



Does source matter? Examining source effects in online product reviews

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the literature about online source classification, source credibility, and attribution theory, this study examines how the source of a product review influences people's product judgments. Results from a between-subjects experiment suggest that the perceived source of a message (the visible source) impacts how people evaluate actual reviewer (the original source) and product. Reviews made by regular Internet users (visible sources) lead to greater trust in the actual reviewer (the original source), compared to product reviews from product makers. Results further indicate that visible sources play a crucial role in helping people judge the credibility of online reviews. Particularly, the identity of a visible source is used to consider the intention of original source of the message, which in turn determines message persuasiveness. The authors conclude that evaluating the intentions of online reviewers is a critical antecedent to forming opinions about online reviews and products.

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1. Introduction

The Internet today is more crowded than ever before with content in a variety of formats and from a range of sources. The rise of several new technologies such as broadband Internet, Extensible Markup Language for website programming, and easy to use interactive software platforms among other developments has made it easier for people to upload material to the Internet. When it comes to online commerce, one noticeable development is the increasing number of digital product reviews. These reviews are a crucial source of information for consumers and can greatly influence purchase intentions. Several recent reports reveal the power and pervasiveness of online product reviews. One study found that consumers are substituting time spent directly with retailers with time spent on the Internet learning about products (Ratchford, Talukdar, & Lee, 2007). An industry study reported that around half of male Internet users and 42% of female Internet users in the United States use product ratings and reviews at least monthly (Reitsma, 2010). An oft-cited poll by the Harris Interactive group found that 71% of US adults say that product reviews from friends or family influence them either a great deal or a fair amount (Heckathorne, 2010).

Three primary sources appear to dominate today's new media landscape: Regular Internet users who produce user-generated content such as product reviews, professional media gatekeepers who prepare material for "third-party" editorial websites, and marketers and advertisers who produce content for promotional purposes. With these sources competing for our attention, it certainly appears that we have an active and cluttered environment and this can have an important role when it comes to product reviews. Online reviews are often posted anonymously, which makes it hard for consumers to discern the source's identity and where a review comes from. To this point, the literature on online reviews and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has overlooked sources evaluation and source effects.

Traditionally, scholars have found that source characteristics such as trustworthiness and expertise influence individuals' message perception and behaviors. Especially, in this new e-commerce environment, there are challenges for consumers to sort through and mentally process the vast amount of online content. People therefore have to rely on mental shortcuts or heuristics such as source characteristics for this sensemaking and to help them make credibility judgments about content. Source can still be a critical variable to be considered when understanding people's message judgment, even if the identity of the source is anonymous or somewhat ambiguous. Considering how people evaluate sources and source effects can be a crucial step to understanding the psychological process of people's online review evaluation.

This study empirically tested the ways in which people evaluate online sources and how this source evaluation impacts their perception of online product reviews. The study first considered the recent literature about online source classification and differentiates two types of sources: original sources and visible sources.

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Drawing on the source credibility literature and attribution theory, this study presents a rationale of how one type of source can influence trustworthiness and expertise of another source and how this inter-relationship impacts message evaluation. A between-subjects experiment was conducted using a video review of an online book reader in order to clarify the role of source in the evaluation of online product reviews.

2. Literature review

2.1. Source credibility and credibility judgment online

Source credibility is a term used to suggest that a communicator's positive characteristics can enhance the value of information in a message, and this therefore impacts the receiver's acceptance of a message (Anderson, 1971; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004). The commonly identified dimensions of source credibility include trustworthiness and expertise (Hovland et al., 1953). Trustworthiness refers to the audience's confidence that the source will provide information in an objective and honest manner (Ohanian, 1991) and expertise refers to the degree to which audience feels that the source is capable of making correct and valid assertions (Hovland et al., 1953).

Source credibility is especially important online. Previous literature has shown that source information serves as a peripheral cue or heuristic to influence individuals' judgments of message credibility (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). The effect of source credibility is stronger when individuals process information heuristically (i.e., effortless and more use of cues) rather than systematically (i.e., effortful and analytical). In the current media landscape, consumers are bombarded with information from a variety of online sources. To avoid confusion and to save mental effort, consumers need to quickly assess information. This requires individuals to rely on peripheral cues to judge information (Fogg et al., 2003; Metzger, 2007), which increases the importance of source credibility for individuals' information judgment in online environment (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Sundar, 2008).

