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Why should I believe this? Deciphering the qualities of a credible online customer review

Carl J Clare, Gillian Wright, Peter Sandiford, Alberto Paucar Caceres

*Leeds Business School**, Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Adelaide

RB465, Rosebowl, Leeds Beckett University, Portland Crescent, Leeds, LS1 3HB

*(please note that this research took place at Manchester Metropolitan University, where the main author was employed at the time. The main author moved to Leeds Beckett University shortly after the first draft of this paper was submitted.)

Dr Carl Clare is a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University. His research interests are concerned with the use and influence of electronic word-of-mouth on customer attitudes and decisions, and the use of CAQDAS to facilitate qualitative data analysis.

Professor Gillian Wright is Chair of Strategic Marketing and Director of Research of the Research Institute for Business and Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. Her research is concerned with the development of stakeholder-responsive service and the knowledge infrastructures that support this. Gillian is editor of Marketing Intelligence and Planning and a member of the European Doctoral Association Executive Committee and Academy Faculty. Her professional background is in decision-support information - as a clinical trials scientist in pharmaceuticals and a market analyst for a multinational electronics company.

Dr Peter Sandiford is a Senior Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour and Management. He joined The University of Adelaide Business School in July 2012. Before this Peter worked in a number of universities in the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. His previous career focused on Hospitality, working in hotels, restaurants and bars internationally, although he also has experience in accounts and sales.

Professor Alberto Paucar Caceres is a Professor of Management Systems at Manchester Metropolitan University. His work has been published in a number of international journals including the Journal of Operational Research, OMEGA (International Journal of Management Science), Systems Research and Behavioural Research and Systemic Practice and Action Research. Alberto also served as Editor and Associate Editor for Systems Research and Behavioural Research.

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Why should I believe this? Deciphering the qualities of a credible online customer review

Online customer reviews have been shown to have a powerful impact on the sales of a given product or service. However, the qualities of a ‘credible’ online customer review are still subject to debate. Existing research has highlighted the potential influence of a range of factors on the credibility of an online customer review, but relies heavily on quantitative methods and a ‘top down’ approach. In turn, this can reduce our understanding of the influence of these factors into merely discerning whether one pre-determined factor is more influential than another is. This paper adopted a ‘bottom up’ thematic analysis of individual qualitative interviews with a purposeful sample of consumers who regularly utilised online customer reviews. The findings uncovered a range of factors that influenced the credibility of an online customer review that were attached to a reader’s personal experience and to the content of a specific review, and inferred the existence of a reciprocal relationship between the constructs of review helpfulness and review credibility.

Keywords: review helpfulness, review credibility, online customer reviews, electronic word-of-mouth, consumer behaviour, qualitative research

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the term word-of-mouth (WOM), when used within a marketing context, referred to the direct communication from person to person regarding an opinion of a product and/or service. There have been many definitions of this concept quoted from within academic marketing literature. These definitions tend to focus on the mode of communication (often verbal), flow of information (from person to person), the independence of the sender and the offline context (Arndt 1967, Merton 1968, Stern 1994, Brown, Broderick et al. 2007, Jansen, Zhang et al. 2009). Definitions of electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) can be differentiated from their traditional counterparts by their emphasis on the online context that facilitates the exchange of information regarding the usage and characteristics of goods and services (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner et al. 2004, Litvin, Goldsmith et al. 2008).

One particular communication type which falls under the EWOM ‘umbrella’ is the online customer review. This is an area that has been researched heavily, and considered of the utmost importance to organisations that sell to consumers, with research clearly demonstrating the impact this source of information can have on the sales of the product or service they are associated with (see section 2.1). However, in an era when consumers have to contend with issues such as fake reviews (both good and bad) and a situation whereby a consumer can post a negative review of a product or service regardless of whether the fault came from them or the product/service provider, an important question that needs to be addressed by any organisation who allow users to post reviews is ‘what are the key factors that influence consumers when it comes to evaluating whether or not the information and opinions conveyed in an individual online customer review are seen as credible, or ‘believable?’

An important limitation to note regarding the extant EWOM literature, including the literature addressing the credibility of an online customer review, is its heavy reliance on quantitative research methods, a limitation which has already been noted within recently published literature reviews (Cheung and Thadani 2010, Chan and Ngai 2011). Research on the topic of review credibility often takes a ‘top down’ approach, by pre-selecting a range of potential influences from within the existing literature and testing the extent to which they affect the credibility of an online customer review. Relying solely on such an approach can reduce our understanding of the issue to merely discerning whether one pre-determined factor is more influential than another when determining the credibility of an online customer review. As quoted in previous qualitative marketing studies, a lack of qualitative depth of understanding can lead to an insufficient understanding of a lived experience, with qualitative based studies allowing for a more refined understanding of behaviour (MacIver et al, 2012), which in this case is the experience of evaluating the credibility of an online customer review. The objective of this study intends to address this particular limitation of the extant literature base by adopting a qualitative approach, using consumer testimonies about their experiences with online customer reviews as the primary unit of analysis.

2.0 REVIEW OF KEY LITERATURE

The term ‘EWOM’ is frequently used as an umbrella term to encompass many different types of online communications, each with different characteristics, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of EWOM				
SCOPE OF COMMUNICATION				
	One-to-one	One-to-many	Many-to-many	
LEVEL OF INTERACTIVITY	Asynchronous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Websites ○ Blogs ○ Online customer reviews ○ Hate sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Virtual communities
	Synchronous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Video calling ○ Instant messaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Chat rooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Newsgroups
Source: Litvin et al (2008)				

The EWOM literature base has previously been categorised according to an input-process-output model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. EWOM IPO Model

<p>INPUT: Posting or reading EWOM</p> <p>Writer’s motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social tie - Opinion leader - Information giving - Credibility - Experience/expertise/Involvement <p>Reader’s motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social tie - Opinion seeker - Information need - Prior knowledge/experience/involvement - Cost/risk/uncertainty of buying <p>Marketer’s motivations</p>	<p>PROCESS: Processing EWOM</p> <p>EWOM platform</p> <p>EWOM system</p> <p>EWOM interface/site design</p> <p>EWOM message characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Valence - Volume - Content/quality - Usefulness - Credibility - Accuracy <p>EWOM information interpretation/processing</p>	<p>OUTPUT: Outcome after processing EWOM</p> <p>Purchase decision/product sales</p> <p>Customer behaviour/attitude</p> <p>Customer loyalty</p> <p>Product judgement acceptance/adoption</p> <p>Reduced risk</p> <p>Marketing implications</p> <p>EWOM metric</p>
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Source: Chan and Ngai (2011)

This study is located in the ‘process’ segment of this model, in particular the area of EWOM message characteristics, focusing specifically on online customer reviews.