



Information usefulness in online third party forums

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of consumer and expert eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) information on information usefulness perception of information readers in third party forums. Extending existing studies on eWOM, our research model contends that *sense of belonging* plays moderating roles on eWOM information. Online survey instrument was used to collect data from two third party forums in China. The results show that the attributes of both consumer and expert eWOM information serve as important antecedents to affect information usefulness perception. Additionally, sense of belonging assumes an important role to influence the antecedents' effects on information usefulness.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, third party forums have become one of the most innovative and important channels for Internet users to seek product/service information (Yan et al., 2016). In essence, a third party forum is a virtual community which provides an interactive platform for online consumers to share their evaluation and recommendation toward a product/service (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009). Previous studies confirmed that these product/service reviews would significantly reduce online consumers' information asymmetry perception (Manes & Tchetchik, 2018), thus affecting their consuming decisions and behaviors (Abubakar, Ilkan, Meshall Al-Tal, & Eluwole, 2017; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Lu, Ba, Huang, & Feng, 2013; Zhao, Stylianou, & Zheng, 2018). As such, it is of paramount importance to further investigate how the information readers evaluate the usefulness of the review information as previous research confirms that information usefulness will determine the extent to which the information readers adopt the information (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008) and make the final consuming decisions (Lee & Youn, 2009; Lee, Park, & Han, 2008; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007).

In third party forums, information readers can obtain product/service review information from two sources (Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010). The first source is the forum members. In many third party forums, the members are willing to utilize this social network to

share their previous purchasing experiences and express their viewpoints about the product/service. Information Systems (IS) and marketing scholars often refer to such a communication among forum members as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), which is termed *consumer eWOM* in this study. Likewise, forum administrators invite professional experts to provide their reviews on the forum (Chen, Teng, Yu, & Yu, 2016; Flanagan & Metzger, 2013), allowing information readers to access product/service evaluations and recommendations from the experts. In this study, this type of review is termed *expert eWOM*. Previous research believes that product/service reviews from these third party sources are more influential than information from manufacturers and retailers (Chen et al., 2016). In general, we believe eWOM information is one of the crucial determinants for third party forums devoted to social commerce (Shin, 2013).

Since these two kinds of eWOM information originate from different sources, the pattern of their effects on information readers may be distinct (Zhang et al., 2010). That is, the information readers may utilize certain information attributes to evaluate the consumer eWOM, while utilizing different information attributes to judge the expert eWOM. Nonetheless, previous studies, such as (Cheung et al., 2008; Jin, Cheung, Lee, & Chen, 2009; Luo, Luo, Schatzberg, & Sia, 2013; Park et al., 2007) have focused primarily on consumer eWOM information. The paucity of the effect of expert eWOM in existing studies motivated us to develop a research model that aids in a more comprehensive understanding of how the information readers can be affected by both kinds of information received from a forum. This study posits that information readers

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will simultaneously analyze both kinds of information and will be affected by both of them, consequently, they will formulate a holistic perception of information usefulness toward all the forum information. This study therefore contributes to advancing the current body of knowledge on eWOM research.

The first research question of this study is:

How the attributes of both consumer and expert eWOM information affect information readers' general information usefulness perception in third party forums?

Given the different effect mechanisms of these two kinds of eWOM information, this study further predicts that their effect modification trends to be distinct. We believe that sense of belonging (SOB) of the information readers regarding the third party forums may differentiate the effects of these two kinds of eWOM information. In the literature, SOB refers to online users' social and emotional connections with the forum and other members in it (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012). Thus, a person's experience in a forum reflects his/her level of SOB (Blanchard, 2007; Koh & Kim, 2003; Lin, 2008). As SOB may help them distinguish the common characteristics from other forum members and assess the expertise of the professional experts, we deem that it has substantial relationships with the effects of both consumer and expert eWOM information. In general, we consider that probing the moderating effects of SOB can validate the necessity to differentiate the eWOM information based upon its sources.

The second research question of this study is:

How the information readers' senses of belonging moderate the consumer and expert eWOM information's effects on their perception of information usefulness in third party forums?

