

The influence of electronic-word-of-mouth on consumer decision-making for beauty products in a Kuwaiti Women's online community

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Online communities are an important source of electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM), however few studies have examined these types of messages within the Middle Eastern context. This study focuses on Kuwaiti women as members of an online beauty forum; previous work has suggested a mediating effect of gender with women being more likely to trust and follow-up word-of-mouth with a purchase. A conceptual model, based on existing theoretical contributions, provides the basis of a coding framework for the message characteristics that influence members' eWOM adoption. A sub-set of the analysis is presented: 218 threads (1820 messages, coded into 6702 units) illustrating cases where eWOM was adopted and thereby demonstrating continuance intention with members returning to the forum. Content analysis revealed the prevalence of emotional aspects in messages, coded into a new category of 'community bonding'. Findings show that emotion expressed in messages is as influential and important as cognitive aspects of argument quality.

Keywords: electronic-word-of-mouth, online community, decision-making, consumer opinion, Kuwait

Introduction

Electronic-word-of-mouth (eWOM) along with specific consumer-opinion and review platforms, such as bulletin boards, forums, blogs, social network sites and online communities can exert a strong impact on members and their decision-making (Pollach, 2006). It comprises positive and negative statements about a product, which are made consumer-to-consumer (Cheung, Lee and Thadani, 2009; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). This holds a business and marketing benefit in the promotion of products and services (Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzatol, 2008), but also a community benefit in facilitating online participation and increasing membership through the sharing of information, knowledge and experience content between members (Cheng and Zhou, 2010; Okazaki, 2009; Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn, 2008; Sun *et al.*, 2006; Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Cen-

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tral to this is the development of understanding of the factors that influence members to adopt the information and of what may support continuance intention to act on the information and participate in an online community (Hashim, Tan and Andrade, 2011; Jin *et al.*, 2009; Limayem, Hirt, and Cheung 2007). Many recent works has highlighted that few studies have explicitly assessed the relation between eWOM and continuance intention (Chen, Yen, and Hwang, 2012).

However, despite the prevalence of online forums among Arab internet users, few studies have investigated the effect of eWOM within a Middle Eastern context. One such study by Almana and Mirza (2013) examined eWOM use among Saudi internet users and found that respondents are heavily dependent on eWOM in online forums when making purchasing decisions. Related to this are the effects of gender in online participation and the uptake of eWOM; for example, Al Nashmi *et al.*, (2010) found that participation in online discussion boards was greater amongst Saudi and Kuwaiti women than other GCC countries, although more research to understand this phenomenon in the Middle Eastern context is required (Sharif and Al-Kandari, 2010). In other cultural contexts, research has found significant gender differences in consumers' use of eWOM. Kim, Mattila and Baloglu (2011) found that women are more likely to read eWOM on hotel reviews for convenience, quality and risk reduction. Bae and Lee (2011) found that more positive consumer reviews have a greater effect on women who are more likely to follow up with a purchase than males. Awad and Ragowsky (2008) found that women place greater trust in eWOM than males owing to the sense of social support that they value. This is supported by an earlier study by Hung and Lee (2007) who found that eWOM provides explicit information, tailored solution interactivity, and a quality of empathic listening in women online communities. Therefore, taking the women perspective into account should prove a fruitful approach in identifying clear cases where eWOM is adopted.

In this study we build on existing contributions to theory by developing a conceptual model for understanding eWOM in a Middle Eastern context. We take into account the mediating effects of gender and how women adopt eWOM and express continuance intention to act on eWOM. We examined the content of the content of messages posted by Kuwaiti women on an online beauty forum to answer the following research question:

What are the characteristics of the messages that influence the adoption of eWOM?

The next section presents the conceptual model and how it is has been developed from existing theoretical contributions in the literature that describe the flow of information between consumers. In the methods section, a description of the case used for analysis – a Kuwaiti women's online beauty forum – is presented along with details of the data collection, coding schema and analysis. Finally, the results section details the findings of the study arranged by content categories. The findings suggest that community bonding and associated emotional expression play a key role in the adoption of eWOM and a member's continued use and participation in a forum.

