

Analysis of Factors Influencing E-WOM Credibility

Fatema Tuz Zohora*, Nazia Choudhury**, Md. Nazmus Sakib***

ABSTRACT

As the use of Internet is getting more widespread and people are putting more trust on the Internet-based information, a new form of word of mouth termed as electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) has been developed. People receive E-WOM messages from social media, consumer review sites, discussion forums etc. Researches say that people tend to rely on E-WOM messages as much as they do on personal word of mouth. But what variables influence E-WOM credibility? After conducting an intensive background research on this topic this study has been able to identify certain variables such as E-WOM's quantity, polarity, logic and articulation, source and user's prior knowledge/expertise that affect E-WOM credibility. Based on the identified variables a survey was conducted on the students of 10 private and public universities of Bangladesh with a view to measure the effect of those variables on the E-WOM credibility. The regression analysis result indicates the quantity of E-WOM and the source of E-WOM has significant impact on E-WOM credibility. While, the designed model overall with all the included variables came strongly significant in explaining E-WOM credibility. In addition, to measure the internal consistency and correlation of the variables Cronbach's Alpha technique and correlation analysis are also conducted which have brought satisfactory outcome. From a strategic point of view, this study is useful for the modern marketers who want to use E-WOM to promote their products or services. By focusing on the predictor variables which have impact on E-WOM credibility, they can be able to enhance the effectiveness of their marketing strategy with a very cost efficient and a time savvy manner.

Keywords: E-WOM, Logic and Articulation, Marketing Communication, Polarity

INTRODUCTION

The rapid technological advancement of modern times and the widespread use of Internet worldwide have caused the evolution of a new type of communication channel that is interactive by nature. This new type of communication technology is termed as Web 2.0 that includes online discussion forum, social media network, consumer review sites, weblogs etc. Due to having two-way communication facilities, more and more consumers are using Web 2.0 tools to exchange information and also share their experiences and opinions (Lee, Park, & Han, 2008). This gives rise to an online-based word of mouth, termed as electronic word of mouth (E-WOM). Theoretically, the definition of E-WOM is, any positive or negative statement made by a customer or an expert or an ordinary person about a product or service which becomes viral via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

Research has shown that consumers nowadays search for and put trust on online reviews while making any purchase decision about a product or service more than the traditional media. Another survey result indicates that online opinions are perceived to be as trustworthy as brand web sites by the consumers (AC Nielson, 2007 cited in Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008). According to Cheung & Lee (2012), user generated content in the form of online consumer review has significant influence on consumer purchase decision. Because of the anonymous nature and wide range of contents, the power of E-WOM is expanding fast. In addition, one unique aspect of E-WOM that distinguishes it from the traditional way of marketing communication is the positive feedback mechanism in between E-WOM and sales (Duan, Gu, & Washington, 2008). That is because positive E-WOM about a product leads to more sale of the product, which in turn causes more E-WOM and that causes to more sales again.

From the above research evidences, it is quite clear that E-WOM has become a powerful noncommercial

* Professor, International Business & Management, Centre for Business, George Brown College Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
Email: Fatema.Tuz-Zohora@georgebrown.ca

** Lecturer, School of Business, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Bangladesh.
Email: nazia.choudhury@ulab.edu.bd

*** PhD Student in Marketing, University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley, Texas, USA.
Email: mdnazums.sakib01@utrgv.edu

communication channel which is quite effective and efficient at the same time for spreading messages about a product or service. But, in this circumstance, a question that should come up in the mind of any rational person is, how credible are these E-WOM messages? Or, more specifically, what are the factors that indicate the credibility of the E-WOM messages? As the dependency of Bangladeshi customers on online shopping is gradually increasing, a demand for academic research in this field is also building up. Unfortunately, there has not been enough academic research on E-WOM in the context of Bangladesh. This is where the study gained its inspiration to conduct a research with a view to identify factors that can judge the credibility of E-WOM messages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The widespread use of Internet, especially in the developed countries where most of the product/service organisations provide an online version of their offering; people are merely more comfortable with Internet in terms of news, product/service information, quality checking etc. (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). Besides, the continuous effort to ensure Internet security has made people less skeptical to online based information and they appear to exhibit a 'willingness to believe' attitude. As cited in Cheung *et al.* (2008), a major role is played by traditional word of mouth in consumer buying decisions by influencing consumer choice (Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; Arndt, 1967; Engel *et al.*, 1969; Richins, 1983; Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1987).

