

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY  
School of Business and Governance  
International Business Administration (TVTB)

Emmi Puolakka

**CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS FABRICATED  
FEEDBACK**

Bachelor's thesis

Programme International business administration, specialisation Marketing

Supervisor: Merle Ojasoo, PhD

Tallinn 2019

I hereby declare that I have compiled the paper independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors has been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading. The document length is 12062 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

Emmi Puolakka .....

(signature, date)

Student code: 177644TVTB

Student e-mail address: emmi.puolakka@gmail.com

Supervisor: Merle Ojasoo, PhD:

The paper conforms to requirements in force

.....

(signature, date)

Chairman of the Defence Committee:

Permitted to the defence

.....

(name, signature, date)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| ABSTRACT .....                            | 4  |
| INTRODUCTION .....                        | 5  |
| 1. THEORY CONCEPTS .....                  | 8  |
| 1.1. Ethical marketing.....               | 8  |
| 1.2. Customer feedback .....              | 12 |
| 1.3. Fabricated customer feedback .....   | 14 |
| 1.4 Attitudes .....                       | 18 |
| 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH .....      | 21 |
| 2.1. Research method.....                 | 21 |
| 2.2. Research design .....                | 22 |
| 3. EMPIRICAL PART OF THE RESEARCH.....    | 25 |
| 3.1. Results and analysis.....            | 25 |
| 3.2. Comparison.....                      | 32 |
| 3.3. Discussion and recommendations ..... | 37 |
| CONCLUSION .....                          | 40 |
| LIST OF REFERENCES .....                  | 42 |
| APPENDICES .....                          | 45 |
| Appendix 1. Questionnaire .....           | 45 |

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this Bachelor's Thesis is to research the consumers' attitudes and awareness towards the fabricated customer feedback among consumers. University students' in Estonia and in Finland are selected as the target group. The empirical research is conducted by using the quantitative methods and the data collecting is conducted by using online questionnaire. The following research questions are examined in this paper: are consumers aware of the fabricated consumer feedback on e-commerce; what are the consumers attitudes towards the ethicalness of the customer feedback tactics; what are possible outcomes when discovering that companies are using manipulation tactics in their consumer feedback; what are the consumers attitudes towards developing regulations concerning consumer feedback; would consumers purchase a product if they are not certain that the customer review is real. The main finding of the research is that a large percentage of the respondents are not aware or not sure about the existence of the manipulation of the reviews. In addition, majority of the respondents agreed that new legislations should be created to protect consumer rights. Although most of the respondents considered tactics which are used to modify reviews as unethical, majority of them would despite of this purchased a product if it would offer them enough valuable features. As a conclusion it can be stated that customer feedback is considered as important part of the consumers purchasing decision making process, even though consumers would not be sure about the authenticity of the reviews.

Keywords: customer feedback, customer review, fabricated feedback, ethical marketing, attitude

## **INTRODUCTION**

The growth of the e-commerce has created new tools for companies to reach their potential consumers, one of the most popular methods being online consumer feedback. Consumer feedback is based on the concept of word of mouth marketing, which many of the consumers consider more reliable than direct information received from the companies. Since the e-commerce is constantly evolving, also new marketing methods are developed to affect more efficiently the consumers purchasing behavior. As there are unregulated areas where the companies are able to practice marketing using unethical methods, the consumers are exposed to unethical marketing unwillingly. One of the tactics used by the companies in e-commerce being fabrication of consumer feedback.

Fabricated consumer feedback might be hard to detect since the lack of face to face communication leaves less cues, where the consumer could make conclusion from. Since manipulation of the consumer feedback seems to be growing trend and because it was challenging to find scientific articles of consumers' attitudes towards fabricated feedback, the topic was considered as important to research. Previous results from empirical researches have been conducted from the companies' point of view, however only few empirical studies have been made from the consumer aspect (Peng et al. 2016, 270). Due to this, the previous researches were collected from the concepts of customer feedback and customer review and these will be used as synonyms in this research paper. The topic was selected because the usage of e-commerce has increased significantly in the few last years. The companies' marketing in the internet are utilizing the customer reviews as part of their marketing processes due to their affordability and efficiency to influence consumer behavior. The focus of the research was decided to be university students, because (Helversen et al. 2018, 1) the one of the largest user groups of e-commerce are young consumers. In addition, author of this research paper was interested researching the topic, since it is an area of marketing, which the author considers requiring further research.

The journal, Consumer perceptions of online review deception suggests that in China even 70 percent of the product ratings are compensated posters, this is due to the bribing of employees as

a response to achieve more positive reviews of the company's products (Peng et al. 2016, 270). The research conducted by Peng *et al.* explained that directing the content to more positive looking can be achieved for example by deleting not so favorable content and the criteria for evaluating manipulation tactics in their research was for example ethicality, while also the ease of detection was part of the evaluation criteria (*Ibid.*). The results of the previous study clarified that receiving rewards in a visible manner was considered to be acceptable, however removing unfavorable reviews and adding fabricated flattering reviews were seen as challenging since they can result to an unfavorable decision of pre-purchase (Peng et al. 2016, 276). Thus, removing unfavorable feedback is experienced obtaining the greatest level of unethicality, as it was agreed as the most unethical way, nevertheless having also the strongest negative impact on pre-purchasing behavior (*Ibid.*). As their research was conducted in university in China, it gave support for researching the attitudes among the university students in Estonia and in Finland.

The literature review was used to collect information of the previous research methods and to select the core concepts of the selected topic. The objective of this research was to discover the consumer attitudes towards the fabricated consumer feedback by collecting and analyzing the data based on the research questions. The correct research questions were found using the methods used in the article of Hyman and Sierra (2015, 4), from which the problems to the possible research questions were drawn leading to the objectives of the research.

The five selected research questions:

- Are consumers aware of the fabricated consumer feedback on e-commerce?
- What are the consumers attitudes towards the ethicalness of the customer feedback tactics?
- What are possible outcomes when discovering that companies are using manipulation tactics in their consumer feedback?
- What are the consumers attitudes towards developing regulations concerning consumer feedback?
- Would consumers purchase a product if they are not certain that the customer review is real?

The empirical research was conducted as quantitative research method. The preliminary problems which needed to be addressed in this research were consumers' attitudes towards for example,

awareness and ethicalness of fabricated customer feedback. The research objective was to discover the level of ethicality considered as acceptable among the selected consumer groups. In addition, researcher would be able to find out, whether the consumers are comfortable committing purchasing decisions without valid information of the authenticity of the customer feedback. As the objective would be to discover if unethical marketing methods have consequences in a form of changes in the company's image and possible profits. The task of this report is to analyze the aggregated data collected from the respondents, process it using correct tools and draw conclusion from it. Thus, answers to explain the research problem can be discovered. With this, the researcher is able examine consumers attitudes towards fabricated feedback.

This research paper consists of three chapters and begins with describing the main theory concept as following; ethical marketing and its importance in decision making and the concept of customer feedback and how customer feedback is used in online marketing. Moreover, the theory of fabricated consumer feedback, the tactics and the motives behind the usage of it will be explained. It includes also consumers' perceptions of the potentially experienced fabricated feedback and attitudes towards ethicalness of the fabrication. Theory part ends to the topic introducing theory of attitudes. In the second chapter, methodological part of the research is covered. This chapter will discuss about the research methods used and after this the research design followed in this research paper will be covered. These parts will explain the chosen sample and method used. Questionnaire and the content of it is also explained in this chapter. The third chapter of the research paper is the empirical part. In the first chapter a results and analysis will be covered. Additionally, some comparison between the respondent's genders and the university students studying in Estonia and in Finland is provided. The last chapter includes section of discussion, in which also the analysis derived of the research is compared to finding presented in the theory chapter. Suggestions drawn from the research are reported. The report will end with conclusions, in which the main findings are discussed.

The author of this research wants to express gratitude toward the respondents contributing to this research and the supervisor for the guidance and support, which was received during the research process.

# 1. THEORY CONCEPTS

The theoretical part will explain the concept of ethical marketing, customer feedback, fabricated customer feedback and theory of attitudes. The first part will describe how the concept of ethical marketing has developed and how the concept sets in international markets. Next section explains how consumer feedback is used in online marketing and consumers' perceptions of the usage of customer reviews as part of their purchasing decisions. The usage of fabricated feedback and the tactics which are used to manipulate the reviews are described. The final section discusses the theory of attitude.

## 1.1. Ethical marketing

Cambridge dictionary describes word ethical as an assumption of whether something is morally wrong or right and marketing as tasks that relates encouraging people to commit a purchase of a product or a service (Cambridge Dictionary 2019). Javalgi and Russel (2015, 705) conducted literature review of the topic of international marketing ethics in which Yüsel *et al.* states: "Ethics is a historically important branch of philosophy that focuses on morals and values."

The definition of marketing ethics has evolved through decades while the core meaning of the concepts has stayed reasonable similar. Javalgi and Russel (2015, 707) explain in their article, that marketing ethics can have multiple explanations however, most interpretations include similar characteristics. Brennen and Molader (1977, 59) described in the year 1977 the marketing ethics as following; "not only the moral values and duties of the profession itself, but also the existing value and expectations of the larger society." Approximately 13 years later in year 1990, Singhapakdi and Vitell clarified marketing ethics in the article of Javalgi and Russel (2015, 707) as; "an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral judgements, standards and rules of conduct relating to marketing situations." When in year 2005, Murphy *et al.* (2005, 266) defined the concept as following; "the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors and institutions." The definitions in the examples describe how morals should be taken into account when performing decisions in marketing.



Ethical behavior can vary in different countries, because the nationality can reflect persons own ethical values, which can show as a form of attitudes (Javalgi, Russel, 2015 706). Solving the ethical issues in businesses can be difficult due to mixture of many different nationalities in international working environment, thus defining the international marketing ethics can be considered as difficult, because instead of one common conception there are several ones (Javalgi, Russel 2015 704,706). Due to peoples' habit of perceiving experiences differently, statement of absolute ethics can not be made, however, Donovan and Henley present two ways for evaluating what can be perceived as unethical behaviour or actions in their article (Donovan, Henley 2010, 196-197). Ethical actions can be identified by asking two questions and the questions that evaluates the external and internal ethics focuses on persons own perception of what one thinks others think of their action or how it is supported by the law or legislation (*Ibid.*). Carrigan *et al.* (2005, 481, 483) discuss that combining the ethical aspects suitable for companies in their native countries and the ones they are targeting can be hard, because people in different locations might have varying perceptions what is believed to be good. Defining international marketing ethics can be more challenging than defining marketing ethics. This is because the concept of international marketing contains the perceptions of various cultures instead of one.

Carrigan *et al.* (2005, 481) explain that from philosophical point of view, it is challenging to state what can be considered as good and what ethical. Furthermore, it can be demanding to find out whether these two factors are considered and experienced as equal concept, meaning that one would think the words good and ethical as same (*Ibid.*). The company's success can be seen as dependent of the satisfaction they are providing to their customers (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 481-482). As the customers have tendency to value companies that prioritize consumers' ethical values before their own, the companies have enticement to present themselves with that manner regardless of the real situation (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 482-483).