Conceptual Model

The following section describes the three models that contributed to the development of the conceptual model, which underpins the coding framework and analysis of the forum messages. Cheung and Thadani (2010) have pointed out that no particular theory or set of theories currently dominates research on online communities and the phenomenon of eWOM and therefore, recommends that researchers build their own theories. The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

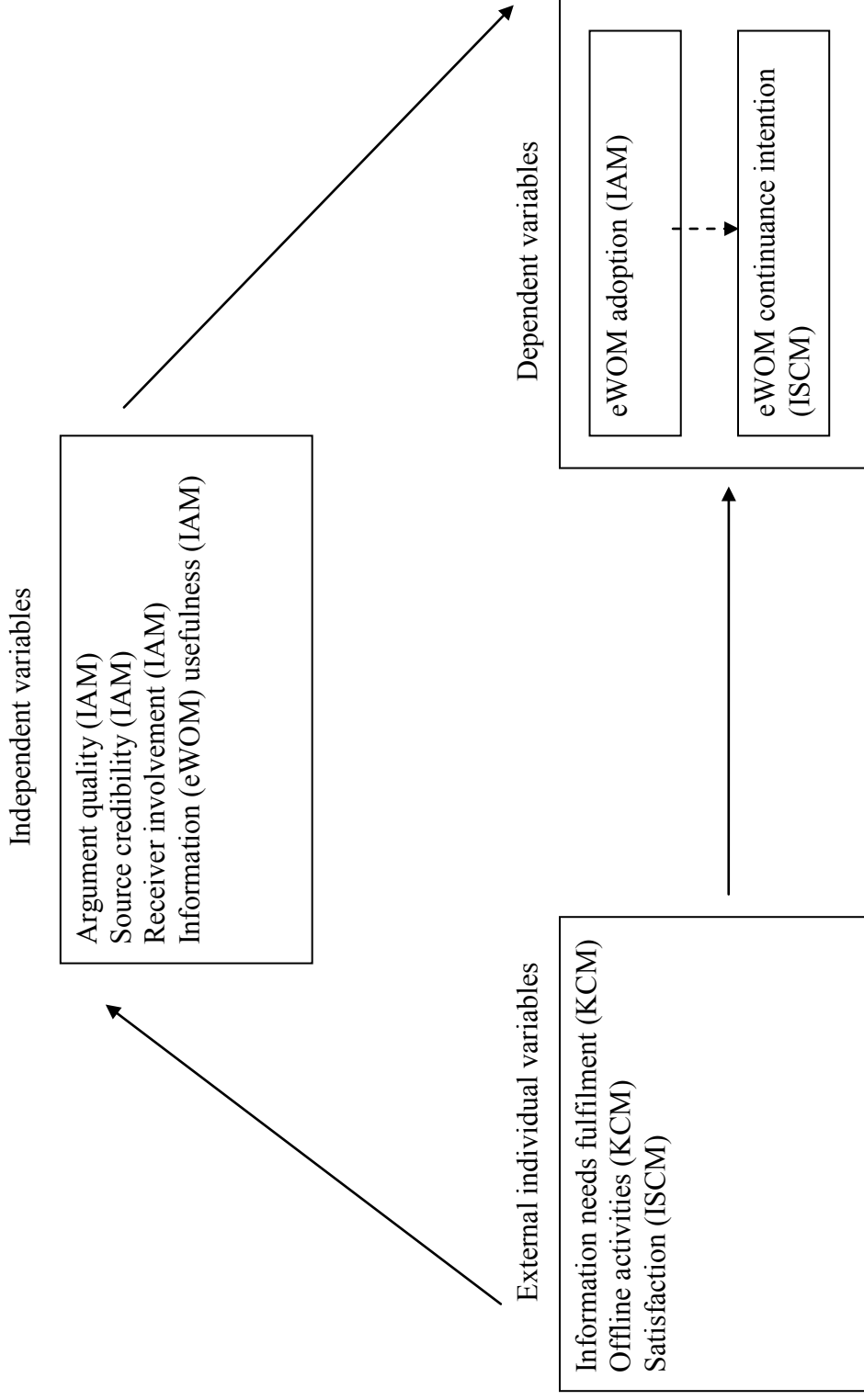


Figure 1: Conceptual model

Information System Continuance Model (ISCM)

The ISCM - Information System Continuance Model (Bhattacharjee (2001) predicts that the continued use of Information Systems (IS) is sustained use by individual users over the long term. The ISCM is adapted from Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) (Oliver, 1980). ECT is a behavioural theory that is used to predict consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention; the theory predicts that a consumer's intention to repurchase a product or to reuse a service is mainly determined by his or her level of satisfaction. This model has been applied in research on online communities. For example, Jin *et al.* (2009) investigated factors contributing to information continuance on online platforms in China by using ISCM and found that individuals will continue to use the information in a computer-supported social network when they are satisfied with their prior usage, and when they perceive that the information in the network is useful. Similarly, Wang and Lin (2010) examined the intention to continue using an online discussion forum at a University in Taiwan. They found that the more satisfied users were with the online community, the more they would spread positive eWOM and continue using the forum. More recently, Hashim (2012) found that knowledge-sharing continuance is influenced directly by satisfaction and perceived usefulness concluding that most researchers have extended ISCM with other relevant theories (Hashim, 2012). For example, the use of ISCM to examine members' continuous knowledge sharing intention within an online community setting has also been identified (Cheung and Lee, 2007; Jin *et al.*, 2007). Based on the empirical findings, this model has demonstrated its suitability as an underlying theoretical lens to examine continuous knowledge sharing intention (Bhattacharjee, Perols and Sanford, 2008).

