ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE REVIEW COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades Online Communities (OCs) have captured the attention of many academics and business practitioners. There are a large number of different types of OCs serving different purposes. Online Review Communities (ORC) are seen as one instance of OCs and as one of the paramount developments of the Internet, which present many great opportunities to both businesses and consumers. From businesses' perspective, they are seen as powerful tools for companies to increase their profits and market performance. From consumers' perspective, ORC are seen as online platforms enabling people to engage in electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) communications that involves sharing information of products/services, which found to have a significant impact on their purchasing behaviour. A large body of empirical research found in the literature that focused on eWOM, the examination of these prior related works revealed that the issue of eWOM in ORC has not been resolved and still evolutionary. Particularly previous studies provide limited understanding of the factors influencing eWOM in ORC. The literature is contradictory on how eWOM can be measured. Further, Trust and Reciprocity found to be as two important antecedents of eWOM, yet the two constructs have been overlooked in eWOM research. The vast majority of discovered studies pay little attention to the multi-dimensional aspect of trust. Further, the relationship between trust and reciprocity found to be multifaceted and this has not been well recognised in prior eWOM research. Towards filling these research gaps, the present study proposes a theoretical model to further enhance our understanding of how reciprocity and trust may influence eWOM in ORC. The model is only theoretical and its implications yet to be tested with an ORC.

Keywords: Online Review Communities, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Trust, and Reciprocity

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades academics attentions have shifted towards Online Communities (OC), defined as communication technologies enabling interaction and information sharing between geographically dispersed group of people (Pai and Tsai, 2016). There are numerous different types of OC serving different purposes (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). The present study focuses on Online Review Communities (ORC) often referred to Online Opinion Sharing Communities (Ku et al., 2012). TripAdvisor and Yelp are examples of such online platforms, enabling millions of consumers to interact with each other online and to share products/services related information (Lim and Van Der Heide, 2014). Such phenomenon is regarded as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which found to shape consumers' future purchase behaviour (Cheung and Lee, 2012).

ORC have many great benefits for companies and consumers. They can be seen as powerful tools which enable companies to have access to business intelligence and gain competitive advantage (Hughes et al., 2009, Miller et al., 2007, Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004 , Lin, 2008, Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). They help businesses to increase their profits and market performance (Huang et al., 2014). On the other hand ORC provide opportunities to consumers to interact and connect with each other, to share information and advice about product and service experiences (Pai and Tsai, 2016, Brown et al., 2007) any time regardless of any geographical and culture barriers. Such information sharing behaviour in ORC found to shape consumers decision making and purchasing behaviour (Cheung and Lee, 2012). Because of these great benefits, eWOM in OC settings like ORC and social networking sites has received a many great attentions among various scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds ranging from marketing to business and information systems (IS) (Leimeister et al., 2005). However, an examination of the extant literature revealed that, there is still lack of understanding of the factors affecting consumers to participate in eWOM communications, particularly in ORC. Accordingly to fill this gap, drawing upon SET, this paper proposes a model to better understand how reciprocity and trust my influence eWOM communication in ORC.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: first it reviews the relevant literature with the aim to better understand ORC and eWOM. Next it analyses the relevant literature with the intention to further shed lights on the discovered research gap. Finally, it discusses the theoretical background as well as the proposed research model, followed by conclusions and future works.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Online Review Communities

