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Do you believe in eWOM?: An empirical study on the credibility of eWOM.

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Abstract

In an era of technology, there is a shift in the consumer decision making-process. For information search and evaluation of alternatives, consumers have started relying on online reviews shared by other consumers who are complete strangers and geographically dispersed. With the increase in the popularity of eWOM information, it becomes important to understand what makes such information credible. Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) provides the base for our conceptual framework. In this study, we examined the credibility of eWOM. Consistent with previous research, the findings of our study indicate that source credibility and homophily, significantly affect a consumer's perceived eWOM credibility. Also, there is a positive relationship between homophily and source credibility.

Keywords: eWOM, Review Credibility, Source Credibility, Source Expertise, Source Trustworthiness, Homophily.

1. Introduction

In the marketplace, traditional face-to-face communication between the sender and the receiver is considered the most influential source of communication. It is perceived as relevant and credible since it takes place between people who share strong tie strengths. With the emergence of the internet and Web 2.0 tools, this word of mouth communication takes place on electronic platforms where people share their experiences with others. This new form of word of mouth communication is known as electronic word of mouth communication that takes place between strangers who are geographically dispersed and are anonymous to each other. The growing importance of eWOM has changed the way consumers search for product or service-related information before making a purchase decision. Many studies have demonstrated that the reviews shared by consumers on various online platforms have an impact on shaping the attitude of consumers and it also influences their buying decision (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Liu, 2006; Cheung et al., 2009; Dellarocas et al., 2007).

In comparison to the word of mouth communication, eWOM communication has a wider reach and thus it becomes difficult to evaluate the credibility of the information. With the massive amount of information available online it becomes very challenging whether to believe that information which is shared by complete strangers or not. Thus, information credibility as a dimension of trust is needed to be evaluated by the consumers before adopting such information. To evaluate the information credibility, source credibility is one of the cues that is used by the receiver. Source credibility plays an important role in eWOM communication. The reader perceives the information as credible if it is coming from a credible source. Now many websites provide an overall product ranking to help the consumers in evaluating the quality of the product. However, little is known about whether the information shared on marketer-generated platforms or user-generated platforms is perceived as credible or not. To fill this gap, we focused on homophily and source credibility as the predictors of information credibility and empirically investigated the impact of homophily and source credibility on eWOM credibility.

2. Literature Review & Hypotheses

Source credibility

Source credibility is defined as *"the extent to which an information source is perceived to be believable, competent, and trustworthy by information recipients"* (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Previous studies have established that credibility plays a significant role in influencing the decision-making of the recipient. Information received from a high credibility source facilitates knowledge as it is perceived as reliable and trustworthy compared to the information received from a low credibility source. Existing studies indicate source expertise and source trustworthiness as the two major dimensions which measure information credibility. (Hovland and Weiss , 1951).

Source Expertise

Source expertise refers to *"the extent to which a source is believed to be capable of making valid assertions"* (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953). Ohanian (1990) defined expertness as *"the degree to which a person perceived to possess knowledge, skills or experience and thereby is considered to provide accurate information".* It is the extent to which the receiver of the information perceives that the source provides valid information (Elaziz et al., 2015). The opinion coming from an expert is considered more reliable and credible than the opinion of a non-expert, also, the receiver changes their attitude towards the product in accordance with the experts' opinion (Shen et al., 2010). In the context of Social networking sites, the findings of Fang (2014), suggest that source expertise positively affects the credibility of eWOM reviews. Thus, if the receivers believe that the review is shared by a highly credible source having relevant expertise, they are more likely to perceive that the review is highly credible. Consumers often rely on the expert opinion as a cue for evaluating the product or service whose benefits are intangible or ambiguous (Elaziz et al., 2015). Previous studies indicate that receivers trust the information shared by the reviewers having immense knowledge and experience about the product or service because their opinions are perceived as more credible (Lis, 2013; Teng et al., 2014). Following the source credibility model, the expertise of the sender plays a significant role in evaluating the credibility of the online recommendations (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Previous studies have examined the relationship between the source expertise and the perceived credibility of the information and their findings show a positive relationship between the two (Fang, 2014; Lis, 2013; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Tien et al., 2013).

