Students' perspectives on RateMyProfessors.com: an empirical investigation of perception and attitude

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Abstract: Since its inception in 1999, the website of RateMyProfessors.com has been popular and has gathered more than 15 million ratings of approximate 1.5 million professors from more than 7,000 schools. It provides college students opportunities to rate and comment on their instructors and helps them with course selection. The purpose of this study was to investigate the college student perception and attitude towards this website. We analysed survey data from 166 undergraduate students. Our findings suggest that overall students have positive experiences and find RMP as a reliable source of information for course selection. About 25% of participants who have posted ratings have stronger positive attitude towards the website and higher tendency to check the website before registering classes.

Keywords: attitude; faculty evaluations; faculty ratings; perception; RateMyProfessors; student evaluations.

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1 Introduction

Over the years, the internet has helped facilitate word-of-communication that includes emergence of instructor rating websites. One of the largest and best known sites is Ratemyprofessors.com (hereafter identified as RMP). Since its inception in 1999, the website has gathered more than 15 million ratings of approximate 1.5 million professors from more than 7000 schools and has more than 4 million monthly visits from college students (RMP, 2016). Even Forbes Magazine included RMP's ratings to establish its rankings of top US universities and colleges (Steinberg, 2009). RMP provides an outlet for students to anonymously rate and comment on their instructors. Students could use

five-point Likert scale to rate their instructors on three dimensions: easiness, helpfulness and clarity. The average score of helpfulness and clarity provide an overall quality score for each instructor. Beginning May 18, 2016, RMP eliminated all three dimensions and only measured *overall quality* and *level of difficulty* on a five-point scale. A professor's overall quality rating reflects how well the professor teaches the course material, and how helpful the professor is both inside and outside of the classroom. Is the professor available for additional help after class or during office hours? Is the professor approachable, nice and easy to communicate with? According to the website, an overall quality score ranges between 3.5 and 5 is considered 'good', 2.5–3.4 is 'average' and 1–2.4 is 'poor', respectively. Based on the rating, the professor receives one of the three of smiley faces: smiling (good: green), neutral (average: yellow) and frowning (poor: red). In addition to both measures, students also indicate attendance (mandatory or not mandatory), whether they would take the professor again and take the course for credit, textbook use and hotness of the instructor with yes or no response. Students could also select up to three tags (e.g. 'tough grader' and 'gives good feedback') and provide qualitative feedback. Given its ratings and comments from only a subset of students voluntarily visit and post ratings, there has been scepticism and researchers have been trying to understand RMP's impact on several issues (Otto et al., 2008; Kindred and Mohammed, 2005; Bleske-Rechek and Fritsch, 2011).

2 Literature review

One central issue is reliability and validity of ratings and the literature has shown inconsistent results. Some have found RMP ratings to be biased (Clayson, 2014; Legg and Wilson, 2012), whereas others have found them to be valid measures of student learning (Otto et al., 2008). A common concern of reliability and validity is that the characteristics of those self-select individuals who provide RMP evaluations could be different from all students (Legg and Wilson, 2012) and evaluations may be influenced by other factors such as race, gender, attractiveness and easiness of the instructor than quality of teaching (Felton et al., 2004, 2008; Leung et al., 2013; Reid, 2010; Stuber et al., 2009). Students motivated to post their evaluations could possibly have extreme viewpoints about the professor (Peterson et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is no control over who can post the evaluation. Evaluations could be made by anyone without even taking the course (Carnevale, 2006; Jaschik, 2006; Johnson and Crews, 2013). Using Otto et al. (2008) study to further analyse RMP data, Clayson (2014) concluded that RMP ratings are biased and could be merely called a 'likeability' scale.

Analyses of RMP ratings and reviews have shown to have patterns in the findings. There are positive correlations among almost all scale items: helpfulness, clarity and easiness. Helpfulness and clarity are found to be redundant (Davison and Price, 2009; Otto et al., 2008). The average of both is associated with easiness (Coladarci and Kornfield, 2007; Davison and Price, 2009; Felton et al., 2004, 2008). The correlation between ratings of instructor quality and easiness is consistently strong and positive. Despite concerns of validity, RMP is popular (Davison and Price, 2009; Hartman and Hunt, 2013) and overall has been found to be strongly correlated with traditional teaching evaluation. In a survey of 426 students, Coladarci and Kornfield (2007) found a significant correlation between overall quality rating and traditional student evaluation with comparable measures. In addition, students made more positive than negative

comments about the course and instructor (Silva et al., 2008; Kindred and Mohammed, 2005) and generally perceived RMP evaluations to be valid and credible to guide their choices of professors and courses (Field et al., 2008; Hayes and Prus, 2014; Landry et al., 2010).