OC started to evolve with the growth of the Internet and since then the topic has been very popular among researchers. It is multi-disciplinary subject as it has been studied from different disciplines and backgrounds. There are different terms associated with OC. These include 'Virtual Communities', 'Virtual Groups', 'Online Discussion Forums', 'Computer-Mediated Communities', 'Electronic Communities', and so forth (Preece et al., 2003, Armstrong and Hagel, 1999, Lau, 2007, Wasko and Faraj, 2000, Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004, Ardichvili et al., 2006). As to these diverse terms, OC has also been described with different definitions throughout the literature (Stockdale and Borovicka, 2006). This study define it as a virtual place consisting of a group of people from different physical locations with a shared purpose governed by policies who have already established some level of participation regardless of time through a communication technology (Gharib et al., 2017). Moreover, there are also different types of OC serving different purposes. To date there is not an agreed classification schema for OC to help us to identify the many types of OC exist in the real world as the literature review suggests (Gharib et al., 2017). For example, OC are often classified based on different characteristics such as purpose (e.g., community goals), supporting software (e.g., technology platform), relationship to physical world, and boundedness (e.g. people, location, and social relationship) (Lazar and Preece, 1998). Hagel and Armstrong (1997) classified OCs into four categories (community of interest, community of transaction, community of fantasy, and community of relation) based on the purpose attribute of OC. Similarly, Stanoevska-Slabeva and Schmid (2001) suggested four OC types: discussion communities, tasks and goals oriented communities, virtual world, and hybrid communities. DeSanctis et al. (2003) reviewed 40 OC, and then labelled them into three groups: community of information kiosks, community of association, and community of practice. Other types of OC reported by Koh and Kim (2004) include 'geographic community' and 'relational community'. Further review of the extant literature revealed various OC types such as online knowledge sharing communities, online communities of practice, online social networking sites, online review communities, online health communities, online transactional communities, online travel communities and so forth. The present study focuses on online review communities (ORC) also known as online opinion sharing communities or online feedback systems, which empower consumers to engage in electronic word-of-mouth communication mainly involves sharing information about product/service experiences with each other (Pai and Tsai, 2016, Brown et al., 2007), which seen vital for consumers' future purchase decisions (Cheung and Lee, 2012) .

2.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Traditional Word-of-Mouth (WOM) originally defined as a verbal type of interpersonal communication among contacts (Arndt, 1967) and as an informal communication process that enable consumers to share product/service related information (Hawkins et al., 2010). In recent years the concept has evolved into electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) (Cheung and Lee, 2012) reflecting on new form of WOM taking place in various online settings including and Social Networking Sites as well as ORC (Cheung and Lee, 2012). It is regarded as a post purchase behaviour, where product/service related information is communicated between

consumers in in online settings like ORC (Weinberg and Davis, 2005, Yang et al., 2015). Two types of eWOM have been reported in the literature. These are negative eWOM and positive eWOM that influences consumers purchase decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Several factors can be used to distinguish eWOM from WOM. These include speed, accessibility, and measurability (Cheung and Lee, 2012). Unlike WOM, eWOM communications are performed in asynchronous mode via ORC and this results in a fast communication (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, Cheung and Lee, 2012). Traditional WOM is limited too face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction (Lim and Van Der Heide, 2014) and therefore it is a two way exchange of information taking place in a verbal format available for a limited period of time, whereas eWOM communications are mainly text base involving multi way exchange of information available for an unlimited period of time (Park and Cho, 2012). Further, eWOM communications are more measurable as compared to WOM communications, since the presentation format, and quantity of eWOM communications can be easily observed (Cheung and Lee, 2012). eWOM has several commercial and non-commercial values for both consumers and companies (Yang et al., 2015). Participation in eWOM communications in ORC can reduce uncertainty among consumers and ease their perceived risks and time spent before committing to a purchase (Karahoca et al., 2011, Khammash and Griffiths, 2011, Yang et al., 2015), as well as reducing product/service related issues after purchase (Yang et al., 2015). Accordingly, consumers have been seen to be keen to participate in ORC. Particularly, studies have shown that about 80% of consumers participate in some sort of ORC before purchasing a new product/service (Cheung and Lee, 2012). Beside, research suggests that some people are willing to pay a higher fee (e.g., 20% more) for product/service with good reviews (Cheung and Lee, 2012). For these reasons eWOM in ORC in recent years has received a substantial attentions not only from managerial but also from academics (Cheung and Lee, 2012).

