use of other customer's experiences when making their final decision, either through face-to-face interactions or using online platforms (Blazevic *et al.* 2013:295). In addition, it was found that that word-of-mouth is an effective component in a firms marketing strategy and has the ability to affect the sales for products and services.

The concept of word-of-mouth is seen in terms of the traditional form, whereby customers share their experiences with the product to family members, co-workers and friends by means of a face-to-face conversation (Becker & Pizzutti, 2017:398). Traditional WOM can be seen as an influential source of product information, as it originates from a trustworthy source who is seen to have higher levels of credibility and influence on the purchasing decisions of a prospective customer, in comparison to that of an advertisement published by a business (Abălăesei, 2014:136). Word-of-mouth was also seen in terms of an electronic form, whereby customers can post their experiences with a product in the form of a review on various online platforms, which can be viewed by anyone (Matute *et al.* 2016:1090). As a result of the growing online environment consumers are frequently making use of the information available to them online, in order to make purchasing decisions. However, prospective customers are unable to determine the credibility of

online sources. This making online reviews the next trusted and influential source of information after the advice from friends and family (Filieri, 2015:1261).

In terms of online customer reviews compared to content generated by firms, prospective customers are seen to trust the experiences of previous customers to a great extent. Online customer reviews of cameras written by customers who are knowledgeable about the product are seen as helpful, especially to prospective customers who may lack expertise. These online reviews will be beneficial and informative as the prospective customer will gain an understanding on the product from a customer who has had first-hand experience.

The researchers used a model presented by Kotler and Armstrong (2015:227) which classifies products into categories such as convenience, shopping, specialty and unsought products. In terms of the study, the DSLR camera was categorised as a shopping product, as the prices are generally high with a lot of planning before making the purchase. In addition, a consumer buying decision model and process for a shopping good was presented. Online reviews can be seen to be a valuable part of the process, as once prospective customers have recognised a need for the product, they could make use of reviews to search for information and evaluate alternative options to ultimately make the purchasing decision. Customers can then return to the website and post a review expressing their experience with the product, completing the process.

Online customer reviews give the prospective customer a better understanding of product information and the personal experiences of previous customers, to which this knowledge is used to make purchasing decisions (Chen & Huang, 2013:1759). Online reviews are generally posted without having any economic incentives and therefore motivations for posting reviews vary between customers (Chen & Huang, 2013:1760). However, occasionally customers are offered compensation to write a review, this can be in the form of coupons, discounts and free samples (Kim *et al.* 2019:114). Reviews can also be organic where customers do not receive any type of compensation as an incentive (Kim *et al.* 2019:114). Various platforms are available for prospective customers to view online reviews for desired products. Businesses have their own websites where customers can leave a review of their experience with the product (Peng *et al.* 2016:269). However, third-party websites, independent platforms, are available to prospective customers to read the reviews of previous customers (Belarmino & Koh, 2018:2732). Prospective customers are

believed to prefer the reviews generated on third-party websites than that of content found on a firm's website. This is as a result of the authenticity of the reviews being questioned by prospective customers, as the business has the ability to manipulate and control published content.

Several factors of an online review were identified as having an influence on prospective customers' purchasing decisions. The first factor concerns the perceived value of the review to the prospective customer, in the sense of whether the review is helpful or provides a sense of usefulness. This factor included various sub-factors and will be discussed as follows. The rating of a review is seen to have some influence to a prospective customer and could assist the customer in filtering potential product choices by reducing alternatives to only show those above or below a certain star rating. However, in order to make a final purchasing decision, prospective customers prefer a more in-depth description of the product. In terms of length, prospective customers have varying thoughts, as some prefer a more in-depth review as they find reviews too short to be vague and unclear. Whereas some prospective customers prefer a shorter review as they find excessively detailed reviews overwhelming. The readability of the review is based on the writing style and how easily the content of the review could be understood by the prospective customer. Online reviews with a higher level of readability are more influential to a prospective customer's purchasing decisions, as they are considered to be more credible. The timeliness of a review refers to how current or up-to-date a review is, which can be influential to a prospective customer as the helpfulness of a review decreases as time passes. The quantity of reviews available for a product is influential to a prospective customer as this indicates a higher chance of finding the information about the products performance and quality. Valence is seen as the positive or negative attributes of the online review. Online reviews conveying a negative message was seen to be more useful for prospective customers during the purchasing decision. In terms of cameras, message valence is believed to have a stronger effect on the purchasing decisions for beginner users than the more expert users. However, it was argued that of prospective online customers are influenced by online reviews that are of a positive nature from previous customers. The quality of a review refers to the content within the review and whether the content is believable, objective, timely and appropriate. Online reviews which are of higher quality are more influential to a prospective customer's purchasing decisions.

