

DETERMINANTS OF E-WOM INFLUENCE: THE ROLE OF CONSUMERS' INTERNET EXPERIENCE AND THE TYPE OF WEB SITE

MANUELA LÓPEZ

MARÍA SICILIA

manuela.lopez@um.es, sicilia@um.es

University of Murcia

ABSTRACT

Communication research has widely demonstrated that personal sources are more influential than firm-generated sources of information. The potential impact of others' opinions has dramatically increased with the development of new media. The purpose of this paper is to examine the determinants of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) influence. An empirical study has been developed to assess the proposed hypotheses. We demonstrate that the influence of e-WOM depends on volume of information, favorability, and source credibility. In addition the type of website where opinions are found moderates the relationship between source credibility and e-WOM influence. More interestingly, we have also found that there exists a quadratic relationship between consumers' Internet experience and the influence of e-WOM.

Keywords:

E-WOM, Internet experience, credibility, volume, favourability

1. Introduction

Marketing researchers have demonstrated that word of mouth (WOM) has a great importance on consumer behaviour. Opinions by other consumers exert a significant impact on consumer choice (Arndt, 1967; Chatterjee, 2001; Katz and Lazarfeld, 1955), as well as on post-purchase product perceptions (Bone, 1995).

The potential impact of others' opinions has dramatically increased with the development of new media (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006; Stephen and Lehmann, 2009). The Internet is changing the way consumers communicate by allowing a common space for sharing opinions (Goldsmith, 2006). They can interact with other consumers via e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, forums, online communities, chat rooms, and review sites (Goldsmith, 2006). Recent research is showing electronic WOM (e-WOM) also influences consumer behaviour (Park and Kim, 2008). It has a direct effect on sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas et al., 2007; Duan et al., 2008; Liu, 2006) and nearly 70% of Internet users trust on e-WOM (Nielsen, 2009). Even though marketers may not have control over e-WOM communication, they still need to understand how it works in order to manage it (Lim and Chung, 2011). However, few researchers have examined yet what makes certain reviews/opinions more influential than others (Lim and Chung, 2011; Xia and Bechwati, 2008).

This paper studies the determinants of e-WOM influence. Source credibility, volume of information, favourability of opinions, the type of website where opinions are found, and Internet experience are analyzed as factors that determine the impact of e-WOM on consumer decisions. As recent research, we focus on e-WOM communicated via consumer opinions (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006), because it represents the most widely used e-WOM format (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004).

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Volume and favourability are among the most important WOM attributes that have been examined in the literature (Mahajan et al., 1984; Mizerski, 1982). Favourability captures the nature of the information, whether it is positive or negative (Liu, 2006). According to the traditional literature about interpersonal influences, negative information is more diagnostic, in other words, it is of greater help to establish a classification of a product than positive information (Herr et al. 1991; Skowronsky and Carlston 1989). However, positive WOM is far more common than negative WOM (East et al., 2007). If the number of positive reviews is higher than the number of negative reviews, the review balance will be positive (Purnawirawan et al., 2010). Positive balance has been found to induce a positive attitude and behaviour toward the target product (Matos and Rossi, 2008). As it is more likely that consumers easily find a positive agreement in the opinions about a product, such favourability is likely to positively influence on consumer decisions. Thus, we propose:

H1: The relationship between the favourability of e-WOM and its influence is positive and linear.

Previous studies have also found that the volume of information on WOM correlates significantly with its impact on consumer behavior (Anderson and Salisbury, 2003). The volume of WOM has mainly an informative role as it enhances consumer awareness. Then, the greater the volume of WOM, the more likely a consumer will hear about the product (Liu, 2006). As a result, many consumer reviews can be a signal of product popularity (Park et al., 2006). The volume of reviews is considered to represent the market performance of the product (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), so consumers can make inferences about the quality of the product based on the volume of e-WOM.

H2: The relationship between the volume of the e-WOM and its influence is positive and linear.

Message source is a crucial determinant of influence (Park and Lee, 2009). Some studies indicate that the majority of individuals trust little on what they find online (Johnson and Kaye, 2009). Therefore, credibility of the person who refers e-WOM is considered a very important aspect that determines e-WOM influence. Recruitment sources vary in the degree to which potential users perceive them as providing credible information (Cable and Turban, 2001; Fisher et al., 1979). Behavioural influences are higher when the credibility of the source is high than when it is low (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). If the source lacks in credibility, it will be discounted and will not be very persuasive (Buda, 2003). Users do not rely on information from sources that they do not view as credible (Metzger et al., 2003). Similarly, when the consumer is exposed to e-WOM information from a highly credible source, the message should be more persuasive than e-WOM information coming from a less credible source. Therefore, we propose the following:

H3: The relationship between source credibility of e-WOM and its influence is positive and linear.

