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The influence of Facebook discussions on purchase intention and word of mouth

Abstract

This chapter examines the influence of online consumer discussions on Facebook on purchase intention and word of mouth (WOM). Specifically, it attempts to determine whether Facebook discussions are perceived as credible and how these discussions are linked with behavioural intentions. The first part of this chapter presents a research model linking seven constructs. In the second part, we tested the research model and hypotheses with a sample of 151 consumers from one Facebook group for children's shoe recommendations. Of the seven hypotheses tested, we found support for six. This chapter concludes by discussing the contributions of the study to both theory and practice, outlining the main limitations and suggesting future study areas.

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The influence of Facebook discussions on purchase intention and word of mouth

Introduction

Today, e-commerce is linked with different social media platforms and online communities, where people can share their knowledge about different products by using electronic word of mouth (eWOM) (Hajli, 2018). When planning purchases, consumers use the internet to seek information on certain products or services, and eWOM is an effective marketing communication strategy because it provides consumers with information about products and services (Yeh & Choi, 2011). Because consumers tend to rely on eWOM as support for their purchase intentions, it becomes important for them to evaluate the credibility of recommendations made by other consumers (Lis, 2013). However, knowledge of the effect of eWOM source credibility on consumer behaviour, such as purchase intention, has remained scarce (Ismagilova et al., 2020).

As the amount of time spent on different social media channels has increased, consumers have gradually become active participants. Therefore, the power of marketing has changed from brands to consumers (Hutter et al., 2013). Consumers are usually seeking information from different social networking sites (SNSs) because recommendations made by acquaintances are considered more credible than those of strangers. Some eWOM source credibility determinants, such as social homophily and trustworthiness, have been recognised as influencers of consumer eWOM behaviour (Chu & Kim, 2011). Today's consumers are quite active in different online communities, yet understanding what drives them to spread eWOM and what affects their eWOM behaviour has remained understudied (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

SNSs and online communities can also affect brand awareness. However, while companies have been trying to create brand awareness on SNSs, they have not optimised their approaches because they are still focusing mainly on one-way interactions, even though two-way interaction is possible on these platforms (Barreda et al., 2015). The connection between social media operations and consumers' experience with products and brands, as well as its impact on consumer behaviour, such as purchase intention, has received little attention from researchers (Hutter et al., 2013). Additionally, previous studies regarding, for example, the connection between eWOM and purchase intention have been studied in the context of blogs, shopping websites or discussion forums instead of social media platforms (Erkan & Evans, 2018).

Based on this, the following research questions were formulated:

Main research question:

Is consumer-to-consumer eWOM considered credible in online communities maintained by consumers on Facebook?

Sub-research questions:

How does the credibility of consumer-to-consumer eWOM affect brand awareness in the context of social media?

How does the credibility of consumer-to-consumer eWOM affect consumer behaviour, such as purchase intention, eWOM intention and eWOM behaviour, in the context of social media?

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, we will present the relevant literature background, the research model and the study hypotheses. This will be followed by the methodology and results sections. The chapter concludes by presenting the discussion section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

eWOM

The most used definition of eWOM was provided by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), who defined it as ‘any positive or negative statement made by [a] potential, actual, or former customer about a company or product, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet’. eWOM has absorbed many names in previous studies, such as *word of mouse* and *online word of mouth*. These names reflect the ongoing growth of internet users, as well as the purpose of finding information online through friends, acquaintances and strangers (Verma & Yadav, 2021). With the development of social media and SNSs, eWOM has been shifting towards social eWOM. This means that consumers use several different communities in SNSs to interact with one another around the world, making it easy to seek knowledge about specific products or services and write evaluations (Hajli, 2018).

