



An integrative approach to eWOM and marketing communications

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to improve the understanding of how different forms of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and simultaneous marketing communications (MC), two crucial components of relationship marketing, affect consumer persuasion when presented in a business-to-customer (B2C)-sponsored vs a customer-to-customer (C2C)-sponsored social network site (SNS). A concise typology of eWOM is also proposed.

Design/methodology/approach – An experiment involving different social network movie sites was conducted testing the effects of different eWOM along with a comparison to MC on consumers' interest in, and likelihood to watch movie DVDs.

Findings – The empirical results showed that not all eWOM types have the same persuasiveness and community sponsorship as a source credibility cue is more influential from a C2C-sponsored SNS than from a B2C one, particularly for many-to-one eWOM communications.

Research limitations/implications – Future research should include both positive and negative types of eWOM using different product categories to increase the generalizability of the results.

Practical implications – Not all eWOM types are created equal, and thus, SNS sponsorship can lead to source bias and affect the persuasiveness of eWOM embedded in SNSs. The results also imply that not all positive word-of-mouth has a more positive effect than MC.

Originality/value – The approach of measuring two forms of communications simultaneously adds to the much-needed integrative approach of studying the simultaneous delivery of MC and WOM and provides a more nuanced view of persuasion knowledge.

Keywords Social media, Credibility, Marketing communications, Persuasiveness, eWOM, Social network site sponsorship

Paper type Research paper

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is a rapidly growing, quickly evolving and increasingly important extension of traditional face-to-face word-of-mouth (WOM) in the marketing and consumer environment (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004) and most recently a very important outcome of activity on social media (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). From a corporate brand standpoint, social media is used for building relationships and enabling marketplace conversations (Booth and Matic, 2011). Indeed, social media have greatly changed the way in which firms and their constituents are able to communicate electronically, extending the possibilities of eWOM from the traditional one-to-many and one-to-one marketing communications (MC), to the new many-to-many and many-to-one communications (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). eWOM has been defined as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or



former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

The internet medium has enabled the simultaneity of the delivery of both firm initiated MC (e.g. advertising) and customer-to-customer (C2C) interpersonal communications in social network sites (SNSs), defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007) as web-based services that “allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 212).

In 2011 it was reported that 65 percent of all adult Americans have participated in SNS (Madden and Zickuhr, www.pewinternet.org). Marketers can no longer ignore the interactivities that are going on among consumers (Riegner, 2007). Mass media-based communications’ effectiveness in gathering consumer attention and trust is increasingly threatened by the abundance of, and easy access to eWOM (Booth and Matic, 2011; Greer, 2003; Riegner, 2007). Indeed, eWOM has a larger influence in generating product interest among consumers than firm-initiated MC (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Further, the combination of MC and eWOM forms a crucial component of relationship marketing and persuasion (Larson and Watson, 2011). Given all these reasons, an integrative approach of both MC and WOM communications within one study is much encouraged (Chen and Xie, 2008; Feng and Papatla, 2011; Smith and Vogt, 1995; Villaneuva *et al.*, 2007), and yet, prior research has yet to investigate the effect when eWOM simultaneously co-exists with MC within SNS.

While traditional WOM which usually emanates from a sender who is known to the receiver of the information, has been seen as high in credibility and persuasiveness *vis-à-vis* sponsored advertising and other promotions (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Smith and Vogt, 1995), an important issue to consider is how eWOM in social media functions in this regard. The electronic nature of eWOM in most instances eliminates the receiver’s ability to judge sender and message credibility. Since SNS are embedded with infrastructures that impact individuals in processing information cues (Larson and Watson, 2011), we thus suggest that the persuasiveness and credibility of eWOM in these communities will vary depending on how individuals process these cues.

To address these questions, we first present a concise typology of eWOM communications based on the level of interactivity and participation and theorize that the persuasiveness of each eWOM type differs. Next, extending the literature on the difference between firm- vs third-party-sponsored web sites (e.g. Bickart and Schindler, 2001) to SNS, we suggest that sponsorship of SNS comes in the form of business-to-customer (B2C) and C2C and that there is reason to believe that the persuasiveness of eWOM in these SNS vary. The empirical results of an experiment support the hypotheses and have important managerial implications. As an overall contribution, we show how an integrative approach to social media and eWOM can inform our understanding of message persuasiveness on consumer product choice.

