

Establishing the Adoption of Electronic Word-of-Mouth through Consumers' Perceived Credibility

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Abstract

In an online environment, consumers never touch the product and depend on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to help them making purchase decision. The eWOM becomes one of the most influential channels of communication in the marketplace. This study aims to determine the importance of perceived credibility in an online consumer's decision-making process. In this empirical study, we verify that a consumer's perceived eWOM credibility positively influences his or her adoption of eWOM. We also found that source credibility, eWOM quantity, and eWOM quality significantly affect a consumer's perceived eWOM credibility.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), credibility

1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is one of the most influential channels of communication in the marketplace. The Internet provides numerous venues for consumers to share their views and experiences, and electronic WOM (eWOM) spreads at an unprecedented speed and at a much lower cost than traditional WOM (Li & Zhan, 2011). Compared to general marketing communication tools, WOM is perceived to be more trustworthy and more relevant, and can reduce consumer resistance significantly because it originates from the experiences of other consumers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). With the popularization of the Internet, eWOM has begun to offer the promise of an emerging advertising discipline (Plummer, 2007).

How WOM changes consumer attitude toward purchasing decisions is worthy of investigation. WOM adoption is considered an effective measure for consumers' acceptance of communicator opinions (Li & Zhan, 2011). Adoption refers to WOM persuasiveness, in addition to the degree that consumers are likely to rely on WOM in purchasing decisions (Duhan et al., 1997). Previous studies have also attempted to determine the factors that contribute to consumer WOM adoption because it is difficult to verify the authenticity and source of WOM, especially in an online environment (Cheung et al., 2009; McKnight & Kacmar, 2006).

Trust is considered a vital factor affecting online consumer activities, such as the acceptance of others' advices (McKnight et al., 2002). Information credibility is an underlying dimension of trust, which is more appropriate for evaluating WOM communication; a consumer who believes online information to be credible has no reason to forego adoption (Cheung et al., 2009; Sallam & Wahid, 2012). Compared with other attitude dimensions, how people construct online WOM credibility would be a significant topic for understanding the process of eWOM usage.

Studies on the impact of eWOM communication can be classified into two levels: market-level analysis and individual-level analysis (Lee & Lee, 2009). At the market level of analysis, researchers have focused on market-level parameters such as product sales. Studies of this type have used objective panel data including the rating stars of a review, total number of reviews, the content length of each review, and the review content quality. At the individual level of analysis, researchers have postulated that eWOM is a process of personal influence in which communication between an eWOM sender and a receiver can change the receiver's attitude and purchasing decision.

Generally, elaboration likelihood model (ELM) provides a theoretical explanation of the message-processing route of a person's perception (Park et al., 2007). The ELM posits that people who are willing and able to process a message are more likely to process persuasive attempts by using the central route. In other words, they

are more likely to generate their own thoughts in relation to arguments. However, people who lack motivation or ability are more likely to process information by using peripheral routes, or mental shortcuts, by focusing on non-content cues. Consumer involvement is associated with the motivation to process information, and expertise is associated with the ability to process information; these two factors are considered to represent consumer experience.

The objective of this study is to determine the factors that influence a consumer's perceived eWOM credibility and the importance of credibility in affecting a consumer's adoption of eWOM, including purchase intention. Theoretically, this study provides a viewpoint to clarify the impact of eWOM adoption in the purchase decision-making process and the important predictors of eWOM adoption. In practical terms, this study offers evidence that eWOM plays a significant role in consumer decision making. Thus, firms should not only focus on advisement creation, but also pay attention to consumer opinions.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1 Credibility and eWOM Adoption

Wathen and Burkell (2002) indicated that source credibility is a key factor in assisting a consumer to judge online information. The first task for an online consumer is to rate the credibility of the medium itself, based on its surface characteristics. If a Web site presents a reliable interface, is well-designed, and has effective visuals, it attracts the consumer to remain on the site and continue using it. The second task involves rating the source regarding the message content because source credibility is fairly consistent with trustworthiness and expertise. The third aspect of the process involves assessing the interaction of the message presentation and the content with the consumer's cognitive state. This is determined from the consumer's experience and acknowledgment.

