

## The Co-construction of Credibility in Online Product Reviews

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Reviews of products on Web sites like Epinions.com make explicit the ways in which credible identities are co-constructed. Product reviews reveal not only how reviewers construct credibility for themselves but also how readers of reviews, through their comments about reviews, ratify and contribute to reviewer credibility. I present a framework and analyze examples of reviews of digital cameras to examine how reviewers of a technical product convey credibility and how review readers co-construct reviewers' credibility. The framework and analysis can help identify those reviewers who are likely to influence review Web site users.

At Web sites devoted to consumers' reviews of products and services, such as Epinions.com, a product reviewer can describe and evaluate most anything. For instance, in this post, compwhiz67 (2007) reviewed a Pentax K10D digital camera:

I purchased this camera about 7 months ago for [\$]984.00. I have already taken around 15000 images with this camera. It still works just as good as when I got it. . . . With its very durable magnesium alloy chassis it will stand up to some abuse and is splash-proof and dust proof. Sensor dust is only a mild problem with this camera as the flourine coating makes all you have to do use a blower (such [*sic*] as the rocket blower). . . . I recommend this as an all around semi-professional camera that would be good for any amateur or semi-pro [*sic*] photographer. (para. 1)

Compwhiz67's review of the Pentax camera demonstrates how site users (most who, I presume, are not professional writers) generate technical communication when they convey their assessments of technical products at Epinions.com and other review sites. Consumers' reviews of products like digital cameras exemplify the technical communication that Durack (1997) referred to when she argued in favor of expanding the range of texts that "count" as technical writing. These re-

views—written by unknown and distant others—raise this question: How do product reviewers show that their reviews should be taken seriously (Richardson, 2003, p. 172)? That is, how do product reviewers show that they are credible? The excerpt taken from compwhiz67's review suggests a partial answer. Reviewers like compwhiz67 make assertions in support of their credibility, and they also demonstrate in a variety of ways that readers should take the reviewers seriously. In addition, to convey that their work is credible, reviewers rely on their reputations: the credible (or perhaps not-so-credible) identity that their work and responses to their work have developed.

In this study, I present a framework and analyze examples selected from a corpus of 750 reviews<sup>1</sup> gathered for prior research (Mackiewicz, 2010). In this manuscript, I examine how reviewers of digital cameras convey credibility and how review readers validate (or deconstruct) reviewers' credibility through their comments about reviews. The framework and analysis help to identify those reviewers who, in dialog with review readers, are likely to influence users' decision making.

## PRODUCT REVIEWS AND READERS' RATINGS AND COMMENTS

As is the case with other review sites like Rateitall.com, Newegg.com, and Judysbook.com, the goal of Epinions.com (2010) is to solicit and categorize reviews to help users "make informed decisions." An important strength of review sites is the number of people who contribute reviews; users access collective knowledge about a product. But a weakness stems from users' inability to verify

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<sup>1</sup>In conducting research on Epinions.com reviews and the comments they generate, I referred to the recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess & AoIR, 2002). The research reported here accords with the AoIR's guidelines. Namely, with studies of discourse in public venues like Epinions.com, particularly venues in which contributors know their discourse will be archived and can be accessible to anyone, researchers are under less obligation in regard to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. The Epinions.com contributors whose reviews and comments I discuss in this study have made their discourse public and have done so willingly. They know that their reviews, comments, and other discourse will be archived and accessible. Indeed, the AoIR differentiates between "participants . . . best understood as 'subjects' (in the senses common in human subjects research in medicine and the social sciences)" and "authors whose texts/artifacts are intended as public" (p. 7). Epinions.com contributors are the latter type. Still, the AoIR asks researchers to consider risk to the authors whose discourse is under analysis. The AoIR states that whether form or content is being studied, "if the content is relatively trivial, doesn't address sensitive topics, etc., then clearly the risk to the subject is low" (p. 8). In the case of this study, which analyzes both the form and content of online credibility, no content likely to "result in shame, threats to material well-being (denial of insurance, job loss, physical harassment, etc.)" (p. 8), including no discussion of intimate topics, was included. Thus, in this study, I refer to Epinions.com contributors by their usernames, giving them attribution for their work.

reviewers' credibility. In fact, to write a review for Epinions.com, potential reviewers need only to register with an e-mail address. Once registered as a member, a user can post reviews of products that range from wood stoves to golf clubs and from dollhouses to laser printers. All products (and the reviews and review comments they inspire) are arranged by category, such as the electronics category that includes reviews of digital cameras.

Each review begins with an ordinal-scale rating (1 to 5 stars), a short list of pros (e.g., low price, good optics) and cons (e.g., slow operation, slow memory-card writing), as well as a bottom-line statement (e.g., "Pass on this one." Epinions, 2010). Most reviews also contain a discursive description and evaluation of the product, as in compwhiz67's description and evaluation of the Pentax K10D. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of compwhiz67's review, including the star rating that compwhiz67 assigned to the camera.

In addition to product reviews, Epinions.com also allows for ratings and comments from review readers. Instead of using a 1-to-5-star rating, as do reviewers of products, review readers assign a different type of ordinal-scale rating: "very helpful," "helpful," "somewhat helpful," "not helpful," or "off topic" (Epinions.com, 2010). As I discuss in more detail later, ratings from review readers help determine

