



Social influence's impact on reader perceptions of online reviews



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ABSTRACT

A large number of online customer reviews greatly influences consumer purchasing decisions. Whether positive or negative, consumers regard online customer reviews as providing useful information. Based on the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), this study focuses on the factors of the central and peripheral route in online customer reviews that make readers feel they are trustworthy and helpful. In addition, the researchers are interested in the impact of social factors in the reviews on consumers. Using content analysis, the study analyzes 983 customer reviews from restaurant review websites. Results show that the larger reviewer's number of followers, the higher level of expertise of the reviewer, the larger image count and word count also make readers feel the review is more practical and useful. Further, the influence of the peripheral route, the social factors, on readers is higher than that of central route factors.

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1. Introduction

When individuals plan to dine out, they often search for restaurants they have never been to before. Acquisition of relevant restaurant information before dining can reduce the risk of wrong choices. Conventionally, word of mouth (WOM) from friends reduces such risks, yet face-to-face communication is restricted to a limited range (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). With the popularity of the Internet, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is becoming increasingly important. User-generated content (UGC) review websites appearing under the concept of Web 2.0 break through the limitations of traditional WOM (Cheung and Lee, 2012). Since many consumers present restaurant information and dining experiences faithfully, these websites have become hubs for spreading word of mouth, affecting the purchase decisions of consumers who read them (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

Further, review websites can present information that consumers need in a systematic way, enabling them to easily learn about restaurants. Such websites also provide a rapid channel for relevant information and a platform to gather both positive and negative reviews. However, these reviews come from diverse consumers with different levels of argument quality. If readers mark whether a review

is useful or not after reading it, other readers can skip unnecessary information and thus make choices more efficiently. Therefore, many review websites provide users with a rating function for reviews. The literature shows that useful review ratings can influence the sales of restaurants with useful reviews (Chen & Xie, 2008). Therefore, our first research question is what factors make readers of an online review perceive the review as useful.

In addition, many review websites provide social network functions that allow readers to follow reviewers or to rank reviewers according to their review quality in order to attract more users to post reviews and to make friends with each other. The social effects of these functions could affect the way readers perceive review quality. For example, they may more easily mark the reviews posted by their friends and high-ranking users as useful. This situation could influence the neutrality and credibility of the review website. Therefore, the second research question is whether the social factors on review websites influence reader's judgments of the reviews they host.

1.1. Literature review and hypotheses

Researchers generally focus on the influence of reviews on online consumers' attitude toward the product and their purchase intention (Chu & Kamal, 2008; Doh & Hwang, 2009; Lee, Park, & Han, 2008; Lee & Yoon, 2009; Martin & Lueg, 2013; Sen & Lerman, 2007). Few studies explore how readers evaluate the content quality of online reviews and whether the reviews are useful. Mudambi and Schuff (2010) investigate customer reviews on Amazon.com and find that a useful customer review facilitates the consumer's purchase decision process. They find that the depth of the review (word count), extreme review ranking, and product attributes (experience goods and search goods)

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affect the reader's attitude toward the usefulness of the reviews. Zhang, Ye, Law, and Li (2010) examine consumer-generated ratings of the quality of food, environment, and service of restaurants and find that the volume of online consumer reviews is positively associated with the online popularity of restaurants.

Sussman and Siegal (2003) find that argument quality and source credibility can affect consumer attitudes toward information usefulness. Cheung and Thadani (2012) indicate that online review quality is positively related to consumer's eWOM adoption, while source credibility can directly influence eWOM credibility, which has a positive influence on eWOM adoption.

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) is a major theoretical model in eWOM research (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Chu & Kamal, 2008; Gupta & Harris, 2005; Lee et al., 2008; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Park & Kim, 2008; Park & Lee, 2009; Sher & Lee, 2009). Researchers often classify the content quality of reviews into the central route and other cues into the peripheral route to explore the influence of the factors related to the two routes on consumers' final attitudes toward the product and willingness to purchase. However, few studies explore the effect of two routes of ELM on the perceived usefulness of online reviews. To address this gap, this study investigates the factors affecting the perceived usefulness of reviews. Potential factors affecting reader perceptions are classified into one of the two routes. Based on the literature, this study defines argument quality as the central route and source credibility as the peripheral route in evaluating the reader adoption of the two routes and their influence on perceived usefulness.