According to Kudeshia and Kumar (2017), eWOM can be categorised into four different groups by the meaning and use of different platforms: (a) *specialised eWOM*, when consumers write their estimation of a specific product or service on webpages that are not intended for sales, such as rating forums; (b) *affiliated with eWOM*, when consumers write their assessments of products and services on retail-related webpages, such as Amazon; (c) *social eWOM*, when consumers share information about certain brands, products or services on different SNSs; and (d) *miscellaneous eWOM*, which differs from the previous in that the information is shared on other social media platforms, such as blogs.

Social media and SNSs

The development of social media has created an opportunity for consumers to communicate with one another through a variety of platforms. The content that is created for different social media channels has become a significant source of information on which consumers can rely (Pour & Lotfiyan, 2020). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is ‘a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content’ (p. 61).

According to Mangold and Faulds (2009), social media channels can be categorised into several groups, including SNSs, such as Facebook, business networking sites, such as LinkedIn, and creativity work-sharing sites, such as YouTube. One of the most used definitions for SNSs belongs to Boyd and Ellison (2007), who defined it as follows:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p.210).

Previous research regarding SNSs has focused more on the aspects of social interactions, ties, influence and identity on behalf of consumers and SNSs as a tool for marketing communications on behalf of companies (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017).

eWOM in SNSs

The development of different SNSs allows consumers to use eWOM to share their knowledge and information about specific brands, products or services (Erkan & Evans, 2018). Because it is possible to spread content to a wide audience of both familiar and unfamiliar consumers, different SNSs have been considered powerful platforms for spreading eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011). The information on SNSs is mostly created by consumers and is based on their knowledge and evaluations of products and services; therefore, other consumers consider it beneficial. SNSs also allow consumers to interact with people with whom they are already familiar, causing them to seek information from SNSs instead of other platforms (Erkan & Evans, 2018).

One of the most commonly known studies on what motivates consumers to share and participate in eWOM in consumer-driven platforms was provided by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), who created five main categories that motivate consumers to spread eWOM: (a) *focus-related utility*, when consumers spread eWOM about products and services if the information brings more value to the community; (b) *consumption utility*, when consumers benefit from other consumers' evaluations of a product or a service if they ask for supporting information in the online community; (c) *approval utility*, when consumers are pleased with the information shared on SNSs (i.e. they are more likely to publicly praise the support to the group); (d) *moderator-related utility*, which means that behind the consumer interaction, there might be a moderator who can ease different operations, such as reclamations; and (e) *homeostasis utility*, when consumers constantly aim towards a harmonised life (i.e. if consumers are disappointed in a product or service, then they try to create harmony via adding positive feelings in their comments, which might reduce the effect of negative comments [Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004]).

Previous studies have proven that engaging in eWOM on different SNSs has an impact on, for example, the behaviour and attitudes of consumers (Xiao et al., 2014), as well as their purchase intentions (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Tien et al., 2019) and product sales (e.g. Babić et al., 2016).

Hypotheses and research model

eWOM credibility

The credibility of eWOM can be viewed through different features that influence one another and are related to the source, the message and the recipient (Kapoor et al., 2020). Source credibility occurs when the message receiver can count on the information in a sender's message (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Message credibility occurs when the message receiver considers the message itself credible (Kapoor et al., 2020). According to Kapoor et al. (2020), the determinants of message credibility are *message structure*, *language intensity*, *the inclusion of evidence* and *message attractiveness*.

Source models are the most commonly used models for defining the features of source credibility and include *the source credibility model* and *the source attractiveness model* (Ohanian, 1990). According to Lis (2013), the source credibility model assumes that the information coming from a credible source usually impacts consumers' attitudes and views about certain things. The two components that lead to credibility are *expertise* and *trustworthiness* (Ohanian, 1990). Expertise is the ability of a message sender to make adept arguments (Kapoor et al., 2020), whereas trustworthiness refers to the sincerity and objectiveness of a message sender (Lis, 2013). The source attractiveness model proposes that the message sender's attractiveness impacts how the message receiver experiences the effectiveness of a message. Social attractiveness can be compared to social

homophily, in which the source is considered credible if it is similar enough to something already accepted (Ohanian, 1990).