The second factor of whether an online review is influential depends on the degree to which the prospective customer has internet experience. Those prospective customers who have internet experience are more likely to make use of online reviews when collecting information before making their purchase decision. Having internet experience enables the prospective customer with the ability to analyse and evaluate the information in order to make sense of it and determine its credibility. The third factor is the credibility of the website in which the review is posted on, which relates to whether the website has a good reputation and the prospective customer's trust in the website. A prospective customer's trust in a website contributes to whether online reviews have the ability to influence their purchasing decisions. Prospective customers depend on signals or cues exhibited by a business to judge whether products are of quality as this can not be observed prior to purchasing. Prospective customers identify reviews, written by prior customers, to be of more importance than the trust signals exhibited by businesses or their website characteristics. Reputation is an important asset for a business as it ensures their sustainability and the retention of good customer relationships. The reputation of a business can be developed by delivering quality, customer service and their product offering. Prospective customers are influenced by reviews from websites that have a good reputation of quality, prompt and correct shipping and handling of customer complaints.

5.6   MAIN FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The demographic and empirical findings obtained by the respondents were presented in Chapter Four and are as follows.

A total of 40 questionnaires were randomly distributed, by means of convenience sampling, to various individuals within Port Elizabeth, who were identified as prospective online customers of DSLR cameras. In Section A it was revealed that all of the respondents who were selected met the requirements for participation in the study, namely, that they read online customer reviews in assisting their online shopping and or purchases, they had previously made purchases of products and or services online and lastly that they were considering the purchase online of a DSLR camera. The majority of the respondents were female (60 percent) and they were between the age of 20 to 29 years (32.5 percent). The majority of the respondents in this study were from the population group classified as White (70 percent), the highest level of education acquired

by the respondents was Grade 12 or equivalent (matric) (35 percent and the monthly income earned by most of the respondents was R10 0001 to R20 000 (32.5 percent).

In terms of the respondents online shopping activities, the majority of the respondents shop online less than three times per month (85 percent) and more than half of the respondents (57.5 percent) spend less than R1 000 per online transaction. When analysing the following elements respondents were allowed to select more than one option which was seen to be applicable to them. Thus, the respondents calculated the frequency to which that particular response was chosen. When reading online reviews prior to making online purchases, Takealot (25.2 percent) was identified as the most popular platform used by the respondents. Facebook (16.5 percent) and YouTube (12.6 percent) were the other major platforms used by the respondents. Respondents indicated that their last electronic purchase were Gaming (15.8 percent), Cell phones (14 percent), Laptops/notebooks/desktops (12.3 percent) and Cameras (12.3 percent). The respondents indicated that their main reason for shopping online was due to the convenience (27.5 percent) it provides.

The empirical results of the study captured from Section B were analysed through the utilisation of descriptive statistics. This included identifying the mean, mode, median and standard deviation of the collected data. The *Reviewer helpfulness, Rating and Timeliness* factor reported a mean score of 4.007, indicating that the vast majority of the respondents (82.5 percent) agree that reviewer helpfulness, rating and timeliness influences their online purchasing decisions. Respondents are seen to agree with the statements that online reviews make it easier for them to shop online and those reviews that include up-to-date information are more valuable.

The *Length and Readability* factor reported a mean score of 3.346, showing that the majority of the respondents (65 percent) are neutral or have no opinion on the length and readability of an online review on their purchasing decision. The respondents did agree that detailed reviews would influence their purchasing decision but were neutral to whether summarised online reviews would be sufficient in their purchasing decisions. In addition, the respondents were neutral to if the use of slang in an online review would influence their purchasing decision.

The factor relating to *Quality and Quantity,* reported a mean score of 3.750 indicating that the majority of the respondents (77.5 percent) agreed that the quality and quantity of an

online review would be influential to their purchasing decision. Respondents agreed that products with a higher number of online reviews, which are also objective, will influence their online purchasing decisions. In terms of online reviews which are subjective, respondents had no opinion or were neutral towards their influence.