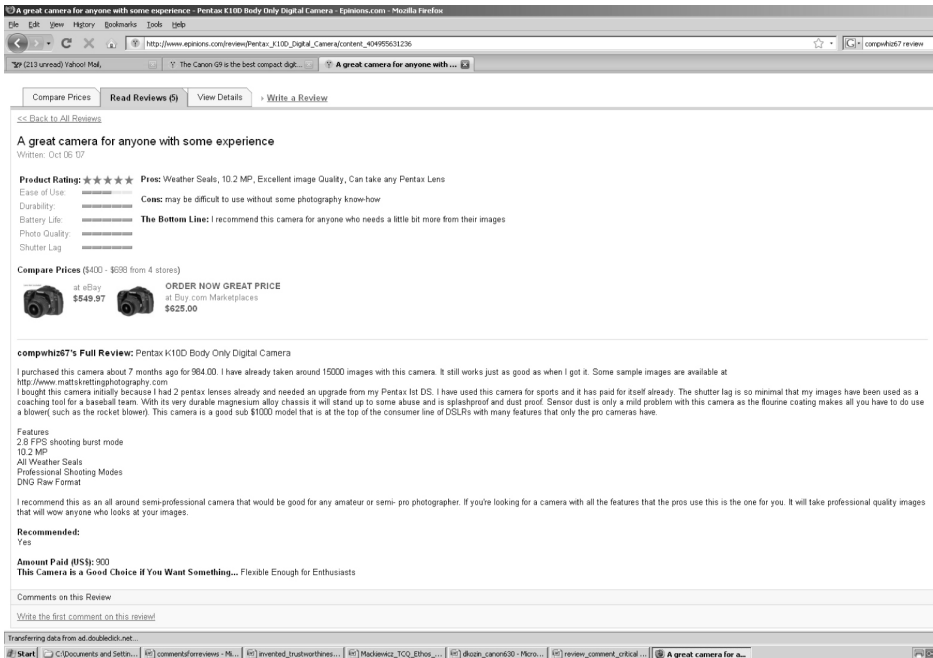


FIGURE 1 Compwhiz67 (2007) assigned a 5-star rating to and wrote a review of the Pentax K10D digital camera at Epinions.com.

which reviewers will receive a “recognition”: a special designation assigned to worthy reviewers to signal that they are considered particularly credible by members of the Epinions community.

### CREDIBILITY FROM DIALOG

Product reviews and the comments that review readers append to reviews together comprise a forum in which community members discuss reviewers’ assessments of products like digital cameras, reviewers’ motivations for their ratings, and the helpfulness of reviews. For example, the co-construction of a credible identity is evident in the following comment about a review from a review reader. In this comment, smoke11 (2008) agreed with the reviewer, jvandeagr, about the Canon PowerShot G9:

Agree completely with your view that the “megapixel numbers game is getting old.”

It is a durable line.

On the noise issue, you’re right, I think. I keep the asa at 50. (para. 1–3)

By strongly agreeing with jvandeagr (“Agree completely . . .”), smoke11 validates what jvandeagr wrote and thus helps construct credibility for the reviewer. Comments like this from smoke11 make explicit the ways in which credibility and credible identities are co-constructed. That is, the comments reveal not only how reviewers use language and apply their knowledge to create credible identities for themselves but also how readers of reviews, through their review ratings and comments about reviews, ratify and reshape reviewer credibility. Thus, studying credibility in product reviews—examining how it is generated, maintained, and developed through dialogic interaction—is interesting from a theoretical perspective. Such study confirms recent theory that describes identity, including credible identity, as constructed via interaction.

The idea of the co-constructed identity via discourse has a tradition in linguistic as well as rhetorical research. Both fields, for example, draw upon Bakhtin’s (1982, 1993) description of language as inherently dialogic and identity as amalgamated from our self-perceptions and others’ perceptions of us. As Ochs (1993) wrote, “Speakers may use a verbal act or stance in an attempt to construct not only their own identities but the social identities of other interlocutors” (p. 289). Drawing from Ochs’s work in a linguistic analysis of discourse in academic counseling sessions, He (1995) defined identity co-construction: “Identity is taken to be a construction that makes actual what was once potential in the context of other persons’ responses and attitudes toward a person” (p. 217).

The rhetorical tradition also builds on Bakhtin’s point that all we say (or write or sign) responds to something that has been said before and anticipates what will

be said next (Bakhtin, 1982) and that co-constructed credibility, or ethos, arises from dialog (Bakhtin, 1993). Writing about author ethos in journalistic commentaries, White (2003) echoed Bakhtin in his discourse semantic analysis, saying that “the textual voice acts first-and-foremost to acknowledge, to engage with or to align itself with respect to positions which are in some way alternatives” (p. 260). White wrote about an author’s “dialog” with other texts to which his or her own text “responds,” but such dialog is in fact manifested in interactive online forums. Spoel (2009) examined two midwifery Web sites for how those sites construct midwives’ professional identities. She found that the sites are dialogic in the sense that they replicate and sustain “mainstream assumptions” about midwives’ identities and relationships (p. 285). But Spoel also showed how the sites fail a more important test of dialogic communication. The sites, she pointed out, offer little opportunity for bidirectional communication—dialog that would enable midwives to participate in formulating their own professional identities. The dialog missing from midwifery Web sites presents itself in the review–comment interactions on Epinions.com. In the current study, I draw from the Bakhtinian tradition—both linguistic and rhetorical—to analyze how a discourse participant’s credibility is generated through dialog with others in the discourse community.

## CREDIBILITY IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

Most studies of perceptions of credibility in professional discourse (e.g., Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990) have discussed the concept in terms of two components: trustworthiness and expertise. A trustworthy person generates confidence in others by intending “to communicate the assertions [that the person] considers most valid” (Ohanian, p. 41). The key word in this definition is the verb “considers.” That is, a trustworthy person is sincere and honest when making assertions, but it does not mean that a trustworthy person’s assertions are necessarily accurate. Rather, they are what the trustworthy person *considers* accurate.

In contrast, an expert person is perceived “to be a source of valid assertions” (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). Experts have background knowledge that allows them to make accurate assertions. Experts know what they are talking about (at least in regard to a specific topic, like digital cameras). Thus, a product reviewer might be perceived as making a sincere attempt to help others but as not having expertise. For example, a reviewer might write a long, detailed review of a product, conveying a sincere attempt to be helpful, but the reviewer could confuse auto exposure with white balance bracketing or show that the reviewer does not understand what ISO is. Such errors would negatively affect perceptions of that reviewer’s expertise. Similarly, a reviewer can show expertise but not be perceived as trustworthy. Such a case might occur if readers perceive that a reviewer knows about a subject

but has something to gain from writing the review (e.g., an employee of a camera manufacturer reviewing company products positively). This distinction between the components of expertise and trustworthiness is therefore a useful one.

