Online Faculty Rating Sites: Examining How Students Perceive and Use RateMyProfessors.com

Nicole M. Landry

Katelyn E. Kurkul

Christopher R. Poirier*

Stonehill College

We surveyed 550 students to examine which rating categories on RateMyProfessors.com (2010), an online faculty rating site, they found to be most important when selecting a professor. We hypothesized that students would trust RateMyProfessors.com and choose Easiness as the most important category. Results indicated that students did tend to trust RateMyProfessors.com ratings. Furthermore, they reported that Quality, Helpfulness, and Clarity are more important categories than Easiness and Hotness. In addition, analyses revealed that men are more likely to consider Hotness when selecting a professor than women. The findings from this study shed light on how online faculty rating sites may influence students' selection of professors.

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have been a standard procedure on college campuses since the early 1900s (see Algozzine et al., 2004, for a review). Although the method of evaluation may vary from institution to institution, typically the process involves students anonymously answering a series of open- and closed-ended questions about course content, teaching effectiveness, and student learning. Ideally, faculty use the feedback to enhance teaching and learning; in addition, college administrators may use the evaluations when making decisions on salary, tenure, and promotion. At most institutions, the completed evaluations are not accessible to the students (Kindred & Mohammed, 2005). However, due to recent technological innovations (e.g., the Web), the popularity of Web-based survey sites has increased significantly (Carini, Hayek, Kuh, Kennedy, & Ouimet, 2003), offering students access to informal evaluations of professors.

Online faculty rating sites, such as RateMyProfessors.com, Pick-A-Prof.com, and ProfessorPerformance.com provide students with a new method of evaluating professors. Currently, the largest and most well known of these sites is RateMyProfessors.com, which includes over 10 million reviews of more than 1 million professors (RateMyProfessors.com, 2010). When visiting the site, students can anonymously rate professors based on Clarity, Helpfulness, and Easiness on a scale of 1 (*negative*) to 5 (*positive*), and the site calculates an Overall Quality score by averaging the Clarity and Helpfulness scores. Moreover, students may rate their professor's appearance (i.e., "hot" or "not") and post written comments about their course experiences and professors. Recently, RateMyProfessors.com added a feature that allows professors to offer rebuttals to posted comments.

It is apparent that RateMyProfessors.com is becoming more popular on college campuses (RateMyProfessors.com, 2010), although little is known about how students use the site. Kindred and Mohammed (2005) investigated undergraduate students' opinions of RateMyProfessors.com by conducting focus groups. They asked students about their motives for using RateMyProfessors.com as well as their perceptions of the site. They found that students were motivated to visit RateMyProfessors.com because they were curious about other students' opinions. Moreover, although students revealed that they trust their friends' opinions of professors, they also reported that the RateMyProfessors.com ratings provided supplemental information for course selection. In addition, they preferred the comment-based assessment of each professor more than the numerical ratings, but they viewed the comments with suspicion and thought some comments reflected students with extreme views. Overall, students visit RateMyProfessors.com to quickly gather informa-

Author Note: A portion of this research was presented at the Association for Psychological Science (APS) Teaching Institute poster session in Chicago, IL (May, 2008).

We are grateful to Jane Nash for reviewing a draft of this manuscript and providing valuable comments and suggestions. We also thank those who kindly volunteered to participate in the study.

*Faculty mentor

tion about professors and courses so that they can make more informed course selections.

Aside from the research conducted by Kindred and Mohammed (2005), there is a paucity of research on RateMyProfessors.com usage. In the present study, we explored students' use of RateMyProfessors.com by surveying 550 undergraduate students. First, based on the literature and RateMyProfessors.com statistics (Felton, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2004; Felton, Koper, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2008; Kindred & Mohammed 2005; RateMyProfessors.com, 2010), we predicted that the majority of students would report using RateMyProfessors.com at least once to browse reviews or to comment on professors. Second, based on Kindred and Mohammed's findings (2005), we predicted that students would trust the information on RateMyProfessors.com. Finally, considering that instructors of courses rated as easy tend to be rated more positively overall (Felton et al., 2004; Felton et al., 2008; Kindred & Mohammed, 2005; Silva et al., 2008), we hypothesized that students would consider Easiness the most important category when selecting a professor or course. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not state hypotheses for the other categories.

Method

Participants

We used convenience sampling to distribute surveys to five hundred-fifty 17- to 22-year-old (M_{age} = 19.54 years; 222 men, 328 women) undergraduate students enrolled at a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States. We recruited participants by visiting dorms and classrooms across campus. The participants consisted of first- (n = 127), second- (n = 166), third- (n = 168) and fourth-year (n = 89) students.