Valence resulted in a mean of 3.443 where the majority of the respondents (52.5 percent) expressed having a neutral or no opinion regarding this factor. Respondents are seen to agree that positive online reviews will encourage their purchasing intention and that they pay more attention to products which have positive online reviews. However, respondents are less inclined to be influenced by a single negative online review.

Prospective customer's internet experience reported a mean score of 3.997, signifying that the majority of the respondents (92.5 percent) agree that having internet experience will affect the extent to which an online review will influence their purchasing decisions. The respondents agreed with all the statements within this factor, however they firmly believe that having internet experience assists them in making online purchases.

Prospective customer's trust in the website resulted in a mean score of 3.539, revealing that 57.5 percent of the respondents agree that their trust in a website will influence the extent to which an online review will affect their purchasing decisions. The respondents had neutral feelings towards the majority of the statements making up this factor, however they felt strongly towards the making of purchases from online stores which are deemed honest in their product offerings and payment methods. In addition, finding well-designed websites more trustworthy than those websites that, in their view, are poorly designed.

Reputation of the website factor reported a mean score of 4.156, indicating that the vast majority of the respondents (97.5 percent) agree that the reputation of the website, on which a review is posted, will influence their purchasing decisions. All of the respondents agreed to the various statements within this factor, however respondents strongly agree with the statement that they prefer shopping from an online store that has a known reputation for delivering quality customer service.

Therefore, the results from the data captured in Section B indicate that the *Reputation of the website* and *Reviewer helpfulness, Rating and Timeliness* are the two major factors of an online review to have an influence on prospective customers purchasing decisions when buying a DSLR camera. Prospective customers would trust the reviews from websites who have a good reputation in delivering quality product offerings, customer

service, prompt and correct shipping. In addition, feel more comfortable in purchasing from the retailer. Prospective customers would be more likely to be influenced by reviews whereby the previous customer or reviewer provides an overall evaluation of their experience with the product represented by means of a rating and the degree to which the review is seen as recent or up-to-date in terms of its timeliness.

In Section C the respondents were asked to list the top five factors which they, as prospective online shoppers, considered to be the most important factors of an online review which would influence their purchasing decisions. These answers were imported into a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet where they were analysed and grouped into themes according to the frequency of the responses received from the different respondents. The researchers identified eight themes, whereby the quality of the review (25.2 percent) and product descriptions (19.8 percent) were the two main important and occurring themes. Many of these themes were similar to the factors that the researchers identified as important in the literature review.

5.7   CONCLUSIONS

Based on the secondary research, it is evident that word-of-mouth has a power or influence on prospective customers' purchasing decisions. This being said, as a result of the growing online environment consumers are frequently making use of the information available to them online, in order to make purchasing decisions. However, prospective customers are unable to determine the credibility of online sources, especially content created by businesses. Prospective customers then turn to online reviews created by previous customers who detail their experiences with the product. In spite of this, not all online customer reviews will have an influence on prospective customers' purchasing decisions which can be reasoned for by the factors that were identified by the researchers in Chapter Two.

The *Reviewer helpfulness, Rating and Timeliness* which is defined as the extent to which the online review left by a previous customer will assist the prospective customer in making their purchasing decisions. Specifically looking at the reviewer's overall evaluation of their experience with the product represented by means of a rating and the degree to which the review is seen as recent or up-to-date in terms of its timeliness. Current literature indicates that a review's rating is very influential in a prospective customer's purchasing decision, compared to earlier literature arguing that the rating can be used

simply to filter product choices as customers prefer a more in-depth description. In terms of timeliness, online reviews on products are more influential when they are current and up-to-date. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 4.007, the majority of the respondents agreed in finding this factor an influential component of the review to their purchasing decision. Respondents believe that online reviews make it easier for them to shop online and those reviews that include up-to-date information are more valuable. However, respondents are less inclined to be influenced by the rating left by a previous reviewer regarding the desired product. Therefore, the earlier literature found by the researchers in terms of the rating, is an accurate representation as to how respondents currently feel towards the rating provided for a product. Respondents continue to require online reviews that are up-to-date in their search for product information.