The credibility construct bifurcates again when analyzed through the lens of traditional, Aristotelian rhetoric, which discusses credibility as *ethos*. Invented *ethos* is constructed in a particular rhetorical situation, in the text-at-hand, such as in a product review. In contrast, situated *ethos* (i.e., situated credibility) builds through time; it constitutes the reviewer's "good reputation in the community" (Crowley & Hawhee, 2008, p. 198). Smith (2004) noted that critics tend to deemphasize the importance of reputation in relation to Aristotle's work on ethics because "Aristotle wishes to focus on what can be created *in* the speech" (p. 5). Taking a different view, Smith argued that Aristotle viewed reputation as critical if only because a speaker might contradict what he or she has said in the past or become tedious by saying the same thing again. In terms of online reviews, both invented and situated credibility are important. A product reviewer with a good reputation might contribute a review that fails to demonstrate (to invent) credibility. For example, the review might be perceived as hurriedly written, which in turn might cause review readers to reconfigure their perception of the reviewer. More commonly perhaps, a reviewer who lacks situated credibility could contribute a review that invents credibility and thus begins the process of building a reputation.

Combining the invented–situated pair with the trustworthiness–expertise pair generates a useful framework for analyzing how credibility is co-constructed by and for product reviewers. In this framework, credibility comprises four components (Figure 2).

These components interact, one promulgating the other, as in the case of invented trustworthiness (e.g., writing a long, detailed review) leading eventually to situated trustworthiness (e.g., a badge of recognition from the site) and to situated trustworthiness validating invented trustworthiness. More important to this discussion, however, reviewers' credibility is validated, negotiated, and at times deconstructed in the dialogic discourses between reviewers and review readers.



FIGURE 2 Credibility comprises four components.

## THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATED EXPERTISE

The situated components of credibility, rooted in but independent from the invented components of credibility, are those that comprise reputation. Reputation is critical to reviewers who want to establish themselves in larger discourse communities, such as the Epinions community or, more likely, in a specific category community, such as the group of people who regularly contribute to the Epinions.com electronics category. In the early days of online forums, contributors could not easily convey their reputations and thus could not easily rely upon those reputations to “underwrite” their messages (Richardson, 2003, p. 175). Now, the reputations of product reviewers (and review readers) are more apparent, even to new users of the site.

Situated expertise constitutes a complex component of reputation. On Epinions.com, as with other review sites, reviewers (indeed, all members, whether they write reviews or not) can create profile pages that relate their interests (professional and personal) and, particularly in the case of members who review products, that construct credibility (in various ways discussed later, including via a list of their recent reviews and the ratings their reviews have received). These profile pages give a sense that reviewers are accountable for what they say—that an identifiable person exists behind the username. Indeed, some Epinions members like Howard\_Creech use a username that suggests an offline identity. Others do not (e.g., compwhiz67). But if profile pages give this sense, it is only a sense. On Epinions.com, a user has no way to verify a connection between an online identity or username and a person. (Some newer sites such as Viewpoints.com have gained popularity in part because they tie usernames to real-world identities in a way that Epinions.com and other sites do not. Also, some older sites, such as Amazon.com, have added “Real Name” badges to tie reviewers to real-world identities.)

Profile pages do much to construct situated trustworthiness (although that trustworthiness likely exists in part because of a reviewer’s continued displays of expertise). However, situated expertise manifests itself in reviewers’ profile pages too. Profile pages provide lists of experiences and roles that convey the reviewer’s background knowledge. With these lists in mind, readers determine the extent and relevance of a reviewer’s expertise for evaluating a particular product. Howard\_Creech’s (1999) page, as shown in Figure 3, demonstrated situated expertise: expertise that exists outside any of his digital camera reviews.

Several profile page items point to Howard\_Creech’s (1999) background knowledge about digital cameras. First, the profile page allowed him to describe himself and his interests: “Photographer/Writer . . .,” which asserts expertise arising from a role relevant to the product. In addition, his profile page conveyed that he has done relevant research, as his profile page links to Web sites devoted to digital cameras. Readers who click through to Howard\_Creech’s profile page from

The screenshot shows the Epinions.com profile for Howard\_Creech. At the top, there are navigation tabs for various categories: CARS, BOOKS, MOVIES, MUSIC, COMPUTERS & SOFTWARE, ELECTRONICS, GIFTS, HOME & GARDEN, KIDS & FAMILY, OFFICE SUPPLY, SPORTS, TRAVEL, and MORE... Below these is a search bar with a 'Member Search' option. The profile is divided into several sections:

- Web of Trust:** Lists members Howard\_Creech trusts (e.g., ladyconsumer, wsmunch) and those who trust Howard\_Creech (e.g., sguhr, ladyconsumer).
- Howard\_Creech's Profile:** Includes a profile picture, bio (Photographer/Writer fascinated by Movies, Music, Books, American Diner Food, History, "Popular Culture", and Travel), and favorite websites.
- Howard\_Creech's Recent Opinions:** A table of reviews with columns for Date Written, Review Title, Product / Topic, Product Rating, and Review Rating.