Source Trustworthiness

Cheung and Thadani, 2012 defined trustworthiness as "*message source's perceived motivation to provide accurate and truthful information*". One of the most vital and integral element of word of mouth communication is that its source can be viewed as unbiased and trustworthy (Martin and Leug, 2013). Listeners are concerned with whether they can trust the recommendation of the speaker or not and the speaker does not have any ulterior motive (Arndt, 1967). If the information is provided by a trustworthy source than it is less doubted by the receiver and is considered more credible than the one coming from a not so trustworthy source. In an online environment it is not possible for consumers to touch the products and thus they search for the product reviews and here trust on the reviewer plays an important role in shaping the consumer behaviour. Various studies have suggested that source trustworthiness plays a significant role in information credibility (Lis, 2013; Shamhuyenhanzva et al. , 2016; Tien et al., 2019; Ismagilova et al., 2020). Lis (2013) suggested that receiver of online information relies on the reviewer's trustworthiness as the information from a trustworthy source is deemed as honest, valid and it shows high level of sincerity and objectivity. The findings of a cross-sectional study of fast food industry conducted by Shamhuyenhanzva et al. (2016) suggests that source trustworthiness has a direct relationship with eWOM credibility. Tien et al. (2019) also suggests source trustworthiness plays a significant role while evaluating the information credibility.

Dimensions of Source credibility

Dimension	Relationship	Source
Source Expertise	Source Expertise-Information Credibility	Ho and Chien (2010); Lis (2013); Elaziz and Mayouf (2017); Fan and Sun (2012); Fang (2014); Saleem and Ellahi (2017), Tien et al. 2019, Ismagilova et al. (2020)
Source Trustworthiness	Source Trustworthiness-Information Credibility	Cheung et al. (2009); Ho and Chien (2010); Lis (2013); Shamhuyenhanzva et al. (2016); Tien et al. (2019); Ismagilova et al. (2020)

Table 1

Homophily

Homophily is defined as "*the similarities between two people's values, likes, dislikes, and experience*" (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). It refers to "*the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with similar others who possess the same attributes and characteristics*" (Brown et al., 2007). While evaluating reviews consumers look for recommendations from the sender with whom he shares similar values, interests, and preferences. Previous studies concluded that individuals are more likely to engage in interpersonal communication with people having similar characteristics. (Lim and Chung, 2011). Consumers with a high degree of homophily engage in eWOM communication with each other which affects their purchase decisions (Chu and Kim, 2011). Following the Elaboration model, the information provided by the sender becomes more persuasive when the reader shares similar interests with the sender (Petty and Cacioppo., 1981; Saleem and Ellahi., 2017). According to the theory of social comparison, people compare themselves with others. They believe that similar people share similar interests, choices, needs, and preferences. The study of

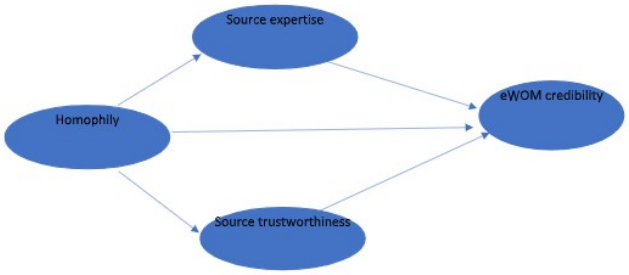
Steffes and Burgee (2009) suggests that information shared by homophilous sources is perceived as more influential in comparison to the information shared by heterophilous sources. In the context of virtual marketing, the study of Jalees et al. (2015) found that homophily has a significant impact on electronic word of mouth communication. According to Ismagilova et al. (2020), homophily between the source and the receiver has a positive impact on the credibility of the message. In the context of user-generated content for travel planning Ayeh et al. (2013) studied the impact of homophily on source expertise and source trustworthiness and found that homophily positively influences the expertise and trustworthiness of the user-generated source. Shamhuyenhanzva et al. (2016) also suggest that homophily has an impact on trustworthiness of the source.

Thus we hypothesize that:

H1: Homophily between the sender and the receiver is positively associated with source credibility.

H2: Homophily between the sender and the receiver is positively associated with eWOM credibility.

H3: Source credibility is positively associated with eWOM credibility.



Research Model

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

Respondents were assured that any information provided by them will be kept strictly confidential and will be used for academic purposes only. To make sure that the answers provided by the respondents are reliable and authentic, we used a filter question in our survey where we asked the respondents whether they read online consumer reviews before purchasing any product or service. Respondents who do not read the reviews were excluded from the analysis. Total 240 responses were deemed valid for analysis. SEM has been used in this study for analysing the data and testing the hypotheses.

