

READER PERCEPTION OF THE USEFULNESS AND CREDIBILITY OF
JOURNALISTIC AUTOMOTIVE REVIEWS

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University of Missouri

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Master of Arts

by
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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

READER PERCEPTION OF THE USEFULNESS AND CREDIBILITY
OF JOURNALISTIC AUTOMOTIVE REVIEWS

presented by Chris DeRosier

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine the usefulness of journalistic automotive reviews from the perspective of readers making purchase decisions. Additionally, this study also looked at the perceived credibility of the sources of those reviews. Intercept interviews were conducted at a new-car dealership in a Midwestern city to determine what sources of information buyers consulted in their decision-making processes. When it was found that journalistic automotive reviews played a role, additional questions were asked about the usefulness of the reviews and how credible users felt they were. Data was then transcribed, coded and grouped into themes.

The results showed the majority of car buyers do not use journalistic automotive reviews or automotive journalism of any kind. This was in large part because outside factors such as money concerns, relationships with brands and people, enticements and personal circumstances limited purchase and information consideration sets. Those who did use automotive reviews believed them to be mostly credible, but they expressed skepticism depending on the presence or absence of the reviewer's stated professional background and of detailed information sensitive to the needs of the audience.

Introduction

Approximately 14.5 million new cars rolled off of dealership lots in 2012 in the hands of new owners, (Henry, 2012) and each of those cars is likely to represent one of the biggest monetary investments of its owner's life. A September 2012 report in the *Wall Street Journal* found the average amount paid for a new car was a little more than \$30,000 (Passy, 2012), or about 60 percent of the median income in America of just more than \$50,000 (Luhby, 2012). With so much money tied up in a single purchase, the research process can become very deliberate in the hope of making the "right" decision, but professional journalistic materials often get left out. A 2012 Maritz Research study found that, among Americans' 10 most influential sources for information in car shopping, automotive magazine reviews and third-party auto websites finished sixth and fifth among users, respectively. Ahead of them on the list, starting with first place, were dealership salespeople, word of mouth, consumer guides such as *Consumer Reports* and the car dealers' and manufacturers' own websites. (Travell, 2012) "People buy from people," Maritz writer Chris Travell says in his report, but the survey's own description says it's about sources of information. What about car buyers' info-gathering processes leads them to choose the messages of professional automotive reviewers so little, if they do at all?

Automotive journalists in print, broadcast and online media produce numerous different kinds of content that can be used to evaluate cars and make comparisons between them. This can include everything from vehicles' specifications and available

options to user-generated online reviews to journalistic reviews. However, manufacturer and dealer advertisements—from the same manufacturers and dealers that are often providing the cars for review—frequently appear in the same publication as the reviews.

Journalistic auto reviews have often made for uncomfortable relationship between publications and their advertisers. For example, in 2003 then-General Motors Vice Chairman Bob Lutz threatened to pull ads from magazines and newspapers that wrote negative reviews of GM cars. (Winter, 2003) These same manufacturers and dealerships are the ones who also provide access to the vehicles for review purposes—access that could also, at least in theory, be restricted just as with advertising. If the automakers and dealerships can hold both access and a revenue stream over reviewers’ heads, how much can car shoppers have faith in the veracity of the “help” reviewers are giving them? How much does the perception of that veracity affect readers’ reliance on reviews relative to other information source?

This qualitative study looks at both of these issues from the perspective of the consumer of journalism, i.e. the readers of journalistic automotive reviews. By interviewing consumers at the point of purchase—auto dealerships—it will provide a rich description of how car shoppers use the variety of sources at their disposal and why they chose those sources. For those who do turn to professional auto reviews, it will also show how much faith shoppers have in what is put on the page about the cars they’re looking at. In the process, this study intends to answer two specific research questions:

***RQ1:** What factors lead new-car buyers to choose certain sources of automotive information over others?*

***RQ2:** When journalistic automotive reviews are included as an information source, how valuable and credible do buyers consider those reviews to be?*

Because shopping for a car is influenced by factors such as a person's decision making and level of involvement with the product (cars, in this case), it's important to take a closer look at these elements before proceeding. A look at how the credibility of a message source is determined is worthwhile, as well.

Literature Review

The Decision-Making Process

Shopping for a new car is a decision-making process subject to many different influences. The process itself, though, is worth examining on its own before looking at influences in greater detail. Studying decision making as a process, rather than as predictable outcomes based on input information, began with the work of Herbert A. Simon. (1955) In breaking down the prevailing theory about choice at the time, Simon suggested that such an approach—in which people sought to maximize the utility of their choices by predicting what the outcomes would be—was more than the human mind could handle. Instead, Simon said people seek to streamline the information-gathering process, simplify outcomes into “pay-offs,” (p. 104) and cycle through them in an adjustable order until a choice is settled upon. (Simon) When external pressures such as time play a role in decision making, people often reduce the process down further to deliberate step-by-step procedures known as heuristics. (Payne et al 1988, p. 535) However, pressure can confound the process depending on how it’s handled. For example, anxiety can negatively impact the decision-making process by altering how the person perceives risk and the potential for negative consequences. (Butler and Mathews 1987)

Later studies found decision making is also influenced by affect or emotions. (Goossens 2000) Affects fall into one of two general categories: integral ones which tie in with the cognitive activity and incidental affects which are unrelated to the cognitive function at hand. (Blanchette and Richards, 561)

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The idea that car buyers consult different information sources while shopping, and evaluate them based on utility and/or credibility, aligns closely with Uses and Gratifications Theory. The theory states that media users choose what they read, watch or listen to based on how it satisfies users' needs. It also says that "audiences are active and attentive when media content serves some function they believe to be valuable."

