The Effects of Information and e-WOM on Consumer Purchase Intentions: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

The dynamic nature of online consumer behavior necessitates a deeper understanding of how persuasive communication influences purchase decisions. The Chinese cosmetics market, with its heavy reliance on social media, presents a unique context for investigating these dynamics. Hence, this study explores how persuasive information on Sina Weibo, disseminated through merchant and social media influencer channels, influences electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and subsequently influences consumer purchase intention. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the research employs a quantitative, cross-sectional design, collecting data from a random sample of Sina Weibo users through a self-administered online questionnaire utilizing a five-point Likert scale. Analysis using Smart-PLS software reveals that argument quality, information accuracy, source credibility, and source attractiveness all have a significant positive influence on e-WOM. Furthermore, e-WOM demonstrates a positive influence on consumer purchase intention within the cosmetics market. While the study's focus on the Chinese cosmetics market and Sina Weibo users may limit the generalizability of the findings, it offers valuable insights for marketers seeking to leverage e-WOM and persuasive information to enhance consumer engagement and purchase intention. This research contributes to the existing literature by examining how persuasive information influences e-WOM and, in turn, purchase intention within this specific context. It highlights the importance of both central and peripheral routes of persuasion (as described in the ELM) in shaping e-WOM. The findings offer practical implications for businesses seeking to optimize their social media marketing strategies. Future studies should explore other product categories and social media platforms to broaden the understanding of these dynamics.

Keywords: Persuasive Information, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM), Purchase Intention, Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Conceptual Paper

Introduction

The rise of new media has led consumers to increasingly turn to mobile social networking sites (SNSs) as vital platforms for sharing information and enhancing their shopping experiences in today's marketplace (Hajli et al., 2017; Riaz et al., 2021; Siddiqui et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). The rapid advancement of digital technology and the widespread use of smartphones have created more avenues for personal communication through social networks and online communities, greatly expanding opportunities for interaction and collaboration among consumers (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2014; Lo et al., 2020). Many mobile social networking sites are gradually evolving into social commerce platforms by integrating commerce-related applications, reflecting the growing importance of social commerce in consumers' purchasing experiences. Research has demonstrated that mobile social media serves as an effective and adaptable tool for users to create personalized profiles, foster connections, and share product reviews (Mahoney & Tang, 2024; Mulyana et al., 2020). Ultimately, these mobile SNSs can act as powerful marketing channels for engaging individuals in both social and commercial activities in our increasingly mobile-centric world.

In China, a survey conducted on digital usage revealed that approximately 87.3% of participants had utilized WeChat by the third quarter of 2023. Other popular social media platforms include the short video app Douyin, the social commerce platform Xiaohongshu, and the microblogging site Sina Weibo (Statista, 2024). As the influence of social media grows, an increasing number of influencers are leveraging platforms such as Sina Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin to disseminate information and promote electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), significantly shaping consumer purchase intentions (Zottola, 2020). This trend highlights that many consumers now make product purchasing decisions based on information released by social media influencers and e-WOM. Given the considerable influence of e-WOM adoption via online media on consumer purchase intentions, it is crucial for marketers to understand the factors that shape trust in opinions and recommendations conveyed through persuasive e-WOM messages (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019).

Over the past decade, China's cosmetics market has experienced rapid growth, with the retail sales value of cosmetic products reaching 414 billion yuan in 2023. As demand for these products continues to rise in second- and third-tier cities, the cosmetics retail sector is anticipated to sustain its growth trajectory in near future. Among the primary distribution channels for cosmetics in China, online retail has seen substantial expansion, while traditional retail formats, such as hypermarkets and department stores, have been declining (Ou, 2024). An increasing number of Chinese consumers are making purchasing decisions based on information obtained from social media and electronic word-of-mouth communication (Chu & Chen, 2019).

To further investigate these dynamics, this study employs the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty et al. (1986) as a theoretical framework. According to ELM, persuasive information can be processed through two distinct routes: the central route, which focuses on argument quality and information accuracy, and the peripheral route, which emphasizes source credibility and source attractiveness. The objectives of this study are to explore: (1) how argument quality influences e-WOM adoption, (2) how information accuracy influences e-WOM, (3) how source credibility influences e-WOM, (4) how source attractiveness contributes to e-WOM, and (5) how e-WOM influences purchase intention.