Procedure

We administered a 13-item paper questionnaire. The instructions informed participants that their answers would be held in confidence and that they had the right to withhold any information. Participants completed questions that asked their gender, age, high school GPA, college GPA, and class year. Participants circled "*yes*" or "*no*" in response to "Have you participated in a previous RateMyProfessors.com study?" and "Have you ever used RateMyProfessors.com before?" Furthermore, they rated "the importance of each RateMyProfessors.com factor in your decision to take a professor" on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Finally, the survey asked "On a scale from 1 (*strongly distrust*) to 5 (*strongly trust*), how much do you trust the reviews on RateMyProfessors.com?" After participants completed the survey, we debriefed them about the intended purpose of the study.

Results

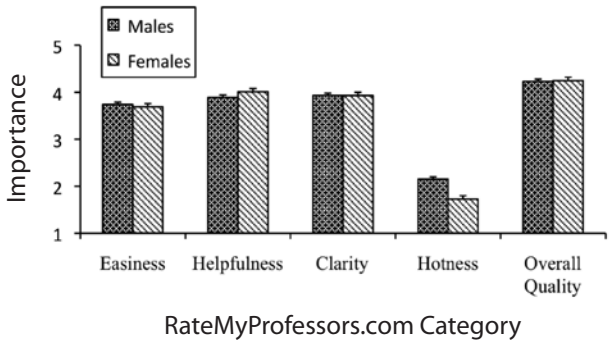
Of the 550 students we surveyed, 500 (90%) students reported using RateMyProfessors.com at least once; therefore, we conducted analyses on the data of these 500 participants (M_{age} = 19.55 years; 192 men, 308 women). First, we found that students who used RateMyProfessors.com generally trusted the ratings (M = 3.46, SD = 0.74). An independent samples t test comparing trust scores of men (M = 3.41, SD = 0.79) and women (M = 3.49, SD = 0.71) revealed no statistically significant difference, $t(498) = 1.14$, $p > .05$.

Second, we analyzed the ratings data with a 2 (gender: Male, Female) x 5 (RateMyProfessors.com category: Easiness, Clarity, Helpfulness, Hotness, Overall Quality) mixed-factor ANOVA with RateMyProfessors.com category as a within-subjects variable. Results indicated that there was a significant main effect of RateMyProfessors.com category, $F(4, 1992) = 550.56$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta = 0.53$. Post-hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD (HSD = 0.17, $p = .05$) indicated that participants rated Hotness as a significantly less important factor in their decision to enroll in a professor's course than Easiness, Helpfulness, Clarity, and Overall Quality. Furthermore, they rated Overall Quality as significantly more important than Easiness, Helpfulness, and Clarity, and Easiness as significantly less important than Helpfulness and Clarity (see Table 1).

In addition, there was a significant interaction between RateMyProfessors.com category and gender, $F(4, 1992) = 6.85$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta = 0.01$ (see Figure 1). Although Hotness was the least important category for both men and women, a follow-up independent samples t test indicated that men rated Hotness signifi-

FIGURE 1

Male and female mean ratings (+*SE*) of the importance of Easiness, Helpfulness, Clarity, Hotness, and Overall Quality on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).



cantly higher than women, $t(330.66) = 3.63$ $p < .01$.[1] Finally, the main effect of gender was not significant.

Discussion

Online faculty rating sites are growing in popularity: 90% of the students in our sample reported visiting RateMyProfessors.com at least once. Also, they seemed to trust the RateMyProfessors.com ratings. Although we predicted that students would consider Easiness the most important RateMyProfessors.com category, our findings revealed that Overall Quality, Helpfulness, and Clarity were more important. Furthermore, men and women reported that Hotness is not an important category; however, men were more likely to consider Hotness than women.

Undergraduate students spend a significant amount of time online, so it is not surprising to find that 90% of the students reported using RateMyProfessors.com to evaluate or choose professors. Moreover, not only do they use online faculty rating sites, but they also trust RateMyProfessors.com ratings. According to Kindred and Mohammed (2005), students enjoy using RateMyProfessors.com to quickly obtain information about a class or professor. It is clear that these sites are popular and that they may affect students' course choices.

In the present study, students indicated a preference for considering Overall Quality, Helpfulness, and Clarity instead of Easiness when making decisions about courses and professors. It is encouraging that students focused on categories that are more likely to correlate with teaching effectiveness and student learning. In addition, similar to Kindred and Mohammed (2005), we found that students dismissed Hotness as an important category. This is a surprising finding because research suggests that attractiveness influences how students rate professors (Felton et al., 2004; Felton et al., 2008; Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman, & Misso, 2006). For instance, when Riniolo et al. (2006) examined the influence of physical attractiveness on student evaluations using the RateMyProfessors.com Hotness ratings, they found that professors who had higher Hotness ratings had higher SETs. Apparently, students' evaluations of their professors are influenced by physical attractiveness, but they say their reasons for selecting a course or professor are not very much affected by attractiveness. Further research is necessary to explore the potential impact of gender and attractiveness on how students perceive and use SETs (Riniolo et al., 2006).