(DeSanto, 880) Early research by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) found five basic assumptions within the theory:

1. The audience is an active part of media, not a passive consumer.
2. Each individual decides which media he or she selects to bring into his or her life.
3. Gratification comes in many forms, and media must compete with those other forms to hold a user's attention.
4. People are aware of what media they choose and why they choose it. It is a conscious decision.
5. The reasons behind users' media choices can be found in what values they find in those media and their content.

Palmgreen (1984) later expanded the theory by incorporating the beliefs and evaluations of users to develop what he referred to as expectancy-value theory. In it Palmgreen said a media user's beliefs influenced what he or she would get from the medium's use, and evaluations would determine if he or she got what was wanted from that use. (p. 36)

Finding out why car buyers chose (or didn't choose) to use a particular source of information while shopping is the central concern of this study. Because of that,

questions about choice and value—key tenets in Uses and Gratifications Theory—will be included among those asked to participants.

Product Involvement

Another element that can be part of the decision-making process, particularly involving items such as cars, is the individual's personal interest in the type of product under consideration. According to Bloch, Commuri and Arnold (2009), cars are among the products that can be subject to enduring involvement, which is “a long run, general concern with the product class, rather than a situational involvement, the temporary state of involvement that often accompanies risky purchases.” (p. 50)

Both situational and enduring involvement have been found to have an impact on purchase decisions, often making the purchaser more hands-on during the purchase process. (Richins, Bloch and McQuarrie, 1992) Studies have also shown that, while enduring involvement tends to remain stable over time, situational involvement in car purchase situations tends to decrease after a purchase is made. (Richins and Bloch 1986) In other words, people who aren't usually interested in cars will cease the activities associated with the purchase and decision-making process—including, one could deduce, the reading of journalistic automotive reviews—while those interested in cars will maintain some involvement activities even without a purchase. Questions about how often the participants read reviews aside from active car shopping will attempt to account for this potential difference in involvement and its possible effects.

Car Reviews

Article types in the field of automotive journalism can range from hard news to travel stories, but the story type with the most reader service is the car review. A car review is a form of consumer-oriented product review evaluating a car for utility as well as enjoyment of use. As with other forms of product review, car reviews mix information with persuasion, detailing each car's positive and negative characteristics in the hope of steering the reader toward an informed decision to purchase or not purchase.

Reviews of cars are one of the longest-running features in automotive journalism. The publication credited with being the world's oldest car magazine, the British monthly *Autocar*, also credits itself with pioneering the journalistic auto review. The first such review came in 1928 when the magazine tested the Austin Seven Gordon England Sunshine Saloon, an upscale version of a British sportscar with a customized body by coachbuilder Gordon England. "The 'Gordon England' sunshine saloon derivative of the Austin Seven is not, in fact, a true Austin in the sense that it represents the car at its best value for the money expected," the review summarized. "The extra accessories and more elaborate body cost more, and it is just a question whether the extra cost is worth it." (*Autocar*, 2008)

Car reviews debuted in America in *Mechanix Illustrated*, a home hobby and engineering magazine similar to *Popular Mechanics*, in 1946. Those first reviews, written by Tom McCahill, introduced instrumented testing with the author's invention of the 0-60 mile-per-hour acceleration test. (McCahill, 1956) When car enthusiast magazines took hold in the United States in the late '40s and '50s, reviews—which the magazines called "road tests"—were part of their repertoire, instrumented testing and all.

Reviews became common in many city newspapers, too. However, by the early '90s papers such as the *Raleigh News and Observer* and the *Birmingham News* had reorganized their automotive sections to answer to their advertising departments, and editorial coverage was openly geared toward offending car dealers as little as possible. (Singer, 1991) The problem became even worse in the late '90s when classified advertising, so long a staple of newspaper income, moved online and papers had to scramble to recover the difference. Papers such as the Lexington (Ky.) *Herald-Leader* converted sections such as real estate into all-advertorial content, meaning the stories were selected and paid for by advertisers. Other papers took a similar tactic with their automotive sections. (P. Luecke, personal communication, November 19, 2013)

Today, although the kinds of information given in car reviews tend to follow patterns dating back more than a half century, ethical standards of reviews vary greatly. At one end of the spectrum, publications such as *Autocar*, *Consumer Reports* and Edmunds post detailed explanations of their review and testing procedures on their websites. *The New York Times* practices its own form of transparency, with a section devoted to automobiles in its ethics handbook requiring its car reviewers to pay market rent value for the car reviewed and to return it promptly at the review's completion. (*The New York Times*, 2004) At the other end of the spectrum, Motor Matters, a company that sells its car reviews to city newspapers and websites across the country, describes its reviews as "high-quality editorial content to drive your advertorial sales." (2013)

Source Credibility

The most significant determinant in the utility of any product review is the credibility of its source. According to Erdogan, “a credible source... can influence beliefs, opinions, attitudes and/or behavior through a process called internalisation, which occurs when receivers accept a source influence in terms of their personal attitude and value structures.” (p. 297) Research shows a more credible source has greater effect in persuading a message recipient than a less credible source. (Sternthal, Phillips and Dholakia 1978) Additionally, highly credible sources tend to produce more positive attitude changes in message recipients than their less credible equivalents. (Craig and McCann 1978)

However, there are exceptions to the correlation between credibility and attitude change. The exceptions found involved the cognitive response theory (Karlins and Abelson 1970), which says that the initial position of the message recipient—positive or negative—affects how he or she receives persuasive messages. Harmon and Coney (1982) and Sternthal et al. (1978) found that a message recipient with a preliminary positive attitude toward the message topic will favor the message source who matches their attitude, regardless of high or low credibility. Meanwhile, a recipient with a preliminary negative attitude toward the topic will favor the more credible source, letting the source’s own position take the place of the recipient having to think independently.