The goal for the ethical marketing (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 485-486) is currently to achieve common guidelines which leads to creating regulations concerning the ethical concerns in the unregulated areas. Therefore, consumers also have higher expectations regarding the marketing practises (*Ibid.*). Thus, marketers and companies that are targeting to maximizing profits require ability to recognize the ethical issues, which can be acquired using the newest theories. These updated methods help to respond to the demands expected from companies (*Ibid.*). When the values of the

company are not aligned with consumers' values, issues appear. It is important that the external morals encounter the ones company obtains. (Donovan, Henley 2010, 199)

The article of Francesca Gino (2015, 107-108) involving moral psychology and ethical behavior explains the relationship between unethical behavior and people who commit them although obtaining moral values. The phenomenon can be categorized into two research orientations. The first one focuses on studying settings where people know they are conducting unethical behavior however; they are not aware which factors lead them to commit unethical behavior. The second one focuses on studying how people involve not knowing that their behavior is leading to unethical consequences. Morals can be seen as an adjustable factor of one's character varying in different situations, despite the ethicality being important factor of one's self-concept. In addition, despite the wish to be perceived as ethical person, one might lack the ability to detect that their actions are related to moral problems. (Gino 2015, 107-108)

Interest towards the international marketing ethics has developed due to the globalization, and as a result of this growth of multinational companies (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 485-486). The e-commerce grew from the year 2015 to 2016 by 19.9 percentages and the sales purchased on online were 2018 approximately 8.7 percent of the global retail sales (Helvesen *et al.* 2018, 1). Developed countries have been the subject of most of the studies of ethical marketing, while emerging countries have been less researched (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 485-486). Emerging countries are facing issues with ethical marketing due to lack of legislations and laws involving marketing ethics (*Ibid.*). Emerging markets offer less protection for their consumers, when in contrast the multinational companies operating in their society obtain usually a strong legal protection (*Ibid.*). Freedom to express individual rights in market economy results as securing and enhancing customer rights, despite of this, multinational companies practice for example fabricating consumer feedback in cover-up manners (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 486-487). This can be noticed as a process in which the need for less desired products are modified to more desirable needs from the urge of the company to increase its profits (*Ibid.*).

The lack of legislations concerning the marketing can create an incentive for the companies to manipulate consumers, as a result, companies operate creating fabricated needs (Carrigan *et al.* 2005, 486-487). Deceptive marketing and corruption in a manner of bribing can be considered as issues of unethical marketing and while consumers are developing to become more aware of their expectations of ethicality, the pressure towards the companies operating in ethical manner

increases (Javalgi, Russel 2015, 706, 708). The areas not regulated in marketing are most vulnerable to misconduct and unethical behavior of companies.

The consumers that experience unethical issues in internet marketplaces might start having negative thoughts towards purchasing in places that are associated with unethicality, thus the article of Limbu *et al.* (2011, 71) suggested that the unethical behavior can also damage the development of retail industry on the internet. Factors such as access to internet and cultural backgrounds affect consumer behavior practiced in the internet involving the purchases (*Ibid.*). Unethical marketing can damage the e-commerce industry and danger its development, because when consumers feel insecurity and dishonesty towards online retailers, they might start having negative feelings towards the companies acting unethically.

The article of Limbu *et al.* (2011, 72-73) suggests that despite of the European countries been economical similar there can be found differences in the usage of internet. Findings of the previous researches made concerning the ethical behavior of companies' state that consumers might value more features such as price over the ethicality. Expectations of the product can reflect how consumers evaluate the ethicality of the product, on the other hand, finding information about companies' ethical behavior can be challenging and consumers do not always obtain enough of it to be able to draw conclusions. Ethical issues concerning consumers were the quality of the bought items and whether the company selling the products was trustworthy. In some cases, consumers might sacrifice their ethical values in order receive other values they appreciate in the products or services. (Limbu *et al.* 2011, 72-73)

When conducting a decision involving unethicality, Gino (2015, 108-109) states that people are making choices between the long-term positive self-concept and incentive to increase short-term personal benefits. Creating and maintaining positive self-image is pursued as a way to achieve approval of the society, therefore one's ability to evaluate actions and judgements concerning morality based on the two options result to variations in the ethical behavior during longer periods of time. Social forces are considered affecting individual's behavior, in a manner which even one person's unethical actions can result to the other persons behaving in unethical manner. (Gino 2015, 108-109)

## 1.2. Customer feedback

Ma and Lee (2014, 226-227) describe customer feedback as user made descriptions of opinions, which include the characteristics of objective and subjective knowledge of the factor being evaluated. Subjective knowledge offered through consumer reviews regards the information gathered from the usage experience, on the contrary the objective information offered in reviews involves descriptions of the product features and its appearance, not the usage. Customer reviews can be found typically from the companies' homepages and forums including usually space for writing opinions and possibility complete numerical evaluation as well. They can be persuaded as great tool to get inside information about the quality and the usage experience of the focus. (Ma and Lee 2014, 226-227)

Since the marketing has developed, nowadays the customers are creating and controlling more of the marketing communication that was before the task of marketers (Ahrens *et al.* 2012, 1034-1035). This has led to challenges with maintaining current customers and gathering new customers, thus it has created the marketers to develop new methods, for example technology to cover these issues. Word-of-mouth marketing has been considered as the one of the oldest tools to gather new customers, which the marketers have developed into an electronic form. The referrals can be formed from a one's own personal will to conduct them or from an initiative of a company. Social media webpages and blogs are used for writing the opinions and in addition, e-mails can be used to generate personal referrals. However, when the initiative for creating referrals has arisen from company's part, companies might ask customers to fill out ratings of products. (Ahrens *et al.* 2012, 1034-1035)

The popular platforms specialized in sharing consumer feedback is for example the following companies; Yelp, Trustpilot and TripAdvisor (Kolowich 2019). In addition to that Amazon Customer Reviews started operating in 1995, being of the first platforms to share online customer reviews. Amazon Customer Reviews is considered as important platform to gather information pre-purchase for product bought from online and offline (*Ibid.*). The company HubSpot explains that the reviews can be practiced in online as Business to Business or Business to Consumer forms and because customer feedback is important for creating pre-purchase decision, companies should be aware in which platforms they collect and distribute the customer reviews (*Ibid.*). The research of Liu and Wei (2010, 129) explains that consumers are more likely to receive and take in the information from consumer feedback if they consider it to be beneficial. Therefore, the level of

the benefits derived from customer feedback depends also from how important the consumers perceive the customer feedback to be, including also factors such as previous experience and trust (Liu, Wei 2010, 129). Celuch *et al.* (2015, 288) state that from companies' point of view, there is also a need to develop the utilizing and encouragement of consumer reviews. Yao *et al.* (2009, 1286) state that for some companies, such as eBay, the well working customer feedback is one of the main factors for its succeeding.

The article of Ahrens *et al.* (2012, 1035,1037) suggest that referrals are perceived as more convincing and affordable marketing method than traditional marketing methods for example ads in the internet and because the amount of advertising has increased, consumers are facing overload of them which has led to impact of them to decrease. Helversen *et al.* (2018, 1) explain the amount of the review and the sentimental values being most important factors of affecting sales when using customer reviews. From consumers' point of view word of mouth can be connected to trust and satisfaction which are leading to customer loyalty (Ahrens *et al.* 2012, 1036-1037).

The consumers searching for information of products and services value less the information received directly from marketers, whereas in comparison consumers prefer and value more the information from other customers' opinions concerning services or products (*Ibid.*). Helversen *et al.* (2018, 1-2) state that consumers' characteristics influences how the reviews are being interpreted. In addition, the platform where the reviews can be found and expose to, are considered to have impact of the effectiveness of the reviews, thus under normal circumstances the positive customer reviews result as growth of sales and negative customer reviews can be seen resulting to decreasing of sales (*Ibid.*). Singhapakdi states in his article (2004, 267) that improving the future state of the ethical marketing, it is beneficial to include separate course of ethical marketing for students studying in marketing field.

Consumer feedback is perceived as beneficial source of knowledge concerning product or service. Because consumers value word-of-mouth communication, the consumers have a habit of trusting reviews more than direct information given by the company. However, it is important to notice that consumers' personal traits have impact on how effective the reviews are experienced.

### **1.3. Fabricated customer feedback**

Fabricated reviews can be implemented with various methods. The purpose of them is to impact to the pre-purchase perceptions of the consumers by persuading consumers to commit to proceed in purchasing decision. This part the report is going to provide information of the fabricated consumer feedback and reflect the ways, which companies are using as manipulation tactics to influence the consumer behavior. The article by Ma and Lee (2014, 225) describes that in year 2009 Forrester Research conducted study in which 60 percent of the retailers which participated in it admitted using feedback created by consumers as a method to affect consumers.

One of the largest Chinese web search engines fired its employees due to discovering them taking bribes for deleting the negative reviews (Kan 2012). The company monitors its employees that are working with the access to deleting content, although companies monitor these employees, illegal removal of content from the internet is a notable issue. The Chinese industry removing services, also known as professional post deleting businesses, stated that they were able to remove reviews from several Chinese websites. The Baidu itself reported improving and forcing the monitoring of involving the illegal removal of the internet content. (Kan 2012)

The article of Morrison et al. (2011) published in the website of Southern California Public Radio discusses the topic of fabricated feedback and the ethics of the feedback given focusing on the internet review webpage Yelp. In USA approximately fifty percent of the states obtain anti-slap law, which is varying in different states, California having the strictest laws. The purpose of the anti-slap law is to protect individual right to express one's own opinion without fear, since its purpose is to prevent large companies to limit their consumers' opinions. However, from the small companies' point of view, the law could expose them to losing large portions of their revenues, this is because few singular cases of failed business processes for example in the service field can lead to several bad reviews, which can escalate into victimizing of the small companies. (Morrison et al. 2011)

The article is addressing the statement of the lawsuit, in which the small companies explained that Yelp had offered their services in the year 2008 as a return of them paying advertising fees to Yelp (*Ibid.*). After refusing, the small companies noticed that the positive customer feedback had been removed from the Yelps webpage, however the vice president of corporate communications did

not agree with the statements made, as he implied that for some companies manipulating the reviews might be attractive option (*Ibid.*).

The largest user group of e-commerce are young and middle age consumers, as also consumer group minimum age being 55 years are purchasing more than before products and services from the internet (Helvesen *et al.* 2018, 1). In USA, approximately 72 percent of the population using the internet have confidence regarding the consumer feedback posted to internet based on research conducted by Nielsen in the year 2009 (Ma, Lee 2014, 224-225). The research of Ma and Lee, Consumer responses toward online review manipulation states that, generally consumers' attitudes towards the authenticity of the written feedback is considered more reliable than the one directly written by the companies (*Ibid.*). This is due that feedback is created from the consumers' point of view and experienced as a visible method to improve the honesty of the company, therefore approximately 95 percent of previously mentioned target group in USA uses customer feedback searched from the internet as evaluating the item prior to the purchase (*Ibid.*).

The report states: "To offset these socially undesirable practices, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has applied truth-in-advertising guidelines against fake online consumer reviews to protect consumers who likely believe that online reviews are honest and posted by peers" (*Ibid.*). The article also implies that the persons receiving payments for creating flattering advertisement should not present oneself as a normal customer reviewer, nonetheless promoter should make the connection between the company and the payments visible for others (*Ibid.*). The article also implies that the manipulations practiced involving the customer opinions online has exceeded the ethical limit, thus becoming also concern of legal matter (*Ibid.*, 225-226). Companies such as Yelp and Amazon are using algorithms to discover the fabricated feedback, additionally few researches have been conducted concerning the topic of manipulated customer review from the aspect of data mining methods (Peng *et al.* 2016, 270). The research conducted with usage of data mining implies that consumers might not be capable to recognize fabrication (*Ibid.*).

Fabricated reviews can be created through concealment, which can happen through by purposefully concealing or removing unflattering information (Peng *et al.* 2016, 271). Equivocation and falsification are also methods to create fabricated feedback (*Ibid.*). Falsification of the knowledge can be performed for example as an act in which the company is providing incentives to its employees, while asking in response them to write positive assessments of the company's products (*Ibid.*). Nevertheless, falsification can be performed also by scripting positive

ratings personally and with these methods the sellers are able to fabricate the content, therefore also the authenticity and completeness of the meaning concerning the information companies are offering (Peng *et al.* 2016, 271, 274).