The role of eWOM in SNSs: all eWOM are not created equal

SNSs in their essence are built on eWOM in various forms and guises. We suggest that we can locate these forms in a 2 (communication: collective, individual) × 2 (C2C interactivity: low, high) framework (see Figure 1). In our framework, we focus on eWOM, extending Xia *et al.* (2009) information systems approach to the

Communication	Collective	Many-to-one (computed by computer) Overall Average ratings (A-D) Number of Votes Number of Downloads	Many-to-many (highly involved) Discussion forum Wiki ListServ
	Individual	One-to-many (text based) Descriptive Product Reviews Blogs	One-to-one (dyad based and private) Email Instant Messaging
		Low	High

Level of C2C Interactivity

Figure 1.
Types of eWOM
Communications

Source: Adapted from Xia *et al.* (2009, p. 139)

marketing-consumer environment, allowing us to make direct links to WOM persuasion research in a more relevant and useful way.

While much literature has addressed some of the differences between the cells in Figure 1, there has not been a consolidated conceptualization of such differences. Four distinct categories of eWOM emerge from our framework: many-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many and one-to-one. Many-to-one eWOM (e.g. the number of votes) represents the trend or explicit preference of a crowd. One-to-many text-based eWOM (e.g. product reviews) is descriptive and requires the audience to use more cognitive effort to read the reviews. Many-to-many eWOM (e.g. online discussion groups) is a high involvement activity in which consumers continuously participate in the communication process. Finally, dyad-based one-to-one eWOM (e.g. instant messaging) is mostly private and non-transparent communications. The typology of eWOM presented in Figure 1 not only depicts how different eWOM types are generated but also reflects how these different types are processed by users. Furthermore, researchers found various types of eWOM impact the persuasion process and product sales – see examples in Table I. We focus on the first three categories since they are among the most transparent categories for researchers and represent the most commonly found and widely available eWOM contents on SNS.

Different types of eWOM and persuasiveness

For many-to-one eWOM, a popular form of eWOM which users often rely on when making decisions, the persuasive element is typically from the explicit and obvious collective trend provided by the aggregate evaluative information. Researchers have found this kind of eWOM to impact consumer choice of new products and product sales. Specifically, the number of votes for a song positively impact users’ preference and their downloading of the same song (Xia *et al.*, 2009). Favorable online ratings of movies by users are viewed as signals of quality which increase consumers’ response to advertising that lead to movie sales (Moon *et al.*, 2010). In other words, the aggregate rating leads to an easily understood single grade for consumers to decipher without extending much cognitive effort.

Past research	Many-to-one eWOM	One-to-many eWOM	Many-to-many eWOM
Andreassen and Streukens (2009)			Discussion boards lead to new ideas
Duan <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Consumer ratings do not impact sales		
Duan <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Product ranking influences consumers adoption of software		
Liu (2006)		Valence of reviews does not impact movie sales	
Moon <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Ratings interact with advertising impact movie sales		
Xia <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Votes correlate to download of songs		
Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2010)		Both positive and negative reviews are helpful for users	
Some successful examples	Lego's company's new product decision based on consumer votes on other consumer's design (http://lego.cuusoo.com/)	Tripadvisors.com Cnet.com	Dell's ideastorm (www.ideastorm.com/) Ducati's community (http://ducati.kontain.com/) Salesforce's idealexchange (https://success.salesforce.com/ideaHome) Starbuck's mystarbucksidea (http://mystarbucksidea.force.com/)

Table I.
Recent findings and examples of eWOM persuasiveness

However, for one-to-many eWOM in which users have to exert cognitive effort to read texts written by fellow consumers, researchers found the impact of such type of eWOM to be highly contextual. Both positive and negative product reviews are helpful depending on the motivation of the users for reading reviews (Zhang *et al.*, 2010). However, Liu (2006) found that negative user reviews have no impact on movie sales.

In many-to-many eWOM in which users engage in intensive social interactions among themselves, this type of discourse leads to the generation of new innovations (Andreassen and Streukens, 2009). Even when users of such eWOM did not engage in the intense interactions, they benefit from learning know-how knowledge published in this type of elaborate and detailed text-based eWOM (Gruen *et al.*, 2006). Together these findings suggest that various types of eWOM will exert different degrees of persuasiveness on the users of these eWOM. More formally:

- H1. The persuasiveness of the type of eWOM differs depending on whether it is one-to-many, many-to-one or many-to-many format.