In examining the ties between source credibility and product reviews, the most research exists in the field of movie reviews. Wyatt and Badger (1987) asked subjects to rate negative, positive and mixed reviews of a movie and give their interest in seeing the reviewed film. The results found a review’s positive or negative “take” had significant

effects on readers' level of interest in the film, but not on the credibility of the reviewers. (p. 23) The same researchers also conducted another study that included research on the effect of a review's direction, positive or negative, on how audience members perceived the movie's quality after watching. Results showed a significant correlation between how a reviewer evaluated a movie and how the reviewer's readers saw it. (Wyatt and Badger 1984, p. 876.)

Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) broke source credibility down into two major components, namely trustworthiness and expertise. (p. 22)

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness "refers to the consumer's confidence in the source for providing information in an objective and honest manner." (Ohanian 1991, p. 47) A high level of trustworthiness results in greater receptiveness to the source's message, but Smith (1973) found the effect trustworthiness might be most noticeable when it's in negative form: "The untrustworthy speaker, irrespective of his other qualities, is viewed as a questionable message source." (p. 309) As with the studies on credibility of which it is a part, research on trustworthiness has most often looked at how it is perceived in celebrity endorsers. Friedman (1979) sampled students to rate which characteristics in an endorser most correlated to trust. From among six tested attributes, Friedman found trustworthiness corresponded most strongly to likeableness and to similarity. (p. 293) Friedman and Friedman (1976) also found a strong correlation between likeableness and trust with regard to political figures.

Expertise. The other component of credibility that applies to product reviews is the perceived expertise of the source. The study of source expertise originated in the work of Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) defined expertise as “the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions.” (p. 21) The perception of a source’s expertise can come from the knowledge of, or experience with, a particular message topic or from a specific skillset the source possesses. (Erdogan, p. 298) In the field of automotive review, it’s most likely that a message recipient would perceive a reviewer’s expertise based mostly in experience and skillset, as knowledge-based expertise is best equated to academic learning. For example, a medical doctor specializing in cardiology would be perceived as having greater expertise than the average person when it comes to messages having to do with cardiology. (Ohanian 1990)

There are three reasons why, given the available research, this study is important. First, much of the research regarding product reviews has concentrated on user-generated content, i.e. online consumer reviews. These reviews are usually written by owners of the product under review rather than by journalists who review that particular type of product professionally. As a result, the online reviewer often lacks experience with similar new products made by competitors, which could be a valuable reference point when making assertions about characteristics such as product quality. Additionally, as is the case with automotive reviewers, the professional has access to instrumentation that can help to better articulate and quantify differences between one product and another, similar one made by a competitor. Finally, whereas the online consumer reviewer frequently does not, and is not required to, provide proof of ownership of the product being reviewed, the professional reviewer documents the use of the reviewed product photographically and in

writing to verify the use of it. This study intends to focus on professional reviewers of automobiles, filling a hole in the research currently available.

Second, the existing research examining source credibility focuses predominantly on how it pertains to political and commercial advertising messages. In particular, a lot of research exists looking at product endorsement, whether by consumers or, later, by celebrities. Hovland et al's original components of source credibility—trustworthiness and expertise—would apply to reviewers as message sources just as much as endorsers. The only difference would be that reviewers are equally capable of communicating a dissuading message (i.e. a negative review) as they are of a persuading message (or positive review). Among the research found, the closest equivalent to product review credibility was that of movie reviews, which is not comparable in terms of money spent. The difference in the amount invested by a buyer, and the anxiety that comes with it, could influence the decision-making process and how reviews of cars are perceived, both in value and in credibility.

Finally, while a considerable amount of research exists regarding source credibility and the effects of product reviews, all of the material found is quantitative in nature. While a qualitative approach allows researchers the opportunity to learn some information from a large number of respondents, the richness of detail associated with qualitative methods could provide significant additional information regarding who review readers and product buyers see as more credible and why. Given the size of investment one makes in buying a car, rich detail would seem to be desired as a complement to what quantitative data is available to give a more complete picture of what prospective buyers want from their product reviews.

Methods

Sampling

The most important goal in collecting a sample of participants was to get a group that has made recent vehicle purchases. With that in mind, participants were recruited directly at the source of new-car purchases: the auto dealership. New-car dealerships in a Midwestern city were solicited and given an explanatory consent form (See Appendix 2) about granting access to their in-store customers in exchange for a consulting report based on the research results. Of the 14 dealerships asked about participating, one agreed to allow interviews with buyers on its premises. The participating dealership sold new and pre-owned vehicles from a foreign manufacturer that makes compact cars, sedans and sport utility vehicles. New cars sold ranged in price from approximately \$14,000 to \$35,000.

For 10 weeks, the researcher spent Saturday mornings and afternoons as well as select weekday evenings at the dealership interviewing buyers about what information sources they consulted in their decision-making process, why they consulted those sources and what they thought about the information they received. In all, 16 interviews were conducted in an attempt to get enough rich description regarding both information source choices and source credibility from which to spot emergent patterns.

Intercept Interviews

In order to get rich detail in such a spontaneous circumstance as meeting people in auto dealerships, a form of intercept interview was conducted with each participating car buyer. Intercept interviews, sometimes called “exit interviews,” are a form of data collection originating in marketing research. In them the interviewer “intercepts” subjects in a public environment to ask questions as opposed to prearranging time, location and permission for the interview. Intercept interviews tend to be used as a form of quantitative analysis, but for this study a collection of questions was prepared (See Appendix 1) with eight primary questions and five probe questions to give the interviews a qualitative, description-rich focus.

Interview participants were people in the process of shopping for a new vehicle or who had just completed a purchase. The interviews were audio recorded, after which the audio recordings were stored on a password protected laptop computer for review and final data analysis. Participants were asked to read a consent form (See Appendix 3) before the interview began which explained to them the purpose of the study, why they were asked to participate, what would be done with the answers to their questions and what precautions would be taken to minimize risks to the subjects. The consent form included contact information for the researcher as well as the university IRB office. Each participant was given the option to keep the consent form, if desired, after the interview.

