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Credibility of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) sender — explorative perspective

Wiarygodność nadawcy opinii w procesie komunikacji nieformalnej online — perspektywa eksploracyjna

Abstract

Credibility of opinions published online depends on credibility of the site where these opinions can be found (e.g. webpage, chat, and forum) as well as the author (sender of message). Depending on who gives opinion, where it's placed and what it concerns, they can be perceived as more or less credible source of information. The main purpose of this article is to identify personal sources of information (eWOM senders) that are treated by consumers as credible opinion providers. The additional purpose is to examine both how customers (if at all) verify message and eWOM sender, and what they pay attention at. In order to achieve the assumed research objectives, 10 IDI's were conducted. Participants were purposively sampled from the panel of Internet users delivered by Mobile Institute (research agency) and with control of such variables as: gender, age, place of residence and purchasing activity in the Internet. It was found that perhaps it would be worth introducing the category of befriended expert to ewom's credibility studies.

Keywords

eWOM, credibility, qualitative study

Streszczenie

Wiarygodność opinii publikowanych w Internecie zależy od wielu czynników, z których najistotniejsze to wiarygodność serwisu, na którym te opinie się znajdują (np. strona internetowa, czat, forum), oraz wiarygodność autora (nadawcy wiadomości). W zależności od tego, kto wyda opinię, gdzie się ta opinia znajduje i czego dotyczy, wiarygodność źródła informacji może być różnie postrzegana. Głównym celem artykułu jest identyfikacja osobistych źródeł informacji (nadawców wiadomości), które są traktowane przez konsumentów jako wiarygodni dostawcy opinii. Dodatkowym celem jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób klienci (jeśli w ogóle) weryfikują wiadomość i jej nadawcę oraz na co zwracają uwagę. Aby osiągnąć założone cele badawcze, przeprowadzono badania eksploracyjne w postaci 10 pogłębionych wywiadów indywidualnych. Uczestnicy zostali dobrani celowo z panelu internautów dostarczonego przez Mobile Institute (agencję badawczą) i pod kontrolą takich zmiennych, jak: płeć, wiek, miejsce zamieszkania i aktywność zakupowa w Internecie. Rezultatem badań jest opracowanie katalogu wiarygodnych osobistych źródeł informacji, a także narzędzia badawczego do badań o charakterze eksplanacyjnym.

Słowa kluczowe

kommunikacja nieformalna online, wiarygodność źródła informacji, badania jakościowe

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Introduction

The contemporary consumer lives in the information environment. They use the Internet in the purchase decision making process more

and more often, paying attention at opinions appearing online (Alalwan, 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2015; Shiau et al., 2018). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is defined as "the dynamic and on-going information exchange process between

potential, actual, or former customers regarding a product, service, brand or company, which is available to a multitude of people, and institutions via the Internet" (Ismagilova et al., 2017:8). Credibility of the information source is the basic filter used by consumers for evaluating the information available in the Internet (Cheung et al., 2009; Xu, 2014; Baharrudin et al., 2020; Alalwan et al., 2018; Chang & Wu, 2014; Munzel, 2016; Teng et al., 2017; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018; Yan et al., 2018). The recipient of eWOM communications is more willing to use the Internet opinions in the purchase decision making process if they consider such opinions reliable (Aladwani & Dwivedi, 2018; Wathen & Burkell, 2002).

Credibility is a perceived quality that has two dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise (Fog et al., 2003). Credibility of opinions published online depends on credibility of the site where these opinions can be found (e.g. webpage, chat, and forum) as well as the author (sender of message). Depending on who gives opinion, where it's placed and what it concerns, they can be perceived as more or less credible source of information.

According to Flanagin and Metzger (2007) the information credibility assessment in online environment is complex and can be conducted on the level of author, message, sponsor and site.