2.3 Research Gap

While a substantial amount of empirical research found in the extant literature that focused on eWOM, a thorough examination of prior related works revealed that the issue of eWOM in ORC has not been resolved and still evolutionary. Particularly it was discovered that prior research focused on eWOM provides limited understanding of why people participate in eWOM communications. A large stream of studies discovered that investigated the causes and outcomes of eWOM (Cheung and Lee, 2012, Lee et al., 2012, Kim et al., 2016), the vast majority of these prior studies mainly focused on eWOM intention. Yet, intention to participate in eWOM communication cannot be seen as same as the actual participation behaviour. For instance a consumer may have the intention to write reviews in an ORC, but that do not necessary means he/she will perform such behaviour in the future. Further, the review of the literature indicates that eWOM in ORC is a multidimensional involving different element such as opinion seeking, opinion given, and opinion passing (Chu and Kim, 2011). Surprisingly, such multi-dimensional aspect of eWOM has not been recognised in most prior related studies that focused on eWOM intention and that includes research publications (Chu and Kim, 2011, Yeh and Choi, 2011). Furthermore, research underpinned by Social Exchange Theory (SET) found that reciprocity and trust are two crucial factors for OC participation including eWOM communications in ORC (Chen and Hung, 2010, Chiu et al., 2006, Chen, 2013, Ray et al., 2014, Liao, 2008). However, the analysis of the reviewed literature suggests that the vast majority of prior related research provide limited understand of how the two factors may affect consumers decision to engage in eWOM in ORC. For instance, trust is seen as a multi-dimensional construct (Gefen et al., 2003), yet this has been discounted in most ORC research. Finally, a closer examination of the literature revealed that the interrelationships between reciprocity, trust and eWOM is far more complex than been studied in previous research. According, towards filling these gaps, the present study proposes a theoretical framework with the aim to further enhance the understanding of how trust and reciprocity may influence eWOM in ORC.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory (SET), the present study proposes a framework (See Fig 1) to better understanding of how reciprocity and trust may impact consumers' participation in eWOM in ORC. SET was selected as the theoretical foundation for this study because eWOM communication in ORC involves voluntary actions/behaviour performed by community members and that that routed in social exchange (Jin et al., 2010, Beldad et al., 2010).

TRUST   **eWOM**
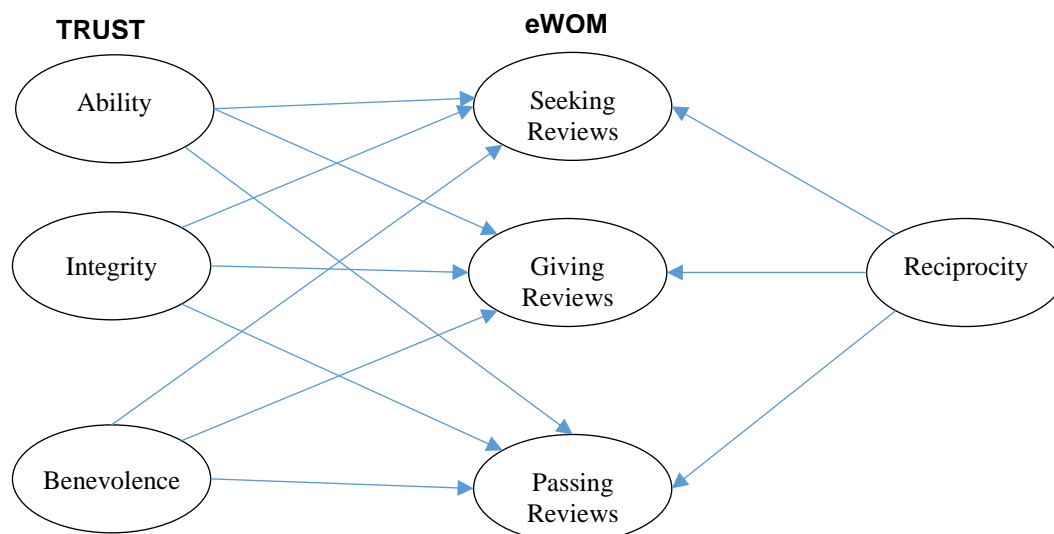
Fig 1: Proposed Framework

From SET view point, ORC members use cost-benefit approach to interact and communicate with each other (Kordzadeh et al., 2014). Community members may decide actively get involved in eWOM communications such as writing or passing on reviews of products/services if they belief other community members would perform same behavior in the future. Accordingly, the present study proposes that ORC members who have a higher belief in reciprocity, will participate more actively in eWOM communications inside their communities. Such postulation is in-line with previous empirical studies that confirmed the positive influence of the reciprocity on various OC participation behaviour including eWOM (Cheung and Lee, 2012). Accordingly, this study postulates that reciprocity has positive impact on eWOM in ORC.

P1a: There is a positive association between reciprocity and opinion seeking in ORC

P1b: There is a positive association between reciprocity and opinion giving in ORC

P1c: There is a positive association between reciprocity and opinion passing in ORC

Moreover, Trust is a vial social exchange factor in OC settings and therefore has been recognised under SET (Beldad et al., 2010, Chen, 2013). Since trust shapes the social relationships in OC settings (Fang and Chiu, 2010), then it can be seen important for eWOM communications in ORC. Specifically, from the theory perspective, trust comprises anticipation of ORC members whose prospect is based on the calculations that weights the costs and benefits of certain course of action to either trustor or trustee (Beldad et al., 2010). Thus, ORC members who finds other community members as trustworthy, will be more engaged in eWOM communications in order to reciprocate the trustworthy relationship (Fang and Chiu, 2010). Trust is a multidimensional construct, this research only focuses on three dimensions of the construct: ability trust, integrity trust, and benevolence trust. This because they are seen relevant to OC participation, precisely for information sharing (Ridings et al., 2002, Chiu et al., 2006, Chow and Chan, 2008) and therefore can be seen crucial for eWOM participation in ORC.