Data Analysis

To find out what impact journalistic automotive reviews have on purchase decision-making, the audio recording of each intercept interview was transcribed and

coded. The coding process initially used open coding, which codes on a word-by-word, line-by-line basis with no predetermined outcome looked for. (Benaquisto, 2008) The researcher then looked for evidence of decision-making process such as “pay-offs” and heuristics; of situational and/or enduring involvement; and of components of source credibility such as trustworthiness and expertise. Source credibility components were coded according to evidence of the participant’s positive or negative attitude toward the component when mentioned. Finally, content analysis was performed on the transcripts to find emerging themes and patterns regarding what sources participants consulted while shopping, why they chose those sources and how they regarded the information they received from them.

Results

Manifested Decision-Making Factors

Sixteen participants were interviewed at the dealership, all of which considered between one and six makes and models of cars in their shopping processes. Interviews with the participants revealed five categories of factors influencing the decision-making process, with each buyer exhibiting all of the categories or many of them in different combinations. Some buyers were influenced by *money concerns* such as credit history, available financing options and the affordability of the car they were buying. Others were driven to the showroom by different forms of *enticements* including advertising in newspapers, on TV and on the radio; the potential value of their trade-in and the assurance (via advertising of special promotions) that no trade-in would be turned away; the positive experience of a test drive; and the length of the manufacturer's warranty.

Several customers revealed they had *prior relationships* informing their thought process, including with the brand, the dealership, an individual salesperson or a trusted word-of-mouth information source. Many referred to *life circumstances* such as the need to escape their current vehicle, which was falling apart, or needs related to work or hobbies meaning the winning choice "fit their lifestyle." Finally, *vehicle characteristics* including comfort, safety, interior dimensions, reliability, performance and appearance were almost universally discussed as important factors for shoppers.

For many buyers, the four factors separate from the physical vehicle—money concerns, enticements, prior relationships and life circumstances—superseded factors tied to the vehicle itself when it came to deciding which car to purchase.

[The dealership] ended up getting me approved. I got denied by a lot of people, but they got me approved by three different banks, so they got me into a, and I wanted a Toyota, they got me into a 2009 Toyota Camry, so I'm very, very happy. it's a lot cheaper, 'cause now I can go back to regular insurance, don't have to pay mileage, my car now is just \$420 a month, so it's going to save me four or five hundred. (Participant 5)

Although all research participants exhibited some combination of the five characteristics, only two—Participants 10 and 14—showed evidence of all five characteristics in their coded interviews. The most common were prior relationships and personal circumstances (13 appearances each), followed by vehicle characteristics (12), money concerns (11) and enticements (9).

Journalistic Review Value

Of the 16 research participants, four of them—Participants 6, 7, 9 and 13—said they used some form of journalistic automotive reviews in the information gathering process. All of them expressed finding value in the reviews, though the specific site characteristics providing that value varied. The use of high-quality original (as opposed to stock) photos and the presence of similar vehicles for comparison were the most repeated positive features of reviews. Use of multimedia for video walk-throughs of the cars being reviewed was also singled out.

While those features connected with the review users in this research, two characteristics in particular were singled out for lack of value. First, instrumented performance measurements such as acceleration from 0 to 60 miles per hour, slalom time, braking distances, et cetera failed to resonate with shoppers interviewed.

Even the *Motor Trend* people, you know, get a car and they'll get it and put it through the driver's tests and whatever, they'll spit out a review, that's not... that doesn't apply so much to me because, yeah, those are great, but that doesn't really relate to my personal life, how I was gonna actually use it. (Participant 13)

The second value-lacking characteristic applied not to journalistic reviews so much as journalistic automotive websites taken on the whole: poor website functionality. A site layout considered poor or disorganized by the user resulted in less perceived value from the information and reviews provided.

I used [TrueCar.com] for the reviews as well as the trim package level details, because it's really difficult... they don't really provide an easy way of saying, "Here's our trim levels and this is what you get with this." (Participant 9)

It should be noted that, although the four vehicle-unrelated considerations factored into purchase decisions for review users just as they did for non-users, they did not supersede the weighing of different vehicles' characteristics for the former. Journalistic review users tended to let the cars be judged more on their own merits rather than on credit scores, advertising or salespeople they knew.

Review and Source Credibility

Surprisingly, all four of the participants who used journalistic automotive reviews in decision making actively weighed the credibility of the review sources while using them. The four review users expressed doubts about the credibility of the field of journalistic automotive reviews, and some singled out specific review sources as problematic. However, all of the users were able to find at least one journalistic source they found satisfactory in terms of both trustworthiness and expertise.

Among the four review users, the site most consistently held up as credible was KBB.com, the site for Kelley Blue Book.

So now the things that I get from Kelley's Blue Book [sic] and all that talk about the safety ratings and the crash test ratings, I do look at that now. I didn't used to. And, um, those sites are usually very good at putting in those ratings. They'll actually talk about it a little bit. (Participant 6)

The site considered the least credible for journalistic automotive reviews was the video hosting site YouTube. Users went there for video reviews by long-running publications and TV programs as well as by individual reviewers claiming to be journalists but with no clearly stated affiliation with a publication or program.

Positive Credibility Influences. The four users of journalistic reviews seemed to find a small number of positive indicators of trustworthiness but many for expertise. In fact, positive influences on trustworthiness amounted to just two. The first was the age of the publication providing the review; the more "established" the brand, the more users seemed to have faith in what its reviews would say.

Like, *MotorWeek*, you know, Kelley's Blue Book [sic], Edmunds, they've just been around long enough that I think you can actually go there and... like *Consumer Reports*. You go there and you kind of know that they're going to be kind of unbiased. (Participant 6)

The other important contributor to a positive sense of trustworthiness was the availability of the reviewer's professional background and biographical information.