As for the customer's viewpoint the hitherto prevailing eWOM credibility surveys made a distinction between opinions given by relatives/friends and opinions formed by individuals unknown or anonymous to the customer (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2009; Granitz & Ward, 1996). The main key to the classification of informal sources of information was the strength of relations binding these sources with the consumer. A question arises, however, if such classification is sufficient, if consumers distinguish the paid information from the word of mouth, and if they verify persons giving their opinions in the Internet.

The main purpose of this article is to identify personal sources of information (eWOM senders) that are treated by consumers as credible opinion providers. The additional purpose is to examine both how customers (if at all) verify message and eWOM sender, and what they pay attention at.

In order to achieve the assumed purposes the systematic literature review was followed by the qualitative study, with the use of the research methods inspired by the structured in-depth interview approach and the grounded theory.

The paper consists of 5 parts, starting with the literature review, followed by the research method presentation and the research findings.

Finally, the paper will be concluded with the discussion of implications of the study, followed by limitations and proposed directions for further research.

Literature review

Source credibility

"Credibility refers to the belief in the speakers' words. Such credibility cannot be objectively measured because it is the results of the listeners' perception" (Adler & Rodman, 2000). There are two important dimensions of this attribute: expertise and trustworthiness. The expertise is a kind of authority based on exceptional knowledge of a given subject area. A source perceived as having some proficiency in a specific area is more convincing than someone less familiar with it. Still, the source must also be reliable — honest, ethical, trustworthy. The research findings univocally confirm hypothesis stating that sources having specific knowledge than those with smaller knowledge (Fogg et al., 2003; Ismagilova et al., 2020).

The source credibility may also depend on its other feature — similarity. The similarity manifests itself in perceiving another person (sender of message) as being similar to the message recipient. According to Wangenheim and Bayon (2003) the influence of similarity is stronger in case of higher risk of socio-psychological nature, while the influence of professionalism is bigger for financial and functional risk.

The opinion credibility is derivative of the source credibility. The same information is evaluated differently depending on what person or what periodical provides it, which was proven by Hovland and Weiss (1951).

eWOM

eWOM emerged together with the Internet, while the first mentions on this subject in the literature appeared in 1996 (Granitz & Ward, 1996, pp. 178–182). According to Web of Science the increased interest in eWOM started in 2004 and should be connected with the rapid growth of social media.

Granitz and Ward (1996) described the main difference between traditional word of mouth and eWOM. In their opinion this difference is expressed in the fact that in case of eWOM the person's identity is not defined by such

circumstances as appearance, origin, status or workplace. The Internet provides a lot of diversified opinions on products or services often coming from absolute strangers. Therefore the main difference between traditional and online communication is reflected in the strength of ties binding the interaction participants. In case of traditional communication they are usually stronger. As for eWOM the weakness of ties results, however, in certain benefits for buyers. First of all thanks to weaker ties it is possible to acquire diverse information from various sources, including expert ones, often being out of reach of traditional WOM communication. Still, some problems may occur mainly with the credibility assessment, and hence, also with the quality of information obtained by eWOM. Next differences between WOM and eWOM were indicated by Christian Dellarocas (2003), who distinguished three main factors determining eWOM exceptionality: the large scale of impact supported by the low cost of online operations and the high level of interactivity, the ability to control and monitor the WOM communication process, as well as challenges and problems connected with hiding identity in the Internet and inability to interpret information often lacking any wider context.

Credibility of eWOM

In order to determine the most important factors that may influence eWOM credibility, the systematic literature review was carried out with the use of two databases: Google Scholar (due to its reach and popularity) and Web of Science (due to its focus on periodicals listed in JCR with impact factor). Both databases were searched with the following key words: source credibility and e-wom in two fields: title and topic. Next the results obtained from two databases were compared in order to remove recurrent records. Over 28,000 publications found in/from Google Scholar were reduced to 999 items, including only articles published in scientific periodicals, in English, and having at least one citation. Then the output in the form of abstracts was subject to the content analysis and it was found that the most frequent words used in publication abstracts were as follows: effect (203 cases), online (193) and consumer (178). It was concluded that travel, food and entertainment were the most often surveyed industries in the aspect of eWOM credibility. The research projects were most frequently conducted in the following countries: China, UK and USA.