Date Written	Review Title	Product / Topic	Product Rating	Review Rating
May 26 '08	<a href="#">The Kicker IK500 really does kick!</a>	<a href="#">Kicker IK500 Powered iPod Speaker System (08IK500) in MP3 Accessories</a>	★★★★☆	Very Helpful
Apr 24 '08	<a href="#">Canon Digital Rebel XSi/EOS450D</a>	<a href="#">Canon EOS 450D / Digital Rebel XSi Body Only Digital Camera in Digital Cameras</a>	★★★★☆	Very Helpful
Mar 26 '08	<a href="#">The Powershot A590 IS - Canon's new P&amp;S digicam value champ</a>	<a href="#">Canon PowerShot A590 IS Digital Camera in Digital Cameras</a>	★★★★☆	Very Helpful
Feb 25 '08	<a href="#">Insignia NS-BTHDP Bluetooth Cordless Headphones</a>	<a href="#">Insignia Stereo Bluetooth Headphones NS-BTHDP in Headphones</a>	★★★★☆	Very Helpful
Feb 15 '08	<a href="#">The Insignia NS-2V17B 2GB SPORT MP3/Digital Media player</a>	<a href="#">Insignia Sport 2GB Video MP3 Player NS-2V17B in MP3 and Digital Media Players</a>	★★★★☆	Very Helpful

FIGURE 3 Howard\_Creech's (1999) profile page on Epinions.com shows his Lead and Advisor badges, his biography, a list of his favorite Web sites, and a list of his latest reviews; these items contribute to his situated expertise.

one of his reviews thus encounter a previously constructed (situated) identity that will likely play a role in the extent to which they find the Howard\_Creech identity to be credible and, for that matter, the extent to which they are likely to base purchasing decisions on Howard\_Creech's recommendation.

Besides Howard\_Creech's (1999) profile page, his designation as a "Category Lead" conveys credibility. Epinions.com (2010) established the Lead designation, and Leads like Howard\_Creech ensure that products in their categories, such as electronics, are reviewed. This designation conveys (at least to those who know or are willing to find out the criteria for becoming a Lead) that Howard\_Creech was nominated for his Lead recognition by other Epinions members and has received high ratings from readers on his reviews. Because one of the criteria for rating a review as "very helpful" is that the review is "exceptionally accurate," readers who know what this rating entails will understand that other readers must also have found Howard\_Creech to be a source of valid, accurate reviews.

In sum, like other review sites such as Amazon.com, Epinions.com provides profile pages so that readers can familiarize themselves with product reviewers. Reviewers who construct their profile pages wisely can bolster the situated expertise that they construct and that their readers perceive. Thus, analysis of these pages provides some insight into which reviewers are likely to have influence in a particular product or service category.

### THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF SITUATED TRUSTWORTHINESS

Situated trustworthiness arises from signs that a reviewer has been sincere and honest in contributions to the discourse community. In the case of product reviewers, situated trustworthiness is complex. The complexity stems in large part from the fact that reviewers develop reputations of being trustworthy through multiple variables, including the quantity and, especially, the quality of their reviews. However, reviewers' ability to write frequent, helpful reviews stems in part from their expertise in relation to the products. Expertise feeds situated trustworthiness.

Figure 3 showcases other signals of trustworthiness. The profile page shows the quantity of reviews that a reviewer has contributed and the date on which the reviewer became an Epinions member. These statistics help review readers gauge the reviewer's commitment to the Epinions community and, thus, may indicate the reviewer's sincerity.

Over time, frequent, quality reviews lead Epinions members to include a reviewer in their Web of Trust—a network of reviewers whose opinions an Epinions member values. (Other sites have related designations. For example, at Rateitall.com, a review reader can become a "fan" of a reviewer.) A reviewer who is in the Web of Trust of many Epinions members is a reviewer with one strong sign of a good reputation. Howard\_Creech's (1999) inclusion in the Web of Trust of 1,272 Epinions members is a clear sign of his good reputation (Figure 4).

Situated trust in the Epinions discourse community also rests in the aforementioned recognitions: signals of status that Epinions confers for excellent reviewing.

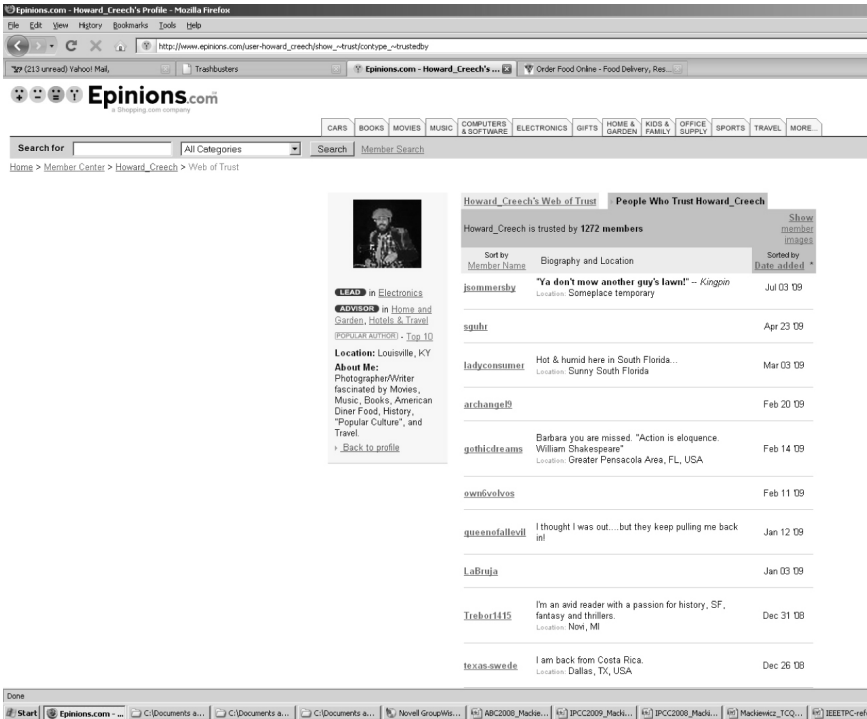


FIGURE 4 Howard\_Creech's (1999) inclusion in the Web of Trust of 1,272 Epinions members is a clear sign of his good reputation.

Epinions.com signals recognition with badges that appear near a reviewer's name, such as Howard\_Creech's (1999) username in Figures 3 and 4. Recognitions are important because they allow reviewers greater visibility in the Epinions community, and that visibility allows more opportunity to accrue more trust and, thus, more credibility as more users notice, read, and respond to their reviews.