There are many reasons due to which consumers might find it difficult to evaluate the realness of the customer reviews read online. Peng *et al.* (2016, 270-271) explain that fabricated feedback is systematically constructed which makes it hard for the consumers to evaluate the level of truthfulness of the reviews, nevertheless they are usually disguised and can be characterized as complex. Purnawirawan *et al.* (2015, 22) state that when internet platform includes also negative reviews the credibility of them increases, although (Peng *et al.* 2016, 270-271) consumers might experience difficulty to perceive the fabricated reviews due to the lack of face to face communication. Thus, customer is having less cues which they could use as a tool to evaluate the realness of the feedback (*Ibid.*). The presence of negative reviews suggests for the consumer that the platforms are operating without censoring (Purnawirawan *et al.* 2015, 22). The anonymity of the writers of the review and the opportunity to act in a disguise as a role of a customer increase the challenge of evaluating the origin of the feedback (Peng *et al.* 2016, 270-271).

One of the challenges of recognizing the manipulation is that the review process of the companies can have influence for the company's whole review system and that it might contain also the valence of the shared information concerning the reviews (Peng *et al.* 2016, 271). The process can extent to the volume and the distribution of the company's feedback (*Ibid.*). Since the fabricated review might include sentimental values and be manipulated and controlled as overall by the companies or marketer, it is hard for the consumers recognize the cues which imply of the review been manipulated.

Companies can perceive the manipulation of customer reviews as beneficial for their company, because with this companies are able to modify the customers purchase believes proactively (Peng *et al.* 2016, 269). Consumers use product reviews to support their purchasing decisions, however the increasing information concerning knowledge of fabricated feedback can also reflect to the amount of value that customer gives to the review when proceeding with the potential purchasing decision. An empirical study in China states that survey conducted by Dimensional research suggest that 90 percent of participants admitted flattering customer ratings affecting their consumer behavior, furthermore, it stated that negative ratings could have an effect on consumer behavior for 86 percent of the respondents. (Peng *et al.* 2016, 269)



Removing negative customer feedback can be experienced as most unethical way of manipulating the customer reviews, as it generates unbalanced information and cues not visible to the consumer to notice (Peng *et al.* 2016, 274). Purchase decision based on the previously mentioned manipulation method results to negative notions towards purchasing online, which can create negative impact on the evolving e-commerce practices and therefore, it can affect the wellbeing of the consumers (*Ibid.*).

In the article discussing influence of online consumer reviews, Purnawirawan *et al.* (2015, 22) explained negative reviews having greater effect towards the consumers' perceptions than other reviews if the review contains also positive information in it. Thus, the degree of positivity has only importance in negative customer reviews and the reason that negative reviews are more precise in evaluation of the products, implies that the negative review would have more weight when assessing the usefulness of them compared to other reviews (Helvesen *et al.* 2018, 2). The theory of Wu argues that consumers consider negative reviews to provide better quality information and since they are also rarer the negative review might be perceived having more weight although they would not (*Ibid.*). The article of Nasr *et al.* (2018, 144) agrees there being more positive reviews than negative ones. These statements of Helvesen *et al.* (2018, 2) was supported by the research of Yao *et al.* (2009, 1286) where it is stated that customer feedback has more impact when having only moderate level of negativity in them.

Filieri (2014, 1261-1262) states in his article that online consumer reviews, abbreviated as OCR can have strong impact on customers purchasing decision. Many companies are utilizing the customer reviews in their webpages as a method to effect consumers purchasing decision for example by offering consumers platform where to discuss about products quality. In addition to previously mentioned, company Kia Motors is using the consumer review in the advertisement displayed in television, on contrary some companies such as TripAdvisor and Yelp core purpose is providing customer reviews. Consumer feedback traits are that they offer information concerning the sold products, which then helps to clarify and making assessments of the efficiency and quality of the items, most common are the normative assessments of the items sold is in many internet sites. (Filieri 2014, 1261-1262)

In the article of Filieri (2014, 1262) he has specified online customer reviews as “any positive, neutral, or negative online review about a product or service created and published on a CRW by a potential, former, or actual customer “. People are affected by the information if at least two

people are distributing similar experiences of certain item (*Ibid.*). Cues can be utilized when discovering the variation based on the evaluators concerning certain items or services. For example, ranking the products with stars is common in many webpages, the stars representing the average evaluation of all the people that have completed review of it (*Ibid.*).

Jiménez and Mendoza (2013, 226) describe in their article that e-word-of-mouth creates difficulties, since evaluation of their authenticity is based on written text and graphical forms, for example written product reviews and likes instead of verbal communication. The article states that consumers using the e-marketing platforms use approximately 30 to 60 minutes to read reviews before deciding whether to perform purchase, to specify consumers, have tendency to view at least eight reviews pre-purchase. Thus, the time consumed for reading consumer reviews has habit of increasing while the even more of sellers' implement reviews as part of their webpages. The realness of the customer reviews is evaluated approximately 35 percent of the people purchasing product from the internet. (Jiménez, Mendoza 2013, 226)

The research conducted by Helversen *et al.* (2018) states that younger adults preferred selecting products with higher consumer ratings. Making selection among the young adults based on ratings was emphasized when selection of product was involving decision of selecting products with different features in them. However, the effect of one credible positive or negative review was discovered to have impact to the perceptions of consumers although the overall rating would have obtained high ratings. The older consumers were affected greatly by one-time credible negative review. The one-time credible positive review did not affect their decision making, neither did the average ratings. (Helversen *et al.* 2018)

Consumers might find it challenging to detect authentic consumer reviews from manipulated ones. The deleting of the customer feedback was perceived most unethical tactic of manipulation among consumers because it was considered offering more reliable information than the positive ones.

## **1.4 Attitudes**

Famous social psychologist Icek Ajzen (2005, 3-4) has defined attitude as “disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event.” As attitudes can be researched only indirectly, they are researched by collecting information from responses that are measurable.

Thus, attitudes are hypothetically created. When conducting a research concerning the topic of attitudes, the dividing the responses to different subgroups for example as reactions and actions can help to clarify the research. On the other hand, attitudes can also be divided into groups of under the concepts of conation, cognition and affect. This categorizing system derives from the time of Plato. (Ajzen 2005, 3-4)

Ajzen (2005, 4-5) explains that classification method of a cognitive approach researches ones' perceptions of the attitudes, whereas affective researches the feelings of it. On contrary to the previous, connotations are commitments towards the attitudes, including also intentions, reflecting the actions one would have towards the topic of attitudes (*Ibid.*). There have been empirical researches that have clarified that although expressing certain attitudes verbally towards the researched topic, people might still verbally act opposite to that (Ajzen 2005, 39). There are multiple approaches to conduct research of attitudes. There are also findings that support the fact that person's verbally spoken and the action-based behavior might differ.

Ajzen *et al.* (2011, 115) state in the article, Knowledge and the Prediction of Behavior: The Role of Information Accuracy in the Theory of Planned Behavior, that people require to obtain valid information of the topics they are conducting decisions of, because they based their decisions on the information they have of the topic. Although knowledge is considered important for decision making, there might be other factors that are contributing to the decision-making process. Thus, the most important thing is not sufficient knowledge of the topic, so much as the persons own subjective knowledge of the topic, such as beliefs. These inner thoughts of the topic guide behavior of the person and whether the outcomes are negative or positive from normative point of view. To specify, despite of research the connection between the information persons obtains of certain topic and the decision outcome, these results might also reflect the persons' subjective beliefs rather than the general information of the topic. The article states also that even though persons would have received information and knowledge to guide them to better decision making, they might not act persistent what is expect of them afterwards, as person might conduct unwanted decisions. (Ajzen *et al.* 2011, 115) This might suggest that although consumers were informed about the possible dangers of unethically created fabricated consumer reviews, they might not be willing to change their behavior and purchase the product still. Thus, although knowing that company might use unethical marketing, consumers might still conduct purchasing decision.

Ajzen and Fishbein (2005, 208) discuss in their article about previous researches that have stated factors such as situational factors and features of the researched attitude having influence on the persons' behavior. Kind and Barmby wrote (Saleh, Khine 2014, 117-118) that there have been researchers supporting and, on the contrary, criticizing the research methods, which are used to research the attitudes, because they are considered as complex and challenging to measure. For example, Likert-scale is suggested to be too simple methods to measure the attitudes of the person creating the research instead of the respondents (*Ibid.*). Despite of the criticisms there are also researchers supporting the measuring attitudes with Likert-scale, as it is considered beneficial for measuring attitudes, that are researched in the general level of the topic (*Ibid.*). In some cases, especially when conducting large scale study, the observation of the development of the attitudes can be important, which means research could be done in a manner which enables the research to compare the results (*Ibid.*). Therefore, in large scale studies the measurement should happen in different moment in time, thus this provides the possibility to monitor the development (*Ibid.*). When conducting research examining attitudes conducted in general level can use Likert-scale can be considered as beneficial.

It is stated that creating valid results can be accomplished by thoroughly planning and creation of the questionnaire scales and by finding correct means out of it. Kind and Barmby has wrote (Saleh, Khine 2014, 119). Ajzen (2011, 1116) explains that the previous researches had discovered that factor such as emotions can reflect to the behavior especially when they involve a topic important for a person. For this reason, the emotions are affecting indirectly to attitudes (*Ibid.*). In the article, Ajzen (2011, 2020) discovered that the past experiences could not provide valid direction of the future outcomes. The past behaviour reflects more about how strong person's habits are rather than predicting future behaviour (*Ibid.*).

The theories of Ajzen support that emotions can impact towards creation of attitudes, especially when the topic which is searched is important for the person. Researchers could not made any valid conclusions of direct effect of previous experiences to future outcomes of attitudes, despite of this they could indicate habits.

## **2. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH**

The methodology part explains the research method selected for this Bachelor's Thesis as well as the purpose of the research. Methodology part describes also research design and formation of the questionnaire, as well as the selection of the sample. The analysis methods used in this research will be also introduced.

### **2.1. Research method**

Aim of this research is to study the consumers' attitudes towards the fabricated consumer feedback. Furthermore, the purpose of this research is to investigate if consumers are willing to purchase a product although they do not have certainty whether the customer feedback, they are reading is manipulated. The research performed in the report was conducted by using the empirical research method. Conducting the study with quantitative method was suitable for the chosen topic, since there are no previous studies made of the specific topic in Estonia and in Finland. To specify, a quantitative research method was selected due to the topic, which was required to be explained in objective manner. The target group for the research were 18-35 years old university students in Estonia and in Finland. Quantitative research strategy is considered also qualified for collecting data for researches which require large number of respondents. To support the selection of the research methods previous studies of the topic were searched. In the empirical research of Peng *et al.* (2016, 275-276) also a quantitative method was used to discover how participants experienced the fabricated methods of consumer reviews.

Online questionnaire was considered to be most suitable option for collecting the data from both countries. Since the university students have access to internet, the platform to collect the data was selected as Google Forms. Online questionnaire was considered as most beneficial for data collection, because the study requires large number of respondents to be able to provide representative explanations of the topic. The language used in the questionnaire was chosen as English, since it provided students in both countries equal opportunity to interpret content of the

questionnaire and eliminated the possibilities of word nuances providing different meanings to the concepts.

## **2.2. Research design**

The topic of this research is consumers' attitudes of ethicalness of fabricated customer reviews, specifically comparing Estonian and Finnish university students. Literature concerning the topics customer feedback, fabricated feedback, ethical marketing and attitudes were collected. Due to this reason articles involving the topic of online reviews used in this research paper were mostly research conducted outside of Estonia and Finland.