The Web of Science search resulted in 45 publications focused on eWOM credibility from top academic journals. The earliest paper is dated

2007 (Cheung et al., 2007), while the biggest number of them (11) were published in 2020. Due to the growing occurrence of fake news, the scholars' interest in eWOM credibility is also expected to rise.

Close reading of all papers was followed by the use of paradigm funnel model (Berthon, Nairn & Money, 2003), thanks to which they were assigned to 4 levels: (1) empirical observations, (2) analytical methods, (3) specific theory and (4) deep assumptions. 21 papers (41%) went to level 1, while level 2 included 18 papers (40%), level 3 — 4 papers, and level 4 — only 1 paper.

As a result of in-depth analysis of 45 publications the most important relations within eWOM credibility studies were indicated and classified in two groups:

1. Referring to source

- message sender's credibility and argument strength have the biggest influence on opinion credibility (Cheung et al., 2007),
- information about an opinion author (who they are) increases opinion credibility; the presence of personal identifying information has a positive effect on the perceived credibility of online reviews, which in turn significantly affects participants' intention to buy (Jin & Phua, 2014),
- influencers (bloggers, youtubers, instagramers) are perceived as more reliable source of information than commonly known celebrities having their profiles in social media (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017),
- expertise, trustworthiness, and aggregate rating are the most significant factors of the perceived eWOM credibility (Lis & Bettina, 2013); source expertise, trustworthiness, and homophily significantly influence perceived eWOM usefulness and credibility (Ismagilova et al., 2020).

2. Referring to opinion and context of presentation

- the presence of a conflicting aggregated rating will decrease review credibility and diagnosticity via its negative effect on consumers' product-related attributions of the review (Qiu, Pang & Lim, 2012),
- balanced reviews are perceived to be the most credible (Jensen et al., 2013),
- assessment of online WOM credibility is based on four factors: the polarity and quantity of posts, the logic and articulation of posts, the ability to find corroborating sources, and the previous experience of participants with particular seller (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011),
- social media interactivity significantly influences credibility and usefulness of information (Hajli, 2018),

- web site reputation, source credibility, obtaining buying-related information, and social orientation through information positively influence perceived positive eWOM review credibility (Chih et al., 2013).

Out of 45 analysed papers coming from Web of Science only one used exploratory quantitative research (IDI) as the primary research method, obtaining in-depth information on the source credibility — in the context of celebrities and influencers. A research gap was observed consisting in the lack of in-depth information on the identification of personal sources of information and methods of verifying the received eWOM.

Research method

In order to achieve the assumed research objectives, such as the identification of personal sources of information (eWOM senders) as well as checking how customers (if at all) verify message and eWOM sender and what they pay attention at, the scenario for the qualitative research with the use of IDI method was developed.

"Qualitative research projects serve different purposes than quantitative research ones: understanding the reality, not measuring phenomenon"(Silverman, 2015). In qualitative research there is no single interpretation of results. "The analysis and interpretation of results (...) are actually subjective; however it does not make this method worse than quantitative methods" (Silverman, 2015).

The research was conducted with the participation of 10 e-consumers (including 5 females and 5 males aged 22 to 53 years), purposively sampled from the panel of Internet users delivered by research agency and with control of such variables as: gender, age, place of residence and purchasing activity in the Internet.

Interviews were conducted in September in October 2020 with the use of online meetings through Microsoft Teams. The data obtained from the exploratory qualitative research include audio recordings and individual interview videos. All gathered materials were analysed on the grounded theory basis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

The recorded interviews were transcribed and then the information output was set in order and sorted out according to the assumed scenario. The collected data were induced; they emerged from the researcher's intervention (Silverman, 2015). The coding method was applied in order to label certain data fragments and afterwards joint

elements were specified (Gibbs & Taylor, 2020). The data coding provided the basis for further analyses and resulted in grasping regularities.