Faculty could use online faculty rating sites to enhance their teaching and improve their traditional evaluations. For instance, to increase Helpfulness and Clarity, professors might self-reflect about their helpfulness, or poll their current students about what they find unclear. Although the sites may be perceived by many students as providing supplemental information for course selection, students, faculty, and administrators should be cautious when using such sites for several reasons. First, online ratings may not be valid. For example, an emotional student could use a site to "attack" a professor. In addition, the online ratings represent a small percentage of the total number of students enrolled in courses. Therefore, the ratings are not representative of the population.

Another reason for using caution is because the online faculty rating sites are constantly changing. For example, as new features are added to a site or old features are deleted, students' ratings may be influenced. Therefore, their ratings may depend on when they visited the site. Finally, the operational definitions of the rating categories are poorly developed. Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008) suggest that Easiness could have several different meanings and therefore could affect how students interpret the ratings. The sites should take greater care in defining the rating categories.

The current study had several limitations. First, we used convenience sampling and recruited our entire

Footnote: [1]Because the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated, the results of the *t* test do not assume equal variances.

TABLE 1

Students' Mean Ratings of the Importance of RateMyProfessors.com Categories

RateMyProfessors.com Category									
Easiness		Helpfulness		Clarity		Hotness		Overall Quality	
M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
3.71_a	0.95	3.97_b	0.89	3.93_b	0.86	1.89_c	1.19	4.24_d	0.89

Note. Means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ in the Tukey HSD comparison.

sample from the same small liberal arts college. Further research should consider taking a random sample from a larger population (i.e., several institutions from across the country). Second, because we relied on the survey method, we did not measure students as they were using the actual RateMyProfessors.com website. Perhaps future research could focus on students using RateMyProfessors.com during the course registration period. Furthermore, a comparison of these students with a group of students who do not use the site, or use the site infrequently, would be worth exploring. Third, we examined just one site. Future work should examine other sites and the importance of the rating categories listed on such sites. Finally, we did not assess the importance of the written comments on RateMyProfessors.com. According to Kindred and Mohammed (2005), students pay more attention to written comments than numerical ratings; therefore, it is imperative to consider both in future studies.

Given the popularity of online faculty rating sites, this is an important area of research. Our data show that sites such as RateMyProfessors.com affect many students' decisions about which professors to take. Due to concerns about validity of the online ratings, institutions should consider making their SETs public, providing students with more information than what they find on online faculty rating sites. Babad, Darley, and Kaplowitz (1999) examined post-course evaluations at Princeton University, which are made public to the student body. They suggested that students chose classes after reviewing the post-course evaluations, and students selected professors and courses in accordance with their needs. If institutions made their student evaluations of faculty public, students would most likely use this information rather than the information found on websites such as RateMyProfessors.com (Coladarci & Kornfield, 2007).

References

Algozzine, B., Beattie, J., Bray, M., Flowers, C., Gretes, J., Howley, L., et al. (2004). Student evaluation of college teaching: A practice in search of principles. *College Teaching, 52,* 134-141.

Babad, E., Darley, J., & Kaplowitz, H. (1999). Developmental aspects in students' course selection. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91,* 157-168.

Carini, R. M., Hayek, J. H., Kuh, G. D., Kennedy, J. M., & Ouimet, J. A. (2003). College student responses to Web and paper surveys: Does mode matter? *Research in Higher Education, 44,* 1-19.

Coladarci, T., & Kornfield, I. (2007). RateMyProfessors.com versus formal in-class evaluations of teaching. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 12,* 1-13.

Felton, J., Koper, P. T., Mitchell, J., & Stinson, M. (2008). Attractiveness, easiness and other issues: Student evaluations of professors on Ratemyprofessors.com. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 33,* 45-61.

Felton, J., Mitchell, J., & Stinson, M. (2004). Web-based student evaluations of professors: The relations between perceived quality, easiness, and sexiness. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 29,* 91-108.

Kindred, J., & Mohammed, S. N. (2005). "He will crush you like an academic ninja!": Exploring teacher ratings on RateMyProfessors.com. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 10,* article 9. Retrieved February 17, 2009, from http:// jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue3/kindred.html

Otto, J., Sanford, D. A., Jr., & Ross, D. N. (2008). Does RateMyProfessors.com really rate my professor? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 33,* 1-16.

RateMyProfessors.com (2010). Retrieved November 1, 2010, from http:// RateMyProfessors.com

Riniolo, T. C., Johnson, K. C., Sherman, T. R., & Misso, J. A. (2006). Hot or not: Do professors perceived as physically attractive receive higher student evaluations? *The Journal of General Psychology, 133,* 19-35.

Silva, K. M., Silva, F. J., Quinn, M. A., Draper, J. N., Cover, K. R., & Munoff, A. A. (2008). Rate my professor: Online evaluations of psychology instructors. *Teaching of Psychology, 35,* 71- 80.