The questions required were set up to detect if there were differences in for example what does the student consider to be the most and least unethical methods to fabricate reviews. Furthermore, discovering whether there were differences between students in Estonia and in Finland usage level of feedback as support of purchasing decision. In addition, the questions were to find out does the uncertainty of the authenticity of the customer feedback and the possibility of it being fabricated affect to the purchasing decision. The consumer reviews were researched from the consumer perspective. The research design could also create new information for emerging theories (Bryman 2012, 74). Additional aim was to understand feedback such as its general trustworthiness and ways of being a source of information. Furthermore, the customers attitudes of needs for more specific regulations monitored by law. The questions were compared between the university students of Estonia and Finland. Measuring the level of ethicality of the manipulation methods from consumer perspective was considered as important for the research. This is because, it offered a view of how society, university students in Estonia and Finland consider as ethical marketing.

The questionnaire was distributed in different social media platforms among university students of the universities as well as within their student organizations. Some of the questionnaires were filled by students physically present at the university via the online questionnaire. The required amount of responses was decided as 201 all together and the survey was decided to be open from 15.4.2019 until the 24.4.2018. This collection period was considered to be suitable for the research. As the article of Hyman and Sierra (Hyman, Sierra 2015, 5) state, collecting data can be performed fast and at the same time being accurate. The method used was convenience sampling, because it

is suitable for collecting data easily from the target groups especially when target group is composed of university students in two countries, Estonia and Finland.

The questionnaire received in total 205 respondents, from which 135 respondents were female university students and 70 of the respondents were male university students. The percentage of the women participants answering to the questionnaire of the overall number of respondents were approximately 66%, whereas 34% of the total answers came from men participants. The four age groups were formed based on responses as following, 18-20 years old, 21-23 years old and 24-26 years old. The last category was 27 years old and older. Approximately 29% of the participants were between the ages of 18-20 years old, and 43% where 21-23 years old. Around 12% of the respondents belonged in the age group of 24-26 years old, as 16% of the university students came from age group of 27 years old and older. The majority of the participants were from the age group between 20 and 23 years old.

The total of 43% of the overall respondents were university students in Estonia. Thus, 57% of respondents were university students in Finland. When representing the number of participants' current educational level in figure 1 in percentages, it was discovered that the major educational level of the participants with 73% of the total respondents was Bachelor's degree level. The proportion of the master level student was 23% of the overall respondents and 4% of the participants were studying level of a Doctors degree.

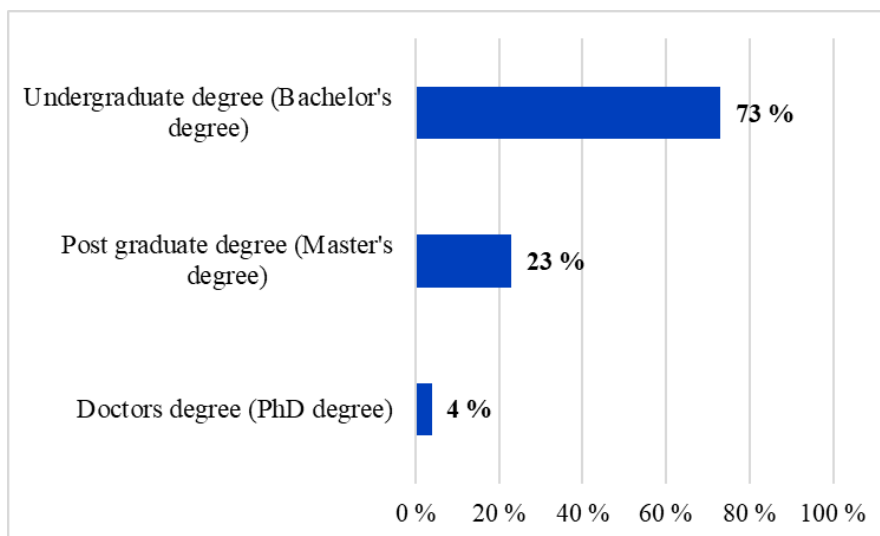


Figure 1. Degree level of the respondents (n=205)

The distributed questionnaire was same for everyone and it included 14 questions. The first four questions were covering demographic questions, them being gender, age and country of a student. In addition, a question clarifying respondents' level of university education studies was added. The questions 5-8 in the questionnaire focused on customer feedback. Question number five collected data of how often consumers search them on a weekly basis. The next question was about areas which the consumers searched most reviews to support their pre-purchase decision. Question number seven researched how important the consumer reviews are. The final question focusing on general topic of customer feedback collects information about customers' attitudes of the expected trustworthiness, benefits as an information provider and level of importance in purchasing decision. Questions 8-14 were focused on the topic of fabricated feedback and the ethicality expectations involving the topic. Both direct and indirect questions were asked because it was important to receive reliable data from the attitudes of the respondent to research successfully and create reliable information. The Likert-scale and multiple choice questions were used to collect the data. Textbox and bipolar scales were also used in the research. In addition, to receive relevant data from the respondents, a short explanation in the questionnaire about the tactics used to manipulate reviews we presented, as the concept were also introduced before the research conducted by Peng *et al.* The results derived from the data collected were processed with descriptive statistical analysis. The statistical analysis was performed by using Microsoft Excel in which the information was categorised, aggregated and formed to visual graphs.

The questionnaire was pretested before the usage with potential participants. After being accepted by the supervisor, the collection of the answers from the first participant group was conducted in supervised setting. When the participants had submitted their answers, it was asked if any clarification or possible improvements to the questionnaire should be made. In addition, potential participants for the questionnaire were collected in the campus area of Tallinn University of Technology by the author asking students face to face whether they could participate in the research. To collect answers from Finland, a request for distribution of the questionnaire was send to the student organisation such as Lipidi ry, which is organization consisting students of food and environmental sciences. Link of the questionnaire was also shared in NESU-KY, which is one of the subcommittee of Association of the Economics Students in Helsinki (KY). To be able to collect larger data, the author contacted student organisation of MMYL ry, which is the head organization under which other specified student organizations under Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Helsinki belong at.



### 3. EMPIRICAL PART OF THE RESEARCH

The empirical part covers the results and analysis derived from the conducted research. Descriptive analysis providing charts and explanations are included in this part, additionally comparison of the main findings based on gender and country of the student are presented. The discussion and recommendations are provided, the empirical part of the research ending to the conclusions.

#### 3.1. Results and analysis

The questionnaire consisted of questions discovering the respondents' attitudes towards customer feedback. The first question focused on examining how often the respondents search for customer reviews online when considering purchasing a product or service. The question received answers to all its answering options, suggesting that consumers' tendency to search for online reviews vary. The figure 2 shows that 12% of the total participants answered searching customer reviews at minimum of 4-6 times a week, while 26 % of the respondents searched for customer reviews at least 2-3 times a week. 30 % of the respondent searched consumer reviews once a week. This clarifies that approximately 55 % of the respondents searched customer reviews from online more than once a week and are exposed to consumer feedback at least once a week.

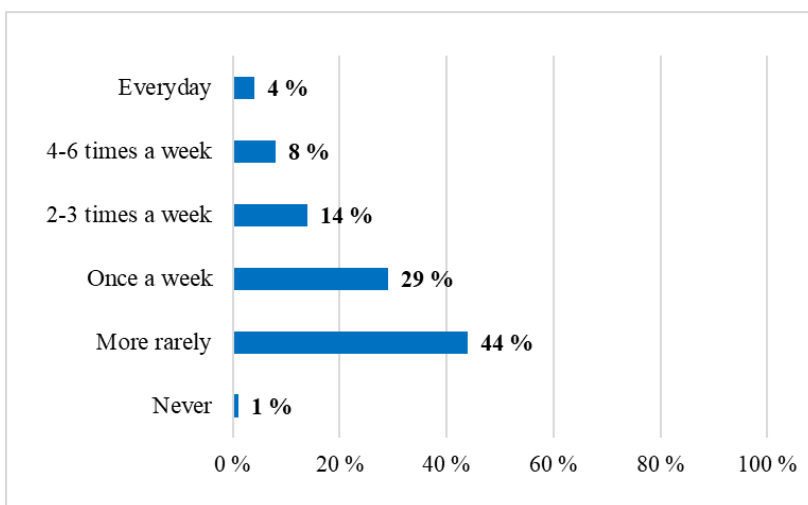


Figure 2. Searching customer feedback online (n=205)

When asking a question about, which areas the participants are looking for consumer reviews when making a purchasing decision, the three most popular options selected in order were restaurants, electronics and travelling. The figure 3 shows that the answer option of restaurant was selected by 77% of the respondents. Least popular areas from the predetermined options, not including the open- end question, was groceries, which only 6% reported searching customer reviews from.

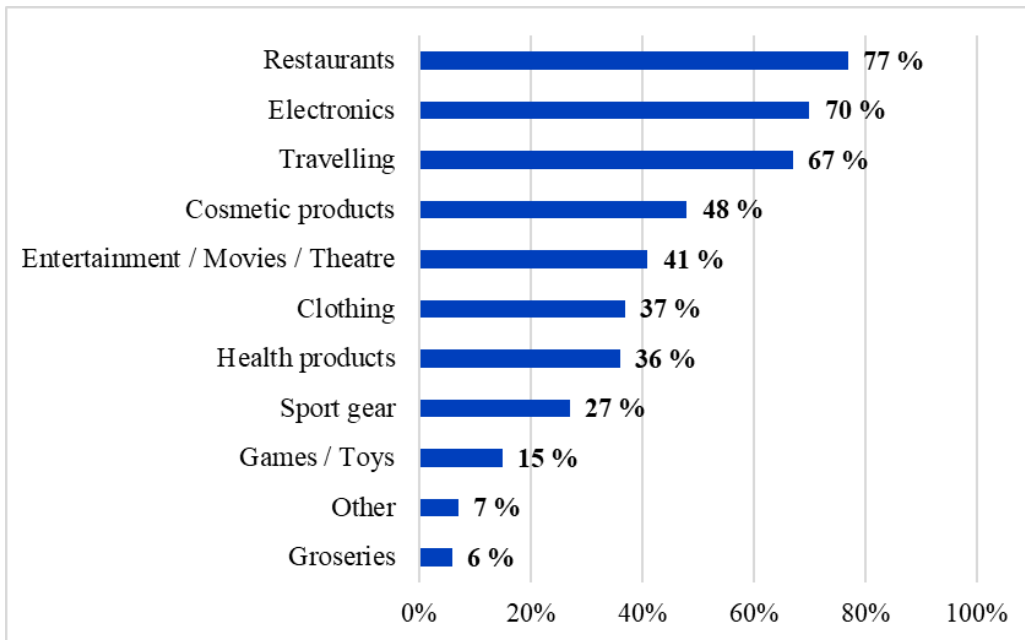


Figure 3. Areas which respondents searched customer feedback from (n=205)

The figure 4 reveals that majority, 59% of the respondents found the customer feedback rather important when considering purchasing a product or service. In addition, approximately 19% of the participants found customer feedback totally important when considering purchasing of a product or a service, while 18% of the respondents had neutral opinion of the question. The result drawn from the question highlighted the importance of consumer reviews as part of consumers' decision-making process.