Information Adoption Model (IAM)

The IAM – Information Adoption Model (Sussman and Siegel, 2003) is drawn from TAM - Technology Acceptance Model and ELM - Elaboration Likelihood Model. TAM was developed by Davis (1989) who suggested that system use is a response that can be explained or predicted by user motivation, which, in turn, is directly influenced by an external stimulus consisting of the actual features and capabilities of the technology system. Davis suggested that users' motivations could be explained by three factors: perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness and attitude toward using the system. ELM - Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) identifies two relatively distinct routes to persuasion. Firstly, there is the central route, which is persuasion induced by a person's careful and thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the information presented in support of a particular concept or idea. This route was found to have impact among consumers within online communities, particularly with respect to argument quality: Wang, Lui and Fan (2011) identified argument quality dimensions such as relevance, subjectivity, timeliness, and completeness that contributed to knowledge adoption; Yan (2008) found that argument quality has strong and positive influences on knowledge seekers' trust in and perception of information usefulness on the level of knowledge adoption; and Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn (2008) found that argument quality dimensions such as relevance and comprehensiveness exhibit significant impacts on perceived information usefulness.

The second route does not necessitate scrutiny of the information presented, and is mostly the result of a simple cue (e.g. source credibility), and which is referred to as the peripheral route. In an online environment, source credibility refers to a recipient's perception of messages as being trustworthy, expert, knowledgeable, and reliable. This route was found to be impactful

among consumers in different online communities. Cheung et al. (2009) found that source credibility led to e-WOM adoption in Chinese online forums, and it is one of the important factors in information receivers' cognitive processes. In contrast, Cheung, Lee, and Rabjohn (2008) found that source credibility (source expertise and source trustworthiness) of messages did not impact information usefulness in a Chinese online community and particularly in online forums. Others identify that source credibility dimensions such as past experience, expertise, and trustworthiness improve knowledge adoption in online communities (Wang, Lui and Fan, 2011). Another key factor - information usefulness - reflects how the information is beneficial, helpful, and informative in that it mediates the relationships between argument quality and online advice adoption.

Receiver Involvement measures how involved a person is in the topic of a message context. Recipients' perceptions of message usefulness are the direct determinant of information adoption, mediating the ELM-based informational influence processes. Researchers have proposed that receiver involvement is a key factor that has the potential to explain eWOM in that the message recipients' domain-based involvement serves as a moderator of the credibility usefulness and argument quality usefulness. It is suggested that the greater the recipient's involvement in the topic of the message, the more argument quality affects perceived message usefulness. Receiver involvement tends to motivate increased acceptance of the messages. For example, Ha (2002) found that eWOM was more likely to influence individuals when they were in a high-involvement purchase situation, while Xue and Phelps (2004) suggested that individual reactions to consumer-generated product reviews from independent online forums are moderated by receiver characteristics such as product involvement.

Knowledge Contribution Model (KCM)

The Knowledge Contribution Model (Ma and Agarwal, 2007) is a theoretical framework to investigate the contribution of knowledge within an online community. The framework applies two factors that are relevant for use in this study: Offline Activities, and Information Needs Fulfilment. They indicate that such offsite communication is an important aspect of any type of online community and strengthens the relationship-building process of virtual communities. For example, Xue and Phelps (2004) found that individual reactions to consumer-generated product reviews on online forums (i.e. consumer-to-consumer eWOM) were moderated by offline consumer-to-consumer communication. In other words, the more contact the members had offline, the more they tended to be persuaded by eWOM. Information needs fulfilment can possibly influence the contribution of knowledge within online communities as it can lead to reciprocation, where members contribute knowledge of their own if they find information useful.