B2C vs C2C SNS sponsorship and persuasiveness

Web sites as virtual communication channels are perceived differently by consumers depending on whether they are firm or third-party sponsored web sites. Because of the

intent to persuade for commercial purposes, firm-sponsored web sites are perceived as being lower in credibility than independent third-party sponsored web sites (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001). As a result, the source credibility of a web site also affects the content within the web site (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Senecal and Nantel, 2004).

This paper extends the findings that web site sponsorship has an effect on the overall persuasion of the content to SNS sponsorship. SNS is an extension of a web site with a lot of social interactivity added to it (Larson and Watson, 2011). We believe that SNS sponsorship will continue to impact the content within the community. Similar to the credibility difference between firm vs independent third-party web site sponsorship, eWOM content, when placed in a C2C- (B2C-) sponsored SNS are perceived as more (less) genuinely contributed by fellow consumers and lead to higher (lower) believability. More formally:

- H2. Due to the perceived higher (lower) source credibility of a C2C- (B2C-) sponsored SNS, the persuasiveness of eWOM added to MC in a C2C- (B2C-) sponsored SNS is greater (smaller).

SNS sponsorship, eWOM type and persuasiveness

In combining SNS sponsorship and eWOM type, persuasiveness may vary depending on how consumers process the information of eWOM content and community sponsorship as a source cue. The elaboration likelihood model posits that depending on their ability, and how motivated they are, individuals have two alternative routes in which they process information (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Those that do not use extensive cognitive processing to understand the message are more likely to process information by using peripheral routes, or focussing on non-content or irrelevant cues. Conversely, those who are willing and able to process a message are more likely to process persuasive attempts by using the central route and to generate their own thoughts in relation to arguments. Since many-to-one eWOM requires simple processing whereas one-to-one and many-to-many eWOMs require more elaborate information processing (Xia *et al.*, 2009), when consumers process the many-to-one eWOM type, they will probably include the heuristic cue of SNS sponsorship. Conversely, when they process the one-to-many and many-to-many eWOM, they spend too much cognitive effort in processing the eWOM texts and therefore will not include SNS sponsorship as a heuristic cue. In fact, Senecal and Nantel's (2004) study did not find significant web site sponsorship effect and concluded that their subjects were paying more attention to the content of the messages than to the web sites' sponsorship. This leads to our argument that consumers include the source credibility of SNS sponsorship when they are evaluating many-to-one eWOM and that they will find it in a C2C-sponsored SNS more persuasive than the same many-to-one eWOM in a B2C-sponsored SNS. However, consumers do not include SNS sponsor credibility when they engage in elaborative processing in the evaluation of one-to-many or many-to-many eWOM, and therefore the persuasiveness of these two types of eWOM do not differ from C2C- to B2C-sponsored SNS.

In addition, when it comes to the MC itself, the SNS becomes irrelevant so that the persuasiveness of the message does not differ between a C2C- and B2C-sponsored SNS. This argument follows the persuasion knowledge model which suggests that once customers perceive a message as coming from a marketer, they will activate their persuasive knowledge and respond accordingly regardless of where the MC is placed

(Friestad and Wright, 1994). Considering the joint effects of SNS sponsorship source credibility and eWOM information processing:

- H3a.* The persuasiveness of many-to-one eWOM added to MC differs between a C2C-sponsored SNS and a B2C-sponsored SNS.
- H3b.* The persuasiveness of one-to-many eWOM and many-to-many eWOM added to MC does not differ between a C2C-sponsored SNS and a B2C-sponsored SNS.
- H4.* The persuasiveness of MC only does not differ between a B2C- vs a C2C-sponsored SNS.

Study

To test the foregoing hypotheses, a 2 (SPONSOR: B2C, C2C) \times 4 (CONTENT: MC, MC plus many-to-one eWOM, MC plus one-to-many eWOM, MC plus many-to-many eWOM) between-subjects experiment was conducted to measure consumers' response to the increased persuasiveness of when various eWOM were added to MC in a B2C- vs a C2C-sponsored SNS.