Online consumer opinions can be found either in firm-sponsored websites, where the product is sponsored and/or commercialized; or in third-party websites, where the product is not commercialized (Chatterjee, 2001). E-WOM is non commercial information in nature and it is more credible than firm-created communication (Bart et al., 2005; Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Nevertheless, its influence depends on where the opinions are found. Senecal and Nantel (2004) showed that the type of website on which recommendation sources were found did not affect their perceived trustworthiness and did not influence consumers' propensity to follow the product recommendation. However, other studies (Alba et al., 1997; Sen, 2008) suggest that independent websites are assumed to be preferred by consumers. This thought is also supported by Flanagin and Metzger (2007), who have shown commercial sites are perceived as less credible than other type of websites. On the basis of this reasoning, we propose:

H4a: The influence of e-WOM is greater when opinions are found in third-party websites than when they are found in firm-sponsored websites.

Additionally, the type of website where opinions are found could affect to the relationship between source credibility and e-WOM influence. Nowadays, e-WOM manipulation for is widespread (Jindal and Liu, 2008). Some companies offer a specific review format in order to guide consumers to post their opinions in the way they would like (Park and Kim, 2008). In addition, firms can easily disguise their promotion as consumer recommendations (Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin 2006). As a result, individuals are more and more aware that this manipulation occurs, but they cannot directly distinguish honest opinions from fake opinions (Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin 2006). Consumers do know, however, that marketers can filter consumer reviews on their sponsored sites, removing negative opinions about their products, or filtering those that are not of their like. Consequently, individuals who consult opinions in a firms-sponsored websites could attend less strongly to source credibility since they are aware that most opinions can be manipulated because of the commercial interest of the web. In contrast, consumers may think that managers of third party websites have not commercial interest about the products, so manipulation is less likely. Consequently, consumers will spend more time and effort in identifying most credible opinions from fake opinions. Therefore, individuals will pay much attention to source credibility indications such as either the number of opinions posted, or the date of inscription or source's profile. Thus, we propose:

H4b: The effects of e-WOM credibility on its influence will be stronger when opinions are found in third-party websites than when they are found in firm-sponsored websites.

A last factor to be taken into consideration is consumers' Internet experience. There are lots of websites dedicated to providing consumer reviews (Sen and Lerman, 2007). Considering consumer experience, it is more likely that individuals with low Internet experience will search information in a less efficient manner than individuals with more experience (Frias et al., 2008). They are not equipped with the same knowledge and skills as more-experienced users; they do not know the medium, so they may have more difficulty in managing the information flow (Liu

and Shrum, 2009). Furthermore, they should be less critical with the information found in the medium than experienced users (Chevalier and Kicka, 2006). Therefore, it will be more difficult for them to discriminate among alternatives and it is more likely that less experienced users think online consumer opinions are unbiased. However, as experience increases, consumer's awareness about strategic manipulation of e-WOM will be higher. Thus, it is less likely that users with some Internet experience trust on this type of information (Dellarocas, 2006; Mayzlin, 2006). As experience keeps increasing, the situation may change again. Both time and experience are required to learn the credibility assuring some websites (Ward and Lee, 2000). At certain point, individuals may become experts on the Internet. Ability to select the information of higher relevance to their needs will be much greater for these individuals (Frias et al., 2008). Information search strategies of experienced users are expected to be different from those of the general public. As people become more and more experienced, their strategies will evolve towards the most profitable ones (Aula et al., 2005). At this stage, subjects will tend to verify information obtained on the web more stringently (Flanagin and Metzger, 2000), and they will exactly know where it is better searching information. They may have a preferred set of websites and sources because they have previously provided successful recommendations, so they trust on them (Heath et al., 2006). For these individuals, the information found will have a great effect. On the basis of the above reasoning, the influence of e-WOM depends on Internet experience as follows:

H5: The influence of e-WOM initially decreases and then increases, gradually, with consumer Internet experience, drawing a U-shaped form.

3. Methodology

Data were collected from tourist services users because WOM represents the most important information source for travellers (Dey and Sarma, 2010; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008). In addition, Internet has changed tourist behaviour dramatically (Mills and Law, 2004). Prospective travellers have direct access to a much greater wealth of information and can make online purchase themselves instead of relying on travel agencies to undertake this process for them (Morrison et al., 2001). In addition, 93% of web surfers indicate that they visited tourism websites when planning for vacations (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006).

The survey population consisted of travellers over the age of 16 who had searched Internet to plan their last travel. They had to be first-time visitors because prior experience with the destination could affect travel planners' use of information sources (Woodside and Dubellar, 2002). We sent 5,156 questionnaires through a university email listing. We suggested the receiver to re-send the questionnaire to other people, after inviting them to participate in the study. A very similar procedure was developed by De Bruyn and Lilien (2008). A remainder mailing was also undertaken to boost response rate. By following this procedure we have already collected 165 valid questionnaires.