Method

Study context

Kuwait is an oil-rich country in Southwest Asia, on the Arabian Gulf between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Like other Gulf countries, it is culturally conservative and strongly Islamic (Al-Kandari and Hasanen, 2012). Internet services were launched in 1992 and Kuwait was the first Arab country to provide public internet access in 1994 (Al-Ansari, 2006). Kuwait has some of the lowest costs for fixed broadband among Arab countries, and 74.2% of the Kuwaiti households

had internet access in 2012³. For this study, an online beauty discussion forum (to remain anonymous), was chosen from those featured on the Kuwaiti Women's online community. The online community targets women of all ages and was launched in 2000. It had over 405,000 members at the time of this study. This study targets the online beauty forum. It meets the criteria for an online community where members have a common and specific purpose and have ongoing and continuous interactions that facilitate the sharing of eWOM. This type of online discussion forum is also less biased than those run by sellers (Bickart and Schindler, 2001), where only sellers can interact and post positive eWOM, and where no interaction occurs between members. The forum was available to view by non-subscribers and is open to all Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti women.

Data collection and analysis

A total of 8,239 messages in the original Arabic-language were collected over six months from January to June 2013. This comprised 1,120 threads. All threads containing only one message or multiple messages by the same member avoiding interaction were removed (355 threads). The remaining 765 threads were then converted to PDFs and uploaded to text analysis software. MAXQDA was chosen as the most appropriate tool because it has an Arabic language interface, which therefore avoids translation issues (Antaki *et al.* 2006). For the purposes of this study, we analyzed 218 threads that were selected on the basis that they illustrate cases where eWOM was adopted, with 333 members returning to the forum to state adoption of eWOM as a purchase intention and thereby demonstrating continuance intention. In total, this comprised 1,820 messages, which were coded into 6,702 units.

According to the literature (Cheng and Zhou, 2010; Fong and Burton, 2006), an appropriate method of evaluating eWOM is through content analysis. *The coding scheme was derived from the conceptual model where the messages were coded according to the seven content categories of the conceptual model (e.g., argument quality).* The first author read and categorised all messages. When a single message covered several themes, one code was attributed to each theme in a process known as unitizing (Krippendorff, 2012). In addition, images and emoticons were also treated as units of analysis and were coded separately into a new category - community bonding. A measurement was made of inter-rater reliability: messages were coded by two independent coders and Cohen's kappa was calculated to be above 0.88, which is considered highly acceptable (Neuendorf, 2002).

Results and Discussion

The results of the content analysis are shown in Table 1. The findings of each content category are discussed in turn.

Argument quality

Argument quality was a crucial construct based on sub-categories. First, the dominant category is 'neutral', illustrated in the following quote of Member 3: "Use body and bath cream for hand (neutral- argument quality), then followed with instructions for use - Member 4: "Just apply it twice daily (Neutral-argument quality)". The next sub-category was positive eWOM where there

³ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/kw.htm> (accessed 30 March 2014)

was a refinement of the coding to highlight the strength of positive units (e.g., on a scale of 1-5,, 5 being highly positive) and which was typically demonstrated by a lengthening of the words, as shown by Member 5 “O only can say it is It is greaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat (Positive (4)-argument quality)”. The third element is negative e-WOM; some members described products or services negatively to other members, although this was not as significantly weighted as positive units of argument quality. The remaining sub-categories were found with far fewer frequencies, indicating the persuasiveness of positive and neutral units, which more explicitly relay the members’ opinions on a product.

Community bonding

Community bonding was a coding category, which emerged from the data and found to contribute to e-WOM. Emoticons were most frequently coded. For example, Member 1 expressed: “Girls I am learning new things from you every day ♥♥♥♥” which included three hearts to represent her gratitude towards the other women in the online community for helping her. The second most dominant sub-category was religious expression. For example, Member 1: “God bless you girls (religious expression- emotional feeling)”. The third sub-category was gratitude behaviour: Women clearly stated their feelings of thankfulness or appreciation in the conclusion of an inquiry about a product. The fourth sub-category was greetings, usually expressions posted by members seeking e-WOM who were returning to the forum. The fifth sub-category was emotional feeling; the dominant feeling was love for products or services they tended to use, and love towards the online community. To a much lesser extent, other sub-categories were found, such as sharing photos, wishing members luck, posting links and sharing jokes and offering the chance for private messages as part of online activities.

Receiver involvement

Receiver involvement was particularly common in the Women’s comments on their experiences with products or services. For example, Member 7: “girls I am really involved in this issue” were often used to describe both how they were involved in the topic of the discussion. For example, Member 1 “ girls I am interested in this product, what is your recommendations to me girls?” Member 2 replies to her by saying “Me too I am involved in the same issue”. In addition, other women often described their previous use of products or services by saying: “We were involved in the same issue, that’s why we are using this product or services”. Another significant sub-category is where members push each other’s topics to the tops of threads to encourage more posting.