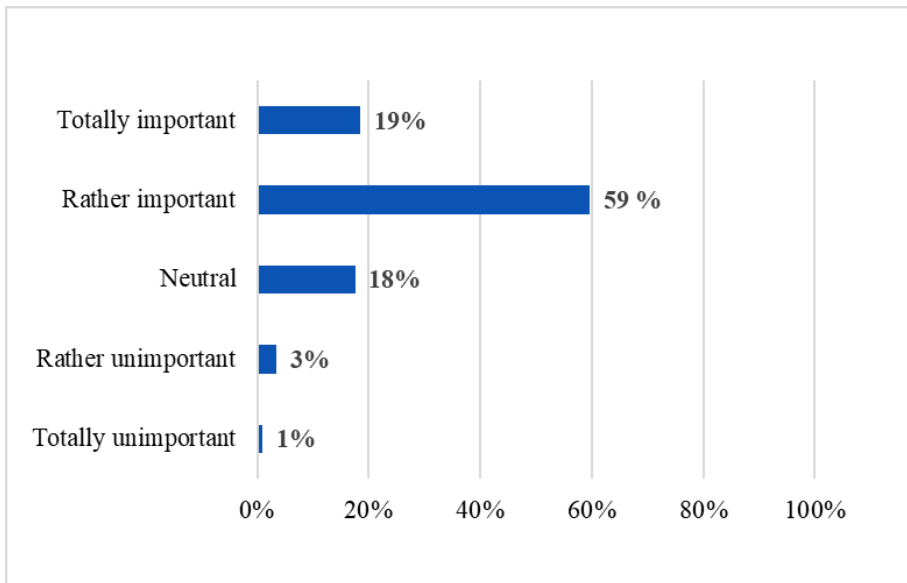


Figure 4. Importance of the customer feedback (n=205)

When researched respondents' thoughts about customer feedback, three statements were presented. The first statement was created to discover whether respondents thought about the consumer feedback being trustworthy. Around 48% of the participants agreed that customer feedback is trustworthy, whereas 40% of the participants had neutral opinion towards the trustworthiness of the customer feedback. Additionally, 13% of respondents at least disagreed with the statement.

The statement, consumer feedback provides good information about the service or product, received majority of the responses as agreeing to the statement. 63% of respondents agreed, and additional 9% strongly agreed upon that customer feedback provides good information about the service or product. This implies that total of 72% respondents agreed that customer feedback provides good information about the service or product. From this can be concluded that majority of the university students in Estonia and in Finland thought customer feedback as good source of information.

To help to clarify does the consumer feedback help to make final purchasing decision, a statement was presented. The analysis represents that 78% of the respondents agreed, while 16% of them strongly agreed that customer feedback helps to make final purchase decision. When in contrary there was only 6% of them who disagreed and strongly disagreed in total to the statement. The results explain that consumer feedback helps to make final purchasing decision, which implies that consumer feedback has impact on consumers purchasing behavior.

When investigating if the university students are aware of the fabricated feedback on e-commerce in figure 5, 53% of the respondents informed being aware of the fabricated feedback on e-commerce, however 27% were not sure. As the usage of the e-commerce has increased during the last decade remarkably, it is concerning to notice that 20% percent of all respondents were not aware that consumer feedback is manipulated online. Nevertheless, the group of people answering “not sure” to the question is quite large, even so when these two groups are combined it results as 47% of the total respondents. This could suggest that even 47% respondents would be more highly affected of the manipulated reviews, since they are not sure about the phenomena.

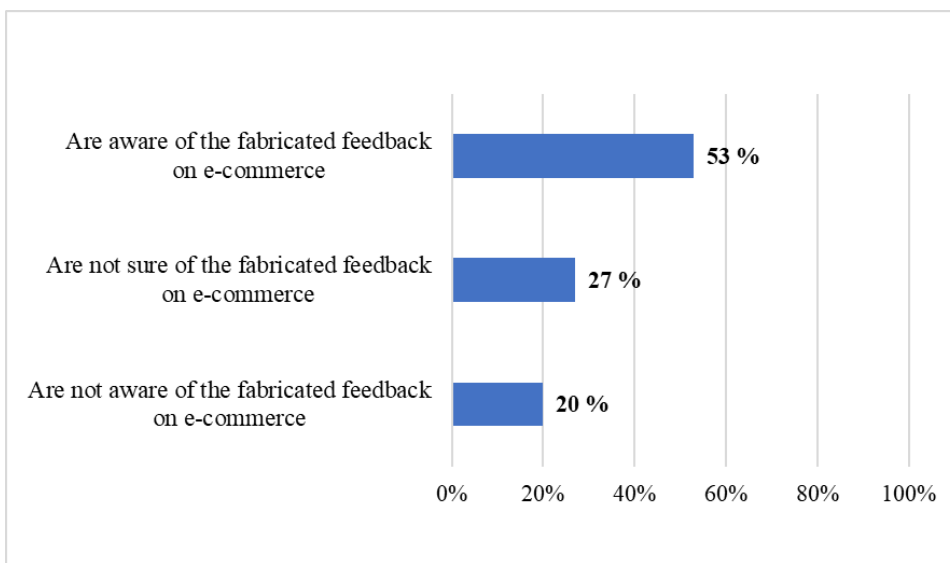


Figure 5. Respondents awareness of the fabricated feedback (n=205)

Well over a half, 60%, of the respondents had not tried to identify the authenticity of potentially fabricated feedback when reading it. On the other hand, 40% of the respondents had tried to identify the authenticity of the potentially fabricated feedback. Ways to identify the manipulated reviews were received from the follow up open ended question. The methods were tracking the user profile by researching if it is new or not, checking the grammar and comparing the reviews of the products in different websites or in a particular platform. Over praising and commercial reviews were also perceived as suspicious, in turn it was also mentioned that reviews having some negative content in them were considered to be more reliable. The most common belief among the respondents was that 21-40% of the consumer feedback was manipulated, while the 41-60% received second most answers. Only one of the participants selected 81-100%, however, 80% of respondents assume that at least 21-40% of the feedback is fabricated.

When researching the attitudes towards the ethicalness of the following customer feedback tactics four tactics were researched. As it can be seen in the figure 6, the attitudes towards the paid reviews, receiving incentives and deleting negative reviews were searched. Furthermore, attitudes towards adding positive reviews were collected. In the questions concerning the paid reviews, 76% of respondents experienced it as unethical, from which 40% of them experienced paid reviews as highly unethical, whereas 5% had selected paid reviews as ethical.

Statement about receiving incentives received more equal distribution than the other tactics to manipulate consumer reviews. 45% of the respondents experienced receiving incentives as unethical and of them 16% experienced incentives as highly unethical. Majority of the respondents considered receiving incentives as neutral, by 39% of them selecting this as their option. In fact, approximately 16% considered this tactic to be ethical. Deleting negative reviews was experienced as most negatively, as majority of the respondents, being 55% experienced deleting negative reviews as highly unethical and 34% as unethical, being in total 89% of the overall respondents.

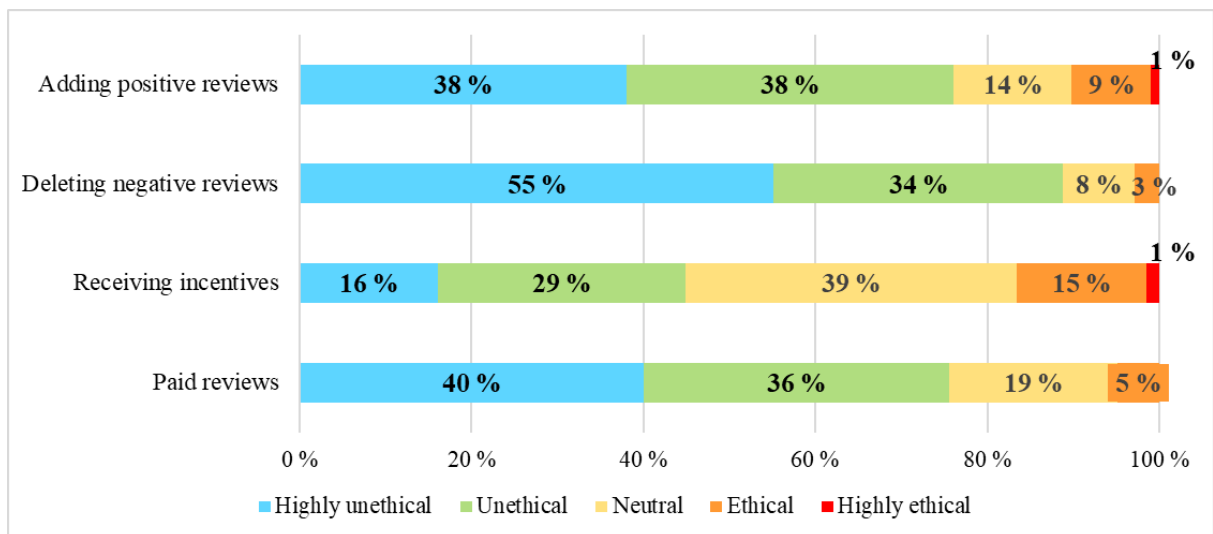


Figure 6. Tactics to manipulate the reviews (n=205)

Statement discovering attitudes towards the adding of positive reviews received equal amount of 38% responses in both options, highly unethical and unethical. Despite of this, average of 10% of respondents considered it as ethical. To conclude the deleting of the negative reviews was considered as most unethical tactic of customer feedback. Thus, receiving incentives was considered as most ethical.

When measuring the opinions involved with fabrication and ethics five different aspects were researched. The distribution between the answers had somewhat similar pattern throughout the five statements. Majority of the respondents replied that they agreed on all of the statements. Whereas the respondent selected agree option in the statement, unethical manipulated marketing influences consumer behavior.

While asking the developing suggestions concerning the regulations concerning the customer feedback 3 development suggestions were researched. The first statement in figure 7 was, additional regulations should be created to protect consumers, to which 23% of the participants strongly agreed while 53% agreed. The option neutral received slightly less answers than strongly agree and only few respondents disagreeing with the statement. As a result, this development suggestion received least amount of answers disagreeing with the statement.

The statement, additional regulations should be made to protect companies, 39% were at least agreed with the statement, on the contrary majority of the participants had selected neutral opinion by 36% of the total responses. Moreover, 25% of the selected responses at least disagreed with the idea of creating new regulations to protect companies. It was found out that respondents' attitudes varied somewhat evenly in these answers compared to the two other statements regarding the development of regulations.

The following statement was presented to the respondents; companies should inform in their websites when using manipulation tactics of offering incentives or paying money for writing of the review. 73% of the answers agreed, from which 30% strongly agreed. 20% of the answers were neutral opinions. This statement included most strongly agree answer. Analysis based on these responses implies that consumers might find it hard to recognize authentic reviews from fabricated ones and are hoping for improvement concerning the difficulty to recognize fabricated reviews clearly.

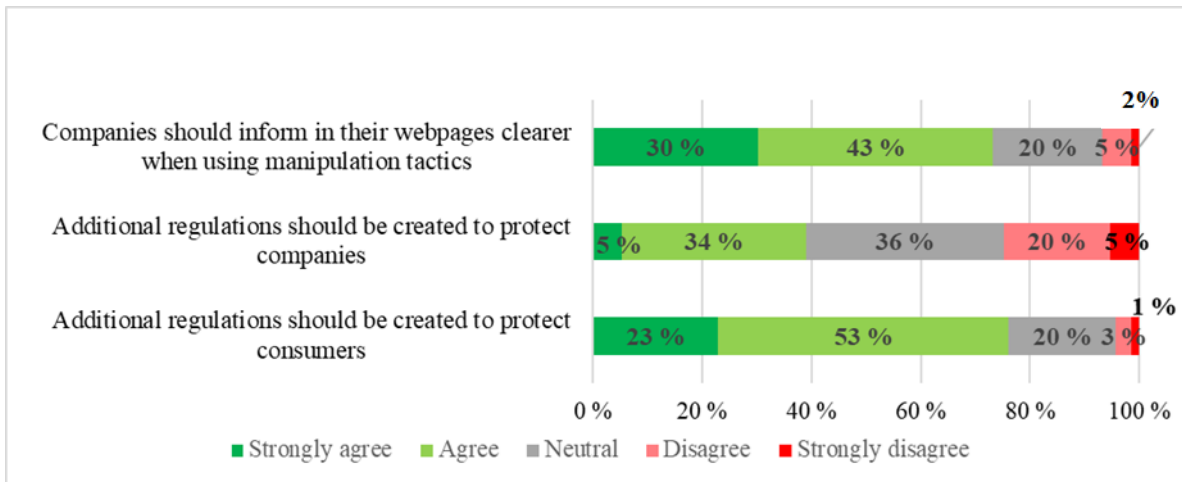


Figure 7. Attitudes towards additional regulations (n=205)

The figure 8 reveals that 76% of the respondents agreed, from which 24% strongly agreed that receiving information about companies fabricated customer reviews can decrease their purchasing from the companies. In fact, only 3% of the responses at minimum disagreed with the statement. Results imply that receiving information of the fabricated feedback can affect consumers purchasing behaviour towards the companies practising unethical marketing, which can lead to decreasing of purchasing from them.