The *Length and Readability* factor was defined as whether the reviewer of the product wrote an in-depth or short review relating to their experience with the product, the style of writing and if the prospective customer was able to understand what was written. The literature stated that online reviews which are more in-depth are considered to be helpful and influential to prospective customers. In spite of this, if the review is excessively detailed it could be overwhelming and if the review is too short it may appear as unclear and vague. In addition, those online reviews with a higher level of readability are more influential to a prospective customer's purchasing decisions, as they are considered to be more credible. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 3.346, the majority of the respondents are neutral or have no opinion on the length and readability of an online review on their purchasing decision. The only statements the respondents do agree with is that detailed reviews would influence their purchasing decisions.

The *Quality and Quantity* factor defined as the degree to which the content of an online review is seen as believable, appropriate and objective and the volume or number of reviews available for a given product. The literature stated that prospective customers would be influenced by reviews of a higher quality, therefore those reviews that are seen as valuable, truthful, based on facts and appropriate in the decision making. In terms of quantity, prospective customers are more likely to find the information of a review as influential when there is a greater number of reviews available. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 3.750, the majority of the

respondents agreed that the quality and quantity of an online review would be influential to their purchasing decision. The respondents' answers aligned with the literature, as they agreed that products with a higher number of online reviews, which are also objective, will influence their online purchasing decisions. In terms of online reviews which are subjective, respondents had no opinion or were neutral towards their influence.

The *Valence* factor refers to the positive or negative attributes of an online review. In the literature the referenced authors had conflicting statements as to whether positive or negative reviews would influence a prospective customer's purchasing decision. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 3.443 where the majority of the respondents expressed having a neutral or no opinion regarding this factor. However, respondents were found to agree that positive online reviews will encourage their purchasing intention and that they pay more attention to products which have positive online reviews.

A *Prospective customer's internet experience* enables them to analyse and evaluate information on the internet in order to make sense of it, determine the credibility and if the information is from a reliable source. In the literature, this factor was identified to result in an online review to be influential in the purchasing decisions of a prospective customer. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 3.997, the majority of the respondents agree that having internet experience will affect the extent to which an online review will influence their purchasing decisions. In addition, respondents reported that having internet experience assists them in making online purchases.

A *Prospective customer's trust in the website* depends on whether they feel secure in making transactions via the online store, providing private information and consider the content on the website as reliable. In the literature, it was noted that that prospective customers identified reviews, written by prior customers, to be of more important than the trust signals exhibited by businesses or their website characteristics. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 3.539, the majority of the respondents agree that their trust in a website will influence the extent to which an online review will affect their purchasing decisions. Respondents felt strongly towards the making of purchases from online stores which are deemed honest in their product offerings and payment methods. In addition, finding well-designed websites more trustworthy than those websites that, in their view, are poorly designed. In this case, the

literature and empirical findings differed, indicating that the respondents are influenced by the retailer's website and having trust in the components of the website will affect the influence of online reviews.

The *Reputation of the website* is the degree to which the website delivers quality product offerings, customer service, prompt and correct shipping. In the literature, the reputation of an online retailer is seen to have an effect on the extent to which an online review will influence a prospective customer's purchasing decisions and whether they will purchase from that website. Based on this study's sample of respondents and the reported mean score of 4.156, the vast majority of the respondents agree that the reputation of the website, on which a review is posted, will influence their purchasing decisions. The respondents felt strongly regarding their preference for shopping from an online store that has a known reputation for delivering quality customer service. This factor was reported as the highest influential factor in the empirical investigation.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the primary and secondary objectives of the study have been achieved and the researchers identified the influence that the factors of an online review have on prospective customers.

5.8   LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

With regards to the limitations of the study, the researchers found the sample size sufficient for the purpose of the study, however, in drawing conclusions based on the literature to the findings of the empirical results, the researchers are unable to make generalisations to the population. This limitation is due to the size of the sample and based on the fact that the sample of respondents were chosen within a specific area using convenience sampling. With regards to the sampling of the respondents from the total population, the researchers did not have a database of individuals who met the participation criteria. Thus, the researchers were responsible for searching for individuals who were able and willing to participate in the study. In addition, the researchers found the time frame for data collection to be limited, resulting in inferior quality data being collected.