Usually, if you read an article like a *MotorWeek* or something like that, at the bottom it'll talk about the person who wrote the article (. . .) Where they're at, who they are, how many years, or what kind of expertise this person actually has to be writing the article to begin with. (Participant 6)

The presence of these professional "credentials" was also one of several contributors toward a positive feeling about a review source's expertise. Other positive influences on expertise included a high level of descriptive detail in reviews; the availability of information on the same page regarding nearby dealers; use of the publication's own photos of a car rather than stock manufacturer images; review content acknowledging widely varying reader characteristics such as height, weight and income; and providing a high amount of the information the particular user found most desirable.

Negative Credibility Influences. Whereas a reviewer's available and familiar background served as a positive influence on the trustworthiness of the source, the lack of such background information had a negative influence. However, the single most expressed problems hurting trust with a reviewer were the suspicion of possible personal bias or even of a bought opinion through partnerships with manufacturers. The closest

any user of journalistic reviews could come to evidence of such partnerships, though, was the too-frequent use of the same cars in the “compared to” sections.

When it came to seeing select vehicles, they already had specific vehicles that they would compare those vehicles to, as if they already knew that these were the vehicles that other people were comparing. (. . .) So it didn’t really give you a good, wide, you know, view of comparison against other ones in the review in itself. It made me feel like they knew what they were talking about, but it made me also feel like maybe there was some, there was some bias there already.

(Participant 9)

Related to the negative “bought opinion” influence was the awareness that auto manufacturers most often provided reviewers with the top-of-the-line model to drive and review. Not only did users connect this with seeking—and, in their minds, possibly receiving—more favor from reviewers, but users identified less with the cars reviewed because they didn’t represent versions of the cars users could afford to buy. Lastly, some users admitted to having their own inherent skepticism toward journalistic car reviews, leading them to take anything said “with a grain of salt.” This sentiment wasn’t exclusive to users of journalistic reviews; in fact, two research participants who didn’t use journalistic reviews—Participants 11 and 14—expressed similar preconceptions, and one even used them as a reason not to read reviews.

Well, you know we all brag up our product, right? (. . .) I mean, I’m in the long-term care business and I brag up my product, so we all think our product is the best. (Participant 11)

Similar to negative influences on trustworthiness, blows to the perceived expertise of a journalistic review source were sometimes the opposite outcomes of positive influences. These included a low or limited amount of detail on the vehicle reviewed, missing information that was strongly desired by the reader or information that was difficult to find. Additionally, a feeling of disconnect with information provided—receiving information not desired or asked for—also resulted in more negative views of the expertise of a review source.

Discussion

Looking at the interviews from all 16 participants, some interesting patterns and tendencies emerge. Participants who didn't use automotive journalism when gathering information generally considered fewer makes and models of cars. They also put more trust in car manufacturers, dealerships and salespeople as information sources. Many of them also showed greater responsiveness to advertising and special promotions. Finally, participants who didn't use automotive journalism were found to be more likely to buy pre-owned vehicles than new ones.

Meanwhile, participants who did use automotive journalism considered more makes and models of cars and consulted more than one source of automotive journalism while shopping. They expressed less trust of manufacturers, dealerships and salespeople as information sources, but still considered a good rapport with a salesperson to be among the most important factors in making a purchase choice. They took longer for information gathering and making a purchase decision. Finally, users of automotive journalism tended to be more likely to buy new cars when they came to a dealership to purchase.

Users of automotive journalism mentioned two kinds of information they looked for most when gathering information on vehicles they considered for purchase. The first was vehicle characteristics such as features and equipment, interior dimensions, safety ratings and impressions of its comfort. The second was information about the car's long-term reliability and livability, which users seemed to associate with professional

automotive journalism although, based on the participants' interviews, it actually came from user reviews of the cars.

This interest in long-term information points back to what was possibly the biggest problem users had with traditional, impressionistic automotive reviews: The reviews represent only a moment in the life of a car, so any impressions can only speak for that moment in time.

“It doesn't give me the longevity, it doesn't give me the longer period and just, like, an extended look, you know? (. . .) ‘Cause a lot of those reviewers what they do is they get the car, they take it out on a track, really, and put it through a road test, and then write it after that, and then they're off to the next car.” (Participant 13)

Information Sourcing

The first research question looks at the complete landscape of automotive information and its sources to find reasons for buyers' preferences among them. As mentioned earlier, four of the five decision-making factors influencing buying decisions came into play before buyers got the chance to weigh characteristics of cars in their consideration set. Since that fifth consideration—vehicle characteristics—would be where automotive journalism would most inform the decision-making process, it can be said the four non-vehicle considerations affected not only purchase choices but information source choices.

These non-vehicle considerations effectively became heuristics themselves, narrowing the scope of the buyer question “Which car do I most want to buy?” to a

simpler variation filtered through the lens of that factor's consideration. This created a set of analogous heuristics, or heuristics with parts and relationships modeled after the original, larger problem but easier to solve because of size. (Polya, 37) Rather than the original purchase question, four analogous ones (or some combination thereof) took its place:

1. What kind of car can I afford to buy with my budget/credit rating/financing options? (Money Concerns)
2. What kind of car can I buy among the ones I trust, or among the ones brought to me by a person I trust? (Relationships)
3. What kind of car can I buy that will let me capitalize on the opportunity presented by this advertisement/test drive/warranty? (Enticement)
4. What kind of car can I buy that immediately lets me escape the one I own, or that best suits the needs of my work or hobbies? (Circumstances)

Each of these new questions seemed to confine the buyer's search not to publications or even vehicle characteristics, but rather to the boundaries of the dealership lot. In the process, they removed less physically and chronologically immediate sources of information, such as automotive journalism, from consideration.

