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## Development of a scale to measure skepticism toward electronic word-of-mouth



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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become an influential factor affecting Internet users' perceptions and behaviors (Chatterjee 2001; Lee et al. 2009). However, as more evidence demonstrating the utilization of fake eWOM has been discovered (Forrest and Cao 2010; Malbon 2013), Internet users' trust of eWOM may have been severely undermined, and they may have developed skepticism about this kind of communication in general. Current measurement scales for evaluating Internet users' suspicions/distrust toward eWOM messages are adopted from the marketing discipline and developed for advertising skepticism, which is contextually different from skepticism toward eWOM. The purpose of this study is to create a new measurement scales for eWOM skepticism. Using data from a preliminary survey, new measurement items for eWOM skepticism were established. Then, the new items were validated using a second survey dataset. The reliability and validity of the new scales suggested that the new instrument is suitable for measuring eWOM skepticism. This study contributes to the eWOM literature by highlighting the importance of investigating eWOM situations from the perspective of suspicion and distrust.

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## 1. Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to the statements regarding a subject (e.g. product or organization) made by Internet users, which are available to others through the Internet (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). In contrast to official information and the information that is released in traditional media, eWOM is created by ordinary Internet users and disseminated in various online platforms. In the discipline of consumer behavior research, eWOM has been investigated as an influential factor in brand recognition (Lee, Rodgers, & Kima, 2009), vendor evaluation (Chatterjee, 2001), risk-taking behaviors (Ha, 2002), product preference (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), and purchase behaviors (Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007). In addition, eWOM has also shown to be significant in the areas of public relations (Cox, Martinez, & Quinlan, 2008), politics (Metaxas & Mustafaraj, 2012) and spectator sports (Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010).

Using the Internet, any individual can create multiple online

identities and masquerade as an entire group that advocates a particular belief or opinion. This gives the false impression that there are many people supporting the same opinion (Magnini, 2011; Zhang, Carpenter, & Ko, 2013). Many organizations are aware of the potential benefits of eWOM (Forrest & Cao, 2010) and hire individuals or public relations firms to spread biased or fake opinions (Ahuja, Michels, Walker, & Weissbuch, 2007; Carl, 2006). These types of deceptive activities are referred to as “online astroturfing”, which is defined as “dissemination of deceptive opinions by imposters posing as autonomous individuals on the Internet with the intent of promoting a specific agenda” (Zhang et al. 2013, p. 3).

Due to the many cases of online astroturfing that have been exposed in recent years (Forrest & Cao, 2010; Malbon, 2013), Internet users may realize that the possibility of being deceived by eWOM is relatively high. Thus, their confidence regarding eWOM messages in general may have been severely undermined. They may also develop broad, negative attitudes towards the reliability of eWOM messages in general (Angela Hausman, Jin Ma, & Lee, 2014; Larson & Denton, 2014; N'Goala & Morrongiello, 2014; Sher & Lee, 2009; Wang & Chien, 2012; Willemsen, Neijens, & Bronner, 2012). This suspicion/distrust may influence Internet user's judgment and behaviors (Darke & Ritchie, 2007). Suspicion is

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a part of human nature which helps people avoid exposure to threatening situations as well as potential harmful consequences (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). This research assumes that Internet users have developed different levels of pre-dispositional suspicion toward eWOM messages, and that this suspicion needs to be evaluated to better understand Internet user behavior in situations where eWOM plays a role in decision-making.

The main purpose of this research is to develop a new set of measurement scales to evaluate Internet users' pre-dispositional suspicion/distrust toward eWOM communications in general, which is referred to *eWOM skepticism* in this research. Currently, skepticism measurement scales used in eWOM research (e.g. Sher & Lee, 2009; Wang & Chien, 2012) were adopted from marketing research (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Obermiller, Spangenberg, & MacLachlan, 2005; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, 2000). To enhance our understanding of user's suspicion in the eWOM environment, we believe a new set of scales measuring skepticism based on the central characteristics of the eWOM communication medium is needed.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Trust and suspicion

Trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). Early studies examining trust and suspicion/distrust framed the two as opposite ends of a single-continuum construct (Mishler & Rose, 1997; Rotter, 1967, 1980). However, the more current trend is to explore the conceptual differences between trust and suspicion/distrust (Kramer & Cook, 2004; Lewicki et al. 1998; Sitkin & Roth, 1993). Lewicki et al. (1998), for example, argue that trust and distrust are not opposite ends of a single continuum, but two separate and related constructs. Moreover, they added that the emotional and cognitive states associated with trust and suspicion/distrust are very different. McKnight and Choudhury (2006) also suggest that trust-related constructs such as trusting belief, trusting intention, and structural assurance are distinct from the corresponding distrust constructs and that the distrust constructs predict different effects on Internet users' behaviors. Their results showed that trust constructs are more predictive when Internet users perceive low to medium risk, while suspicion/distrust constructs may be more predictive when Internet users sense higher levels of risk. Since the eWOM environment is characterized by uncertainty, anonymity, and lack of users' control, opportunistic individuals may exploit these communications in ways that are detrimental to the message recipient. Abusive activities (i.e., deception and manipulation) are relatively easy to perpetrate via eWOM. Internet users may perceive these risks as significant (e.g. Angela Hausman et al. 2014; Larson & Denton, 2014; N'Goala & Morrongiello, 2014; Willemssen et al. 2012), thus their suspicion may be an influential factor in eWOM interactions.

McKnight and Chervany (2002) assert that trust situations may be studied based on three levels: 1) dispositional trust, referring to an individual's tendency of trusting others; 2) institutional trust, referring to people's attitude toward the reliability of a communication context; and 3) interpersonal trust, referring to people's trusting attitude toward a specific entity. This study focuses on the level of institutional trust, more specifically, the skepticism related to the validity of all the eWOM messages and authenticity of the senders.

### 2.2. Skepticism in eWOM research

In the online context, perceptions of distrust developed from interactions with a specific entity can be generalized to other similar entities (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004). Thus, an Internet user's perception toward one or more online merchants may serve as a proxy for forming similar perceptions toward the whole online merchant community, especially when the perception is negative (Pavlou & Gefen, 2005; Tirole, 1996). Recent studies have suggested that Internet users' skepticism toward eWOM communications may be an influential factor in online interactions. (Dou, Walden, Lee, & Lee, 2012; Lee & Youn, 2009; Qiu, Pang, & Lim, 2012; Sen & Lerman, 2007). However, in most previous eWOM research, Internet users' pre-dispositional attitude toward eWOM communications was implicitly assumed as “tend to trust” and it has not been associated with suspicion or the factors that influence this negative attitude (e.g. Dou et al. 2012; Qiu et al. 2012; Sen & Lerman, 2007).

Sen and Lerman (2007) differentiated the perceived eWOM senders' motivations as ‘telling the truth’ and ‘not telling the truth’. However, the authors did not explicitly investigate unethical and manipulative motivations. Using an experiment, Qiu et al. (2012) investigated how the message valence and conflicting aggregated ratings influence consumers' judgment of eWOM credibility. They found that consumers naturally tend not to believe positive reviews and suspect anonymous eWOM communications. The results of this study implied that the general skepticism toward eWOM makes consumers believe negative reviews more than positive reviews. Although eWOM skepticism was suggested as a highly influential factor in the Qiu et al. (2012)'s study, it was not investigated in their experiment. The study only tested perceived positive motives associated with eWOM messages. In another eWOM study, Dou et al. (2012) investigated how Internet users evaluate the different eWOM sources and how their evaluation in turn influences their perception toward eWOM message credibility. Their experiment suggested that if the intention of the reviewer seems genuine, Internet users are more likely to believe the review and the related product mentioned in the review. The authors also mentioned that Internet users may have already been suspicious about the potential marketing intentions behind eWOM messages, setting up defensive attitudes against this new persuasion tactic. However, they did not test any manipulative motive in their study.

Similarly, Lee and Youn (2009) believed that consumers would be less persuaded by reviews posted on business websites as compared to the reviews posted on a personal blog or an independent product review website. Contrary to the authors' expectation, they found no difference in users' perceptions based on the different platforms. This implies that Internet users perceive all eWOM messages similarly, regardless of the platform. From the distrust/suspicion perspective, their study indicated that Internet users have sensed the danger of review manipulation and they have developed a defensive attitude in that situation.

Sher and Lee (2009) is the only known study to investigate the differences between low and high skepticism consumers and how they are influenced by the quantity and quality of eWOM reviews. The authors found that people with higher levels of skepticism do not carefully evaluate the eWOM messages and tend to trust their instincts while consumers with low skepticism are more likely to be persuaded by the quantity of the reviews. Additionally, from a methodological perspective, the authors chose to measure consumers' skepticism only after their experiment manipulation. This technique may be problematic because the participants' levels of skepticism were potentially confounded by the experiment manipulation.

As detailed above, findings from previous studies suggest that

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