Nevertheless, the analysis drawn from the collected data strongly suggest that respondents feel that receiving information about manipulated reviews affects their perceptions of the company's image negatively. As a minimum of 84% responses were agreeing if can damage company's image. Additionally massive amount of responses, 87% at least agreed that fabricated reviews affect trustfulness of the company image. While almost as large amount respondents agreed that ethical marketing in e-commerce is important, this being 83% of the total respondents. These statements received only few disagreeing opinions, since majority of the replies not agreeing were neutral. Because majority of 83% of the respondents agreed in some level that ethical marketing in e-commerce is important, it would be important to raise awareness among the consumers, that some of the reviews are not authentic.

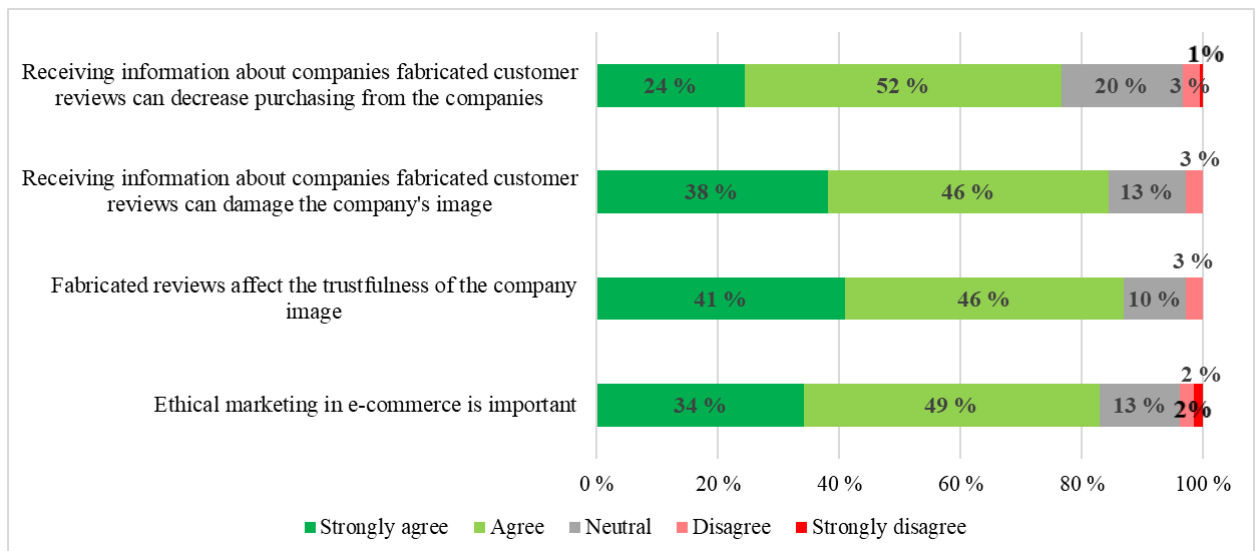


Figure 8. Attitudes towards the potential consequences (n=205)

Approximately 78% of the respondents would purchase a product even when they are not certain that the consumer review is real if the product, they purchase has enough valuable features. 11% of the respondents would purchase the product without the knowledge of the authenticity of the reviews if the product is cheap enough. 10 percent of the respondents would not purchase the product, while 1% would always purchase the product.

79% out of all the answers that in some extent informed purchasing product, even they are not certain that the customer review is real, either strongly agree or agree with statement; receiving information about companies fabricated customer reviews can decrease purchasing from the companies. Therefore, they agreed that receiving information that company is using unethical marketing can decrease the purchasing from the company. When in reality, they were still willing to make purchasing, when it benefitted them enough. In this case when the respondents can't be sure, that the review is real, the benefits received from the product exceeded the will to be a part ethically correct chain on events.

### 3.2. Comparison

The author of this research is conducting small comparison of the main findings between genders and between the university students studying in Estonia and Finland. To specify, this part will explain comparative findings discovered during the analysis process. Data was gathered from 89 university students from Estonia and 116 university students from Finland, the proportions being



relatively 57% and 43%. The proportions of these are somewhat balanced. The majority of participants, 135 were female university students, as 70 respondents were male. Although there is wider sample size of female students, as there was quite good sample proportion of male student too, comparison could be performed. It was discovered from the analysis and shown in figure 9, that female university students were slightly more active to search customer feedback from online compared to male university students.

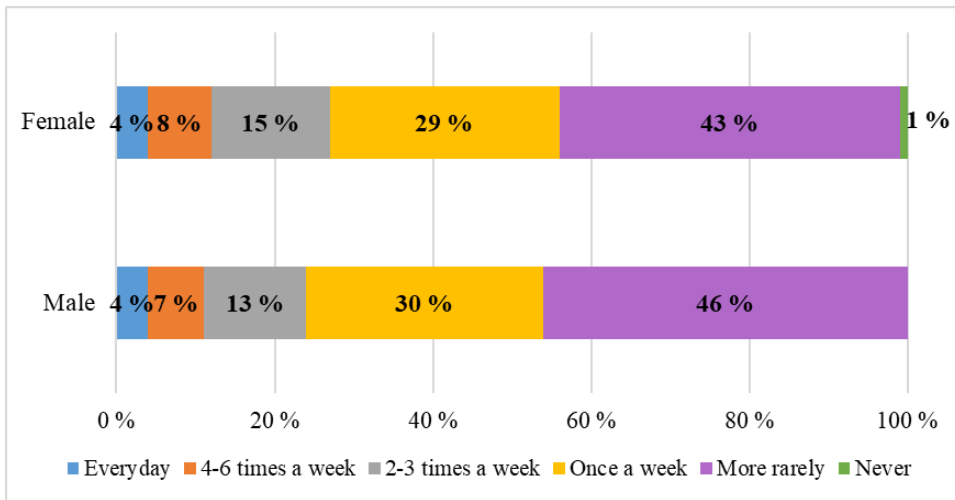


Figure 9. Comparison between genders' search of customer feedback (n=205)

Despite of the previous, male respondents in figure 10, were almost 10% more aware of the fabricated feedback online.

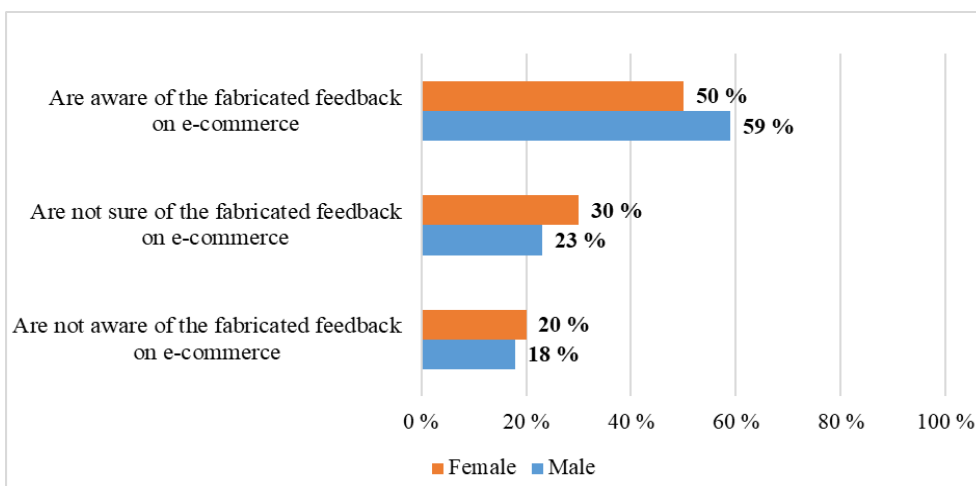


Figure 10. Comparison between the genders' awareness of fabricated feedback (n=205)

Male students' attitudes toward manipulation tactic of receiving incentives were more judging as they considered receiving incentives more highly unethical than females. The founding of figure 11 present that females considered receiving in incentives as more ethical than men.

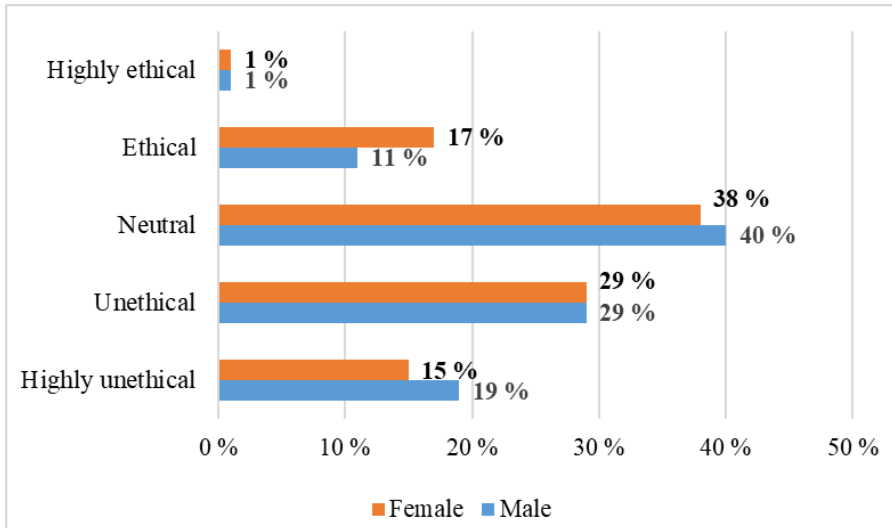


Figure 11. Comparison between genders' attitudes towards tactic of receiving incentives (n=205)

When comparing the results between university student in Estonia and in Finland, it was discovered in figure 12, that respondents studying in Estonia searched more often customer reviews than the Finnish respondents.

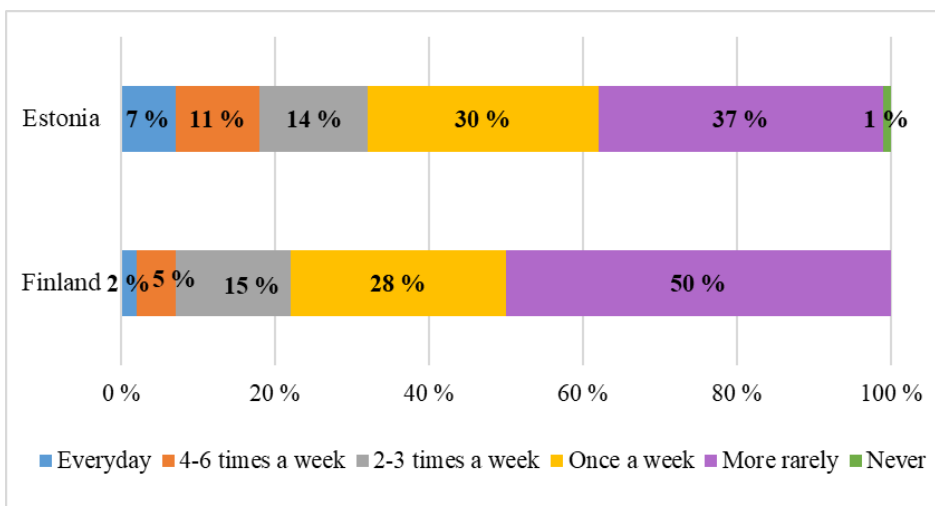


Figure 12. Comparison of the searching of feedback between the different countries (n=205)

Furthermore, the respondents from Finland were less aware of the fabricated feedback on e-commerce, which shows in the figure 13. On the contrary university students in Estonia were slightly more aware of the fabricated feedback.