In order to add to the growing body of third party forum research literature, such as (Flanagin, Metzger, Pure, Markov, & Hartsell, 2014; Gupta & Harris, 2010; Lu et al., 2013; Luo et al., 2013; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Yang, Cai, Zhou, & Zhou, 2005), this study proposes to examine and analyze information attributes of both consumer and expert eWOM information that are being antecedent factors of information usefulness perception. Additionally, we anticipate that information readers' SOB serves as a moderator to modify the relationships between the antecedent factors and information usefulness perception. The rest of this paper is organized as follows: we introduce the antecedent factors of information usefulness, then propose the moderating effects of SOB, followed by the research methodology, data analysis, and findings. In the final section, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications, as well as the limitations of this study.

2. Antecedent factors of information usefulness

2.1. Information usefulness and dual process theory

The construct "perceived usefulness" was coined by the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). It explains how individuals perceive utilizing a new technology can improve their hedonicity, satisfaction, and working performances (Shin, 2017). Perceived usefulness can determine the extent to which individuals form intention to adopt a behavior or technology (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). Previous studies, such as (Cheung et al., 2008; Sussman & Siegal, 2003) suggest that this construct, namely, information usefulness, can be applied to information communication context. Information usefulness is defined as the extent to which the readers perceive the received information as valuable. It is a crucial determinant of information adoption and subsequent purchasing behaviors (Cheung et al., 2008; Sussman & Siegal, 2003).

Several prior studies, such as (Flanagin et al., 2014; Gupta &

Harris, 2010; Lu et al., 2013; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Yang et al., 2005) have investigated the relationship between information attributes and information usefulness perception. They recommend that the dual process theory (Chaiken & Trope, 1999) is a suitable theoretical background to summarize and classify the information attributes. Based upon this theory, the information attributes can be classified into two groups: content-related and environment-related factors. When people carefully scrutinize the content of the information, they utilize content-related factors to evaluate its usefulness. If people rely on some simple cues associated with the information, without any deep thought on the content, to evaluate the information, then the environment-related factors will affect their judgment. Specifically, previous research has acknowledged that information quality is the typical content-related factor (Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Zhang & Watts, 2008), whereas the environment-related factors often include information source credibility and information quantity (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Cheung, Sia, & Kuan, 2012; Lu et al., 2013).

Prior research focusing on the attributes of consumer eWOM information has provided a significant foundation, upon which this study endeavors to further explore and expand the effect of both consumer and expert eWOM information simultaneously. Drawing on the dual process theory and previous empirical research findings, we incorporate information strength, completeness, source credibility, quantity of consumer eWOM information, information strength, completeness, and forum reputation of expert eWOM information into our research model. By doing so, we offer to explore how the content-related and environment-related factors of both kinds of information can affect information usefulness perception in third party forums.

2.2. Attributes of consumer eWOM information

Several previous studies (e.g., Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Zhang & Watts, 2008; Cheung et al., 2012) have confirmed that information quality is the crucial element affecting the information readers' perception of information usefulness. Subsequent studies, such as (Cheung et al., 2008; Luo et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2005) have argued that information quality incorporates two components – argument strength and completeness. Argument strength refers to the extent to which the information readers consider the argumentations of the received information to be reasonable and convincing (Cheung et al., 2009). Whereas, information completeness indicates whether the information contains a wide range of aspects of the product/service. The congruence of the prior studies indicates that both components of information quality can have significant effects on the attitude of information readers. Based on this standpoint, our study further posits that when information readers process the consumer eWOM, they will utilize both argument strength and completeness to evaluate the usefulness of the information. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

H1a. Consumer eWOM strength has a positive effect on information readers' perception of information usefulness in the third party forum.

H2a. Consumer eWOM completeness has a positive effect on information readers' perception of information usefulness in the third party forum.

Several studies, such as (Cheung et al., 2008, 2012; Sussman & Siegal, 2003) have argued that source credibility of the information is a crucial environment-related factor affecting information usefulness perception. Source credibility is defined as to what extent the information readers consider the information source as expert, thus trustworthy (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In a third party

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