The research questions were formulated as follows: what sources of information are used by consumers in the Internet? Whose opinions available in the Internet assist consumers in reaching purchase decisions? How do consumers verify eWOM senders?

Data analysis

Sources of information in the Internet

The respondents were searching online information in various sites, depending on the category they intended to shop in.

"In case of fashion I pay attention at users' opinions available in a given online shopping site... In case of films I check opinions in a review site... As for household appliances I consult my family, but I also pay attention at other users' opinions." (Female, 22 years).

"I use Ceneo, Opineo (price engines), check other consumers' opinions. I visit a cinema website and check film reviews... In case of mobile phone I followed recommendation online, Youtube films etc. Buying recently a smartband I checked Youtube opinions." (Male, 28 years).

"Sometimes I type in Google and sometimes in Facebook, searching opinions and trying to find them." (Male, 20 years).

eWOM senders

The respondents' task was to indicate persons, whose opinions they perceived as the most reliable and having the biggest influence on purchasing decisions.

Among the most important sources of personal information they mentioned as follows:

- Other consumers (the respondents also used term 'other users'),
"Ordinary opinions of ordinary people describing a products... the most reliable; advertisements are not always trustworthy." (Male, 53).
- Experts
"Friends and experts ex aequo; if among friends (...) there are no users of a given product, I approach the professional group instead. In case it were for example a car, I would treat these groups as complementary." (Female, 44 years).

- Friends

"Because I trust them and I know their opinion is honest; they have no business in it". (Female, 28 years).

As expected, celebrities were considered the least reliable source of information.

"Celebrities do nothing but advertise a product; I don't take such opinions into account in any aspect." (Female, 50 years).

"Celebrities, because they are remunerated for advertising a given product, although they may not use it at all. (...) In general I don't understand such celebrities advertising for instance a shampoo for average people, if it's obvious they don't use it as they have their hair done by a stylist." (Female, 30 years)

"Because I simply realize that these are paid opinions and there is not much truth in them." (Male, 20 years).

Verification of eWOM sender's credibility

The information source credibility was evaluated by the respondents on the basis through the prism of being signed and containing more text. During the interviews another attribute of an opinion perceived to be of good quality was brought into light: adding a photo or a film with a given product.

The respondents pay attention at two aspects of eWOM sender's credibility:

1) Opinion formed by a person should be signed with the author's full name

"I often visit this person's profile checking whether it is a real person, not a fake account established only for the purpose of product promotion." (Male, 20 years).

2) Opinion should be authentic and expanded

"Frank and heartfelt compliments about this product; some psychological approach is needed and a person should put some effort... It is not enough to say this is a good product and I recommend it; it must be explanation, why it is good, something more; about wearing or using this product for some time." (Male, 53 years).

"When there are some real photos of this product, provided by a person who has been already using it and have something to say about it". (Male, 20 years).

"A full paragraph, where some advantages and disadvantages are mentioned. Descriptions of user's own experience showing that the author really had this product in their hands and used it; not an influencer who did a copy paste of information from manufacturer's site." (Male, 50 years).

Discussion and conclusions

The respondents stated that first of all it is the category of purchase that determines the type of information source and sites they search for opinions. More engaging categories make them seek experts' opinions, most willingly in the circle of friends. The studies conducted so far allowed first of all a specific dichotomy: respondents were asked about preferences in seeking opinions from experts (independent) or acquaintances (Cheung et al., 2009; Granitz & Ward, 1996; Ismagilova, 2020). It appears, however, that friends with expert knowledge represent the best combination of reliable opinion.

According to the respondents consumers with experience in using a given product constitute the personal information sources having the biggest influence on purchasing decisions. The studies conducted so far suggest that the credibility of eWOM senders and thereby their opinions will be determined first of all by trustworthiness and expertise, as well as homophily (Ismagilova, 2020).