A growing body of literature has investigated how the use of RMP affects students' performance and behaviour in class. For instance, Lewandowski et al. (2012) found that the use of RMP could affect future evaluations of a professor in a positive way. It also has been found to influence students' behaviours in class such as participation (Kowai-Bell et al., 2012). In a series of studies, Edwards et al. designed and conducted experiments to examine whether and how much students were influenced by RMP ratings and reviews prior to viewing a lecture from an instructor. In each experiment, they presented students with rating and reviews of a professor, had them view a lecture and then assess their perceptions of the educational experience. Students did not know that the professor was fictional and the ratings and reviews were fabricated. In their first study (2007), they found students who viewed positive RMP ratings about the professor perceived him as more credible and attractive, and indicated higher levels of affective learning and motivation to learn when compared to students who received negative RMP ratings about the professor or none at all. Students who received negative ratings evaluated the professor least favourably. In the second study (2009), they found exposure to RMP ratings could shape students' belief and motivation to learn because they know what to expect. Results show that students who read positive RMP ratings before viewing the lecture performed significantly better on a quiz over the content and reported a great likelihood of engaging in the behaviours the professor recommended. In their final study (2013) which examined the effects of 'mixed reviews' on student perceptions of instructors and classes, they found students who received positive ratings evaluated the professor and course more favourably. However, students who received a mixture of positive and negative ratings, all negative ratings, or no ratings at all rated the professor identically.

While past studies have investigated validity and reliability of RMP ratings and their effects on students' educational experiences, there is a lack of attention focused on RMP from students' perspective. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to investigate students' perception and attitude by surveying undergraduate students.

3 Methodology

Based on literature review, a questionnaire was developed to measure students' usage of RMP that contains 15-item of 7-point Likert scales (see Appendix) ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. These items were developed to measure the following areas: usage of the site, basis of their rating and perceived accuracy of the ratings. To increase the validity of this study, a semantic differential scale was developed to measure students' attitude towards RMP for the course selection. Nine bi-polar adjective pairs comprised the scale to measure attitudes. Adjective pairs were alternated so that positive and negative did not align on opposite sides of the scale. This step helped prevent acquiescent responses on either side of the scale. Participants were asked to rate the use of RMP for course selection and indicate their judgement on 7-point scale for each bi-polar adjective pair. The higher score is equal to a positive attitude.

A total of 166 undergraduate students enrolled in marketing classes participated in the survey. Table 1 provides the summary of the demographics and usage of RMP. Class standing and major had no significant effects on the measured items. Therefore, they were not discussed further. As indicated in Table 1, of the 166 participants, 84.4% (141) have visited RMP in the last 2 years and 24.6% (25) had posted ratings, a surprising similar result reported by Belske-Rechek and Michels (2010). In their sample, 84% of respondents had visited RMP and 23% of respondents had posted.

Table 1 Summary of participants

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Have you used RMP.com in the last 2 years?		
Yes	141	84.4
No	25	15
Have you posted your rating or comments on RMP?		
Yes	41	24.6
No	123	73.7
Class standing		
Freshman	33	19.9
Sophomore	23	13.9
Junior	62	37.3
Senior	48	28.9
Major		
Marketing	23	13.8
Non-marketing business major	93	55.7
Non-business major	50	29.9

4 Results and discussion

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of 15 survey items. The results indicate an overall favourable perception and usage on RMP. The site's significant influence on students' behaviour is as evidenced by its growing popularity over the years. Even with a small sample, a majority (84%) of participants have visited the website. The results show that RMP has helped participants prevent taking classes with bad ratings. In addition to using the site prior to registering classes, participants found RMP to be helpful and have had positive experience of using the site. More importantly, the results show that most participants like to know what they are getting into before taking the course. As to the credibility of ratings, participants did not have strong opinions. It could be due to their ability to seek out information perceived to be reliable and useful, as reported by Hayes and Prus (2014). Therefore, the issue of credibility is not of students' primary concern.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of survey items

