The Effects of Expertise Claims and Expertise Warrants on Attitude Towards Online Product Reviews

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This study suggests that online source types (typical consumer vs. expert source) can induce differential effects on two dimensions of source credibility—perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness—and, hence, on messages attitudes. This was tested for online product reviewers by means of two experiments. The results revealed two competing mechanisms: Source type (typical consumer vs. expert source) had a positive indirect effect on review attitude through perceived trustworthiness, and a negative indirect effect through perceived expertise. In tandem, these mechanisms suppressed the relationship between source type and review attitude. This suppression situation only emerged when the expert status of the source was based on self-claims; when the expert status of the source was verified by a peer rating system, no suppression situation emerged.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online product reviews are seen as a persuasive source of information in the consumer-decision making process, shaping not only consumers’ attitudes but also their purchase behaviors (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Chevelier and Mayzlin 2006; Park and Kim 2008; Senecal and Nantel 2004). The persuasiveness of reviews has often been explained by its source credibility. Reviews are written by noncommercial individuals who are believed to provide a more accurate and truthful evaluation of product/brand performance than commercial sources.

The literature makes an important assumption that still remains untested: That all reviewers are equal in credibility. However, reviews are authored by different types of sources (Mackiewicz 2010; Willemsen et al. in press), ranging from individuals with little knowledge of the product under review (i.e., typical consumer) to individuals who claim to be knowledgeable about a product as part of their profession (i.e., claimed experts).

By means of two experiments, we examined the relative effects of consumers and claimed experts on source credibility and compared these with the effects of a third source commonly identified online: warranted experts. Warranted experts are sources whose expert status has been established through peer ratings. It is asserted that consumers, claimed experts, and warranted experts have differential effects on perceived source expertise and perceived source trustworthiness—i.e. two dimensions of source credibility—and that teasing apart these differential effects facilitates a better understanding of source effects in computer-mediated communication.

METHOD

Participants were asked to evaluate a product review posted on a fictitious review site which discussed a hotel or computer (study 1, n=265) or a digital camera (study 2, n=96). Product reviews were identical except for the manipulation of the source. That is, respondents were exposed to a review authored by: (1) a consumer; or (2) a self-claimed expert. Study 2 also included a third condition in which the expert status of the source was confirmed by the ratings of the review community (i.e., warranted expert). After exposure to the review, participants answered a series of questions to tap perceived source expertise and trustworthiness, and attitude towards the review.

RESULTS

Source type appeared to have differential effects on what is assumed to be the two dimensions of credibility: Perceived source expertise and trustworthiness. An expert scored significantly higher on perceived expertise than a typical consumer. A typical consumer, however, was considered to be more trustworthy than an expert. These differential effects induced two competing mechanisms when comparing a consumer source with a claimed expert source. A consumer source (vs. expert source) had a positive indirect effect on review attitude through perceived trustworthiness, and a negative indirect effect through perceived expertise. In tandem, these mechanisms suppressed the relationship between source type and attitude towards the review.

This suppression situation was contingent on the way an expert source was demarcated from a consumer source. Conform our expectations, a suppression situation only emerged when the expert status of the source was based on self-claims (i.e., claimed expert). When the expert status of the source was based on peer ratings (i.e. warranted expert), no suppression situation emerged. Warranted experts induced positive assessments of perceived expertise and trustworthiness, thereby closing the gap between the two dimensions of credibility that instigated the suppressed effect of the source type – review attitude relation.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that consumers integrate perceptions about the expertise and trustworthiness of a source into evaluations about the review provided by the source. This alleviates the societal concern that consumers adopt online content without making an effort to differentiate credible online sources from incredible online sources. As demonstrated in the present study, however, the credibility of a source is not easily discerned in the online context where perceived source trustworthiness is not always in par with source expertise, and vice versa.

Anyone can publish online product reviews under any identity, thereby inducing concerns about the identity of reviewers and their intentions to share information. These contradictory source evaluations highlights the “authenticity dilemma” (Metzger, Flanagan, and Medders 2010; Willemsen et al. in press) inherent to online media where one cannot be confident about the true identity of a source and his/her motivations to share information.

This study shows that source evaluations can be brought into line with each other when the expert status of a source is confirmed by peer ratings. In such circumstances, a source scores high on both perceived expertise and perceived trustworthiness. This implies that peer ratings, instead of authority, form boundary conditions for online credibility assessments. This notion is consistent with a growing body of literature that argues that credibility assessments move from “a model of single authority based on hierarchy to a model of multiple authorities based on networks of peers”. This insight stresses the need to develop peer rating tools/systems to gauge credibility and to take away (unwarranted) suspicion about the authenticity of reviewers. Such tools are not only of importance for consumers, but also for practitioners who use reviews as testimonials in their marketing efforts.

REFERENCES