Literature Review

Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) outlines the process of persuasion, which differs based on individuals' readiness to engage in thoughtful consideration of the persuasive material (Petty & Briñol, 2011). This theory is applied to illustrate the effectiveness of e-WOM among consumers (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2019) and to demonstrate how various consumer viewpoints influence information processing (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020). According to the ELM, multiple mechanisms contribute to attitude change along the continuum of elaboration (El Hedhli & Zourrig, 2023).

There are two distinct pathways for persuasion: (1) the central route, where information is analyzed logically and remains unaffected by peripheral cues (Cacioppo et al., 1986; Spielman et al., 2021), and (2) the peripheral route, where decisions arise from less rigorous cognitive processes that tend to be more superficial (Wagner and & Petty, 2022). Consumers often give minimal attention to the substance of a message(Cui & Wang, 2022). From these definitions, it follows that the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) describes how individuals approach information processing. In this research, argument quality, information accuracy represents the central route due to its emphasis on the message's content, while the peripheral route pertains to the source credibility and source attractiveness, as these factors relate more to the characteristics of the messenger rather than the message itself.

Argument Quality

Petty and Cacioppo (1986, p. 264) define argument quality as the audience's subjective judgment regarding the strength and coherence of arguments presented in a persuasive message. According to their framework, effective processing of messages leads to favorable cognitive and emotional responses when the arguments are strong; conversely, weak arguments tend to provoke counter-arguments and generally negative reactions. This underscores the necessity for businesses to prioritize argument quality in their advertising strategies. In situations where there is a high likelihood of elaboration, argument quality becomes a pivotal factor in determining how information is perceived (Petty et al., 1986). It relates to the cognitive processing of content and reflects the power or plausibility of the persuasive arguments presented. Thus, the central route of persuasion can be conceptualized as the emphasis on argument quality, which highlights the persuasive strength of arguments within informational communications (Bhattacherjee & Sanford, 2006).

Zhang et al. (2016) further suggest that the language used by companies in their brand microblogs, along with their responsiveness to consumer comments, plays a significant role in fostering trust among consumers. Specifically, if a brand effectively communicates high-quality arguments through its microblogging efforts, it is more likely to gain consumer trust. Complementing this perspective, Bao and Wang (2021) integrate the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) theory to argue that companies leverage brand microblogs to disseminate information pertinent to their products and brand identity. The quality of arguments presented and the credibility of the source significantly influence consumer perceptions. Companies have the opportunity to share useful, timely, and relevant information on these platforms, enabling consumers to engage with the content by receiving, commenting on, or sharing it (Zhang et al., 2015).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that argument quality has a profound effect on the perceived credibility of online information (Xiao et al., 2018; Shan, 2016). Teng, Wei Khong, et al. (2014) define "argument quality" as the persuasive capacity of a message to formulate an argument effectively. In the context of e-WOM, the quality of arguments is interpreted as the compelling nature or persuasive strength of shared information, which assists customers in evaluating products or brands and making informed purchasing decisions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Moreover, Yu Wang (2016) identifies several key determinants of argument quality, including relevance, clarity, accessibility, and timeliness of information, highlighting their significance in influencing purchase intentions in the realm of e-WOM.

Information Accuracy

Information accuracy has been defined by Bailey and Pearson (1983) as the precision of information output, making it a critical component of inherent data quality (Wang & Strong, 1996). Filieri and McLeay (2014) further refine this definition, describing information accuracy as data perceived to be true, accurate, and trustworthy. This emphasis on trustworthiness highlights the importance of information accuracy across various contexts and industries.

Numerous studies have investigated information accuracy in different domains, including digital libraries (Zha et al., 2016), the medical field (Springer et al., 2023), and sports rehabilitation (Springer et al., 2020). These investigations suggest that the definition of information accuracy may vary depending on the specific context, thereby underscoring its multifaceted nature. Scholars have conducted extensive research to illustrate the significance of information accuracy in informing consumer behavior and decision-making processes (Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2019).