With regards to the data collected from the measuring instrument, the majority of the respondents did not complete Section C and this missing data prevented the researchers from truly understanding the total sample's attitude towards the important factors of an online review. In terms of the availability of information, the researchers found the

compilation of Chapter Three a challenge as limited information was accessible to the researchers. The last limitation was in relation to the lack of prior research studies on the topic as very little was known on the reviews for a specific product i.e. the DSLR camera. Previous research studies provided the researchers with a general and international understanding of how online reviews may influence prospective customers' purchasing decisions and very little is known in terms of the South African context.

5.9 RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the research undertaken, a number of conclusions were made and the following recommendations are presented. Based on these limitations and research findings of this study, it is recommended that future research to be conducted on a broader scope, using a larger sample size and respondents from various geographical areas. This will allow for the respondents to generalise findings as the sample will be a true representation of the population of the study. In future research, the researchers should ensure that every respondent completes every question within the various sections to ensure an accurate and complete study. This can be done by means of sitting with the respondent, while they complete the questionnaire and answer any queries they may have. Future research studies could make use of a qualitative approach, by means of interviewing respondents in order to obtain a more in-depth discussion on the influence of online reviews on purchasing decisions. This study focused on online customer reviews on DSLR cameras, however for future research general electronic products should be investigated, as DSLR cameras can be considered an expensive product and not generally purchased by consumers.

The study showed that prospective online customers pay attention to a number of different factors when shopping online which can influence their purchasing intentions. It is recommended that any person intending to write a review ensure that they write it to the best of their ability when it comes to the language they use or any of the other factors as it may be the difference to whether a prospective customer buys a product or not. The research also showed that negative reviews have a bigger influence on a prospective customer's purchasing intentions than positive reviews, so when writing a review in the future, make sure to not just vent frustration if the product had one small defect with a number of positive attributes. Businesses also read reviews as they started noticing the importance of reviews in modern times, thus it is important to write reviews in an

informative manner that indicates how the product can be improved so that businesses can use the reviews to improve the product for current and prospective customers.

The researchers recommend that websites should provide more interactive guidelines to the reviewer when writing an online review. This could include prompters, which indicate to the reviewer what they should include in order to provide sufficient information, so that prospective customers can make their necessary purchasing decisions.

The study aims to contribute towards the limited body of knowledge on the topic and to provide conclusions and recommendations based on the findings. This aims to assist those who post online product reviews, in which factors are the most influential to prospective online customers in their purchasing decisions.

5.10   SELF-REFLECTION

This study provided valuable insights on the influence to which word-of-mouth has on prospective customers' purchasing decisions. The research highlighted the various factors of an online review that influence prospective customers when purchasing a DSLR camera online and it was found that the reputation of a website has a great influence. Prospective customers prefer to not only read reviews from a trustworthy website but also purchase high-end products from a retailer that is known to provide quality products and good customer service.

The literature identified various motivations for previous customers to post reviews and the numerous platforms available. Prospective customers were noted to prefer reading online reviews posted on third-party websites, as they were considered to be more reliable and authentic descriptions of previous customers experiences. Online reviews posted on a business' website are questioned by prospective customers due to the ability of firms to control the content shown and could even manipulate the quantity of positive and negative reviews available. In most cases customers were motivated to post reviews to express their positive and negative views regarding the product.

On an individual and personal level, this research has resulted in the researchers gaining greater insight and knowledge about the power of word-of-mouth and the ability to affect purchasing decisions and thus the sales of a business' products. Conducting this research has given the researchers more confidence to identify elements of an online review and what to consider as important when collecting information regarding a product

or service online. The researchers also gained an understanding of the respondent views and attitudes towards online reviews and compare the literature to these findings.

Throughout the course of this study, the researchers learned time management as well as valuable research skills. During the completion of the relevant chapters, the researchers further developed skills in terms of finding credible sources, reading and correctly identifying information which was relevant to the study. The researchers then paraphrased the information and completed the required referencing, giving the authors the credit for their work. The researchers gained knowledge on how to develop a measuring instrument and interacting with people while distributing the final questionnaire to respondents. In addition, how to capture the collected data and analyse the data in order to make conclusions on the study.

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NELS●N M▲NDELA
U N I V E R S I T Y

Unit for Management Sciences
Department of Business Management
School of Management Sciences
Summerstrand South Campus
Tel. +27 (0)41 504 4745 /+27 (0)41 504 4065
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1 August 2019

Dear Respondent

RESEARCH PROJECT: THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE PRODUCT REVIEWS ON PURCHASING DECISIONS

We are BCom (Honours) students in Business Management at Nelson Mandela University currently conducting a research project to investigate online product reviews.