However, source models do not consider normative influence, and normative factors influence eWOM credibility alongside informational factors (Lis, 2013). This idea aligns with *the dual process theory*—a recognised theory about how received information impacts people (Cheung et al., 2009). Informational factors are based on reality and the consumer's perception of the information that arises during interactions between other consumers, whereas normative factors explain how other consumers impact the message recipient and how the information is evaluated (Cheung et al., 2009; Lis, 2013).

Researchers have become interested in the credibility aspect of content that is created in different social media channels, as well as how consumers evaluate it and what factors are behind it (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). Some previous studies (e.g., Ismagilova et al., 2020) have explored source credibility factors as individual dimensions that explain consumer behaviour, such as purchase intention, whereas in other studies (e.g., Lis 2013; Tien et al., 2019), source credibility factors have been researched as explanations for source credibility. Given the latter theory, expertise, trustworthiness and social homophily define source credibility. Therefore, this study examines these features as explanatory factors of source credibility and further investigates how perceived eWOM credibility affects brand awareness and consumer behaviour in the context of social media.

Expertise

According to Hussain et al. (2017), the concept of expertise includes consumers' experiences, adept arguments and information, as well as how beneficial these are in the opinion of other consumers. Thus, the information that comes from experts is more genuine and thereby affects recipients' attitudes.

The expertise of a source also impacts consumers' level of uncertainty (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Therefore, when consumers are uncertain, they tend to rely on the information from a source with a higher level of experience and knowledge (Tien et al., 2019). When evaluating source expertise, the consumer can, for example, consider how often reviews are posted in the community, how the content looks like and how long the message sender has been a member of the community (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Additionally, comments made by other consumers are considered more convincing compared to comments from companies (Hussain et al., 2017).

Previous studies have recognised the influence of a higher level of expertise on the persuasiveness and credibility of a message on consumers (e.g., Lis, 2013; Teng et al., 2014; Tien et al., 2019). The assumption is that source expertise is based on knowledge and experience, which makes it more credible, and experts should thus be able to assure the message recipient of the strength of their arguments (Lis, 2013). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: When a message sender has a high level of expertise, it has a positive impact on perceived eWOM credibility.

Trustworthiness

According to Ismagilova et al. (2020) and Lis (2013), the source of a message and the message itself are recognised as trustworthy if the statement is judged valid, honest and direct. With eWOM,

consumers are now able to communicate their experiences and views on certain products and services anonymously through SNSs. Thus, all recipients need to evaluate the trustworthiness of a message and the sender before spreading the information on different SNSs (Ismagilova et al., 2020). However, because of the nature of eWOM, the sender's message cannot be immediately evaluated as trustworthy; consumers must use alternative means to evaluate trustworthiness, such as the level of objectivity and the coherence of both the content and the information. Thus, objectivity and honesty play an important role when evaluating trustworthiness because they help determine whether the message sender should be considered credible (Lis, 2013). To conclude, the more trustworthy the message sender, the more credible the source (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Based on this, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: If a message sender has a high level of trustworthiness, it has a positive impact on perceived eWOM credibility.

Social homophily

According to Teng et al. (2014), source attractiveness consists of three components: *familiarity*, *likeability* and *similarity*. Familiarity refers to convenience when communicating with other consumers; likeability means that there is some sort of attachment between the consumers based on, for example, personal features; and similarity means that there are similarities between the consumers (Teng et al., 2014). Social attractiveness usually refers to *social homophily* (Lis, 2013), which indicates that there are similarities between the message sender and the message recipient (Chu & Kim, 2011). According to Ismagilova et al. (2020), these similarities can be based on *demographic features*, such as gender, age and education level, or *perceived features*, such as values and beliefs.