Before we get to know about electronic word of mouth credibility, we need to understand what E-WOM is. Buttle (1998) as cited in Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008), debated that WOM can be facilitated by electronic means. He also stated that "informal communications" might not be all comprehensive, in disagreement with the fact that viral marketing practices adopted by more and more companies had distorted the boundary between commercial messages and WOM (Lindgreen & Vanhamme, 2005). According to Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004), electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) communication involves any desirable or undesirable testimonial made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or a company, which is made accessible to a crowd of people and institutions via the Internet. The definitional evolution of electronic word of mouth indicates that, with information technology everywhere today, WOM is becoming both more omnipresent and unstructured (Litvin *et al.*, 2008).

According to Tseng and Fogg (1999) as cited in Park, Wang, Yao, and Kang (2011), "E-WOM credibility

is defined as the extent to which one perceives the recommendation as believable, true, or factual." While conducting literature review on E-WOM credibility, an important question that naturally comes in mind is, 'Why do consumers provide WOM referrals online?' Research showed that people's desire to engage in social interaction, people's instinctive nature of being helpful by providing advice (Gupta & Harris, 2010), their perceived sense of concern for other customers, aspiration to gain popularity, will to enhance one's self-worth (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004) etc. are the key factors that primarily motivate people to provide E-WOM reviews online. These reviews are then supposed to help other customers in making their purchasing decisions. Sometimes negative or bad reviews tend to be the only reason behind the switching behaviour of the customers. That is why most of the companies take the matter of E-WOM very seriously. Even sometimes they come forward to get feedback from their customers as they know in today's social media era, every customer's opinion matters.

Researchers have also shown why consumers put trust on the E-WOM referrals online. According to (Huang & Chen, 2006), it has become well established that people perceive ordinary consumer responses to be more trustworthy than someone (i.e. marketers, experts) who may have some personal stake in recommending certain product/service online. Two other important factors that influence people to look for as well as accept the E-WOM referrals are avoiding risk and negativity bias, related to the product/service they want to purchase (Chen, 2006; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, & Scott, 2007).

Quantity of E-WOM

In the consumers' perception, the total information set derived from the reviews tend to be more informative when more reviews are offered (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). Since online reviews build up over point in time and are all saved in Internet forums, the quantity of E-WOM is greater than traditional WOM (Chen & Xie, 2008). As the previous research indicates, people nowadays tend to be less skeptical to the online information; this less skepticism has made people to be more persuaded with the quantity of online reviews (or E-WOM). Since, more reviews are perceived as an indication of higher product popularity (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011). Thus,

H₁: The quantity of an electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) posted online is positively related to the credibility of that E-WOM.

Polarity of E-WOM

Due to high volume of E-WOMs available on the Internet based on different issues, the direction or polarity of E-WOM messages (positive-negative) impact the credibility of E-WOM (Doh & Hwang, 2009). Research indicates that, more polarised customers – who are either highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied, are more likely to initiate word of mouth (Anderson, 1998).

H₂: Polarity of people's perception about the E-WOM is positively related to the credibility of that E-WOM.

Logic and Articulation

The ability of the E-WOM deliverer to frame the message of E-WOM in a logical and convincing manner has impact on the credibility of the message. If the E-WOM is perceived to have valid arguments, the viewers would develop a positive attitude toward that E-WOM and would consider it to be credible (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009).

H₃: The logical structure and articulation of E-WOM is positively related to the credibility of that E-WOM.

Sources of E-WOM

Since the Internet users of today are quite accustomed to do prolific Internet surfing and also have high education

level, this has led them to verify the source of E-WOM via alternative sites, blogs, discussion forums and many other sources to verify the credibility of the E-WOM. Also, naturally, if they find the source of E-WOM as reliable, credibility of the E-WOM increases and vice versa.

H₄: The sources of E-WOM are positively related to the E-WOM credibility.

Prior Knowledge and Expertise

Researchers widely agree that consumer's prior knowledge or expertise related to the E-WOM message has high influence on E-WOM credibility (O'Reilly & Marx, 2011; Doh & Hwang, 2009). So, if a consumer's prior knowledge or expertise about a product/service supports the message of E-WOM, his/her credibility would be high toward that E-WOM and vice versa.

H₅: Consumers' prior knowledge and expertise are positively related to the E-WOM credibility.