		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	I always check RMP before registering a class.	5.18	2.05
2	I trust my friends' opinions on classes more than RMP.	5.30	1.39
3	The credibility of RMP is questionable.	4.01	1.48
4	It is easy to tell whether the comments on RMP are valid.	4.45	1.58
5	I am sceptical with RMP comments and rating.	3.73	1.50
6	I tend to rely on the numerical ratings than comments on RMP.	3.52	1.53
7	RMP has not been helpful with my course selection.	2.65	1.64
8	Comments on RMP tend to be subjective.	4.43	1.28
9	I only post on RMP when I have a really strong opinion of a teacher.	3.93	2.31
10	RMP can be a place for students to seek revenge or vent about bad experiences of a course.	4.79	1.89
11	I post on RMP in order to help other students.	4.15	2.05
12	I like to know what I am getting into before deciding which course to take.	6.00	1.35
13	RMP has helped me prevent taking classes that I wouldn't like.	5.24	1.86
14	My experiences with RMP have been positive.	5.45	1.44
15	I would avoid taking a professor's class if RMP has bad ratings.	5.56	1.60

Note: Means are based on 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

Past studies questioned the representativeness of the ratings that students would rate only those they really liked or disliked which could potentially result in a bias of the ratings. Although our findings suggest that participants somewhat agree that RMP can be a place for students to seek revenge or vent about bad experiences of a course, most did not post on RMP because they have a strong opinion of a teacher. Further analysis to compare means between those who have posted ratings on RMP and those who have not was not statistically significant. This finding is contrary to previous research showing students motivated to post their evaluations could possibly have extreme viewpoints about the professor (Peterson et al., 2011).

Additional comparison of means on each survey item between those who have posted ratings and those who have not posted ratings show more interesting results. There is a statistical significance on 'I always check RMP before registering a class', 'RMP has not been helpful with my course selection', 'I post on RMP in order to help other students' and 'My experiences with RMP have been positive'. This finding suggests that those who have posted are more involved with RMP and their behaviour has been positively reinforced.

Interestingly, the 9-item semantic differential scale ($\alpha = 0.83$) measuring students' attitude towards RMP for the course selection shows similar results. Figure 1 displays the distribution of means on each adjective pair between two groups, those who have posted ratings on RMP and those who have not. As shown in Figure 1, participants have positive attitude towards RMP overall. Using RMP for course selection would be quite wise, safe, beneficial, wise use of time, valuable and effective. Particularly, participants indicate that using RMP for course selection is very useful and very good for them. Compared to those who have not posted, those who have posted on RMP in the past show stronger attitude.

To them, using RMP for course selection is particularly effective, valuable, useful, good for them and wise use of them. This finding also suggests a stronger positive attitude reinforced by their posting behaviour. The results also show that as respondents scored higher on an item, higher scores are also observed in an associated item. The three strongest include good for me-bad for me and useful-useless ($r = 0.85$); worthless-valuable and ineffective-effective ($r = 0.89$); and waste of time-wise use of time and worthless-valuable ($r = 0.82$).

Figure 1 Means distribution of attitude towards RMP between two groups (see online version for colours)

5 Conclusion

Although interest in research on RMP ratings has grown, little is known about their impact from students' perspective. Unlike past studies focusing on RMP ratings which students have posted, this study investigated students' perception and attitude using a survey. While the issue of reliability and validity of RMP has merits, it is also important to understand students' use of RMP. Clearly, the results of this study echoed the concern that evaluations posted on RMP do not constitute a representative of all students taking a course. Although most participants in our sample have visited RMP, only 24.6% has posted an evaluation. However, it should be noted that past research has found that RMP ratings strongly correlate with those traditional in-class student evaluations (Coladarci

and Kornfield, 2007; Sanders et al., 2011) and those who have posted are not different from those who have not posted in grade point average, learning goals and grade orientation (Bleske-Rechek and Michels, 2010).

In general, the results of this study demonstrate that students rely on RMP for their course selection. Most participants use RMP for information purposes versus posting evaluations of faculty. They also have positive perception and attitude towards the site which could help explain its growing popularity over the years.