Ability trust reflecting a type of trust where individuals believing others are able to help and full their needs (Bhattacherjee, 2002, McKnight and Chervany, 2002, Ridings et al., 2002). Thus in an ORC, it regards to one's believing that other members are capable, knowledgeable, and competent in sharing information regarding products or services. Community member will more likely engage in eWOM communications if they perceived the ability trust of other members as high. This implies that in ORC, a member seeks opinions from other members who are knowledgeable about product and services they are interested in. Accordingly, this study postulates that ability trust has positive impact on eWOM in ORC.

P2a: There is a positive association between ability trust and opinion seeking in ORC

P2b: There is a positive association between ability trust and opinion giving in ORC

P2c: There is a positive association between ability trust and opinion passing in ORC

Integrity trust, reflecting on individuals believing that others telling the truth and will perform in accordance with socially accepted standards or honesty that the trustor accept (Bhattacherjee, 2002, McKnight and Chervany, 2002, Ridings et al., 2002). Thus, such type of trust reflects on the trustworthiness of OC members. In an ORC, members seek information regarding products/services from other community member who are trustworthy. Thus, integrity trust can be seen very crucial for opinion seekers in ORC as they make their purchasing decisions based on the opinions of other community members. Moreover, community members who are trustworthy will tend to make content contributions. Integrity trust found to play a vital role in the developments of many OC. Prior research suggests that the construct has a positive impact on OC members' participation behaviour such as knowledge sharing (Gharib et al., 2017), which is found to be crucial success factor for OC. Thus, ORC members who are trustworthy and not opportunities tend to give opinion by writing reviews and pass on opinions by reshoring others' posted reviews. Accordingly, this study postulates that integrity trust has positive impact on eWOM in ORC.

P3a: There is a positive association between integrity trust and opinion seeking in ORC

P3b: There is a positive association between integrity trust and opinion giving in ORC

P3c: There is a positive association between integrity trust and opinion passing in ORC

Benevolence trust reflects on individuals believing that others are voluntarily caring about helping and that have a positive desire to do good beyond their own profit motives (Bhattacherjee, 2002, McKnight and Chervany, 2002, Ridings et al., 2002). Thus, the construct suggests that ORC members who actively involved in eWOM communications are not opportunists and that they only share vital information, personal experiences and expertise predominantly to help others regardless of any personal gains. Accordingly, this study postulates that benevolence trust has positive impact on eWOM in ORC.

P4a: There is a positive association between benevolence trust and opinion seeking in ORC

P4b: There is a positive association between benevolence trust and opinion giving in ORC

P4c: There is a positive association between benevolence trust and opinion passing in ORC

4 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

A large volume of research discovered focused on eWOM in various study contexts ranging from marking to IS. A closer examination of the extant literature shows that the issues of eWOM communication, particularly in ORC has not been resolved. Specifically, the multidimensional aspects of eWOM and trust has been discounted in the ORC research. Further, the present study revealed that the interrelationships between eWOM, trust, and reciprocity needs a greater attention than been examined in prior research. To develop a deeper understanding of the impact of reciprocity and trust on eWOM communication in ORC, underpinned by STE the present study proposed theoretical framework. This research contributes to both research and practice. From theoretical perspective, this study advances the understanding of the implication of reciprocity and trust on eWOM participation in ORC. Particularly, it highlights the need for a greater attention towards the different aspects of eWOM communications such as opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing that are seen vital for the development of ORC. Further, it suggests that researchers should pay a careful attention to the multi-dimensional aspect of trust when investigating eWOM in ORC. From practical view, this the proposed model suggests that its important for ORC providers to develop strategies that assist in developing a reciprocal awareness among community members and also assist increasing the level of trust (ability , integrity, and benevolence) among the community members. Acknowledging the theoretical nature of this study, the proposed framework is yet to be tested with the member of ORC. However, the framework serves as a platform for developing and designing future empirical study to test and validate the conceptual framework with members of ORC.

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