Before starting data collection, the questionnaire was pretested to ensure it was well understood. In order to measure volume of e-WOM respondents were asked to rate how much information they had obtained from this information source using a 5 point-Likert scale (1= nothing and 5= a lot). We next asked about credibility, favourability, and influence of e-WOM. We used previously established scales to measure credibility (Fisher et al., 1979; Van Hove and Lievens, 2007), favourability (Park et al., 2009) and influence (Mishra et al., 1993). Scales are all based on 5-points semantic differential scales. Favourability scale is composed of 2-items, while credibility and influence scales are based on 3-items each. Then, subjects indicated where they saw the opinions (firm-sponsored or third-party websites) and how many hours they surf the Web during a week (Novak et al., 2000). This question was used to assess Internet experience. At the end of the questionnaire individuals provided some demographic information (sex, age, level of education, and occupation).

4. Preliminary results

In order to test the proposed hypotheses a hierarchical regression analysis has been conducted (Cohen and Cohen, 1983). In the first step we regressed the main effects of the variables. Step two tested for interaction effects and the quadratic term was introduced at the third step. The constructs have been mean-centered to overcome potential problems due to multicollinearity (Aiken and West, 1996). The moderation hypothesis was tested by examining the significance of the interaction and by the size of R^2 change when the interaction is included. In order to support the presence of a U-shaped relationship two criteria must be fulfilled: first, the increase in variance explained by adding the quadratic term must be statistically significant; and second, the coefficient of the linear relationship must be negative and the coefficient for the squared term positive (Aiken and West, 1996). Table 2 shows the regression results. Results of step 1 show that favourability ($\beta=0.257$; $p<0.01$), volume of information ($\beta=0.176$; $p<0.05$), and credibility ($\beta=0.335$; $p<0.01$) show a significant positive impact on e-WOM influence. Thus, H1, H2, and H3 are all supported. However, the type of website where consumers find the opinions ($\beta=0.112$; $p>0.05$) does not affect e-WOM influence, therefore H4a is not supported. Results of step 2 show the interaction term is significant ($\beta=-0.341$; $p<0.01$) and this model explains an additional 4.8% of the variance (R^2 change=0.048; $p<0.01$). Thus, H4b is supported. Finally, in the third model we test the quadratic relationship between consumer's Internet experience and e-WOM influence. As table 2 shows, the coefficient of Internet experience is negative ($\beta=-0.379$; $p<0.05$), while the quadratic term is positive ($\beta=0.304$; $p<0.05$). A comparison between model 2 and 3 indicates that the inclusion of the squared term significantly improves the model (R^2 change= 0.025, $p<0.05$). Therefore, there exists a U-shaped relationship between consumers' Internet experience and e-WOM influence, which supports H5.

TABLE 1
Regression Results on e-WOM influence

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Favourability	0.257*	0.228*	0.243*
Volume	0.176**	0.163**	0.183**
Credibility	0.335*	0.605*	0.585*
Type of website	0.112	0.106	0.075
Internet experience	-0.128	-0.132	-0.379**
Credibility x tipe of website		-0.341*	-0.333*
Internet experience ²			0.304**
R^2	0.329	0.377	0.402
Adjusted R^2	0.296	0.339	0.360
ΔR^2		0.048*	0.025**

* $p<0.01$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.10$

5. Conclusions

The present study intends to clarify researchers' doubts about the determinants of e-WOM influence. Previous research has shown e-WOM is more influential than firm-generated information (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Parker, 2005), so an increasing number of companies are actively making efforts to stimulate and manage e-WOM activity (Kozinets et al., 2010). Therefore, it is extremely important that they understand how e-WOM works. We demonstrate that the influence of e-WOM depends on credibility, favourability, volume of information and consumers' Internet experience. We have also demonstrated that the type of website where consumers find opinions do not directly affect e-WOM influence, but this variable does moderate the relationship between credibility and influence. In addition, we have found that there exists a quadratic relationship between consumers' Internet experience and the influence of e-WOM. Interestingly, experienced and novice Internet users are more influenced by e-WOM than consumers with moderate experience in this medium. As many consumers may be classified into the moderate experience category, they may perceive e-WOM as a low credible source. This study contributes to the lack of literature related to the factors that affect the influence of e-WOM communication (Dellarocas, 2006; Park and Lee, 2009). We have studied

how some relevant factors affect e-WOM influence and have demonstrated that their impact may be not linear and that there may be some interesting interactions which should be further investigated.

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