In an online environment, consumers rarely touch the product or recognize the eWOM sender. Source credibility is a vital predictor in the early stage when a consumer is choosing a Web site, and it contributes to the perceived credibility of messages on the site (Dabholkar, 2006; Dou et al., 2012). Consumer-perceived credibility of eWOM is defined as the extent to which one perceives a recommendation or review as believable, true, or factual (Cheung et al., 2009). Awad and Ragowsky (2008) suggested that perceived credibility is a prime determinant in a consumer's decision-making process, and reduces uncertainty in both social and business interactions. Therefore, we provide the following hypothesis:

H1: Higher source credibility positively affects the perceived credibility of eWOM in consumers.

Adopting eWOM is a psychological action that affects online consumers through social norms in an online environment. Sussman and Siegel (2003) indicated that a consumer who perceives a review to be credible has more confidence in adopting eWOM and using it to make purchase decisions. Perceived eWOM credibility refers to the judgments made by a message recipient concerning the believability of online reviews (Hong and Park, 2012). Researchers have also provided empirical evidence that if consumers perceive higher eWOM credibility, the likelihood of eWOM adoption rises (Cheung et al., 2009, Fan & Miao, 2012, Lee & Koo, 2012). We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: Higher perceived eWOM credibility in consumers positively affects their adoption of eWOM.

2.2 eWOM Quantity and eWOM Quality

When a consumer searches for online reviews, the quantity of eWOM makes the reviews more observable (Cheung & Thadani, 2010); that is, the volume of eWOM represents the popularity of a product. Reading numerous reviews by others could reduce consumer anxiety when making a purchase decision because consumers reason that many others have also purchased the product (Chatterjee, 2001). Some empirical studies (Park et al., 2007; Sher & Lee 2009) provided evidence that eWOM quantity positively influences the consumer-perceived credibility of eWOM. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: A higher quantity of eWOM positively affects the perceived eWOM credibility of consumers.

The quality of eWOM is another vital factor that is usually discussed with quantity. Once the eWOM on the site gains consumer attention, consumers begin to judge whether the review is worth reading. Information quality was proven early as a significant predictor of the success of an information system (DeLone & McLean, 1992). Consumers care about the correctness and usefulness of eWOM, and good content quality increases their willingness to trust eWOM (Awad & Ragowsky, 2008). Park, Lee, and Ham (2007) indicated that high-quality and the quantity of eWOM enhance persuasiveness. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Higher-quality eWOM positively affects perceived eWOM credibility in consumers.

2.3 Elaboration Likelihood Model

The ELM explains why people prefer to refer to others' opinions when making a purchase decision (Park et al., 2007; Li, 2012). People who are willing and able to process a message are more likely to process persuasive attempts using the central route. Otherwise, people who lack motivation or ability are more likely to process information using peripheral routes to consult the advice of others. In the ELM, involvement is associated with the motivation to process information, and expertise is associated with the ability to process information (Petty et al., 1983).

Park and Kim (2008) found that customers with high expertise are able to evaluate information according to experience and knowledge. Similarly, Bansal and Voyer (2000) indicated that consumers with higher expertise have more confidence in making purchase decisions and refer less to others' opinions. Therefore, we predicted that customer expertise affects the perceived credibility of eWOM, and proposed the following hypothesis:

H5: Higher expertise in customers negatively affects their perceived eWOM credibility.

Another issue with the ELM is involvement. Celsi and Olson (1988) indicated that involvement can be situational or enduring. Situational involvement is a temporary elevation of relevance regarding the objective product during the purchase decision-making process. We used situational involvement as a predictor in this study. Consumers with higher involvement have more motivation to understand products and are more likely to read others' opinions to gather more information. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H6: Higher involvement of consumers positively affects their perceived eWOM credibility.

Figure 1 shows the research model used in this study.