The **objective** of this research is to investigate the influence that online customer product reviews have on prospective online customers when making purchasing decisions of electronic goods, such as digital cameras.

It would be greatly appreciated if you could respond to the following questions so as to assist us in the completion of our research project. The questionnaire should take no longer than approximately 10 minutes to complete and there are no right or wrong answers. Simply record your response to each question based on your perspective. The results of this study will be valuable to understanding how online shopper reviews influence online shopping behaviour.

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence and you are under no obligation to participate. Please note that the information obtained will be used for research purposes only. Personal particulars of respondents will not be identified in any way, including the final report.

Please do not hesitate to contact our study leader, Ms Beverley Gray at the above contact details should you require any further information.

Thanking you in anticipation for your willingness to participate in the study. It is greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully

Ms Courtney Borgelt (Student number: 216283825) and Mr Jason Voges (Student number: 216600022)
Researchers (BCom Honours Programme) – Department of Business Management

Study Leader: Ms Beverley Gray – Department of Business Management

● ▲

NELSON MANDELA
U N I V E R S I T Y

A GENERAL INFORMATION

Please indicate your responses to the following questions with an (X) in the columns on the right.

1   Please confirm that you meet the requirements for participating in this research.

(i) You read online customer reviews to assist in your own online shopping and/or purchases.	Yes		1
(ii) You have previously made purchases of products and/or services online.	No		2
(iii) You are considering the purchase online of a DSLR (Digital Single Lens Reflex) camera.			

2   Please indicate your gender.

Male	1
Female	2

3   Please indicate the age category to which you belong (for statistical purposes only).

20-29 years	1	40-49 years	3	60-69 years	5
30-39 years	2	50-59 years	4	70+ years	6

4   Please indicate the population group to which you belong (for statistical purposes only).

Black	1
Coloured	2
Indian/Asian	3
White	4
Not willing to say	5

5   Please indicate your highest level of education.

Grade 11 or less	1
Grade 12 or equivalent (matric)	2
National Diploma or equivalent certificate	3
Bachelor's Degree	4
Postgraduate Degree (e.g. Honours/Masters/MBA/Doctorate)	5

6   Please indicate your total monthly income. Please note that this information will be treated in the strictest confidence. Even an estimate will be helpful.

Less than R10 000	1
R10 001-R20 000	2
R20 001-R30 000	3
R30 001-R40 000	4
R40 001-R50 000	5
More than R50 000	6
Prefer not to say	7

7   Please indicate, on average, how often you shop online.

Less than three times per month	1
Approximately 2-3 times per month	2
Approximately 3-9 times per month	3
Approximately 9-15 times per month	4
More than 15 times per month	5

8   Please indicate, on average, how much you spend per online transaction.

Less than R1 000	1
R 1 000-R 4 999	2
R 5 000-R 9 999	3
R10 000-R14 999	4
More than R15 000	5

9   From which platforms have you read online reviews prior to making an online purchase? You may select (**X**) more than one option.

The online retailer you intend making a purchase from	1
YouTube	2
Amazon	3
Takelot	4
Facebook	5
Hellopeter	6
eBay	7
Booking.com	8
TripAdviser	9
MyBroadband	10
TechCentral	11
BandWidth Blog	12
Other. Please specify _____	13

10   What was the last electronic purchase you made online after reading/watching online reviews? You may select (**X**) more than one option.

Cellphone	1
Tablet	2
Laptop / notebook / desk top	3
Gaming	4
Gadgets	5
Cameras	6
Photographic equipment	7
Printer	8
Printer consumables, e.g., ink	9
Scanner	10
Television	11
Audio	12
Other. Please specify _____	13

11   What is your main reason for shopping online? You may select (**X**) more than one option.

Convenience	1
Product only available online	2
Better price	3
Time saving	4
Quick comparison of sellers' offerings	5
Prefer not shopping in a bricks and mortar store	6
Other. Please specify _____	7

B ONLINE REVIEW FACTORS INLUENCING PROSPECTIVE ONLINE CUSTOMERS

Below are a number of statements that relate to possible factors that could influence prospective online customers making purchasing decisions of electronic goods, specifically digital cameras. Please indicate with an **X** the extent to which you **agree or disagree** with each of the following statements. The columns are graded from **1 to 5**. Number **1** denotes **strong disagreement** with a statement and at the other end of the scale, number **5** denotes **strong agreement** with a statement. There are no right or wrong statements.