Although eWOM in SNSs differs from traditional face-to-face interaction, consumers can still make conclusions about other consumers by evaluating the user profiles behind and content of eWOM messages (Ismagilova et al., 2020). However, previous studies have acknowledged that similarities in perceived features are more important than demographic features (i.e. consumers appreciate seeing beliefs and values similar to their own). This positively influences social homophily and eWOM source credibility (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Lis, 2013). Thus, consumers tend to interact with consumers who have similar features by exchanging information, with the similarities making information exchange more fluent and easier (Chu & Kim, 2011). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: A higher level of social homophily between the message sender and the message receiver has a positive impact on perceived eWOM credibility.

The effect of eWOM source credibility on brand awareness

Brand awareness is created when consumers recognise a brand through its different elements, such as name, logo or package, which become familiar through its continuous presence (Langaro et al., 2018). According to Keller et al. (2011), brand awareness consists of *brand recognition* and *brand recall* (p. 60). Brand recognition arises when consumers can remember the brand by its elements, whereas brand recall refers to when consumers can remember certain brands by the clues they are facing (Keller et al., 2011, p. 60; Langaro et al., 2018).

With the development of SNSs, consumers are not only consuming the brand's products and services but are also sharing their experiences and evaluations of those products and services and

creating new content. When consumers have positive experiences with certain brands, they become more faithful towards them (i.e. they tend to share their knowledge easily through eWOM and use a positive tone). Thus, they are continuously creating brand awareness without even noticing it (Hutter et al., 2013).

For this reason, the impact of eWOM credibility on SNSs on brand awareness has gained little attention among researchers. Barreda et al. (2015) examined how virtual environments and rewards, as well as system and information qualities, affect brand awareness and consumer WOM in the travel industry. They found that, among other factors, information quality, which consists of credible, honest and updated information, positively influenced brand awareness. It has been acknowledged that eWOM interaction on SNSs positively affects brand awareness, especially in the long term (Barreda et al., 2015). The following hypothesis is thus formulated:

H4: The perceived eWOM credibility of Facebook group members increases the brand awareness of consumers.

The effect of eWOM source credibility on purchase intention

According to Kunja and Gvrk (2018), consumer purchase intention can be defined as ‘the process through which the consumer’s beliefs or assumptions lead to the intention to purchase’. Consumers today are eager to find information and reviews about products and services before making purchase decisions (Matute et al., 2016). Notably, many previous studies have acknowledged the connection between eWOM and purchase intention (Erkan & Evans, 2016).

Consumers consider eWOM credible because it can be done anonymously (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Additionally, eWOM on SNSs that is created by other consumers is considered more credible (Tien et al., 2019). Some previous studies have also acknowledged the connection between eWOM and source credibility and consumers’ purchase intentions. For example, Zhang et al. (2014) investigated whether online reviews about certain restaurants would impact consumers’ decision-making processes. They found that source credibility had a significant direct impact on consumer’s purchase intentions. Additionally, eWOM credibility impacts eWOM adoption, which is connected to purchase intention (Lis, 2013). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H5: Perceived eWOM credibility of Facebook group members positively impacts consumer purchase intention.

The effect of eWOM source credibility on eWOM intention and behaviour

The phenomenon of eWOM has gained significant attention among researchers over the past decade, while the aspect of consumers’ intention to spread eWOM on different SNSs has received scant attention (Cheung & Lee, 2012). In addition to the previously explained motives behind consumer’s eWOM intention by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), a more recent relevant study by Cheung and Lee (2012) indicated that, based on previous theories, four variables affect consumers’ intention to share eWOM: (a) *egoistic motivation*, when the only purpose of spreading eWOM is to benefit from it personally; (b) *collective motivation*, when information is shared in online communities to benefit all other group members; (c) *altruistic motivation*, when information is shared to benefit others more than the person sharing the information; and (d) *principled motivation*, when information sharing aims to maintain the moral aspect, such as justice. Cheung and Lee (2012) also found that three main factors affect consumers’ eWOM intention:

(a) *reputation*, which refers to egoistic motivation; (b) *sense of belonging*, which refers to collective motivation; and (c) *enjoyment of helping others*, which refers to altruistic motivation.

eWOM behaviour always considers consumers' rational views. This means that the behaviour highlights the aspects of expenses and utility to a consumer (Cheung & Lee, 2012). According to Chu and Kim (2011), there are three behavioural standpoints concerning eWOM in different SNSs: (a) *opinion seeking*, where consumers who are actively seeking opinions rely more on others in their decision-making regarding product purchases than on their own opinion; (b) *opinion giving*, which may significantly impact other consumers' opinions; and (c) *opinion passing*, which is when information is easier to find because consumers are actively spreading it. However, with eWOM on different SNSs, it is possible to adopt many of these standpoints at the same time (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Previous studies have shown how the eWOM behaviours of male and female consumers differ from one another; women are engaging more in eWOM on SNSs, including creating and posting content on different SNSs, as well as commenting on other consumers' posts. Women also tend to suggest products and services to other consumers (Krasnova et al., 2017). Overall, it seems that women are more interested in creating and maintaining their social relationships with others, as well as gaining information from different networks, while men tend to look for information on a general level (Krasnova et al., 2017).

Sharing information can be considered part of a 'public-good' phenomenon (i.e. consumers are willing to share information that can benefit all other group members through eWOM interactions). When consumers consider themselves experts regarding certain products or services, they share information without hesitation and *vice versa* (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Previous studies have also recognised the connection between eWOM behaviour and certain source credibility features, such as social homophily and trustworthiness (Chu & Kim, 2011). Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H6: Perceived eWOM credibility of a Facebook group member has a positive impact on eWOM intention.

H7: Perceived eWOM credibility of a Facebook group member has a positive impact on eWOM behaviour.

This research model (Figure 1) comprises eight constructs. Expertise, trustworthiness and social homophily were based on the theoretical framework of the source models that affect eWOM source credibility. The hypotheses concerning the impact of eWOM source credibility on brand awareness, purchase intention, eWOM intention and eWOM behaviour were also developed based on previous research.

<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, we collected survey data obtained from a Facebook group dealing with recommendations for children's shoes. This group was established in January 2020 and had over 10,000 followers as of October 2020. People can access this group with the approval of the moderators after first answering a few questions. The aim of this group is to provide information

about children's shoes that follows official recommendations. Certain brands fulfil the criteria of recommended shoes, and conversations on the page are mostly about these shoes (i.e. people are asking, sharing opinions and giving recommendations, as well as helping other consumers in this group). This group is only for conversations and recommendations; all forms of selling and buying are forbidden.

A questionnaire comprised of multi-item scales adopted from prior studies (see Table 1) was used. All constructs were measured through a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 = totally disagree and 7 = totally agree. Demographic and background questions regarding the respondents' gender, age and the amount of time spent in the Facebook group per week were asked at the end of the questionnaire.

<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

Results

A total of 151 responses were received (96% female; 66% between 25–34 years of age; 66% spent less than 1hr a week in the group). The analysis was performed in two stages using partial least squares structural equation modelling with SmartPLS 3.3.3. First, confirmatory factor analysis was created to measure the reliability and validity of the measurement model. After dropping five items unrelated to the model, the model showed good reliability and validity. The factor loadings of each item were above 0.70; Cronbach's alphas were above 0.7; the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.5; and the correlations did not exceed the AVE squared values. The model explains most of the variance of perceived eWOM credibility ($R^2 = 0.70$). The R^2 values for eWOM intention and eWOM behaviour were around 0.15.