The other indicator of decision-making process looked for in interviews, "pay-offs" determining value, could be seen with source choices in whether or not the buyer believed it would receive desired information. The "pay-off," then, would come in simple "Won-Lost" form, with "would receive desired information" signifying "Won" and "would not receive desired information," whether in part or in whole, signifying "Lost." Given those parameters, the value in the "pay-off" would depend upon the kind of

information the buyer desired. Since the most common kind of information desired and received by buyers interviewed regarded vehicle characteristics—the same kind of information that could be received from salespeople or dealership websites—the “pay-off” value of automotive journalism, while positive, does not stand out relative to other information sources. The buyers typically “Won” when using automotive journalism, but not any more than they would have by asking a dealership or salesperson for the information they desired.

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and Gratifications Theory manifested itself heavily in the research results. In addition to the five basic assumptions mentioned earlier, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch also outlined five possible uses in their theory: information or education, identifying with the people found in the particular media environment, to be entertained, to inform the user’s social interaction and as everyday stress relief. Three of these uses appeared among the answers given by users of automotive journalism, though not necessarily in regard to journalistic reviews. All four users tried to inform or educate themselves with automotive journalism. One of them, Participant 10, described himself as someone who read reviews all of the time, suggesting someone who read them recreationally in addition to purposefully. Two more interviewees, Participants 7 and 9, used reviews as part of their social interaction, particularly with coworkers. Evidence of identifying with people in the media environment or of stress relief was not found among the participants in this research.

Source Credibility

The second research question looked at value and credibility of journalistic automotive reviews. Looking at those qualities through Uses and Gratifications Theory, it appears buyers used reviews the most not for the reviewer's impression of the vehicle but for vehicle features and comparisons to competitors. Both are pieces of information they can also get from other information sources such as dealership websites or a salesperson. The presence of alternative sources for the same information, especially sources where superseding influences such as prior relationships can factor in, significantly lessen the value of journalistic automotive reviews.

Where reviewer impressions achieved higher value was as affirmation for purchase decisions already made by buyers. Two of the four review users admitted using automotive reviews after the purchase decision rather than during. One of them, Participant 13, used reviews as a way to affirm the quality of the purchased car. "Then while we were doing the paperwork I got on my phone and did some research just to make sure I was getting a good car, you know?" (Participant 13) The other, Participant 14, said he used automotive reviews as a way to see if the price he was paying was consistent with market value.

Only one-fourth of the total number of participants could speak on the issue of source credibility, but what those four participants revealed was nonetheless insightful. Each of the two components of credibility outlined by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953)—trustworthiness and expertise—were found to be present in each interview in both positive and negative associations. Additionally, a pattern emerged in the way the two components were evaluated. Participants tied the trustworthiness of journalistic

reviews to the review source, looking at how long the source has worked in automotive reviews and the presence or lack of the reviewer's biographical synopsis with professional background and experience. Expertise, meanwhile, was tied to the information made available in reviews, specifically how in-depth it was and whether it was presented in a way that showed deference to the audience's varying heights, weights, income levels and personal backgrounds.

Effects of Product Involvement

The level of involvement participants had with cars seemed to affect almost every part of the research. To start, involvement level seemed strongly tied to whether or not participants used automotive journalism in the first place. Five of the 16 participants classified as having enduring involvement with cars; in other words, they paid attention to cars even when not shopping for one. Of those, three participants used automotive journalism in their information gathering process.

Yeah, I'm a car guy. So I study it. You know, I'll look it up and then I'm constantly— He's always calling me. "Did you see, have you seen this car yet?" You know, so, so it's almost a constant, um, investigative, you know. (Participant 10, Male and Female)

The other 11 participants exhibited situational involvement with cars—they paid close attention to them only when looking to buy one—and among them only one person used automotive journalism.

However, when it came to determining the value of journalistic automotive reviews the results were more mixed. On one hand, participants exhibiting enduring

involvement tended to remember qualities about vehicles from the reviews they read and sought to prove or disprove the presence of those qualities in firsthand observations and experiences. On the other hand, enduring involvement among participants also created a variation of the “life circumstances” factor that often superseded the information gathering process: the belief that, because of their background, the participants knew more than a reviewer would. “I’m partially a mechanic, so I know what I’m looking for (. . .) As long as I get to see it in person, drive it and look at it. I look at more things than most people look at.” (Participant 12)

It’s more difficult to draw conclusions regarding the effect of enduring and situational involvement on the perception of source credibility. Of the 16 participants in the study, only one of them, Participant 7, both used journalistic automotive reviews and exhibited situational involvement with cars. None of Participant 7’s responses showed any significant difference in feelings about the trustworthiness or expertise from those of participants with enduring involvement. It’s possible a larger number of review readers with situational involvement would do more to inform this part of the research.

Overall, the study seemed to answer the first research question to the point of saturation but did a less complete job of answering the second question. The five factors influencing automotive purchases, together with the evidence that four of them can affect the buyer before fully sourced information gathering takes place, give insight into the means in which buyers weigh and consider cars for purchase. They also show how much that process can be mostly negated before it even begins, something that was not anticipated at the beginning of this research. However, the question of source credibility

and value still left open the possibility of more and different answers to be found thanks to the relatively low percentage of participants who used journalistic automotive reviews.

Contributions to Literature

The information provided by the 16 participants is mostly consistent with the quantitative information found in the Maritz study mentioned earlier. Salespeople were by far the most relied-upon information source, with word of mouth and dealership and manufacturer websites also frequently mentioned. Although the Maritz research shows few people used advertising as their primary source of information, this study found it to nonetheless have a significant presence with car buyers. Conversely, consumer guides such as *Consumer Reports*, though mentioned as credible sources of information, were not mentioned at all by participants in this study, whereas they were third among sources in the Maritz research.

This research not only reinforces the hierarchy of information sources first laid out in Maritz's quantitative study but provides explanations behind the establishment of that hierarchy and the place of automotive journalism within it. It also looks at automotive journalism and automotive reviews as service-oriented products by asking users about their satisfaction with the kinds of information received and whether some information was left wanting. Finally, this research moves the measures of source credibility—trustworthiness and expertise—from the type of message delivery they were conceived for (spokespeople in advertising) to another type (product reviewers), adding another dimension to the question of how valuable users consider the reviews they read.