John Swapceinski, founder of RMP, argued that students expect more information than before because they view themselves as customers seeking to maximise the value of their educational dollars and demand information about the instructors and courses prior to enrolment (Gilroy, 2003). Moreover, as demonstrated by Edwards et al. (2007), students may rely heavily on online communication prior to contact with an instructor and course to form expectations of educational experiences and learning. Our findings corroborate previous research that RMP is not going away. Given that there may be some validity to the content as past studies have shown, what can instructors and students learn from ratings and reviews posted on RMP? Foremost, as with any form of online reviews, it is important to understand that it could potentially affect perception, attitude and behaviour. Instructors should recognise and value RMP as a source of feedback to improve teaching and as an opportunity to manage students' expectation. To gather useful information from RMP, instructors could employ recommendations used for traditional teaching evaluation (Buskist and Hogan, 2010; Lewis, 2001). As for students, they should be cautious about RMP content. They need to realise that ratings and reviews posted on RMP are motivated by various reasons, including altruism and vengeance. Those ratings and reviews could develop expectation and influence future educational experiences of other students who read them. In addition, RMP should not be a one-stop source for making course decision and be perceived as measures of teaching effectiveness. Students should do more research by looking at the course description, considering the professor's research and even contacting the professor about the course.

Finally, findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, our convenient sample only consisted of students from marketing classes. It is possible that samples from other disciplines may yield different results. Past studies suggest that students rate math and natural sciences instructors as more difficult (Felton et al., 2008; Bleske-Rechek and Michels, 2010) than were instructors from other disciplines. Future research could expand to students in non-business courses, thereby providing further insights into students' behaviour. Second, given RMP recently changed its rating system to only include overall quality and level of difficulty. This change could have an impact on students' perception and behaviour as well.

RMP continues to grow and is popular among students affecting their decisions about which courses to take. In a rapidly growing information age, online evaluations and reviews are becoming an important factor influencing consumers' decision-making. They are conveniently accessible to help consumers make an informed decision. While the ratings may not be perfect, sites like RMP have been a helpful tool for students. How students process information to make their course selection presents another important research opportunity.

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Appendix

PART 1

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement by circling the number on a 7-point scale.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 **Strongly agree**

1	I always check RMP before registering a class.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	I trust my friends' opinions on classes more than RMP.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	The credibility of RMP is questionable.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	It is easy to tell whether the comments on RMP are valid.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	I am sceptical with RMP comments and rating.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	I tend to rely on the numerical ratings than comments on RMP.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	RMP has not been helpful with my course selection.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Comments on RMP tend to be subjective.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	I only post on RMP when I have a really strong opinion of a teacher.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	RMP can be a place for students to seek revenge or vent about bad experiences of a course.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	I post on RMP in order to help other students.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	I like to know what I am getting into before deciding which course to take.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13	RMP has helped me prevent taking classes that I wouldn't like.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14	My experiences with RMP have been positive.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15	I would avoid taking a professor's class if RMP has bad ratings.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

PART 2

Using a 7-point scale, please indicate your degree of agreement with each of the following question.

<i>Using RMP for course selection next semester would be _____</i>	
	<i>Extremely Very Quite Not sure Quite Very Extremely</i>
	<i>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</i>
16	Foolish
17	Safe
18	Harmful
19	Pleasant
20	Waste of time
	Wise
	Risky
	Beneficial
	Unpleasant
	Wise use of time

PART 2 (continued)

Using a 7-point scale, please indicate your degree of agreement with each of the following question.

Using RMP for course selection next semester would be _____	
	Extremely Very Quite Not sure Quite Very Extremely
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
21 Good for me	Bad for me
22 Useful	Useless
23 Worthless	Valuable
24 Ineffective	Effective
25 Have you used RMP in last 2 years? ____ Yes ____ No	
26 Have you posted your rating or comments on RMP? ____ Yes ____ No	
27 Gender: ____ Male ____ Female	
28 You are: ____ Freshman ____ Sophomore ____ Junior ____ Senior	
29 Current GPA: _____	
30 Number of credits completed so far? _____	
31 Are you a marketing major? ____ Yes ____ No	
32 If you are <u>NOT</u> marketing major, are you a business major? ____ Yes ____ No	

Thank you for your participation. Your responses will be kept confidential.