The resulting hypotheses presented above are exhibited in Fig. 1 for a regression model below

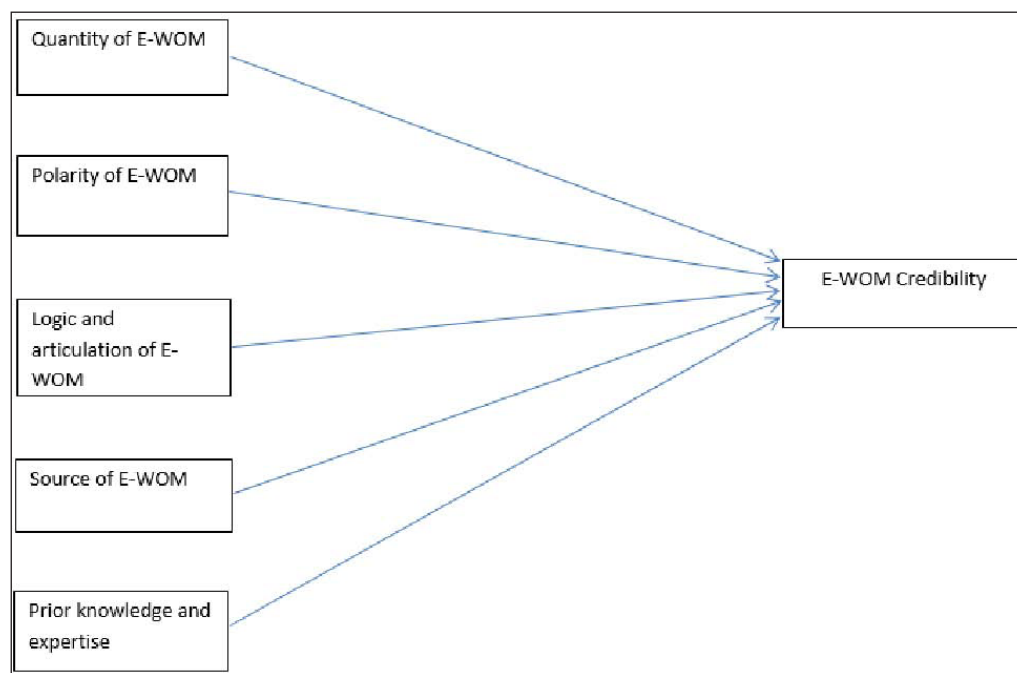
$$\text{E-WOM credibility} = c + \text{Quantity } X_1 + \text{Polarity } X_2 + \text{Logic and Articulation } X_3 + \text{Source } X_4 + \text{Prior knowledge \& Expertise } X_5 + e$$


Fig. 1: Analysis of Factors Influencing E-WOM Credibility

PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Demangeot and Broderick (2007) as cited in Al Karim (2013), businesses are attempting to gain a competitive advantage by using e-commerce to interact with customers with the rapid global growth in electronic commerce (e-commerce). Globally online shopping has become a fast growing sensation. Consumers nowadays shop online for consumption of goods and services, collect product related information or even browse to overcome boredom. Therefore, in the overall relationship between marketers and their consumers, online shopping environments are playing an increasing role (Koo *et al.*, 2008 cited in Al Karim, 2013). Though online shopping culture is new in Bangladesh, it has gained much popularity within the shortest possible time but still consumers have some trust issues regarding the payment system and the quality of the products. That is one of the most important reasons for the customers to look into other customers' opinions or reviews. Today's customers are well-concerned about deceiving marketing advertisements and other marketing activities. They know that they are being targeted by the companies who just want to sell more. According to Goldsmith (2006), people tend to trust opinions of others more than the communications spread by the marketers because of the perceived lack of vested interest which makes the social communication platform more powerful. That is where E-WOM plays a vital role. Thus, the problem of this research is to analyse the factors influencing E-WOM credibility.

PURPOSE

Word of mouth seems to have a great impact on online businesses which File *et al.* as cited in Havaladar and Dash (2009) mention as important for pre and post purchase time frame and ultimately minimise the perceived purchase risk. Nowadays online business is becoming a part of shopping culture in Bangladesh. Customers enjoy their freedom of speech and they love to share their opinions and experiences over the Internet. Thus, it is very important for the business people as well as their customers to know about the factors on which credibility of electronic word of mouth depends. The importance of word-of-mouth communication in a general business setting: a positive buzz would increase sales, while a negative buzz could possibly cause a decrease in sales (Dye, 2000 found in Havaladar and Dash, 2009). Rogers (1995) as cited in Havalder and Dash (2009) stated that to broaden the customer base firms need to learn the maneuver to manage the factors which influence the credibility of WOM. This knowledge will help them to

achieve their desired success in their respective business fields. On the other hand, customers would be able to know about the factors which influence the credibility of E-WOM. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to explore the credibility factors of E-WOM in order to help the business people as well as the customers. The problem statement is discussed first followed by a review of the literature on electronic word of mouth and the five factors (E-WOM's quantity, polarity, logic and articulation, source and user's prior knowledge/expertise) which influence the credibility of E-WOM. Then these factors are analysed via multiple regression analysis using a sample of 200 university going students from Dhaka City. Finally, this paper discusses the implications of the findings for E-WOM marketers and the customers.