Implications

The ways in which the research ties to Uses and Gratifications Theory is established. With the discovery that heuristics plays a significant role in choosing information sources, though, the research also closely aligns with Chaiken's (1980) Heuristic-Systematic Model of Information Processing. Chaiken's model is a variation of Dual-Process Theory in which message recipients evaluate the message's validity either through comprehensive cognitive effort (systematic model) or simplified, rule-based reasoning (heuristic model). Rather than apply to the validity of a message, though, in this case the Heuristic-Systematic Model applies to choices from among a plurality—both with cars considered for purchase and sources of information on them. (Chaiken, 752) With encumbrances such as money issues, past relationships or personal circumstances, buyers made their information and purchase choices using the simplified heuristic model. In the process, they left behind the potentially larger consideration sets and more systematic weighing of options that could have come with an unhindered shopping—and, therefore, information gathering—experience.

The study also points to some interesting implications for journalistic automotive reviews and automotive journalism as a whole. First, given that review users admitted not paying attention to the reviewer's driving impressions, and the fact that users see those impressions as corresponding to an inadequately brief time spent with the car, journalistic reviewers should consider moving away from such at-the-moment, description-based reviews. Users seemed more interested in the differences in features among trim levels and in the room and practicality for people of different sizes and needs. Prioritizing these

elements would make for a far more complicated review method for the journalist but could pay huge dividends in terms of credibility with review users.

Second, because users of automotive journalism seem to pay close attention to the makes and models of cars listed as comparable to the ones they're considering for purchase, including more comparison tests could help both journalist and user alike. For the user of automotive journalism, the comparison tests would give more information on how the compared cars measure up against one another, both positively and negatively, aiding with choices between models. For the journalist, the opportunity to give more detailed information about the compared cars would alleviate the trustworthiness concerns expressed by users who thought the repetitive "compared to" models might be evidence of bought opinions with automotive journalists.

Third, sites with journalistic reviews should include original photography of the cars being reviewed along with the text. Users found considerably less value in the presence of stock or manufacturer- or dealer-supplied pictures. As an additional bonus, original photographs could serve as proof the car was actually present for the reviewer's use, thereby helping source credibility.

Finally, the information sought out by users of automotive journalism, and even specifically of journalistic automotive reviews, suggests reviewers should change their review approach from short-term in nature to long-term. Users repeatedly talked about looking for, and struggling to find, impressions of cars not after a day or two but after several months and up to a year after acquiring it. Indeed, this currently represents a considerable hole in available automotive journalism; although enthusiast magazines keep limited long-term test fleets, the sites consulted overwhelmingly more by users—

Cars.com, Edmunds.com, KBB.com (Kelley Blue Book), AutoTrader.com—have no long-term tests or reviews at all.

With these implications in mind, it seems the ideal review for journalistic publications would be a two-step process following a car over the course of a calendar year. The first step would be a video-based, introductory walkthrough and ride-along when the car joins the publication's fleet. Three different trim levels—base, mid-range and top of the line—would be on hand to illustrate the differences in equipment, appearance and capabilities between them. Interior and exterior measurements would be measured by the reviewer, taking into account his or her own height and weight and how others of different sizes would fit. The easiest way to do this might be to measure the reviewer's "seated height," or the distance from bottom of posterior to top of head, and apply that to the space between seat cushion and ceiling. That way, for example, a five-foot-nine reviewer could apply his or her "seated height" to the driver's seat space to show how many inches of headroom would be left for someone taller.

The second phase would take a representative model of the car—one with the most commonly purchased trim level and features—and update readers on its use at 30-day intervals over the next year. Each of these would be structured similar to long-term tests in enthusiast magazines, beginning with how the car was used since the last review and what strengths and weaknesses arose. Each talking point in the review, whether a positive or negative, would be accompanied by original photos or video illustrating it. The update reviews should also include cost-related information broken down according to fuel use and repair and maintenance, as well as an assessment of the car's current resale and trade-in values based on mileage and wear. Finally, links to reviews of

comparative cars written at the same interval point would be linked at the bottom for reader reference. For example, a 90-day review of a Honda Accord might conclude with links to 90-day reviews of a Toyota Camry, Chevrolet Malibu and Ford Fusion. Both review phases would lead with a photograph and one-paragraph biography of the reviewer, together with hyperlinks to his or her review archive and to a comprehensive review ethics policy, both found on the publication's website. If inclusion of instrumented tests is strongly desired by the publication, those tests should be conducted during both review phases to show changes in the car's characteristics over time.

It's worth noting that, as publications embrace mobile platforms such as smartphones and tablets as well as the use of social media, the need for 30-day review intervals would become all but erased. Reviewers could update on a daily basis via Twitter if desired, complete with links to first-person video accounts and photo galleries. These updates could also be sorted by highly specific hashtags (for example, "#Autocar2014SubaruLegacy") to provide a one-stop archive for potential buyers to read through from their phones and other devices. It would also give publications and reviewers to ask readers and followers if they experienced similar problems at similar ownership intervals, thereby combining professional reviews with user reviews in real time.

Conclusion

The five influencing factors manifested in this study add to the available research by providing the reasons car buyers give for choosing information sources as well as how those choices are often superseded. It demonstrates how four of the five influencing factors can, in fact, become heuristics for buyers that also subsequently confine information sourcing to the physical boundaries of the dealership. Finally, the research looked at the issue of how readers of journalistic automotive reviews perceive the credibility of the reviewers, something initially thought could be holding back automotive journalism as an information source choice. The results found those perceptions to be closely tied to the reviewers' holding of, and transparency with, their professional background; and to thorough, detailed presentation of information in the reviews themselves.