Other recognitions also have implications for how readers perceive reviewers' trustworthiness. According to the Epinions.com (2010) FAQ, members designated as Top Reviewers "have received the highest ratings from the Epinions community," meaning that this recognition comes as review readers evaluate a reviewer's work as "very helpful" for the "vast majority of reviews in a category." Thus, Top Reviewers, whose reviews Epinions.com weighs more heavily, also earn their recognition by earning trust from the Epinions community.

The last recognition of interest—a role that reviewers take on informally in other sites—is Advisor status. Advisors "provide constructive feedback via comments to reviewers on how to improve content quality" (Epinions, 2010). In the excerpt below, cntaur5 (2007), an Advisor in the electronics category, suggested to

the reviewer leftymb that readers would appreciate more detail and explanations of jargon-like abbreviations:

I wanted to take this opportunity and welcome you to the website. I think you get off to a good start, however I think a bit more could be shared on some of the Fuji FinePix S9000 Zoom Digital Camera's functions and features. Your use of abbreviations presents a real challenge for readers not familiar with this particular digital camera. (para. 1)

Cntaur5 coached leftymb in how to create more helpful reviews and thus maximally beneficial work for the broad discourse community of Epinions members as well as the smaller community of members who follow electronics reviews and, in particular, digital camera reviews. Advisors, then, help contributors understand and enact community norms, an act Miller and Halloran (1993) called "making present the spirit or character of a community" (p. 121), to increase reviewers' chances of establishing and maintaining readers' trust. Advisors instruct reviewers, in Reynolds' (1993) words, in the "shared enterprise" of "credible identity construction" (p. 328). At the same time, they reinforce their own credibility as they fulfill the responsibility of their Advisor role.

In sum, review sites like Epinions.com create a system of recognitions, based on merit, by which users can assess trustworthiness of reviewers in particular but also their situated credibility in general. This system allows review readers, through the dialog of review comments and ratings, to co-construct credible identities for others. In addition, determining which reviewers have strong situated credibility reveals those who are likely to influence site users.

## THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF INVENTED EXPERTISE

Although review sites like Epinions.com focus attention on reviewers' reputations—their situated expertise and trustworthiness—analysis of reviewer credibility must also account for how reviewer credibility is constructed and negotiated as review readers encounter and react to reviewers' texts.

Product reviewers invent expertise when they state or demonstrate that they possess the background knowledge needed to make valid assertions about the product. For example, compwhiz67 (2007) asserted that she had amassed experience with the camera (7 months of use and 15,000 pictures taken), conveying that she has enough expertise with the camera for her evaluation to be taken seriously (see Mackiewicz, 2010; Richardson, 2003, p. 172). Another review site, Newegg.com, assesses experience with a product by asking reviewers to state how long they have owned a product (e.g., "1 day to 1 week"). In earlier research, I discussed 10 assertion types and their broader categories (Mackiewicz). Through these assertions of expertise (Table 1), product reviewers convey to readers that

TABLE 1  
Categories and Types of Assertions of Expertise in Online Reviews (See Mackiewicz, 2010)

<i>Assertion Categories</i>	<i>Assertion Types</i>	<i>Constructed Example of a Review of a Canon PowerShot SD400</i>	<i>Natural Language Example of a Digital Camera Review</i>
Assertions of product-specific experience	Regular experience with (using) the product (i.e., regularly using the product over some duration)	I have had my Canon SD400 for about 9 months now and I have been stunned at the difference over my last digital camera.	My husband and I purchased this camera almost 4 years ago and it's still working great. It has taken thousand of pictures over the years.
	Testing of the product (i.e., using it to see what it can do, how well it performs)	I played with this camera extensively at a local retailer, using most of the available modes, including Beach, Sunset, Night, Flower, Landscape, Party and Portrait. I tried the manual mode to take panorama photos.	I have put my PowerShot SD850 through its paces. I've experimented with a wide range of conditions (light, temperatures, distance) and have been quite happy with my SD850.
Assertions of familiarity with related and relevant products	Familiarity or ownership of previous versions of the specific product under review	This SD400 is the fourth one that I have owned in the PowerShot SD series.	I have owned several cameras in the Canon PowerShot SD series, including the SD750, which I will refer to frequently as it compares to the SD850.
	Familiarity or ownership of comparable product model	I already own several digital cameras, including a Fuji and an Olympus.	After owning digital cameras from Sony (3), Panasonic (3), and Nikon (2), I'd have to say that I am very impressed overall with the SD850 as a point and shoot camera.

<p>Familiarity with the brand and brand's products (as opposed to the specific product under review)</p>	<p>I have used and appreciated Canon products for over 20 years.</p>	<p>I had invested quite a bit of money into Canon Point and Shoot digital cameras so I was most comfortable with Canon products and their quality. I have taken many photography classes, and I found out recently that this is an elite camera. I have been a great lover of cameras and the sport of taking pictures since I was a kid. I have always loved going outside just to find those perfect pictures and still do. I do both wedding and wildlife photography and often shoot 1,000 pictures in a session. I need a camera that can stand up to the elements and shoot in any situation. The SD850 never misses a beat. The Canon Powershot SD850 was such a big hit that now my husband (who is a professional photographer) wants one for our casual photos too.</p>
<p>Assertions of a relevant role</p>	<p>I have been using this camera in the photography classes I have taken these past 2 years in college. I have been taking pictures of friends and family in my spare time since I was young.</p>	<p>I researched many different brands, and this camera was the one I chose because it has the features I wanted.</p>
<p>Received or receiving formal training or education relevant to the product</p>	<p>I have been using this camera in the photography classes I have taken these past 2 years in college.</p>	
<p>Relevant experience from a hobby (i.e., nonprofessional experience)</p>	<p>I have been taking pictures of friends and family in my spare time since I was young.</p>	
<p>Employment in a profession relevant to the product</p>	<p>In my line of work, wedding and special event photography, durability and adaptability are critical.</p>	
<p>Association with someone who has expertise relevant to the product</p>	<p>My friend, a professional photographer, told me that this camera captures color well.</p>	
<p>Conducted research on the product (e.g., online research)</p>	<p>I read numerous online reviews and opinions of other cameras before I bought this one.</p>	

they have experience, familiarity with similar products, or a role (such as a professional role) relevant to the product.