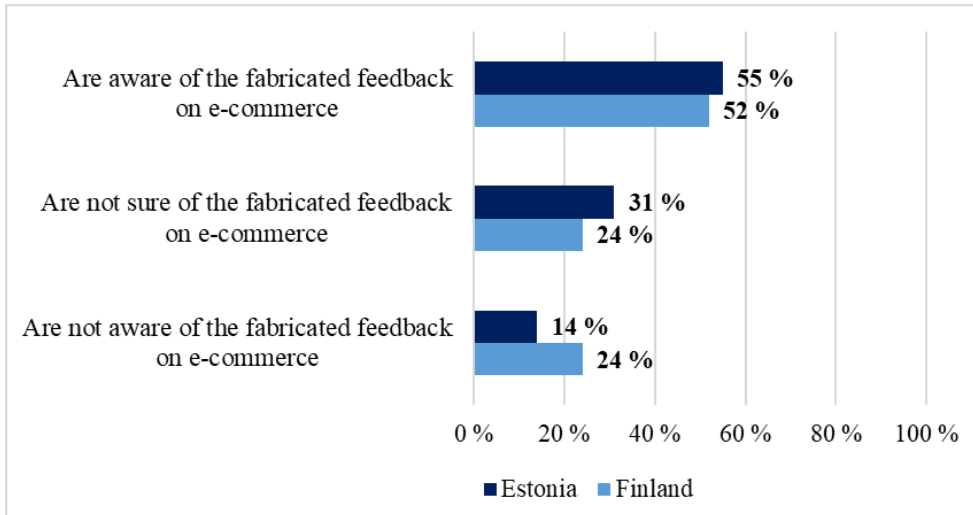


Figure 13. Comparison of awareness of fabricated feedback between university students in Estonia and Finland (n=205)

When comparing the attitudes in figure 14 towards that consumer feedback provides good information about the product or service, the students in Estonia agreed 13% less with the statement compared to respondents from Finland. Thus, from these results we can draw conclusion, that since respondents from Estonia are more aware of the fabricated feedback, they trust less the information quality received from the consumer feedback.

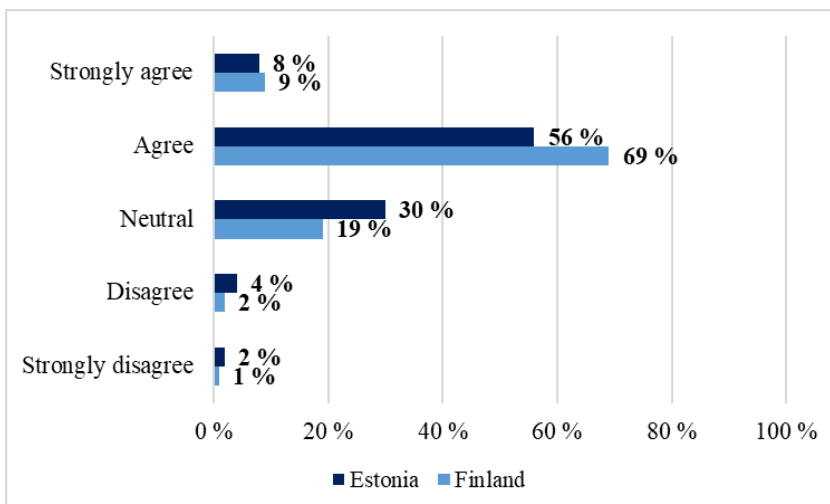


Figure 14. Comparison of consumer feedback providing good information about service or the product (n=205)

The research showed that Finnish university students consider tactic of deleting customer reviews more highly unethical act than the Estonian, while they had more neutral opinion of the statement. In figure 15, 6% of the respondents from Estonia considered deleting reviews as ethical. This could relate to the fact that Estonia can be considered as entrepreneurial country, with lot of small companies. As it was described in the theory chapter, some of the small company owners might be more affected by bad reviews. As small companies, owners have less clients, even smaller amount of bad reviews can have damaging effect on the entrepreneurs' income and company's success. In case of slander they have less resources to fight back the bad reviews compared to the large companies which can afford expensive law services. Since negative customer reviews might have been considered to provide more accurate information among the consumers', reason why it might be considered as neutral, is that deleting bad reviews might be seen as a way to protect the company and its entrepreneur as well. When researching the differences between the tactic of adding positive feedback, this was considered also as more ethical among the Estonian respondents than among the respondents from Finland.

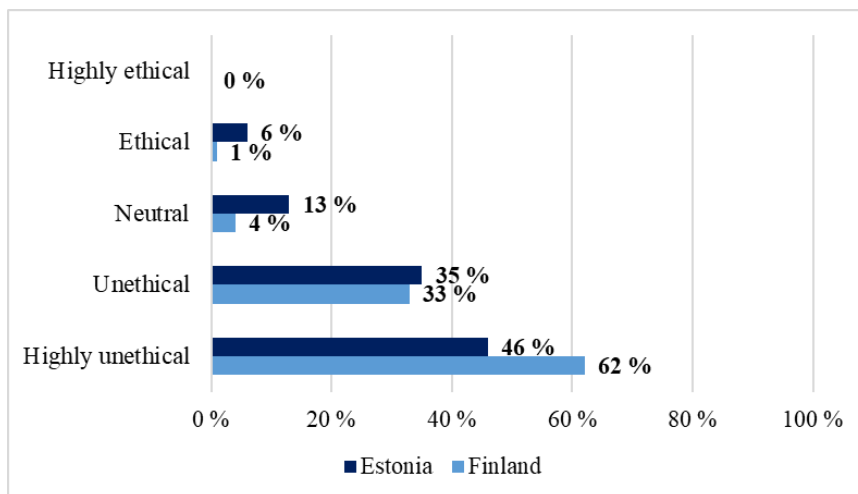


Figure 15. Attitudes towards ethicalness of deleting reviews (n=205)

Pearson correlations coefficients were calculated from the data. These results imply that there were no statistically significant correlations between the receiving information of the question: Receiving information that companies are using fabricated consumer reviews decreases purchasing decision and question: how important you consider customer feedback when conducting purchasing decision, correlation being 0,086. This should be over 0,9 in order to be statistically significant. As there was no statistically significant correlation, it could be suggested

that as it was mentioned in the theory of attitudes by Azjen *et al.* (2011), the people might verbally express their attitudes differently than in behavioral action.

### **3.3. Discussion and recommendations**

Majority of the respondents considered customer feedback as helpful when making purchasing decision and that reviews offer good information of the product or service. Approximately 55 % of the respondents searched customer reviews from online more than once a week, which implied that more than half of the consumers are exposed to consumer feedback at least once a week.

From the overall results, approximately 53% respondents were aware that there is fabricated review on e-commerce, on contrary 47% were not sure or did not know about this. As the usage of e-commerce continues to grow and even more consumers are using these platforms to purchase and search for consumer feedback, the awareness of this issues should be informed more to the consumers. Average amount of 21-40% of the customer feedback was thought to be manipulated, which is way lower than the evaluation made in China as even so much as (Peng *et al.* 2016, 270) 70 percent of the product ratings are compensated posters. These results do not correspond with each other, as it was noticed that the expectation of the overall amount of manipulated reviews was much lower among the respondents in Estonia and in Finland compared to China.

Around 48% of the participants agreed that customer feedback is trustworthy, whereas 40% of the participants had neutral opinion towards the trustworthiness of the customer feedback. Research conducted by Nielsen in 2009 stated that in USA, approximately 72 percent of the population using the internet have confidence regarding the consumer feedback posted to internet. (Ma, Lee 2014, 224-225) When comparing the confidence and trustworthiness as parallel concepts, the results show that attitudes towards trustworthy of consumer feedback among the university students in Estonia and in Finland are lower than the participants of the Nielsen research conducted in USA.

Well over a half, 60%, of the respondents had not tried to identify the authenticity of potentially fabricated feedback when reading it. On the other hand, 40% of the respondents had tried to identify the authenticity of the potentially fabricated feedback. The results of these two questions could be supported by the theory part, in which Peng *et al.* (2016, 270-271) wrote that anonymity of the writers of the review and the opportunity to act in a disguise as a role of a customer increase

the challenge of evaluating the origin of the feedback, moreover the lack of face to face communication leads having less cues which consumers could use as a tool to evaluate the realness of the feedback. Due to this, respondents might find it hard to identify the authenticity of the customer feedback, hence proportion of them might not try to identify authenticity.

Deleting negative reviews was experienced as most negatively. None of the respondents considered the deleting tactic as highly ethical as just 3% of respondents considered it as ethical. As it was stated in the theory part (Peng *et al.* 2016, 269), an empirical study in China by Dimensional research mentioned that negative ratings could have an effect on consumer behavior for 86 percent of the respondents. Deleting reviews generates unbalanced information and cues not visible to the consumer to notice, since purchase decision based on this can results as negative notions towards purchasing online (Peng *et al.* 2016, 274). Consumers consider negative reviews to provide better quality and precise information, not to mention since they are also rarer the negative review might be perceived having more weight although they would not (Helvesen *et al.* 2018, 2).

The majority of the respondents agreed that finding out that company is operating in unethical manner, such as providing manipulated customer feedback to consumers can result in decreasing purchased from the company or that this could damage company image. Majority of respondents supported too the idea of creation of additional legislation to protect consumer rights. To highlight, 88% out of all the answers that in some extent informed purchasing product, even they are not certain that the customer review is real, either strongly agree or agree with statement that additional regulation should be created to protect consumers. This could imply that the people currently purchasing the product might feel unsure about trusting the reviews although purchasing it, however they might want additional regulations to protect themselves from effects of unethical marketing.

57% of the respondents who answered they would not purchase a product if they are not certain its authentic, at least agreed with the same statement regarding protecting consumers. From this could make suggestion that people who do not anyways trust the authenticity of the reviews, might not also trust the additional regulations improving the issue as strongly as those who would consider purchasing the product. Despite of this, the majority of the respondents indicated that additional regulations should be made, since most of them showed positive attitudes towards the idea that companies should inform clearer when using manipulation tactics.

The main findings of the comparison were that different countries perceive ethical marketing in similar ways although some varying in cultural differences. As it was discovered from the analysis, students from Finland and Estonia had similar patterns on all around the questionnaire, as there were mainly only few percentage points differences. Opposite what was expected, in Estonia, country being more entrepreneurship driven than Finland, the trust toward authenticity of the customer reviews was lower compared to the students in Finland. However, the analysis discovered that the university students in Estonia were more permissible than students in Finland when it came to evaluate the attitudes of the manipulation tactics. In addition, it was discovered that male students were more aware of the fabricated feedback on e-commerce although female students used to search them a bit more often than men. Other gender differences concerning the attitudes of the manipulation tactics of the consumer feedback could be noticed, as females' attitudes towards receiving incentives were more positive than male students. Some small difference between the believes of the student in Estonia and Finland was discovered, as students in Estonia were more sceptical about the information being good. Thus, the research could state that university students in Estonia and in Finland perceive benefiting from reading review from online.