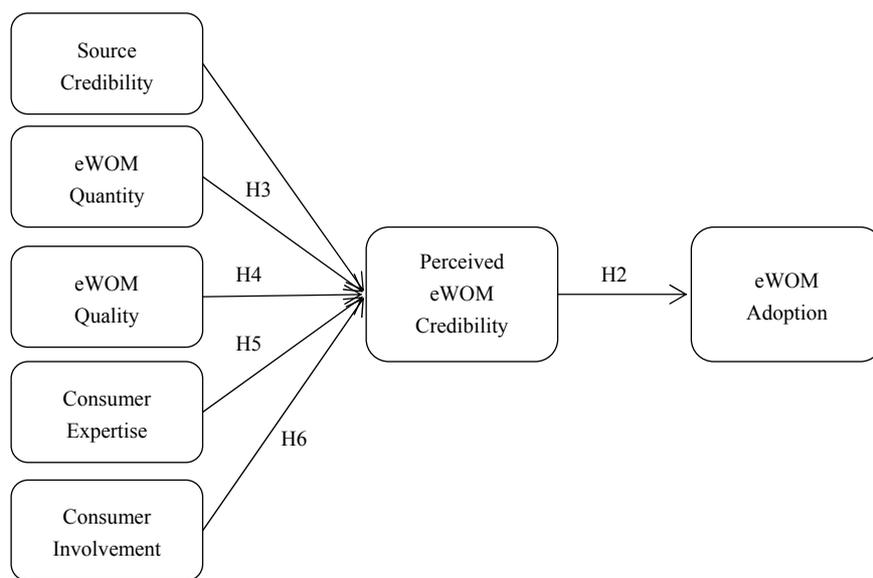


Figure 1. Research model

3. Research Method

Park and Lee (2009) indicated that eWOM has more impact on experience goods than search goods. This is because consumers cannot usually judge the attributes of an experience good before they purchase and use it (Huang et al., 2009). Additionally, consumers only gather information from product images and descriptions, especially in an online environment. Therefore, consumers must be aware of product reviews written by other consumers. For this study, we selected cosmetic products as an instrument to examine how eWOM influences a consumer's decision-making process.

We conducted an experiment that manipulates eWOM quantity and quality, thus resulting in a 2×2 (high quality vs. low quality, high quantity vs. low quantity) factorial designs. We defined high-quantity eWOM as eight reviews and low-quantity eWOM as four reviews, in accordance with the suggestion made by Park and Kim (2008). High-quality eWOM was defined as the provision of a pragmatic description about product attributes, whereas low-quality eWOM was defined as providing more emotional descriptions.

An initial structured questionnaire was developed based on a review of the relevant literature. We adopted

eWOM-quantity items from Park, Lee, and Ham (2007), eWOM-quality items from Park and Kim (2008), source credibility and consumer expertise from Gefen and Straub (2004), consumer involvement from Premazzi et al. (2010), and perceived eWOM credibility and eWOM adoption from Cheung et al. (2009). All items were measured on a 5-point scale.

Subjects were randomly assigned to treatment conditions. Forty-six online shoppers participated in the pretest. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to establish reliability and validity. Cronbach's α of the indicators ranged from 0.821 to 0.917, which is higher than the acceptance reliability coefficient level of 0.7 suggested by Nunnally (1978). Therefore, the questions used for this study were reliable. Regarding validity, the factor loadings belonging to each construct after analysis showed the standardized beta coefficients exceeding the required convergent validity score of 0.5.

A total of 443 responses were collected, of which 435 were usable; 134 were in paper form, written by college and graduate students, and the remaining 301 were submitted by online users. The survey was posted on public cosmetic-related forums of a bulletin board system (BBS; telnet://ptt.cc) and forwarded using Facebook to collect the experiences of eWOM users. Cronbach's α of the indicators ranged from 0.827 to 0.963, and the factor loadings belonging to each construct showed significant standardized beta coefficients that were over 0.6. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, Table 2 shows the discriminant validity of this study, and Table 3 shows the CFA results.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

	Gender	
	Frequency	Percentage
Male	156	35.9
Female	279	64.1
Total	435	100
	Age	
	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20	34	7.8
21-30	367	84.4
31-40	30	6.9
41-50	3	0.7
51-60	1	0.2
61 and over	0	0.0
Total	435	100

Table 2. Discriminate validity

	AVE	CR	Source Credibility (1)	eWOM Quantity (2)	eWOM Quality (3)	Consumer Expertise (4)	Consumer Involvement (5)	Perceived eWOM Credibility (6)	eWOM Adoption (7)
(1)	0.566	0.886	0.753						
(2)	0.852	0.920	0.438	0.923					
(3)	0.614	0.905	0.535	0.570	0.783				
(4)	0.819	0.948	0.466	0.238	0.201	0.905			
(5)	0.843	0.970	0.340	0.238	0.176	0.768	0.918		
(6)	0.819	0.931	0.583	0.543	0.695	0.273	0.245	0.905	
(7)	0.682	0.915	0.546	0.593	0.716	0.282	0.293	0.681	0.826
Mean	N/A	N/A	3.125	3.368	3.578	3.407	3.806	3.337	3.812
S.D.	N/A	N/A	0.928	0.845	0.845	0.963	0.827	0.889	0.884