Table 1 delineates and exemplifies the ways in which reviewers assert that they have the expertise needed to back up their evaluations.

There are, of course, other ways that reviewers can invent expertise—expertise that can either be ratified or challenged by readers. For example, reviewers' use of technical vocabulary demonstrates facility with using relevant language and thus demonstrating knowledge about the product: Compwhiz67's (2007) use of the phrase "fluorine coating" signals background knowledge about photography.

Excerpts from Howard\_Creech's (2006) 3,957-word review of the Canon PowerShot A630, along with readers' comments about his review, reveal the co-construction of invented expertise. In this excerpt, Howard\_Creech asserted familiarity with the brand and with previous versions of the specific camera model:

Canon PowerShot A630 Digital Camera Canon's A series digital cameras continue to hold the number one spot in U. S. sales because they consistently provide consumers with class leading performance, superb ergonomics, tough as nails durability, excellent image quality, and "best in class" bang for the buck. . . .The A630 retains the best features of the A610 (which it replaces) and adds genuine improvements that will appeal to both novice photographers and more advanced shooters. (para.1)

He continued, describing his method of testing the camera, and, in doing so, asserted his firsthand knowledge about how well the camera performs:

#### In the Field/Handling & Operation

. . . my friend was finally able to get his hands on a Canon Powershot A630 (we tested the A640 back in October). The first thing we did was to run some color tests. We use a homemade macro stage and a selection of brightly colored (red, green, yellow, blue, orange, and purple) plastic children's beach toys arrayed on a white photo paper background. (para. 31)

With these assertions (along with others he uses in the remainder of the review), Howard\_Creech (2006) constructed an expert identity for himself by establishing his qualifications to meet readers' needs for accurate information. More important, though, readers' comments validate and solidify Howard\_Creech's standing as someone with relevant expertise and often show their need of and appreciation for that expertise. Paraphrasing Larson's (1977) discussion of the relationship between professional and client, Faber (2002) noted about this reciprocal relationship, "The client gives away self-control and personal regulation in favor of expert control and evaluation" (p. 318). Faber's point is evident in moogles' (2007) response to Howard\_Creech. Moogles began by downplaying his own experience with digital cameras, saying that he owns a low-quality camera that he did

not select himself (but instead obtained it at no cost). Then, moogles acknowledged Howard\_Creech's expertise by asking a question related to digital camera photography:

I used to have the crappiest digicam ever (Came free with a printer) and noticed a whole bunch of red eye pictures, and am now a little hesitant about getting the camera. My question is, does red eye occur frequently, or only sometimes? (para. 1)

Howard\_Creech (2007) responded with certainty, and with his answer he accepted and further strengthened his status:

A630 is better than most digicams in its class, but if you shoot a lot of informal portraits, redeye will be a problem. The best solution is a larger camera (where the flash and the lens are far enough apart not to be on essentially the same plane) or a DSLR and an external flash unit. (para. 2)

Here, Howard Creech not only asserted familiarity with other, similar digital cameras ("better than most digicams in its class"), but he also provided two solutions (confidently using a superlative in asserting that they are "the best solution"). Thus, dialogic interaction, such as this question-and-answer exchange, generates an expert identity (and strengthens his reputation as well).

Comments that communicate threats to a reviewer's expert identity demonstrate co-construction of expert identity as well. Jmatsu's (2006) request to Howard\_Creech for clarification constituted a threat because it suggested that Howard\_Creech's review contained an error and thus that his work was not clear and easily usable:

Hi Howard, I got a little confused in the field section when you were referring to an "SD630." Were you testing another camera at the same time or was it just a typo for the A630? You might want to clarify it, as you mention the SD630 a few times. Just asking.

Otherwise it's a nice review. (para. 1-2)

Jmatsu questioned Howard\_Creech's use of the camera model name SD630 and asked for clarification. Jmatsu's politeness reveals the expert identity readers construct for and with Howard\_Creech; she used a variety of strategies to mitigate the threat implicit in her question (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). First, she downgraded "confused," the adjective she used to describe herself after reading Howard\_Creech's review, with the diminutive hedge "a little." She also signaled that Howard\_Creech's potential typo is a small problem by using the hedge "just": "or was it just a typo." In addition, Jmatsu explicitly stated the illocutionary act she

intends to use to close her comment (“Just asking.”), with which she clarified that her intent is to inquire, not to accuse.

That expertise and, thus, credibility is co-constructed means that it can be challenged or deconstructed, too, but readers often negotiate such challenges to expertise politely, maintaining civility on an individual level and contributing to civility on the community level. Firebugga (2004) began the comment about *andrew12*'s (2004) review of a Sony Cyber-Shot DSC-P73 by asserting personal experience with the product (“I also own this camera,” para. 1). This assertion establishes Firebugga's qualification to state the forthcoming disagreement. But Firebugga used a variety of politeness strategies that mitigated his disagreement and its threat to *andrew12*'s expertise:

I also own this camera and I find what you have said is exactly what I feel. . . .

I don't mind the software, I can really care less on how basic the software is. I look for just unloading and resizing, so with windows xp that will be just fine.

The other features that I disagree with is speed. Speed is great when your not using the flash, when you use the flash sometimes the camera pauses before it actually takes the pic.

I know my review of your review must seem like I disagree with everything, but I really don't. I totally see where your thoughts were coming from and how you could think that about this particular camera. (para. 1–4)

After asserting his own expertise, Firebugga (2004) moved on to politeness strategies that soften his disagreement. First, Firebugga used a politeness strategy that Brown and Levinson (1987) called “giving the gift of understanding”: “I find what you've said is exactly what I feel.” With this strategy, Firebugga claimed solidarity with *andrew12* by conveying that he had carefully considered what *andrew12* wrote, and he agreed. This assertion buffers the disagreement to come. He then delineated a number of points about which he disagreed, including the reviewer's assessment of the software that comes with the camera and the camera's speed.