2.2. Sources in online environment

Despite its importance as a criterion of judging online information credibility, 'source' has not been fully investigated in studies of online product reviews or in the eWOM process. Prior studies have focused on examining message features, such as message valence and strength, and the factors driving people to write and produce online content. Little attention has been placed specifically on source characteristics. This might be due to the fact that online communications tend to be anonymous and characteristic of message senders might be hard to examine. Moreover, the term "source" in the eWOM literature often refers to the person who originated the message. The underlying assumption is that online product reviews are sent from reviewers to audiences without other traditional media gatekeepers becoming involved in the information transmission process.

However, there are multiple intermediaries existing in the communication process between message creation and message reception. For example, a product review can be presented at the reviewer's personal website, posted on a site that aggregates online product reviews, or quoted by others in a random website that the original creator does not know. Since the identity of the original message creator can be easily lost in the crowd of information, intermediaries such as the entity that runs the website become an important cue. We can logically assume that an intermediary in the communication process could influence individuals'

perceived credibility of a review, acceptance of the review, and even perception towards the original source.

The impact of intermediaries or gatekeepers on the persuasion process has been examined in numerous studies. For instance, Sundar and Nass (2001) pointed out that psychologically people perceive gatekeepers as a visible source. A visible source refers to "the source(s) seen by the receiver to be delivering the message of content" (Sundar & Nass, 2001, p. 58). The visible source impacts people's message acceptance, although ontologically information gatekeepers (e.g., news reporter, editor, or news agency) are mere conduits between message source (e.g., the person quoted in the news) and message consumers (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Additionally, Hu and Sundar (2010) examined the influence of sources on perceived credibility of online health information. They classified sources as original source (i.e., the person who originated the message) and selecting source (i.e., venue or vehicle identified as gatekeeper). The study found an effect of selecting source (including visible source) on the perceived credibility of message.

Since the identity of an original source can be anonymous in the context of an online product review, visible source likely influences message credibility, and thus persuasiveness of the message. In this study, a modified model of the communication transmission process is presented (see Fig. A.1). This model incorporates the idea of "original source" as explained in Hu and Sundar (2010). In addition, the model assumes that a visible source can affect individuals' message perception by influencing the individuals' credibility judgment of an original source.

2.3. Effect of visible source on credibility of original sources

2.3.1. Perceived trustworthiness and attribution theory

To understand the possible influence of visible sources on trustworthiness of the original source, source attribution should be considered. Attribution theory addresses "how people make causal inferences, what sort of inferences they make, and what the consequences are" (Folkes, 1988, p. 548). Particularly in consumer research, attribution theory has been used to explain how people infer an endorser's motivation for recommending a product (Folkes, 1988; Lee & Youn, 2009; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004). People often equate a communicator's action with external (or product-related) and internal (or non-product-related) reasons. If a consumer sees a positive comment about a product from an online review site, the consumer might think the review was made because the reviewer actually thought the product has favorable characteristics (external motivations). In another case, a reviewer may have internal reasons such as receiving financial compensation to write the review and these reasons may have nothing to do with the performance of the actual product (internal motivations) (Folkes, 1988; Sen & Lerman, 2007). The attribution of a communicator's motive to internal reasons can increase people's skepticism towards the communicator's genuine intention (Rifon et al., 2004). Particularly, the attribution to monetary gains (internal motivation) has been found to especially decrease the communicator's credibility, especially believability and trustworthiness (Moore, Mowen, & Reardon, 1994; Rifon et al., 2004; Sparkman, 1982).

Studies have found that people use different types of situational cues to infer a communicator's motivation (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973). For example, Rifon et al. (2004) examined how people perceive companies' motives to sponsor websites. They found that when a company offers products that match the content of the website the company is sponsoring (e.g., a pharmaceutical company sponsors an online community for cancer patients), people are more likely to think the company has external motivations (i.e., altruistic motives) than a company whose product offerings

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