4. Results

4.1 Manipulation Checks

The subject responses on the two items that were designed to check consumer perceptions of eWOM quantity were averaged. ANOVA was conducted, which indicated the presence of the main effect of review quantity [$F(1, 433) = 5.202, p < .05$]. Subjects in the eight-review condition perceived the review quantity to be greater, compared to subjects in the four-review condition ($M = 3.90$ and 3.72). Thus, the review quantity was

manipulated successfully.

Subject responses to the manipulation checks on review quality were also examined. These were averaged for ANOVA. The results showed that subjects in the high-quality review condition had a greater perception of review quality than those in the low-quality review condition [$F(1, 433) = 10.826, p < .001, M = 3.675$ and 3.473]. Therefore, the review quality was also successfully manipulated. Table 4 shows the ANOVA test of this study.

Table 3. CFA results

Variables	Items	Factor loadings	Mean	S.D.	Cronbach's α
Source credibility	sc1	0.672	3.368	0.623	0.845
	sc2	0.800			
	sc3	0.830			
	sc4	0.660			
	sc5	0.812			
	sc6	0.724			
eWOM quantity	qa1	0.928	3.806	0.826	0.827
	qa2	0.919			
eWOM quality	qu1	0.734	3.578	0.644	0.874
	qu2	0.800			
	qu3	0.753			
	qu4	0.759			
	qu5	0.794			
	qu6	0.854			
Consumer expertise	ex1	0.901	3.125	1.067	0.928
	ex2	0.850			
	ex3	0.920			
	ex4	0.946			
Consumer involvement	iv1	0.912	3.407	1.041	0.963
	iv2	0.931			
	iv3	0.932			
	iv4	0.941			
	iv5	0.890			
	iv6	0.901			
Perceived eWOM credibility	pec1	0.902	3.337	0.705	0.889
	pec2	0.897			
	pec3	0.915			
eWOM adoption	ad1	0.828	3.812	0.671	0.884
	ad2	0.752			
	ad3	0.837			
	ad4	0.881			
	ad5	0.872			

Table 4. ANOVA test

Depend variable	Source	DF	Sum of squares	Mean squares	F ratio	F probability
eWOM Quantity	Between	1	3.512	3.512	5.202	0.023*
	Within	433	292.323	0.675		
	Total	434	295.836			
eWOM Quality	Between	1	4.931	4.931	10.826	0.001**
	Within	433	175.618	0.406		
	Total	434	180.009			

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

We used smartPLS for structure equation modeling (SEM) analysis. The full model ($n = 435$) is shown in Fig. 2.

The research model shows that source credibility ($\beta = 0.26, p < .000$), eWOM quantity ($\beta = 0.16, p < .001$), and eWOM quality ($\beta = 0.46, p < .000$) all have a significant influence on consumer-perceived eWOM credibility, supporting H1, H3, and H4. Perceived eWOM credibility was shown to have a significant positive effect on eWOM adoption ($\beta = 0.68, p < .000$), supporting H2. Finally, consumer expertise and involvement do not have a significant effect on consumer-perceived eWOM credibility ($\beta = -0.02, p < .343$; $\beta = -0.05, p < .996$); thus, H5 and H6 were not supported.