Pretest of manipulation

To ensure that subjects perceived the B2C-sponsored SNS as less credible than the C2C-sponsored SNS, a pretest was conducted that gave subjects information to read on either a C2C or B2C SNS, and then asked subjects how qualified, knowledgeable and expert the SNS was (1 = disagree and 7 = agree). Totally, 234 subjects were assigned to the manipulation of the two SNSs (B2C, C2C). Three manipulation check items of source credibility (Ohanian, 1991) were averaged to form a source credibility index (three items, $\alpha = 0.93$). A one-way ANOVA on the index yielded a significant main effect for source credibility. Compared to the B2C sponsored site, subjects perceived the C2C-sponsored SNS to be significantly more credible ($M_{B2C-sponsored\ credibility} = 4.80$ vs $M_{C2C-sponsored\ credibility} = 5.35$, $F(1, 232) = 5.36$, $p < 0.05$), verifying that the manipulation is effective. The pretest of the manipulation was done rather than testing for it in the main study to avoid the manipulation check questions priming the subjects as to the main purpose of the study and thus avoiding response-bias as recommended, for instance, by Perdue and Summers (1986). Likewise, O'Keefe (2003) argues that manipulation checks are not always necessary in the main study and may be better defined by their intrinsic messages.

Subjects and stimulus materials

Totally, 160 undergraduate students completed a self-paced questionnaire. They were recruited from a student pool at a large US Northeastern public university and received course credit for participation. The stimulus materials described a fictitious film named *The Other Story*. Subjects were told that this film is soon to be released in DVD and we are forecasting the potential sales of the movie DVD. Demographic profiles of the subjects are presented in Table II.

Independent variables

For the SNS sponsor (SPONSOR), two fictitious web sites, innovative studio and Kazoo.com, were created to represent a B2C- and a C2C-sponsored SNS, respectively.

CCIJ 19,3	No. of observations		
	No. of observations	%	
266	<i>Gender</i>		
	Male	71	44
	Female	89	56
	%		100
	<i>Age</i>	42	26
	18-20	43	27
	21-23	30	19
	24-26	17	11
	27-29	28	17
	30 or over		
	%		100
	<i>Ethnicity</i>		
	African American	13	8
	Asian	61	38
	Caucasian	48	30
Hispanic	20	13	
Other	18	11	
%		100	
Total	160	100	

Table II.
Sample demographic
profiles

For the eWOM type (CONTENT), the first one, a baseline, is a firm-initiated press release (MC) only message which includes a description of the movie, the box office sales of US\$325 million and a five out of 5-star critic rating. The description was clipped from an existing Hollywood Studio web site. For the many-to-one eWOM, an average “A–” grade voted by 14,277 users and 2,005 users provided reviews were included. This is similar to the evaluation format of existing movie web sites (e.g. Yahoo.com). For the one-to-many eWOM, two positive text-based user reviews were included. For the many-to-many eWOM, two positive text-based users’ discussions were included. All eWOM types contain the same quantity of information at approximately 160 words.

Dependent variables

To test the effects of SPONSOR and CONTENT on eWOM persuasiveness, we used measurements of persuasiveness from previous studies (e.g. Ziegler and Diehl, 2011). We operationalized the dependent variable of eWOM persuasiveness added to MC as consumer’s perceived product interest and their likelihood to watch a new movie DVD, as these are among the most common measures used to assess subject responses to eWOM (e.g. Adjei *et al.*, 2010; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Gruen *et al.*, 2006; Senecal and Nantel, 2004). Based on evidence indicating similar predictive validity of single-item and multiple-item scales for many marketing constructs (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007) “product interest” was measured by “I am interested in watching the movie on DVD” (1 = uninterested, 7 = very interested) and “likelihood to watch” was measured using the question of “I am likely to watch it on DVD” (1 = not likely to watch, 7 = most likely to watch).

Subjects were randomly assigned to the eight groups (2 SPONSOR × 4 CONTENT) and were given information about one fictitious movie *The Other Story*. Our manipulations of eWOM are all positive to eliminate confounds of message valence and incongruity of messages. Prior research has also shown that positive reviews

are more prevalent than negative reviews (Fowler and De Avila, 2009) with some suggesting that online positive reviews outnumber negative reviews eight-to-one (Decker, 2006; Greenleigh, 2011).