While conducting the research it was discovered that respondents of the questionnaire expressed strong interest towards the topic, which could also imply that consumers are willing to gather more information of the topic. Since, the research could be considered as pilot testing and the data offered valuable view of the topic, further studies concerning the topic should be conducted. As one of the most important finding being that more regulations should be made to protect consumers, since the e-commerce is growing rapidly and because almost half respondent were not aware or sure about this issue. As a researcher's opinion, while there are grey areas in the area of e-commerce marketing, the companies are also more drawn to utilize this lack of regulations for their benefits. Due to companies then committing unethical marketing in the unregulated areas, and as the e-commerce continues to grow consumers are even more exposed to unethical marketing methods. This can lead consumers to feel disassociation between their personal values and the pressure from the environment.

## CONCLUSION

The research problem of this study was to clarify whether the consumers need more information and possible additional regulations to be able raise the awareness of the fabricated customer reviews that are provided on e-commerce. As a result, the research was aimed at studying the consumers' attitudes towards the fabricated feedback on e-commerce. The questions were formed, and results collected from the data as a purpose to provide answers to the research problem.

The main finding of the research were that consumers lack information concerning the existence of the fabricated feedback on e-commerce. This could partly explain why well over a half of the respondents had not tried to identify the authenticity of potentially fabricated feedback. Despite of this, most of the respondents evaluated that less than half of the consumer feedback on e-commerce had been manipulated.

It was discovered that majority of the respondents search for consumer feedback at least once a week and they were considered providing good information about the product or service. Customer feedback was also considered important part of creation of purchasing decision. This represented that most of the respondents viewed customer reviews in positive manner. However, there was lack of knowledge and almost more than a half of the respondents were not sure or did not know about fabricated consumer feedback in e-commerce, simultaneously reviews were considered informative and important, this could lead the consumers conducting purchasing that result as negative experiences. The theory part of the research paper explained previously mentioned negative experiences due to unethical marketing which can challenge the development of the e-commerce industry. This would harm directly the companies and indirectly the consumers and society's welfare.

The consumer group of university students expressed attitudes supporting the development of the legislations and visibility of the tactics of incentives or monetary rewards. Almost all the consumers considered the deleting of the reviews as most negatively considered tactics of modifying reviews. The research conducted among the university students in China had similar finding.

As possible outcomes of situations were researched, where consumer would find about that company is using fabricated feedback, most of the respondents agreed this affecting the image of



the company in negative manner. The research also discovered that this could also affect in a way the respondents would decrease their purchasing from the company. This implies, that the companies practising unethical marketing, such as fabricating reviews as a goal to maximize profits, in fact could jeopardize their image and profits.

Majority of the respondents expressed attitudes that additional legislation should be created to support consumer right. This might suggest than more action from the organization or government could be made to secure consumers security and improve regulation in the areas, where unethical marketing is appearing. In generally ethicalness was considered to be important in marketing on e-commerce and to specify in the area of customer reviews.

One of the main findings of the research was that most of the respondents, and therefore probably the consumers, would make a purchase decision even when they are not sure about the authenticity of the review. Only few percentages were not committing purchasing decision without valid information of this. This implies that although consumers do not approve or agree with unethical marketing methods, they are still willing to override their inner values if the product has features or price that they value more. It is not certain if this would derive also from the consumers lack of option to be able to sure about the authenticity or could possible additional legislation clarify the result that could be made in the future.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

- Ahrens, J., Coyle, J. R., Strahilevitz, M. A. (2013). Electronic word of mouth: The effects of incentives on e-referrals by senders and receivers. - *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 47, No. 7, 1034-1051.
- Ajzen, I. (2005). *Attitudes, Personality and Behavior*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education. 2nd ed.
- Ajzen, I., Joyce, N., Sheikh, S., Cote, N., G. (2011). Knowledge and the Prediction of Behavior: The Role of Information Accuracy in the Theory of Planned Behavior. –*Basic and Applied Social Psychology* Vol. 33, No. 2, 101-117.
- Ajzen, I., Fishbein, M. (2005). *The influence of attitudes on behavior*. –*The handbook of attitudes*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated, 173-221.
- Ajzen, I. (2011). The theory if planned behavior: Reactions and reflections –*Psychology & Health* Vol. 26, 1113-1127.
- Brenner, S. N., Molander, E. A. (1977). Is the ethics of business changing? - *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 55, 57–71.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Cambridge dictionary. Accessible: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ethical> (1 March 2019)
- Cambridge dictionary. Accessible: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/marketing> (1 March 2019)
- Carrigan, M., Marinova, S., Szmigin, I. (2005). Ethics and international marketing: Research background and challenges - *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5, 481-493.
- Celuch, K., Robinson, N. M., Walsh, A. M. (2015). A framework for encouraging retail customer feedback –*Journal of Service Marketing*. Vol. 29, No. 4, 280-292.
- Donovan, R., Henley, N. (2010). *Principles and Practice of Social marketing: International perspective*. New York: Cambridge university press. 2nd ed.
- Fillieri, R. (2014). What makes online reviews helpful? A diagnosticity-adoption framework to explain informational and normative influences in e-WOM. –*Journal of Business research*, Vol. 68, 1261-1270.

- Gino F. Understanding ordinary unethical behaviour: why people who value morality act immorally Harvard Business School, Negotiation, Organizations & markets, Baker Library, Boston MA 02163, United States, Current opinion in Behavioral Sciences 2015, 3;107-111
- Helversen, B, Abramczuk K, Kopéc W, Nielek R. (2018). Influence of consumer reviews on online purchasing decisions in older and younger adults. - *Decision Support Systems* Vol. 113, 1-10.
- Hyman, M. R., Sierra, J. J. (2015). Marketing research process: Six stages. –Business Outlook, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1-11.
- Javalgi, R. G., Russell, L.T. M. (2015). International marketing Ethics: A Literature Review and Research Agenda - *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 148, No. 4, 703–720.
- Kan, M. (2012). *Baidu Employees Fired and Arrested for Taking Bribes to Delete Content*. Accessible: [https://www.pcworld.com/article/260498/baidu\\_employees\\_fired\\_and\\_arrested\\_for\\_taking\\_bribes\\_to\\_delete\\_content.html](https://www.pcworld.com/article/260498/baidu_employees_fired_and_arrested_for_taking_bribes_to_delete_content.html) (25 March 2019).
- Kolowich., L. (2019). *22 Customer Review Sites for Collecting Business & Product Reviews*. Accessible: <https://blog.hubspot.com/service/customer-review-sites> (25 March 2019).
- Limbu, Y. B., Wolf, M., Lunsford, D. L. (2011). Consumers’ perceptions of online ethics and its effects on satisfaction and loyalty - *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing* Vol. 5, No. 1, 71-89.
- Liu, R. R., Wei, Z. (2010). Informational influence of online customer feedback: An empirical study –*Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*. Vol. 17, No. 2, 120-131
- Ma, Y. J., Lee, H. (2014) Consumer responses toward online review manipulation. - *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 224-244.
- Morrison, P., Miles, K., Mihalik, L. (2011). *The Yelp wars: false reviews, slander and anti-SLAPP –what’s ethical in online reviewing?*. Accessible: <https://www.scpr.org/programs/patt-morrison/2011/08/25/20426/yelpamazonfakereviewcitysearchtripadvisorantislap/> (25 March 2019)
- Murphy, P. E., Laczniak, G. R., Bowie, N. E., Klein, T. A. (2005). *Ethical marketing*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Nasr, L., Burton, J., Gruber, T. (2018) Developing a deeper understanding of positive customer feedback –*Journal of Services Marketing*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 142-160
- Peng, L., Cui, G., Zhuang, M., Li, C. (2016) Consumer perceptions of online review deceptions: an empirical study in China. - *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 269-280.
- Purnawirawan, N., Eisend, M., Pelsmacker, P. D., Dens, N. (2015). A Meta-analytic In-

vestigation of the Role of Valence in Online Reviews. - *Journal of Interactive Marketing*  
Vol. 31, No. 17-27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2015.05.001>

Saleh, I., M. Khine, M., S. (2014). *Attitude Research in Science Education: Classic and Contemporary Measurements* Charlotte NC: Information Age Publishing

Singhapakdi, A., 2004. Important Factors Underlying Ethical Intentions of Students: Implications for Marketing Education. -*Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 261–270.

Yao, E., Frang, R., Dineen, B. R., Yao, X. (2009). Effects of customer feedback level and (in)consistency on new product acceptance in the click-and-mortar context –*Journal of Business Research*. Vol. 62, No. 12, 1281-1288.

# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Questionnaire

Dear all,

I am a bachelor student from Tallinn University of Technology studying International Business Administration. I am researching the attitudes and experiences towards fabricated customer feedback in online commerce among university students in Estonia and in Finland. The fabricated feedback are manipulated customer reviews and ratings that represent opinions of the consumers regarding products or services, with the purpose to affect the purchasing behaviour of other potential customers.

The questionnaire consists of 14 questions and answering takes approximately 5 minutes. The questionnaire will be handled in confidential manner and with anonymity. I'm grateful if you would have time to answer this questionnaire and help in clarifying the attitudes and experiences of university students in Estonia and Finland.

What is your gender? \*

- Male
- Female

How old are you? \*

Short answer text  
.....

In which country you study in? \*

- Estonia
- Finland

What study level are you currently studying? \*

- Undergraduate degree (e.g. Bachelor's degree)
- Post graduate degree (e.g. Master's degree)
- Doctors degree (PhD degree)

How often do you search for customer reviews online when considering purchasing a product or service?

- Everyday
- 4-6 times a week
- 2-3 times a week
- Once a week
- More rarely
- Never

In which areas you are looking for customer reviews when making the purchasing decision?

- Electronics
- Entertainment / Movies / Theatre
- Games / Toys
- Clothing
- Cosmetic products
- Health products
- Groceries
- Restaurants
- Travelling
- Sport gear
- Other...

How important do you find the customer feedback when considering purchasing of a product or a service? \*

1 = Totally unimportant, 2 = Rather unimportant, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Rather important, 5 = Totally important

|                     | 1                     | 2                     | 3                     | 4                     | 5                     |                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Totally unimportant | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Totally important |

What do you think about customer feedback? \*

|                        | Stongly disagree      | Disagree              | Neutral               | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| It is trustworthy      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| It provides good i...  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| It helps to make fi... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Are you aware of fabricated feedback on e-commerce? \*

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Have you tried to identify the authenticity of potentially fabricated feedback when reading them?

- Yes
- No

How have you tried to identify the authenticity of potentially fabricated feedback when reading them?

Long answer text

---

## Description of the methods of fabrication and manipulation of customer feedback

Paid customer review = Companies pay employees or hire people outside of the company to write positive reviews about the company or its products or services

Receiving incentives = Providing discounts, longer guarantees, gift cards or similar benefits to consumers for writing customer reviews

Deleting reviews = Deleting customer reviews means removing the negative customer feedback from any web platform without author's permission

Adding reviews = Adding positive fabricated feedback to any web platform about a company or its products or services

## What do you think about the level of ethicalness of the following customer feedback tactics? \*

|                       | Highly unethical      | Unethical             | Neutral               | Ethical               | Highly ethical        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Paid reviews          | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Receiving incentiv... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Deleting negative ... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Adding positive re... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

## What is your opinion of the following statements about review fabrication and ethics? \*

|                       | Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Neutral               | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Ethical marketing ... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Fabricated review...  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Receiving informa...  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Receiving informa...  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Unethical manipul...  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |



...

To what extent do you consider the customer feedback have been manipulated with? \*

|            | 0-20 %                | 21-40 %               | 41-60%                | 61-80%                | 81-100%               |
|------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Percentage | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

What do you think about the following statements regarding developing of regulations concerning customer feedback? \*

|                        | Strongly disagree     | Disagree              | Neutral               | Agree                 | Strongly agree        |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Additional regulati... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Additional regulati... | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Companies shoul...     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Would you purchase a product if you are not certain that the customer review is real? \*

- Always
- Yes, if the product is cheap enough
- Yes, if the product has enough valuable features
- No