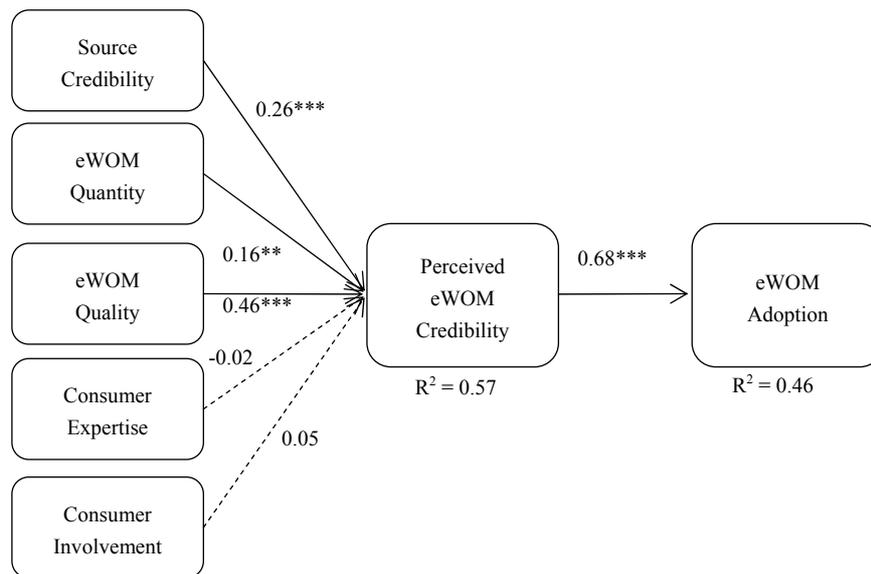


Figure 2. Hypothesis testing

Notes: $n=435$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

5. Conclusion

For this study, we focused on how perceived eWOM credibility in consumers influenced their eWOM adoption and the predictive factors of perceived eWOM credibility. Perceived eWOM credibility significantly affects eWOM adoption in consumers ($\beta = 0.68, R^2 = 0.46$). Consumer adoption of eWOM represents how eWOM changes their attitude toward products, and may help them make purchase decisions. The survey results showed that constructing consumer credibility in an online environment is the most important aspect. Trust and credibility have generally been discussed in electronic commerce research, and are thought to be indispensable for predicting the activity of online consumers (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Awad & Ragowsky, 2008; Cheung et al., 2009; Fan & Miao, 2012).

The quality of eWOM is the most significant factor, positively affecting the perceived credibility of consumers ($\beta = 0.46, p < .001$). Reviews that are pragmatic and persuasive, with a sufficient number of argumentative points based on factual information about the product, increase consumer confidence in referring to eWOM. In addition, in an online environment, consumers difficultly confirm the origin of the eWOM and the identity of the source. Source credibility measures the trustworthiness of the eWOM source, including the reviewer's expertise and the reputation of the vendor. This research provides evidence that source credibility also positively influences the perceived credibility of consumers ($\beta = 0.26, p < .001$).

The quantity of eWOM has a positive influence on the perceived credibility of consumers ($\beta = 0.16, p < .01$). The number of reviews is attracting consumer attention, and the consistency of numerous eWOM enhances eWOM reliability. Finally, although consumer expertise and involvement have no significant effect on perceived eWOM credibility, but the previous study offered a sight that consumer expertise reduces their perceived credibility of eWOM because they prefer making decisions on their own, and consumers who have higher involvement are willing to consider discussions and adopt others' opinions (Fan & Miao, 2012). Some researchers have suggested that a consumer's involvement might be a moderator of perceived eWOM credibility (Park et al., 2007; Petty et al., 1983).

Our results have implications for the nature of eWOM credibility building. The decision-making process of consumers is influenced by the information content received. This study shows that specific aspects of informational influence, such as source credibility, eWOM quality, and eWOM quantity, can be highly influential

on consumers' perceived eWOM credibility. A high level of eWOM credibility enhances a consumer's desire for eWOM adoption regarding the online recommendation, and attracts repeat visits to other consumers' recommendations. Furthermore, eWOM credibility also raises the overall value of the reviews provided, which benefits consumers who refer to the reviews. This study presents a model that provides firms which concerns online consumer reviews with strong instructional insight. We sought to determine the perceived credibility of consumers to make eWOM messages more useful. If the eWOM message is effective in a consumer's purchase decision-making process, then firms should focus more on maintaining their reputation and satisfying consumers.

6. Limitation

The main limitation of this study is that, although five factors were selected as the predictors of consumers' perceived eWOM credibility, only three were shown to have a significant influence. This might be because consumers usually notice the information content more, and ignore normative attributes. Cheung et al. (2009) indicated that a consumer's perceived credibility is influenced by informational and normative factors. Other possible factors that help construct perceived eWOM credibility and eWOM adoption exist, such as recommendation consistency and recommendation rating.

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