After reading the messages, subjects were asked to rate their interest and likelihood to watch the movie on DVD. A paper and pencil version of questionnaire was used here instead of an online version to avoid problematic issues such as computer ease-of-use, navigation habits and web site familiarity. Moreover, given the lack of concern with memory since subjects were looking at the messages as they considered their responses to the questions put to them, print and screen should perform about the same in allowing for the retrieval of information (Jones *et al.*, 2005) thus further supporting the stimulus used here. Subjects' movie viewing habits including their frequencies to go to see a movie in the theater, tendencies to watch a new movie during opening week, and frequencies of watching DVDs were also captured. Respondents took approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Results

We began our analysis by a 2 (SPONSOR: B2C, C2C) \times 4 (CONTENT: MC and MC + 3 eWOM type) ANOVA, an approach used by similar studies that investigate persuasion (e.g. Ziegler and Diehl, 2011). Although many experimental designs that apply ANOVA analysis use sample size of 30 or above per group (e.g. Senecal and Nantel, 2004), it is also not uncommon to find group sample size of <20 per group (e.g. Roskos-Ewoldsen *et al.*, 2002; Ziegler *et al.*, 2004; Ziegler and Diehl, 2011). In this regard, the literature on Type I and Type II errors with respect to sample sizes and power (e.g. Balkin and Sheperis, 2011) suggests that smaller sample sizes reduce the power to detect a significant effect (a Type II error) but also decrease the chance of finding significance when there is none (Type I error). Moreover, since the response data that we collected did not violate the assumptions of ANOVA in terms of normality of distribution and error variance homogeneity, we use parametric tests (ANOVA, *t*-tests) for hypothesis testing with our sample cell sizes of around 20.

Test of sample covariates

Subjects' movie watching habits and demographic profiles were tested for possible confounds. The ANCOVA results indicated that the frequencies of watching movies in general ($p > 0.15$), watching DVDs ($p > 0.70$), watching new movies during opening week at theaters ($p > 0.25$), age ($p > 0.60$) and ethnicity ($p > 0.70$) did not significantly impact respondents interests in or likelihood to watch the movie. These covariates were dropped from further analysis.

Normality and variance of response data

The responses of participants to the two persuasiveness items (interests and likelihood to watch) were averaged ($\alpha = 0.94$). To not violate the assumptions of ANOVA which requires a probability distribution of each response to be normal and have the same error variance (Kutner *et al.*, 2004). We used a Shapiro-Wilk test and confirmed each group to be normally distributed (W ranges from 0.92 to 0.98; p -value ranges from 0.08 to 0.87). We also found normality for the entire response dataset ($W = 0.98$, $n = 160$) and performed the Levene's robust test for variance homogeneity and found that there were no significant differences of standard deviations among the eight groups ($W = 1.56$, $df (7, 152)$, $p = 0.15$).

Persuasiveness and eWOM type

H1 hypothesized that the persuasiveness of eWOM type differs depending on whether it is one-to-many, many-to-one or many-to-many. Excluding the subjects that respond to MC only, we found significant results that support the main effect of CONTENT ($F(1, 118) = 3.14, p = 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.05$; $M_{many-to-one} = 4.09, M_{one-to-many} = 4.13$ and $M_{many-to-many} = 3.30$). The reported η^2 ($\eta^2 = 0.05$) is appropriate for ANOVA and has a near medium size effect (www.ats.ucla.edu/stat/stata/faq/effectsiz.htm). *H1* is supported. Table III shows the cell means and standard deviations. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the results.

Persuasiveness and SNS sponsorship

To test *H2*, that the persuasiveness of eWOM added to MC in a C2C-sponsored SNS is greater than in a B2C-sponsored SNS, the ANOVA results confirmed that there is a main effect of SPONSOR ($F(1, 159) = 3.33, p = 0.07, \eta^2 = 0.03$; $M_{B2C} = 3.68$ vs $M_{C2C} = 4.13$). The reported η^2 at 3 percent lies between a small and medium effect. *H2* is marginally supported.

Many-to-one eWOM persuasiveness and SNS sponsorship

H3a hypothesized that the persuasiveness of many-to-one eWOM posted in a B2C-sponsored SNS would differ from that posted in a C2C-sponsored SNS. The between-group *t*-tests report that subjects who were exposed to many-to-one eWOM added to MC posted in a C2C-sponsored SNS had significant higher persuasiveness ($t(38) = 2.32, p < 0.05, M_{B2C} = 3.55$ vs $M_{C2C} = 4.63$) than those in a B2C-sponsored SNS. *H3a* is supported.