It bears noting that there were several limitations encountered while conducting this research. First, the majority of automotive dealerships approached for permission to speak to customers denied access. Some of those approached said they declined because of problems in past dealings with university students; others simply expressed apprehension at letting someone outside their sales staff speak with customers for any reason. Of the 14 dealerships approached about participating in research, all but one refused.

The one dealership that did agree to allow access to customers for intercept interviews did so with two ground rules. First, the researcher could not enter the

dealership without calling management for permission ahead of time. This became a problem on days when the dealership was busy enough that the sales manager could not return phone calls until the end of the workday. Second, customers could only be approached for interviews after the sale was complete. Because of the workflow of the car buying process, where customers move into and out of offices several times to discuss financing and more, it often was left to the sales staff to point out when a sale was complete or even to introduce customers to the researcher. This introduced another set of limitations that further limited the number of participating customers.

Although the dealership's sales staff was very patient and cooperative overall, not all of the salespeople chose to facilitate interviews with customers. Additionally, those salespeople who did facilitate interviews seemed to pre-select customers for interviews based on whether or not the salesperson thought the customer would be "good to talk to" rather than provide access to all customers equally.

Finally, time became a limitation with regard to finding users of journalistic reviews to determine attitudes toward, and indicators of, source credibility. Because of the limitations already mentioned, and because about one out of every four research participants used journalistic reviews, it was not possible to reach saturation level with the responses regarding source credibility.

Future research could extend the research timeframe to allow for more interviews with participants about their perceptions of source credibility in journalistic automotive reviews. Another possible approach would be to compare the perceptions of source credibility between paid spokespeople in automotive advertising and professional car reviewers. Finally, one idea was suggested by one of the salespeople at the dealership

participating in this research. The salesperson suggested conducting the same research at a dealership specializing in an upscale brand, because, in his estimation, people spending more money on a car would consider it more of an investment and study their choices more carefully.

This study provides a starting point for understanding why automotive journalism, and journalistic reviews of cars in particular, holds the place it does among information sources with car buyers. It not only shows how competitive automotive journalism is in the marketplace of information, but it also gives insight into how credible users see that field's most service-oriented product—the journalistic car review—in terms of trustworthiness of the source and expertise of what that source has to say. Finally, this research points out the information provided in automotive journalism that readers find most useful when making decisions about which car to buy. All of these results can lead to decisions for content providers that ultimately make automotive journalism more relevant and valuable to people spending tens of thousands of dollars on the products it does or does not recommend.

Endnotes

¹The researcher conducted this study with the awareness of his extensive personal background as an automotive enthusiast. He has been a recreational consumer of car-related journalism and reviews, either in print or online, for more than 25 years. The researcher would be classified in this study as someone exhibiting enduring involvement with cars, but who did not harbor strong positive or negative feelings regarding reviewers' source credibility before, during or after the research. He acknowledges the possible effect that personal background may have on the design or process of this research, as well as on its results and interpretations.

Appendix 1 – Interview Questions:

- How many makes and models of cars did you seriously look at before deciding on the one you bought?
- Have you bought this make of car before?
 - **Probe:** How many times?
- What drew you to the cars you were considering?
- When did you know you were going to buy the car you ultimately did?
- Who and what did you consult for information on the cars you were looking at possibly buying?
 - **Probe:** Why did you choose those sources?
- Why did you/did you not consider reading reviews of cars written by automotive websites?
- (If they did consult automotive websites) Which sites did you read?
 - **Probe:** What did you find in reviews on those sites that was helpful to your decision making?
 - **Probe:** What did you not find on those sites that you would have found helpful?
- For your next car shopping experience, or if you had this one to do over again, would you go to the same sources of information that you did this time?
 - **Probe:** Why or why not?

Appendix 2 - Dealership Consent Form

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Chris DeRosier and I am a graduate student with the University of Missouri School of Journalism. I'm currently working on a research project titled Reader Perception of the Usefulness and Credibility of Journalistic Automotive Reviews, looking at what sources of information influence the car buying process and how automotive journalism might play a role. The research goes directly to the buyers themselves to ask them what they've read, seen or heard and whom they've spoken to while deciding what their next car would be.

I'd like to ask for your assistance in completing this work through access to customers at your dealership. Interviews with prospective buyers should take no more than 15 minutes, would be confidential and would only take place with the shopper's explicit permission. Research would be conducted during business hours in the summer and, if necessary, the early fall. Additionally, in exchange for your dealership's help I'm willing to share the findings of the finished research paper, which should be valuable information on the habits of local car buyers that would cost a lot of money if done by professional marketing researchers. If you have any questions about this research project or its procedures, or wish to cease your dealership's cooperation in the research, you can contact me at (417) 849-3854 at any time. Additionally, you can contact the University of

Missouri's Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-9585; the reference number for this project is #1208073. If you understand the research project and agree to allow research to take place at your dealership, please sign below.

I have read the above and agree to allow research interviews to be conducted at my dealership as described above:

X _____

Appendix 3 - Participant Consent Form

Hello, my name is Chris DeRosier, and I am a masters student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. I'm conducting research looking at what information sources car buyers consult when shopping and what role, if any, automotive reviews written by professional journalists play in the decision-making process. I'd like to ask you a few short questions about your experience shopping for your new car, who and what you looked at, read, watched or talked to and how they did (or didn't) help you. The interview will be recorded for audio and transcribed later. Participation is completely voluntary. You can choose not to participate or to withdraw your consent at any time.

Participating in this short interview would not put you at risk of physical or mental harm. While you may not receive direct benefit from this study, your answers will go a long way toward helping professionals in automotive journalism improve how they do their jobs. Every available measure will be taken to protect your confidentiality. Although the interview is recorded, your name will not be requested and nothing identifying you personally will be included in the audio recording, transcript or the finished paper.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please feel welcome to contact any of the following at any time:

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(Ask about Project #1208073)

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