3.2 Measures

The constructs of interest in this study included homophily, source credibility, and eWOM credibility. We adopted the measures from existing literature. The scale items for homophily were adopted from Mc Croskey et al. (1974); McCroskey et al. (1981). The scale items for source credibility were adopted from Ohanian (1991) and the scale items for eWOM credibility were adopted from the study of Cheung et al. (2009). All constructs were measured using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Profile

Profile Category	Percentage(%)
Gender	37.1
Male	62.9
Female	
Age (in years)	38.1
Below 20	26.8
20-30	18.6

30-40	5.2
40-50	6.2
50-60	5.2
Above 60	
Education	13.4
High-School	47.4
Graduate	21.6
Post-Graduate	11.3
Doctorate	6.3
Others	
Occupation	34
Service	5.2
Self-employed	57.7
Student	3.1
Home-maker	nil
Retired	
Annual Family Income (in INR)	35.1
Less than 5,00,000	19.6
5,00,000-10,00,000	18.6
10,00,000-15,00,000	4.1
15,00,000-20,00,000	22.7
Above 20,00,000	
Do you read the reviews shared by others on various online platforms before making a purchase decision?	95.5
Yes	4.5
No	

Table 2

Descriptive statistical analysis has been used to describe the sample characteristics. Table 2 shows the research sample characteristics. The results show that 95.5% of consumers read the reviews shared by others on various online platforms before making their purchase decision while 4.5% of the respondents do not read the online product related information. Females respondents are almost doubled than male respondents. Majority of the respondents are graduates. The highest percentage of respondents are students representing 57.7% of total sample below the age of 20 years.

4.2 Reliability & Validity

In this study we assessed scale reliability through internal consistency reliability. As shown in Table 3 the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the constructs ranged from 0.886 to 0.924, much higher than the threshold level of 0.7 recommended by Nunnally (1978), thus verifying their internal consistency. In addition, the composite reliability of the remaining constructs had a value that significantly exceeded the suggested minimum level of 0.7 (Chin & Gopal, 1995), indicating that the variance shared by the indicators was robust. Overall, the results show that all eight constructs had high reliability and internal consistency.

Construct items	No. of items	Cronbach's alpha
Homophily (HP)	2	.924
Source credibility (SC)	6	.916
eWOM credibility (EC)	3	.886

Table 3

Validity Analysis

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	SC	HP	EC
SC	0.858	0.522	0.165	0.940	**0.722**		
HP	0.941	0.891	0.165	1.154	0.406	**0.944**	
EC	0.893	0.735	0.100	0.902	0.315	0.249	**0.857**

Table 4

No validity concerns here

HTMT Analysis

	SC	HP	EC
SC			
HP	.541		
EC	.327	.236	

Table 5

HTMT Warnings

There are no warnings for this HTMT analysis.

As shown in Table 4 & 5 the AVE values of all the constructs are above the threshold limit of 0.50, the composite reliability values are above 0.80 indicating internal consistency. Also, the square root of each construct's average variance extracted values (AVE) is greater than its correlation with each of the remaining constructs Fornell and Larcker (1981). Thus, the reliability and validity of all the constructs is assessed and there are no reliability and validity

concerns.

4.3 Measurement Model

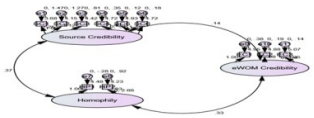


Figure 1

Model fit indices

	CMIN/DF	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Values obtained	3.096	.962	.939	.074
Required Value	Less than 5	Greater than 0.9	Greater than 0.9	Less than 0.08
Source	Kline (1998)	Hu and Bentler (1999)	Hair et al. (1992)	Hooper, Coughlan and Mullen (2008)

Table 6

All the indices indicate overall statistical fit.

4.4 Structural Model

We applied Structural Equation Modeling in AMOS 24 to test the proposed hypotheses. The analytical results indicate that *Homophily is positively associated with source credibility and eWOM credibility.* Therefore, H1 & H2 are supported. These results are in line with the findings of Daowd (2012) & Ismagilova et al. (2020). The results also indicate that Source credibility is positively associated with eWOM credibility. Therefore, H3 is also supported. This result is in line with Cheung et al. (2012) who found that source credibility has a positive effect on review credibility.