Firebugga bookended his explanation of how and why he disagrees with more politeness aimed at building and maintaining (or reestablishing) goodwill. Firebugga used the politeness strategy of avoiding disagreement (“I know my review must seem like I disagree with everything, but really I don't”; para. 4). With this strategy, Firebugga showed that he prefers to agree to accept *andrew12*'s review as valid. Firebugga reinforced this preference by again giving the gift of understanding (“I totally see . . .”; para. 4). Firebugga's comments show how review readers challenge the validity of a reviewer's assertions thus renegotiating that reviewer's expertise.

To sum up this section, reviewers invent expertise in several ways, most notably by making assertions about characteristics they possess (e.g., experience with

the product), which make them and their reviews worthy of serious consideration. In addition, analyzing reviewers' invented expertise clarifies how dialog between reviewers and review readers plays a substantial role in validating (or withholding validation) from reviewers and thus how they play an important role in establishing, maintaining, and negotiating online identities. By asking questions, agreeing, disagreeing, and asserting their own expertise with different degrees of politeness, readers react to and shape reviewers' invented selves. Such analysis helps in identifying reviewers who are likely to have influence, just as recognitions or other signals of situated credibility do.

### THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF INVENTED TRUSTWORTHINESS

Invented trustworthiness arises from what reviewers assert, along with how they show sincerity and honesty. Readers' comments suggest that reviewers show sincerity by demonstrating that they have used care in writing their review. Miller and Halloran (1993), writing about Gould's and Lewontin's argument in favor of historical-dialectical science, as opposed to purely experimental science, made a similar observation. They said this about the argument both Gould and Lewontin made: "What matters about it with respect to ethos is not whether it displays accurate expert knowledge. Rather, it shows the authors to be persons of wit and broad learning, willing to venture beyond their narrow specialty and able to make connections in an elegant style" (p. 119). Miller and Halloran then noted that ethos can come from the quality of a text's presentation. Mainly, review readers' comments suggest that reviewers gain trust by writing reviews that are helpful because the reviewers describe the products in depth, provide details (particularly detailed reasons for an evaluation), and are formatted to be usable. Howard\_Creech's (2006) review of the Canon PowerShot A630, for example, generated praise and "very helpful" ratings. Even in the short excerpt included in this article, it is possible to see that Howard\_Creech carefully used informative headings (e.g., "In the Field/ Handling & Operation") to chunk content and thus increased his review's usability. In addition, the nearly 4,000 words that Howard\_Creech wrote about the Canon PowerShot A630 attest to his care in describing and evaluating the product in detail.

Maxinater's (2007) assessment of subzero4's (2007) review of a Canon PowerShot SD1000 shows that a reviewer's care in preparing and writing a review is important:

This is a great review. It looks as if you have spent a lot of time reviewing it, and know what you are talking about. I think that this does a great job describing the

product. You did a great job describing the features, and your personal opinion about them. In conclusion, great review! (para. 1)

Maxinater's comment in particular acknowledged subzero4 as someone who used care in writing the review. When readers see that reviewers have been thoughtful about their comments and have worked to create a review that readers can use, they are more likely to perceive that review and that reviewer to be trustworthy.

Alternatively, when review readers perceive insincerity, they renegotiate the reviewer's trustworthiness with their comments. For instance, Lousygolfer (2009) impugned ericswife's (2008) trustworthiness on two counts in her review of a Kodak Easyshare M883 digital camera:

I genuinely find it hard to believe that your camera's photos are as you described.

I think the reason you did not receive very high ratings on this review is that you did not provide enough details about the camera and did not organize your review as well as you could. You did not mention important things like ergonomics or the video function. (para. 1–2)

Lousygolfer questioned ericswife's honesty ("I genuinely find it hard to believe that your camera's photos are as you described"; para. 2), accusing her of misrepresenting the results she achieved with the camera. Then, he asserted that the review's lack of organization and detail have generated its low rating for helpfulness.

Conversely, reviewers invent trust when they demonstrate an honest assessment of their own skills. That is, reviewers describe their level of expertise, acknowledging that they are not experts in the relevant subject matter (and indeed might be novices), like carstairs38 (2007) did in discussing the Canon PowerShot A570 IS digital camera. In doing so, reviewers like carstairs38 signal their good intentions toward site readers by making clear the limitations of their ability to assess the camera:

Please keep in mind as you are reading this that this is my first digital camera. I can't compare it to others. While I have used the occasional digital camera, I have never handled one enough to form an opinion or a basis for comparison. Additionally, I don't know what half of the digital terms mean. I will just be discussion [*sic*] my experience with this camera in laymen's terms. (para. 2)

Carstairs38 stated that he lacks familiarity with similar products (other digital cameras) and is not familiar with the technical vocabulary that those with more expertise would likely use to discuss the product (and thus show their expertise). Rather, carstairs38 said that the review will be based on his own limited experience with the camera.

It seems, then, that most important to trustworthiness is being perceived as an honest person, but on this count also, reviewers' identities are negotiated and reshaped via dialog with review readers. For instance, Sageandsavory (2005) accused another user, dkozin, of creating reviews of products that he has not used—reviews that are based on readily available product specifications and that contain lists of URLs rather than thoughtful exegesis:

You give us “your” conclusions but do not explain your personal user experience from which these conclusions and opinions came from. . . . According to your reviews up until a little over a year ago you were using a point and shoot film camera, and now you have posted an unbelievable amount of digital camera reviews. You post one picture of a apartment or condo complex parking lot, and the picture does not really demonstrate anything. The pictures of the cameras you show, could not have been taken by the camera you are writing about; because you don't mention purchasing two of each model! (para. 1)

It is impossible to tell from your review whether your conclusions and opinions are based on your “research” or from your user experience. Your reviews are also beginning to provide less information about the camera while more of your review space is being dedicated to links to your other reviews. (para. 2–3)

It is hard to believe that since Aug 2005 you have spent over \$16,000 on electronics products, primarily digital cameras. (para. 5)