1.2. Source credibility

According to Chaiken (1980), source credibility is the trust of the receiver in the source of information. Thus, a factor for the reader in assessing the usefulness of an online review is whether they trust the source of information. eWOM is often shared by anonymous users. Park et al. (2007) observe that the credibility of online reviews is lower than that of traditional WOM. Park and Lee (2009) also indicate identifying the source credibility of eWOM is difficult for readers because they cannot judge the credibility from the attributes of information providers such as credibility, attractiveness, physical appearance, familiarity, and power. Researchers find that the information provider has great influence on the preference and choice of consumers (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). If the receiver of the WOM information is familiar with the communicator or the communicator has sufficient credibility, the source credibility is higher.

In order to eliminate the problems of anonymity between information providers and receivers, review websites provide the ability to rank reviewers and establish social networks of their followers. The ranking of the reviewer represents the quantity of the reviews published and the level of expertise recognized by readers, while the number of followers represents the reviewer's level of socialization. The more followers a reviewer has, the greater the number of people who recognize the reviewer. Thus,

H1. Readers perceive a review as more useful when the reviewer is recognized as having a higher level of expertise.

H2. Readers perceive a review as more useful when the reviewer has more followers.

1.3. Argument quality

Cheung et al. (2008) indicate that eWOM quality directly affects information usefulness. The evaluation of eWOM quality can stimulate the evaluation of information quality. According to the Information System Success Model of DeLone and McLean (1992), the evaluation of information quality is based on the information system, including the accuracy, reliability, comprehensiveness, and correlation of the

information. The object of this study is customer reviews on a review website. The reader's evaluation of review quality takes into account the comprehensiveness of the information. The richer contents of the review, the higher quality of the review is perceived and thus the higher information usefulness of the review is perceived.

According to Mudambi and Schuff (2010), when reviews have higher word counts, they are perceived as more useful because readers treat word counts as representing greater depth of information comprehensiveness and usefulness. Dining is regarded as an experience good. Consumers hope to see images in the restaurant review since these provide additional information. Thus, this study also uses the number of images as a basis for evaluation of the comprehensiveness (review depth) of online reviews, in addition to the number of words. Therefore:

H3. Readers perceive a review is more useful when the review has a higher word counts.

H4. Readers perceive a review is more useful when the review has more images.

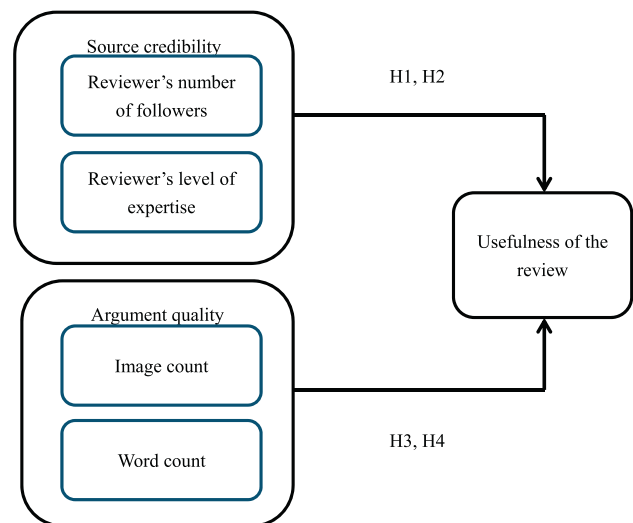
2. Methods

2.1. Research framework and operational definition of variables

Fig. 1 is the conceptual model of the study. The usefulness of the review is the dependent variable, and the reviewer's number of followers, reviewer's level of expertise, image count, and word count are the independent variables. These are divided into the two constructs of source credibility and argument quality. The operational definition and measurement method of each variable is shown in Table 1.

2.2. Methods and data

Most studies on eWOM use questionnaires and experiments to examine the attitude of consumers toward online reviews. Although these methods can obtain data at the psychological level of consumers, inaccuracy is inevitable, which limits the results of the research. Therefore, Mudambi and Schuff (2010) and Zhang et al. (2010) retrieve actual review data from Amazon.com, seeking to present more realistic conditions. Thus, this research adopts content analysis of empirical data as well. Two coders capture the actual reviews from the most



Conceptual Model

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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