	Statements relating to the **online purchase of a digital camera**	Extent of agreement				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
1	Products with a higher number of online reviews will increase my online purchasing intentions	1	2	3	4	5
2	Online reviews increase my productivity when shopping online	1	2	3	4	5
3	The rating given by a reviewer of a product, affects my purchasing decisions of similar products	1	2	3	4	5
4	I feel secure when making transactions via an online store	1	2	3	4	5
5	I am more trusting of third-party, independent review websites, than reviews posted on the online retailer's website	1	2	3	4	5
6	The online review enhances my effectiveness in searching for product information about DSLR cameras	1	2	3	4	5
7	Online reviews that reflect up-to-date information about the product are valuable to me when purchasing online	1	2	3	4	5
8	I found the online reviews helpful in purchasing a similar product	1	2	3	4	5
9	A single negative online review has been the reason I have not bought a product online	1	2	3	4	5
10	A review that is too short might be too vague to influence my online purchase of a DSLR camera	1	2	3	4	5
11	The use of slang in an online review will affect whether it influences my purchasing decision	1	2	3	4	5
12	Positive online reviews will encourage my purchasing intentions of a DSLR camera	1	2	3	4	5
13	The use of language, for example the grammar of an online review, will affect whether it influences my purchasing decision	1	2	3	4	5
14	I am willing to give my banking details to the online stores I purchase from	1	2	3	4	5
15	I compare positive and negative online reviews about DSLR cameras	1	2	3	4	5
16	I pay more attention to products which have positive online reviews	1	2	3	4	5
17	Online reviews about DSLR cameras that are objective, that is based on facts, influence my online purchasing decisions	1	2	3	4	5
18	Online reviews make it easier for me to shop online	1	2	3	4	5
19	I would not mind paying in advance for products from reputable websites	1	2	3	4	5
20	I find the content of online reviews as reliable	1	2	3	4	5
21	Online reviews will be useful in my future purchasing decisions	1	2	3	4	5
22	I find customer online reviews to be trustworthy	1	2	3	4	5
23	Negative online reviews will discourage my purchasing intentions of a DSLR camera	1	2	3	4	5
24	Positive online reviews outweigh negative reviews when I make online purchases	1	2	3	4	5
25	I find it easy to navigate and make my purchases from an online website than going to a store	1	2	3	4	5
26	Summarised online reviews are sufficient for me to make online purchasing decisions about DSLR cameras	1	2	3	4	5
27	I have previously made use of the internet in order to shop for products online	1	2	3	4	5

	Statements relating to the **online purchase of a digital camera**	Extent of agreement				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral or no opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
28	Detailed online reviews influence my online purchasing decisions	1	2	3	4	5
29	Online reviews enhance my knowledge and ability in online shopping	1	2	3	4	5
30	I am prepared to give my personal information to trustworthy online stores	1	2	3	4	5
31	A single positive online review has been the reason I have bought a product online	1	2	3	4	5
32	I find it easy to understand and interpret online reviews	1	2	3	4	5
33	The use of language, for example the punctuation of an online review, will affect whether it influences my purchasing decision	1	2	3	4	5
34	I find well-designed websites more trustworthy than those, that in my view, are poorly designed	1	2	3	4	5
35	I feel that the online store provides the desired products as ordered	1	2	3	4	5
36	I purchase from online stores which are deemed honest in their product offerings and payment methods	1	2	3	4	5
37	Detailed online reviews can be 'information overload' when I make purchases online	1	2	3	4	5
38	I prefer shopping from an online store that has a known reputation for its product offering	1	2	3	4	5
39	Online reviews that are recently posted are helpful to me in purchasing a DSLR camera online	1	2	3	4	5
40	I prefer to purchase from websites that have well known brand names of DSLR cameras	1	2	3	4	5
41	Having internet experience makes it easier for me to make purchases online	1	2	3	4	5
42	Online reviews about DSLR cameras that are subjective, that is based on feelings, influence my online purchasing decisions	1	2	3	4	5
43	I prefer shopping from websites that enable customers to write their own online reviews	1	2	3	4	5
44	I pay more attention to products with larger volumes of online reviews	1	2	3	4	5
45	I find it easier to search for products I want to buy via the internet than to go into a physical store	1	2	3	4	5
46	I prefer shopping from an online store that has a known reputation for delivering quality customer service	1	2	3	4	5

C   IMPORTANT ONLINE REVIEW FACTORS

Please list the top five factors that you, as an online shopper, consider to be the most important in online product reviews posted by other online customers.