Sageandsavory began by questioning dkozin's experience with the camera he reviewed, but this question segued into an accusation. Sageandsavory implied that dkozin is reviewing cameras that he has not actually used; he implied that dkozin is able to generate numerous reviews because the reviews are based on data from Web research as opposed to real use of the cameras (“It is impossible to tell from your review whether your conclusions and opinions are based on your ‘research’ or from your user experience”). This indirect accusation accompanies and relates to his complaint that dkozin's reviews are filled with Web links rather than original content. In addition, sageandsavory questioned whether the pictures that dkozin posted to his Web site were in fact taken with the cameras that he reviewed. Sageandsavory's comment challenged dkozin's situated trustworthiness because in it he is at best accusing dkozin of laziness and at worst accusing him of misleading readers about the number of cameras that he has actually used himself (“It is hard to believe that since Aug 2005 you have spent over \$16,000 on electronics products, primarily digital cameras”). Overall, sageandsavory's comment shows how, through dialog, a trustworthy identity can be renegotiated.

In sum, reviewers invent trustworthy identities for themselves, but whether readers validate and co-construct that identity is another question. In some cases, such as in sageandsavory's (2005) case, reviewer trustworthiness is explicitly questioned. Such renegotiation of reviewers' trustworthiness should play a prominent role in identifying reviewers with influence; these negotiations manifest

themselves in ways other than profile page information and site-granted recognitions.

## CONCLUSION

As a *New York Times* article about the growing importance to businesses of online reviews written by consumers pointed out, “managing your online reputation requires a whole new skill set, including monitoring the online conversation” (Pattison, 2009). Successful monitoring of that online conversation involves understanding the credibility of the reviewers who evaluate products, but as this analysis has shown, credibility is a complex phenomenon that is not quickly assessed and understood. Drawing from linguistic and rhetorical research, particularly studies from a Bakhtinian perspective, I developed a framework for analyzing a discourse participant’s credibility. Breaking down credibility in terms of four components (Table 2) clarifies a reviewer’s potential to influence Web site users. Using Epinions reviews and comments associated with them as evidence, I have argued that credibility’s components, expertise, and trustworthiness, both invented and situated, are intertwined and that one component can affect another, particularly over time. Site users’ perceptions of reviewer credibility will shift as they encounter interactions among reviewers and the readers of their reviews, just as users’ perceptions of dkozin could change upon encountering sageandsavory’s (2005) critique.

This analysis makes clear that going beyond obvious markers of credibility, such as the recognitions that Howard\_Creech and other reviewers who have established good reputations have garnered, is critical. Reviewers with no recognitions or other signs of situated trustworthiness and expertise may nevertheless work to invent credible identities. For example, by pointing out that they have relevant experience or by discussing their training or education relevant to products, reviewers assert expertise that readers can, in turn, ratify. This study, then, shows that analyzing credibility’s co-construction in reviews and the comments that they generate will provide a more detailed, richer understanding of which individual reviewers have influence.

Indeed, some research, particularly business and marketing research, reveals that perceptions of credibility are malleable and that those with greater credibility are more able to influence others (Chen, Wu, & Yoon, 2004). Such influence is apparent in this response from llopez (2006), who responded to a review by Howard\_Creech:

I’m looking to buy my son another Elph to replace his A20 which I bought on your recommendation and was considering the 630 . . . SOLD!!!! (para. 1)

TABLE 2  
Summary of Strategies for Constructing Credibility

<i>Credibility Component</i>	<i>Strategy</i>
Situated expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biographies (in Epinions.com, found on a reviewer's profile page)</li> <li>• Recognitions (in Epinions.com, found on a reviewer's profile page and attached to a reviewer's username)</li> </ul>
Situated trustworthiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Length of time as a site member (in Epinions.com, found on a reviewer's profile page)</li> <li>• Review quantity (in Epinions.com, a complete list of a reviewer's reviews found on profile page)</li> <li>• Review quality (in Epinions.com, measured by review ratings from review readers)</li> <li>• Quantity of users (e.g., Epinions members) who confirm trust in a reviewer (in Epinions.com, quantity of members who include a reviewer in that member's Web of Trust)</li> <li>• Recognitions (in Epinions, found on a reviewer's profile page and attached to a reviewer's username)</li> </ul>
Invented expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assertions of expertise (e.g., testing the product)</li> <li>• Certainty in assertions</li> <li>• Technical vocabulary</li> </ul>
Invented Trustworthiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assertions of limits on own qualifications</li> <li>• Detail in describing the reviewed product</li> <li>• Detail in providing reasons for the evaluation/recommendation</li> <li>• Length of the review</li> <li>• Style of the review (e.g., correctness in spelling, capitalization, grammar)</li> <li>• Usability of the review (e.g., use of headings, bold type)</li> </ul>

Lllopez's comment demonstrates the important role that credible reviewers can have on users' decision making and corroborates the need for careful attention to credible reviewers.

Further research examining the effect of credibility on influence over readers' decision making (see Chatterjee, 2001) or (at least) the extent to which readers attend to a product (see Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007) could isolate credibility's components to determine their relative importance, particularly in relation to online contexts. Wilson and Sherrell (1993) found that expertise has a greater effect than trustworthiness, but they acknowledged that the finding might stem from the fact that people find it easier to assess expertise (e.g., years of experience in using the product under review) versus trustworthiness. Continued work on reviewer credibility might offer important insights for those whose businesses can prosper or falter from the influence of credible reviewers' product evaluations.

The four-part system presented here facilitates analysis of the process through which people determine the extent to which they will take another person's opinion seriously. Such analysis is particularly important in relation to texts with tech-

nical content, like reviews of digital cameras, because the purchasing risk (e.g., price, set-up time) can be substantial. Product reviewers in part construct their own credibility, but dialog with review readers shapes the identity that site users will assess as they make purchasing decisions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Reviewer 1, Reviewer 2, and Editor-in-Chief Amy Koerber for their excellent feedback. Thanks also to my Auburn University colleagues who read an early draft of this paper.

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