Information needs fulfilment and information usefulness

The dominant element in information needs fulfilment is to find eWOM in the community. For example, Member 9 “How are you girls today?, I need your recommendation girls” or Member 11 (initiator of the thread) “How are you girls (emotional feeling-community bonding) I need to solve my problem which dry hands (solve problem –information need fulfilment) I need your recommendation girls (find e-WOM-information need fulfilment). These are examples that illustrate the content of the messaging in this category/subcategory. With respect to information usefulness, this category highlights those instances where women perceive eWOM as beneficial,

valuable and informative and that enables them to continue using eWOM. For example, Member 5: “Your recommendations were beneficial for me and others (information beneficial– information usefulness).

Table 1: Frequency and weighting of main coding categories

Content Category (Overall weighting)	Frequency	Proportion
Argument Quality (37.4%)	2504	
Neutral	1275	50.9
Positive	720	28.8
Negative	261	10.4
Quotes	187	7.5
Accurate	61	2.4
Not accurate	0	0
Community Bonding (30.9%)	2073	
Emoticons	637	30.7
Greeting	247	11.9
Jokes	46	2.2
Links	47	2.3
Luck	59	2.8
Online activities	25	1.2
Photo	158	7.6
Thanks	302	14.6
Emotional feeling	246	11.9
Religion	306	14.8
Receiver Involvement (15.9%)	1063	
Pushing up the topic to the top of the thread	386	36.3
Discussion in mind lately	47	4.4
Involved in the issue	630	59.3
Information need fulfillment (9.7%)	650	
Help make decision	13	2.0
Learn new things	36	5.5
Find eWOM	417	64.2
Solve problem	184	28.3
Information usefulness (3.7%)	245	
Beneficial	227	92.7
Informative	16	6.5
Valuable	2	0.8
Source credibility (2.4%)	161	
Expert	26	16.1
Knowledgeable	20	12.4
Unknowledgeable	79	49.1
Untrustworthy	0	0
Reliable	12	7.5
Trustworthy	24	14.9
Satisfaction (< 1%)	4	
Satisfied with e-WOM	4	100
Offline activities (< 1%)	2	
Contact by phone	1	50
Contact by exhibition	1	50

Source credibility

Source credibility is an indication of the believability of other members, as perceived by recipients of messages. A total of 161 sentences (frequency = 26; proportion = 16.15%) were found in which women cited lack of knowledge about a topic as the reason they tended to seek expertise from other women in an online beauty forum. Women clearly stated that women in this online community were experts in beauty topics. In addition, the trustworthy sub code represents (frequency = 24; proportion = 14.9%) of the overall source credibility content category. For example, Member 13 wrote, “I trust you, I need your recommendations” and the reliable sub code represents (frequency = 12; proportion = 7.5%), where women expressed the reliability of the recommendations. For example member 10 wrote, “Your recommendations are reliable”.

Offline activities and satisfaction

Offline activities and satisfaction refers to how women share their mobile or personal contact numbers in order to share product information offline. The overwhelming majority of women did not express an intention to meet offline or a degree of satisfaction; the latter may be explained in that women may not wish to convey their satisfaction online. In another words these two factors did not contribute to eWOM continuance intention.

Conclusion

This study examined the characteristics of eWOM that influence member’s adoption of information and consequent purchasing decisions. The study applied a coding schema developed from existing models in the literature. Few studies have undertaken a qualitative analysis of eWOM (Gheorghe and Liao, 2012; Fong and Burton 2006). Overall it was found that women tended to rely on argument quality, which represents the primary way contents messages are evaluated. In terms of quality, they also tended to provide more neutral recommendations such as how to use products, where to find them, prices and descriptions, without expressing judgements. However, many of the coding units could not be assigned to existing content categories and therefore a new category of community bonding was developed to capture the emotional aspects of the communication. Coding for this new category comprised comments in which primarily positive emoticons, religious expressions and expressions of gratitude frequently appeared. Moreover, this category seems to be as important as argument quality for eWOM adoption in this Middle Eastern women online community. This is a finding that is more easily distinguishable as part of a qualitative content analysis as opposed to tests of causal relationships between constructs. With respect to the conceptual model put forward, we position this category as an internal individual variable, although future research should investigate the strength of its causal relationship to eWOM adoption.

Limitations of this study include the following: Firstly, the study examined messages posted to a single Kuwaiti online community. Therefore, the results may not be representative of all Middle Eastern women or on other topics. The authors are currently conducting research using larger datasets of comparable online communities of women in the Middle East. Secondly, this study investigated messages posted only to an online beauty forum. Future research could examine eWOM in different consumer opinion platforms such as online review sites to provide a richer understanding of consumers in this cultural context.

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