1   _____

2   _____

3   _____

4   _____

5   _____

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

NELSON MANDELA

UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC SCIENCES

ETHICS CLEARANCE FOR TREATISES / DISSERTATIONS / THESES

Instructions:
- Should be completed by study leader and student
- Must be signed off by student, study leader and HoD
- Submit completed form to Ms Lindie van Rensburg
- Please ensure that the research methodology section from the proposal is attached to this form
- *Please note that by following this Proforma ethics route, the study will NOT be allocated an ethics clearance number*

FACULTY: _Business and Economic Sciences_

SCHOOL / DEPARTMENT: _Business Management_

I, (surname and initials of study leader) _GRAY, B A_

the study leader for (surname and initials of candidate) _BORGELT, CJ and VOGES, JD_

_216283825_ (student number) _216600022_

a candidate for the degree of _BCom Honours Business Management (both students)_

with a treatise/dissertation/thesis entitled (full title of treatise/dissertation/thesis):

The influence of online product reviews on prospective online shoppers' purchasing decisions

ANNEXURE A – ETHICS FORM TO COMPLETE

considered the following ethics criteria *(please tick the appropriate block):*

		YES	NO
1.	Is there any risk of harm, embarrassment of offence, however slight or temporary, to the participant, third parties or to the communities at large?		✓
2.	Is the study based on a research population defined as 'vulnerable' in terms of age, physical characteristics and/or disease status?		✓
2.1	Are subjects/participants/respondents of your study:		
2.1.1	Children under the age of 18?		✓
2.1.2	NMMU staff?		✓
2.1.3	NMMU students?		✓
2.1.4	The elderly/persons over the age of 60?		✓
2.1.5	A sample from an institution (e.g. hospital/school)?		✓
2.1.6	Handicapped (e.g. mentally or physically)?		✓
3.	Does the data that will be collected require consent of an institutional authority for this study? (An institutional authority refers to an organisation that is established by government to protect vulnerable people)		✓
3.1	Are you intending to access participant data from an existing, stored repository (e.g. school, institutional or university records)?		✓
4.	Will the participant's privacy, anonymity or confidentiality be compromised?		✓
4.1	Are you administering a questionnaire/survey that:		
4.1.1	Collects sensitive/identifiable data from participants?		✓
4.1.2	Does not guarantee the anonymity of the participant?		✓
4.1.3	Does not guarantee the confidentiality of the participant and the data?		✓
4.1.4	Will offer an incentive to respondents to participate, i.e. a lucky draw or any other prize?		✓
4.1.5	Will create doubt whether sample control measures are in place?		✓
)4.1.5	Will be distributed electronically via email (and requesting an email response?) Note: • If your questionnaire **DOES NOT** request respondents' identification, is distributed electronically and you request respondents to return it *manually* (print out and deliver/mail); **AND** respondent anonymity can be guaranteed, your answer will be NO. • If your questionnaire **DOES NOT** request respondents' identification, is *distributed via an email link and works through a web response system (e.g. the university survey system); **AND** respondent anonymity can be guaranteed, your answer will be NO.*		✓

ANNEXURE A – ETHICS FORM TO COMPLETE

5.	Do you wish to publish an article from this study and submit to an accredited Journal?		✓

*Please note that if **ANY** of the questions above have been answered in the affirmative **(YES)** the student will need to complete the full ethics clearance form (REC-H application) and submit it with the relevant documentation to the Faculty RECH (Ethics) representative.*

and hereby certify that the student has given his/her research ethical consideration and full ethics approval is not required.

_____
STUDY LEADER(S)

4 April 2019
_____
DATE

_____
HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

27 APRIL 2019
_____
DATE

_____
STUDENT

3 April 2019
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DATE

Bargelt
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STUDENT

3 April 2019
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Borgelt, C.J. - 216283825; Voges, J. - 216600022. EBML410 - TREATISE

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5	Submitted to University of Witwatersrand Student Paper	<1%
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