	Persuasiveness of eWOM	B2C sponsored social media community persuasiveness	C2C sponsored social media community persuasiveness	F and p-values	Hypotheses
Marketing communications only		4.03 (1.28) <i>n</i> = 20	4.19 (1.33) <i>n</i> = 21	$t(39) = 0.40, p = 0.69$	<i>H4</i> supported
Marketing communications + eWOM		3.68	4.13	$F(1, 159) = 3.33, p = 0.07$	<i>H2</i> marginally supported
Marketing communications + many-to-one eWOM		3.55 (1.77) <i>n</i> = 20	4.63 (1.07) <i>n</i> = 20	$t(38) = 2.32, p < 0.05$	<i>H3a</i> supported
Marketing communications + one-to-many eWOM		3.75 (1.61) <i>n</i> = 20	4.53 (1.72) <i>n</i> = 19	$t(38) = 1.47, p = 0.15$	<i>H3b</i> supported
Marketing communications + many-to-many eWOM		3.38 (1.91) <i>n</i> = 21	3.18 (1.73) <i>n</i> = 19	$t(38) = 0.34, p = 0.74$	<i>H3b</i> supported
many-to-one eWOM	4.09			$F(1, 118) = 3.14, p = 0.05$	<i>H1</i> supported
one-to-many eWOM	4.13				
many-to-many eWOM	3.30				

Table III. Cell means, standard deviations, *F* and *p*-values and hypotheses supported

Note: () Standard deviations

One-to-many, many-to-many eWOM persuasiveness and SNS sponsorship

H3b hypothesized that the persuasiveness of one-to-many eWOM and many-to-many eWOM added to MC will not differ between C2C- and B2C-sponsored SNS because consumers do not include sponsorship as a source credibility heuristic cue in elaborative information processing. Support for this idea comes in the finding that the differences in one-to-many ($t(37) = 1.47, p = 0.15$) and many-to-many ($t(38) = 0.34, p > 0.70$) eWOM are not statistically significant in either SNS. H3b is supported.

MC and SNS sponsorship

While we expected differences in the persuasiveness of eWOM between B2C- and C2C-sponsored SNS, we did not expect differences in the persuasiveness of MC itself in either community. To test H4, we analyzed the two groups of subjects who were given the same set of MC only message about a movie DVD posted on a B2C- and C2C-sponsored SNS. The two groups did not differ in persuasiveness ($t(39) = 0.40, p > 0.65$), thus supporting H4.

In visualizing a large difference between the MC only group and the group that added discussion-based eWOM from the graphical results in Figure 2, in a *post hoc* effort we further analyzed our respondent data and found that MC only are more persuasive than when adding many-to-many eWOM to them ($t(79) = 2.35, p = 0.02$). This finding highlights an unanticipated consequence from our research in that it appears that adding positive many-to-many eWOM to MC could actually have a negative impact on consumers persuasion.

Discussion

This paper examined the added influence of three common types of eWOM to MC in a B2C-sponsored SNS and a C2C-sponsored SNS to elicit source credibility and the persuasiveness of combined marketing and consumer messages on consumers' movie choices. Our empirical results support the hypotheses regarding the effects of both SNS source credibility and eWOM type on consumers' interests in and likelihood to watch a movie DVD. They showed that community sponsorship as a source credibility cue is more influential from a C2C- than from a B2C-sponsored SNS. Our findings, based on the manipulation of the same messages in both C2C- and B2C-sponsored SNSs, clarify the separate roles of source credibility of SNSs and the messages within