The source experience as the separate variable having impact on the opinion credibility hasn't been analysed. Racherla & Friske (2012) and Weiss et al. (2008) indicated that the experience can be one of dimensions of the expertise, but perhaps there is a time to distinguish this variable as the separate attribute influencing the source credibility.

According to the respondents celebrities are the least reliable eWOM source, which is consistent with conclusions made by other researchers (Jin, 2014; Djafarova, 2017).

eWOM credibility is assessed by the respondents according to the following factors: quality of text, length of text, identification of author — opinion signed by official email address/full name, advantages and disadvantages of product/service, details regarding product/service.

The above mentioned factors overlap with results of studies conducted by O'Reilly et al. (2016).

The verification of eWOM senders is most often conducted quite roughly on the basis of commonly available information and with the use of heuristics — social proof, bandwagon effect, framing and anchoring.

Conclusion, limitation and further research

Since when information provided by other consumers have been perceived as more

interesting and reliable than information coming from companies or brands, and since when the customers' online opinions have had a significant influence on the purchasing process, it seems relevant to intensify studies on this subject. Till now eWOM senders have been divided into groups closer to the consumer (relatives and friends) and more distant groups (strangers or anonymous users). The further differentiation of eWOM sender categories might be worth consideration. Additionally it would be

reasonable to exclude the source experience from the expertise and verify in quantitative research to what extent it may determine eWOM credibility.

The conducted research is based on the systematical literature review and qualitative studies, while the findings should be verified in the course of quantitative research. The formation and development of comprehensive theories regarding eWOM credibility seem to be a good direction for further publications.

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Adiunktka w Katedrze Marketingu Akademii Leona Koźmińskiego, autorka kilkudziesięciu publikacji naukowych głównie z zakresu zachowań konsumenckich i komunikacji nieformalnej.

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Doktorantka w Katedrze Marketingu Akademii Leona Koźmińskiego, wykładowca akademicki z zakresu e-commerce, autorka popularnej książki wydanej przez PWN *E-commerce. Strategia-Zarządzanie-Finanse*, członek Rady Izby Gospodarki Elektronicznej.

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ZAPOWIEDŹ



Współczesny konsument za sprawą technologii cyfrowych podczas zakupów coraz częściej balansuje na granicy świata rzeczywistego i wirtualnego. Otoczony wszechobecną nowoczesnością oczekuje atrakcyjnych i wyróżniających się komunikatów marketingowych. Anagazujący dialog z marką mogą wspierać między innymi rozwiązania z obszaru internetu rzeczy. Jako jedną z perspektywicznych technologii wskazać można beacons, które pełnią funkcję punktów kontaktowych konsumenta z marką. Urządzenia te lokalizują użytkownika w przestrzeni i przesyłają mu pakiet spersonalizowanych informacji, wspierając go na ścieżce zakupowej. Umożliwiają realizację wielowymiarowych kampanii marketingowych opartych na tworzeniu indywidualnej relacji z odbiorcą.

Książka przedstawia beacons jako technologię z obszaru internetu rzeczy w kontekście ich wykorzystania w komunikacji marketingowej. Można z niej dowiedzieć się między innymi:

- jakie możliwości prezentują beacons w obszarze komunikacji marketingowej,
- jakie oczekiwania mają konsumenci wobec tej technologii,
- w jaki sposób te sensory mogą wspierać działania z obszaru społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu i wyrównywania szans,
- jakie są główne niebezpieczeństwa związane z wykorzystaniem beaconów w przedsiębiorstwie,
- jakie jest miejsce tych urządzeń w systemie komunikacji marketingowej.

Książka stanowi wprowadzenie do dalszej dyskusji na temat znaczenia technologii cyfrowych w biznesie oraz możliwości ich wykorzystania do kształtowania relacji z konsumentem.

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