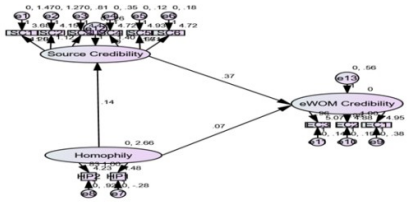


Figure 2

Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
SC <--- HP	.139	.032	4.358	***	par_11
EC <--- SC	.367	.118	3.102	.002	par_9
EC <--- HP	.071	.034	2.111	.035	par_10

Table 7

Standardized Regression Weights: (Group number 1 - Default model)

	Estimate
SC <--- HP	.406
EC <--- SC	.257
EC <--- HP	.145
SE1 <--- SC	.419
SE2 <--- SC	.526
SE3 <--- SC	.572
ST1 <--- SC	.797
ST2 <--- SC	.942
ST3 <--- SC	.910
HP1 <--- HP	1.057
HP2 <--- HP	.815
EC1 <--- EC	.794
EC2 <--- EC	.874
EC3 <--- EC	.901

Table 8

Hypotheses	**p value & β coefficient**	**Result**
H1: Homophily between the sender and the receiver is positively associated with	*P= ***, β= .406*	***Supported***

source credibility.		
H2: Homophily between the sender and the receiver is positively associated with eWOM credibility.	*P=.035, β= .145*	***Supported***
H3: Source credibility is positively associated with eWOM credibility.	*P=.002, β= .257*	***Supported***

Table 9

Since the p value for all the hypotheses is less than 0.05 therefore all the three hypotheses have been accepted.

5. Discussion

The advancement of internet has provided platform to everyone to share their opinions and experiences. This often leads to information overload and credibility concerns. Thus, it becomes important to understand the credibility of the information provided by people who are anonymous to each other. Previous studies (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Fan and Miao, 2012;) have found that homophily between the sender and receiver of eWOM is an important predictor for explaining the influence of EWOM communications, and it is usually measured along several dimensions such as age, gender, occupation, or level of education. In this study, we investigated the impact of source credibility and homophily on eWOM credibility taking Elaboration Likelihood Model as the theoretical framework. In the context of ewOM communication, the role of source credibility has been investigated by many scholars. (Park et al., 2007; Park and Lee, 2009; Cheung, 2009; Cheung et al.,2012; Fan et al., 2013; Luo 2014). Few scholars have also investigated the role played by homophily in eWOM communication. (Lis, 2013; Ayeh et al., 2013; Shamhuyenhanzva et al., 2016; *Ismagilova et al., 2020)*. In line with previous studies, we found that both source credibility and homophily between the sender and the receiver influences how consumer evaluate the credibility of the information. We also investigated the relationship between the source credibility and homophily and the results of our study shows that there is a positive relationship between the source credibility and the homophily between the sender and the receiver. As suggested by previous studies, in electronic commerce , Trust and credibility plays a dominant role in predicting the activity of online consumers (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Awad and Ragowsky, 2008; Cheung et al., 2009; Fan and Miao, 2012) where credibility of the source is measured by two major dimensions : source expertise and source trustworthiness. The findings of our study provides evidence that credibility of the source positively influences the perceived information credibility of consumers. While our findings support the impact of source expertise and homophily between the sender and receiver on the consumer evaluation of online information credibility. Future studies need to explore the moderating role of recipient prior knowledge and level of involvement in evaluating the credibility of the source.

6. Implications

The study results have implications for practitioners and researchers.

i. The consumer decision making process is influenced by the credibility of the information. If the consumer perceives the information to be credible, he will use that information while making his purchase decision, thus, the higher the credibility of the information, the more it will be adopted in the decision making process. Hence, it becomes important for researchers to understand what type of information is used by consumers in the evaluation of an online review.

ii. If the review site provides an effective system to identify and evaluate the credibility of the information provider, then it can attract more consumers. As a result, the credibility of the platform will also improve and consumers will rely more on such website while searching for product information.

iii. Consistent with existing studies , we have found that both source credibility and homophily influences the eWOM credibility, therefore, the reviewing sites may ask the reviewers to provide supporting evidences while sharing their actual usage experience with others to enhance the credibility of their reviews.

iv. Our findings support that people perceive the review to be more credible when it is shared by a homophilious source with whom they share similar interest or choices. Thus, the reviewers may be asked to share their brief profile details, previous purchases, photographs, etc to substantiate their review credibility.

7. Limitations & Scope for Future Research

The findings and implications of this study should be interpreted together with its limitations.

i. In this study, the respondents were asked to recall there perception of the reviews which they had read recently on the online platforms, future studies can confirm our findings by taking one specific platform for evaluating the credibility of the information.

ii. This study is limited to consumer evaluation of eWOM information on the basis of only two factors : source credibility and homophily. In future studies, eWOM credibility can be measured by exploring other factors related to eWOM message characteristics and eWOM recipient characteristics.

iii. In this study, our sample consists of majority of students below the age of 20 years, using a single questionnaire, and the results were analysed by quantitative analysis. Future studies can be undertaken using a large sample size and qualitative analysis can also be done to draw managerial implications.

iv. Future studies can generalize the findings by exploring cultural differences and different product categories.

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