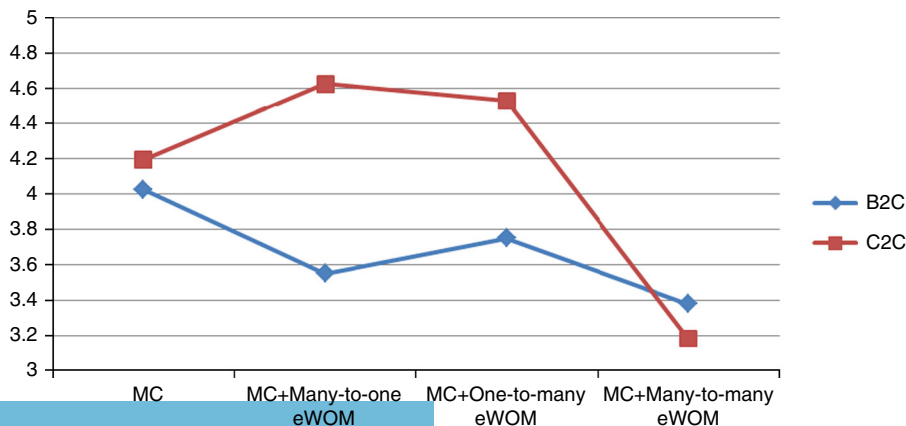


Figure 2. Persuasiveness, social media community sponsor and eWOM type

them, thus extending the work of Bickart and Schindler (2001) which had confounded source and messages when they compared consumer response to the content of corporate web sites vs the content within internet forums. Our findings also support the hypothesis that one-to-many and many-to-many (many-to-one) eWOM do not differ (differs) in persuasiveness between C2C- and B2C-sponsored SNS. The results validate Xia *et al.*'s (2009) suggestion that many-to-one communications requires less effort to process than one-to-many and many-to-many text-based communications; therefore in processing many-to-one eWOM consumers include the heuristic cue of SNS sponsorship. Indeed, our results confirm the suspicion of Senecal and Nantel (2004) that consumers are paying more attention to process the one-to-many product reviews than the heuristic cue of web site sponsorship, which further supports the notion that source credibility as a heuristic cue is only activated when people are engaging in peripheral but not centralized information processing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Contributions

This paper's approach of measuring corporate and C2C communications simultaneously adds to the much-needed integrative approach of studying the simultaneous delivery of MC and WOM (Smith and Vogt, 1995; Feng and Papatla, 2011) and provides a more nuanced view of persuasion knowledge in the social media environment. This integrative approach is especially appropriate when the internet has merged both mass media-based MC and interpersonal WOM communications channels into one, single mass-interpersonal medium. Our investigation of social media source credibility also adds to the body of research, not specific to the online environment, in source credibility and persuasiveness (e.g. source bias by Artz and Tybout, 1999).

The results from our study add to the recent marketing concepts which considered WOM as part of the MC mix (Chen and Xie, 2008; Feng and Papatla, 2011) or relationship communications (Finne and Gronroos, 2009; Sussan, 2012). While research has reported a ripple effect between WOM and MC, whereby WOM complements and extends the effects of MC and vice versa (Hogan *et al.*, 2004), our results challenges these findings by showing that not all positive eWOM complement and extend MC. The added value of eWOM to MC is contextual depending on sponsor source and eWOM type. While we found high many-to-one consumer ratings added to MC in C2C-sponsored SNS increases persuasion, we also found contrary results that adding a discussion board to MC become less persuasive. The additive and diminishing effects of different types of eWOM to MC from our results add to the complement and substitute effects of eWOM to MC reported in Chen and Xie (2008).

Managerial implications

The main managerial implications of our findings are that not all eWOM have the same persuasiveness, and that SNS sponsorship can lead to source bias and affect the persuasiveness of eWOM. Although marketing managers are enthusiastic to use social media and user-generated content within it (Breed, 2012), our results demonstrated that B2C-sponsored SNS has little impact compared to C2C-sponsored SNS. In fact, marketers' perception of consumer voluntary use of SNS to interact with firms and their brands is mostly erroneous (Spenner and Freeman, 2012). B2C-sponsored SNS are perceived to be manipulative and thus eWOM within them, even those objectively evaluated by a large group of consumers may not add value.

Also, our findings suggest that managers should be cautious about what eWOM type to include in their social media strategy (Dembosky and Bradshaw, 2011).

Depending on the type, consumers engage in different routes of central or peripheral information processing. Given the abundance of marketing and eWOM online, consumers are subject to information overload resulting in delay in decision making (Spenner and Freeman, 2012). Thus, marketers have to be selective in both the quantity and quality of communications they provide consumers online.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The limitations of this paper are several. The experimental design in a lab setting, paper and pencil questionnaire, small cell sizes in the ANOVA analysis and lack of pretest in the main study are all limitations which combine to limit the realism, generalizability, power and ecological validity of the results as compared to research that measured actual product use or sales data with other statistical methods (Chen and Xie, 2008; Duan *et al.*, 2008; Liu, 2006; Villanueva *et al.*, 2008). Empirically we only tested movies, the MC used here were restricted to text-based communications and this paper only included positive, but not negative, eWOM. Future research should consider testing SNS sponsorship and eWOM effects on other products, should include multiple forms of MC and investigate both eWOM types.

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