Online reviews are an important source of word-of-mouth and affect consumers’ product choices along with company sales and profitability. Therefore, understanding the factors underlying consumers’ online review-posting behavior is essential for business success and knowledge development. Extant studies have revealed that individuals are often exposed to past consumers’ opinions when making post-purchase rating decisions, after which the current reviewer adjusts his/her evaluation accordingly. The influence of prior reviews may also emerge when an individual checks existing online reviews prior to making a purchase, thereby shaping his/her pre-purchase expectations of the product or service. Social influence theory suggests that individuals may experience conformity needs, uniqueness needs, or normative conflict in a social group, with the dominant factor contingent on situational characteristics. Therefore, the effects of social influence on consumers’ online review behavior provide an interesting area for exploration.

This dissertation consists of three independent but closely related studies within hotel and restaurant settings. The objectives of this dissertation are to investigate how prior reviews and disconfirmation (i.e., the discrepancy between a customer’s post-purchase evaluation and prior average review rating posted by other consumers) may affect consumers’ online review-posting behavior in terms of their willingness to post online reviews, their ultimately posted review rating, and the content characteristics of the review. By utilizing an experimental design method,
Study 1 examines the influence of disconfirmation on consumers’ willingness to post online reviews and on their final review ratings. The findings of this study suggest that disconfirmation can increase consumers’ willingness to post online reviews, and positive disconfirmation can increase consumers’ online review ratings. Compared with a large variance in prior review ratings, disconfirmation effects are stronger when the variance in prior ratings is small.

By utilizing an econometric and text mining method based on online review data from Yelp, Study 2 examines the influence of disconfirmation on the content characteristics of consumer-generated online reviews. Results show that disconfirmation leads consumers to write longer and more sentimental reviews accompanied by within-review explanations (i.e., within the text body of a review) to justify why they have deviated from past consumers’ opinions. Negativity bias is also found to characterize disconfirmation effects, such that negative disconfirmation exhibits stronger effects than positive disconfirmation. Based on online review data from Yelp, Study 3 examines the impact of prior average restaurant review rating on a subsequent consumer’s post-purchase review rating along with relevant factors that inform his/her conformity or differentiation behavior. Findings suggest that prior average review rating exerts a positive influence on subsequent ratings for the same restaurant but is attenuated by variance in existing review ratings. Moreover, this form of social influence is stronger when the consumer has a moderate dining experience or invests less cognitive effort in writing an online review. Additionally, compared with so-called “elite” reviewers per Yelp’s classification, non-elite reviewers are more susceptible to the social influence of prior average review ratings.

This dissertation contributes to the literature in hospitality marketing and general marketing by providing new theoretical insights. The empirical findings across these three
studies offer important managerial implications regarding online review management and digital marketing strategies for hospitality firms and online review communities alike.