Of the seven hypotheses, six were supported (Table 2). Expertise and trustworthiness showed a strong positive relationship with eWOM source credibility. Therefore, H1 and H2 were supported. No support for H3 was received, showing that social homophily would explain perceived eWOM credibility. eWOM source credibility had a strong positive relationship with brand awareness, purchase intention, eWOM intention and eWOM behaviour. The strongest relationships that eWOM source credibility had were those with eWOM behaviour ($\beta = 0.379, p < 0.01$) and eWOM intention ($\beta = 0.374, p < 0.01$), thereby providing support for H4 and H5–H7.

<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>

Discussion

The results of this study support previous studies' (e.g., Lis, 2013) findings that expertise and trustworthiness are the two most remarkable factors affecting perceived eWOM source credibility. However, social homophily was not linked with perceived eWOM credibility. This indicates that because eWOM occurs in an online environment, the social similarities are more difficult to perceive because people can choose a level of anonymity by limiting what information they share about themselves. Therefore, it is difficult to gain a deeper picture of someone's personality.

In this study, the connection between perceived eWOM credibility and brand awareness was statistically significant, indicating that members of the studied Facebook group considered the source and shared information they found credible. Hence, the members of the group seemed to become aware of the different recommended shoe brands. This was also supported by Barreda et al. (2015), who found that the more credible, honest and updated the shared information, the greater the influence on brand awareness. Additionally, Hutter et al. (2013) stated that consumers are more likely to share their brand experiences when those experiences are positive.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that perceived eWOM credibility positively affects purchase intention, which has also been supported by previous studies (e.g. Ismagilova et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2014). It appears that because the Facebook group under study was created and is maintained by consumers and likely includes a certain level of anonymity, it is considered a credible source, which seems to positively impact purchase intention.

Finally, because selling is forbidden in this Facebook group, the information shared appears to be beneficial for other consumers, which indicates that consumers are driven by altruistic motivation (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Overall, the information shared in online communities is usually based on consumers' experiences (Erkan & Evans, 2018), indicating that the members of this Facebook group are (on some level) experts regarding the products, and they share the information to benefit others more than themselves. Additionally, most of the participants in this study were females, which indicates that they are more active in different online communities. These results align with those of Krasnova et al. (2017), who found that females spread information more actively in different online communities, which also helps them create and maintain new relationships.

Managerial implications

The findings of this study indicate that online communities maintained by consumers are an effective fundament for eWOM interactions between consumers. Because the information in these online communities is considered credible, it is important to note its significant impact on consumers' brand awareness and behaviour. With eWOM being known as one of the most impactful ways to communicate with others (Lis & Neßler, 2014), it should impact companies' marketing communication strategies.

Even when companies are unable to control the content written by consumers, it would be advisable to gain knowledge about their products and services from online community conversations to identify consumers' needs and problems and thus improve offered products and services. However, the findings of this study indicate that because the content in online communities maintained by consumers is considered more credible, companies should pay attention to informative factors, such as expertise and trustworthiness, when evaluating the content to grasp real concerns about their products and services.

SNSs are an effective way for companies to create and maintain relationships with consumers (Ali et al., 2020); thus, they should find a way to interact with consumers in consumer-run online communities. Companies could, for example, have a brand ambassador or an employee inside the community to interact with consumers by sharing knowledge and information about their company's products and services. This would make it possible for companies to create brand awareness, enhance their company image among consumers and increase customer acquisition and retention. These actions would positively impact purchasing, which forecasts an increase in sales.

Online communities can have thousands of members, which means that any information shared in such communities has a huge audience. When consumers have good experiences with a brand's products or services, they usually want to share their experiences with others (Hutter et al., 2013). However, companies cannot forget the possibility of negative eWOM and the wide audience it would reach in online communities. If companies have an employee inside the online community, it will allow them to react to and reduce negative eWOM.

Limitations and future research

The main limitation of this study comes from its cross-sectional nature. In the future, we recommend testing the model and related hypotheses in experimental settings and using longitudinal studies. A qualitative enquiry on the topic would also be strongly welcomed alongside survey research.

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