DATA AND METHODS

Data were collected through the development of a structured questionnaire from a sample of 200 university going students from Dhaka city. Students were chosen randomly throughout the campus. 10 private and public universities were covered. 20% of the respondents were masters level students whereas 80% of them were third year and final year undergrad students. 10 students were given a proper training on conducting the survey. They were properly trained about all the questions in the questionnaire. Each of those students was instructed to survey 27 target respondents. It took approximately one month to conduct the survey. Nine students were surveyed each day. Before beginning the survey, respondents were asked whether they had any Internet connection at home and whether they had purchased anything through Internet. The survey was continued only with those students who had positively answered these two questions. Among the respondents, 85% said that they use Internet on their mobile phones. After completing the survey, three trained students were asked to input the survey data. The dataset was analysed using SPSS 24.0. Among the 270 delivered questionnaires, data from 200 questionnaires were finally usable. One of the researchers actively supervised the data cleansing and input process. The average age of the respondents was around 21 years of whom 55 percent consisted of male while the rest 45 percent consisted of female students.

The questionnaire was designed to measure the E-WOM credibility of the respondents based on the independent variables identified during the secondary research. Items that were listed as independent variables were the quantity, polarity, logic and articulation, and source of E-WOM and prior knowledge/expertise of the respondents. And their combined influence on E-WOM credibility was

measured. The questionnaire included demographic questions about the respondents' age and gender; rest of the questions were designed to achieve the research objective by organising them using a seven point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). Multiple regression analysis, correlation, and Cronbach's Alpha technique have been used to measure the significance of the overall model and to measure the reliability as well as correlation of the independent variables (quantity, polarity, logic of E-WOM ... etc.) with the dependent variable (E-WOM Credibility).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The widespread use of Internet in people's day-to-day life and their increasing reliability on the online-based word of mouth (E-WOM) reinforce the importance of conducting a study which investigates based on which factors the credibility of E-WOM depends on. The underlying model of this study (Fig. 1) works as a foundation for empirically testing the proposed hypotheses as well as fill in some gaps in the extant literature. Table 1 in the following illustrates the regression analysis results based on the model exhibited by Fig. 1.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis with E-WOM Credibility as Dependent Variable

Dependent Variable: E-WOM credibility			
	Coefficients		
	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig
Constant	1.03	1.28	
Quantity	0.43	3.13	***

Contd.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis with E-WOM Credibility (E-WOMC) as Dependent Variable

Correlations							
		Quantity	Polarity	Logic	Source	Pexpertise	EWOMC
Quantity	Pearson Correlation	1	.378**	.471**	.139	.405**	.585**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008	.001	.346	.004	.000
	N	48	48	48	48	48	48
Polarity	Pearson Correlation	.378**	1	.378**	-.043	.277	.254
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008		.008	.769	.057	.082
	N	48	48	48	48	48	48
Logic	Pearson Correlation	.471**	.378**	1	.085	.464**	.456**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.008		.566	.001	.001
	N	48	48	48	48	48	48
Source	Pearson Correlation	.139	-.043	.085	1	.197	.347*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.346	.769	.566		.180	.016
	N	48	48	48	48	48	48

Contd.

Polarity	0.01	0.11	
Logic	0.17	1.44	
Source	0.23	2.26	*
Prior Expertise	0.06	0.43	
F	7.174		***
R Square	0.461		
Adjusted R Square	0.396		

Here, *p < .05
 ** p < .01
 *** p < .001

From Table 1, it is clearly visible that this model is significant overall (F value, significant at P<.001 level) along with all its independent variables. Among its independent variables quantity of E-WOM (significant at P<.001) and source of E-WOM (significant at P<.05) have significant influence on the E-WOM credibility. And finally, the R square value of the model of 0.461 indicates that approximately 46% of the variations in E-WOM credibility can be explained with this model, which is satisfactorily strong. This result supports the fact that the factors (independent variables) seem to have much importance for the respondents. Especially the quantity of E-WOM and the source of E-WOM because of the fact that customers are more likely to share their post-purchase experience and they are well aware of the fact that all the sources of E-WOM do not carry the same amount of trustworthiness. That is the reason why these two factors have a significant influence on the E-WOM credibility.

Pexpertise	Pearson Correlation	.405**	.277	.464**	.197	1	.378**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.057	.001	.180		.008
	N	48	48	48	48	48	48
EWOMC	Pearson Correlation	.585**	.254	.456**	.347*	.378**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.082	.001	.016	.008	
	N	48	48	48	48	48	48
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).							
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							

To determine how strongly the pairs of variables (independent to dependent) are related to each other the above correlation analysis has been conducted. The result of the correlation analysis indicates that there is statistically significant correlation that exists in between E-WOM credibility and quantity, logic, source of E-WOM and prior expertise/knowledge.

Table 3: Reliability Test with Cronbach Alpha Technique – I

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items	N of Items
.794	.809	13

Table 4: Reliability Test with Cronbach Alpha Technique – II

Item Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Quantity1	4.31	1.715	48
Quantity2	3.85	1.624	48
Polarity1	5.06	1.278	48
Polarity2	4.27	1.621	48
Logic1	5.21	1.597	48
Logic2	4.94	1.838	48
Source1	4.63	1.696	48
Source2	4.69	2.002	48
Pexpertise1	5.42	1.366	48
Pexpertise2	4.33	1.693	48
EWOMC1	5.17	1.191	48
EWOMC2	5.06	1.493	48
EWOMC3	4.94	1.577	48

Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of internal consistency. To measure the reliability of the included items used in this model the above tests were conducted. Here, the Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.794 (considering .809 as

standard) indicates that there is high consistency among the variables used in this model.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The idea of this study started with the question, “what are the factors that influence the E-WOM credibility?” Accordingly based on the background research independent variables which have impact on E-WOM credibility were identified and hypotheses were developed for empirical testing. The result finds strongest impact of the quantity and the source of E-WOM on the E-WOM credibility. While, the model overall with all its predictors came to be highly strong to explain the variability related to E-WOM credibility. In addition, the correlation analysis and Cronbach Alpha test also find the items to be highly correlated and consistent.

Jung Lee & Lee established the fact that E-WOM had struggled to be trusted at first compared to the traditional WOM (Lerrthaitrakul & Panjakajornsak, 2014). The reason could be that earlier community used to share their ideas, comments and information through face to face channel. According to Cheung & Thadani (2012), “when seeking information the quality of information and sources of information could impact on consumers’ acceptance of it regarding e-WOM communication channels.” Taking into account the amount of information shared online by the public, Lee, Park, & Han found as cited in Lerrthaitrakul & Panjakajornsak (2014) that the decision making process of the consumers for purchasing goods and services gets affected by the amount of information consumers receive. These above mentioned literature once again emphasizes the findings of this research paper.

The findings of this study help to better understand the nature of people’s reaction toward the acceptance of E-WOM. This has high importance in modern times because by effectively using E-WOM marketers can achieve many of their marketing goals in a very fast and effective manner. By examining the antecedents of E-WOM credibility, we are in a position to understand the

key drivers as well as key impediments to create E-WOM credibility. But such findings should not be amalgamated with neither as a new form of communication channel nor as theoretical investigations to explore the factors (Abălăesei & Sandu, 2015). Preferably, these findings are more focused on the effectiveness of the selected factors to influence the particular set of target customer in a relatively narrower context.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Recommendations for the future research are based on the findings and limitations of this research. The primary limitation of this study was its limited sample size targeted to a very narrow segment of Internet users. To get a more neutral and reliable view of consumer E-WOM credibility factor, people from different geographic locations, different age ranges, educational background, occupation etc. can be targeted. Secondly, there can be many other variables which may have significant impact on E-WOM credibility, not covered in this study. Finally, there are many other sophisticated statistical methods (factor analysis, conjoint analysis etc.) which are available to get clearer understanding of how each of the independent variables are actually impacting the dependent variable or performing as a group. But due to time constraints such steps were not taken in this study.

Future research should be done by avoiding the flaws and limitations contained in this study. Gathering responses from the people of developing countries may give a view which can be significantly different from the views of the Internet users in developed markets. Furthermore, future research on this issue can be done with a much larger sample size where a mixture of professionals and respondents from different age groups will be covered along with an increased number of independent variables in order to make the research more reliable and valid. Another aspect of our future research interest would be to have a deeper understanding of the subject matter through covering more of independent variables as well as to seek greater insights on the forces like- homophily, trust and interpersonal influence (Chu & Kim, 2011) that make an individual to be more engaged with E-WOM which have been previously studied in a theoretical context. Accordingly, further research may bring more managerial implications to help managers in formulating new Internet based effective marketing strategies based on the findings of this research paper.

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