According to Jamil and Farid Hasnu (2013), information accuracy is primarily concerned with the reliability and correctness of online evaluations, which significantly influence consumer decision-making. When individuals assess internet reviews, the accuracy of the information presented is crucial, particularly regarding its credibility. In this context, a consumer's prior knowledge of the product or service plays a vital role. This knowledge encompasses the perceived experiences with a product or service and can derive from direct interactions or from insights gained through experiences with similar products.

Furthermore, if consumers recognize previously unknown aspects of an online review as accurate—based on the accurate depiction of familiar attributes—they are more likely to accept the known elements of that review as credible (Jamil & Farid Hasnu, 2013). This interplay between familiarity and perceived accuracy emphasizes the importance of high-quality, reliable information in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions.

Source Credibility

Source credibility is defined as "a message recipient's perception of the credibility of a message source" (Chaiken, 1980, p. 753). It is important to note that source credibility is independent of the content of the message itself. This concept is complex and has been extensively studied across various fields, including information adoption (Hussain et al., 2017), message elaboration and brand attitudes (Wu & Wang, 2011), journalism (Reich, 2011), customer preference in credibility services (Ngamvichaikit & Beise-Zee, 2014), online

consumer recommendations (Filieri et al., 2018), and purchase intentions (Weismueller et al., 2020).

A significant body of research indicates that source credibility is a vital characteristic of peripheral cues in persuasive communication processing. Rhine and Severance (1970) argue that when recipients are dealing with low ego-involvement information, source credibility prompts the use of peripheral cues to complete judgment tasks. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) posits that the message source is one of the key elements that drive information processing in persuasive contexts. According to Mazursky and Schul, source trustworthiness operates as an additional cue when individuals lack the motivation to engage in extensive and systematic elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Recent studies by Reyes-Menendez et al. (2019) and Putra et al. (2020) further illustrate the relationship between source credibility and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). These researchers found that source credibility significantly influences e-WOM (Putra et al., 2020) and establishes its role in generating e-WOM content (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2019). Filieri et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of developing consumer credibility within online environments, aligning with López and Sicilia (2014) and Filieri (2015), who noted that credibility remains a major concern for e-WOM receivers and is crucial in the information processing stage.

Cheung et al. (2008) and Cheung & Thadani (2012) define information usefulness as an individual's belief that utilizing new sources will enhance their performance. When users perceive a source as beneficial on social media, they are more inclined to engage with it. Luo et al. (2018) suggest that information usefulness pertains to how readers assess the information they receive as valuable, beneficial, and informative. Both consumer-generated and expert-driven e-WOM can significantly influence readers' perceptions of information usefulness. When processing e-WOM from multiple sources, information users often employ diverse perspectives. This indicates that individuals with varying levels of belonging may utilize distinct cognitive frameworks to understand e-WOM from different sources (Luo et al., 2018).

Source Attractiveness

Source attractiveness is defined by Kiecker and Cowles (2001) and Wu (2013) as the extent to which message recipients find the source appealing. The attractiveness of online reviews significantly influences individuals' adoption of online information. Three key components contribute to source attractiveness: similarity, familiarity, and likability (Teng et al., 2014). Similarity refers to the resemblance between the message presenter and the receiver; people are more likely to trust online evaluations when they share similar viewpoints with the reviewer. Familiarity describes the comfort level established between the message recipient and the communicator, often augmented by positive interactions with user-generated online reviews. This concept can be illustrated by social media features such as Facebook's "like" button, which allows users to express their approval of content.

Source attractiveness is generally viewed as a peripheral cue within the persuasive environment (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Choi et al., 2005), reflecting whether the information source is favored by the recipient. The number of followers an information source

has on social media platforms typically serves as a strong indicator of their attractiveness (Shi et al., 2018). The influence of source attractiveness on information adoption operates in two primary ways. First, sources deemed more attractive, evidenced by a larger follower count, are often perceived as more trustworthy by audiences. Liu et al. (2012) found a significant correlation between a user's follower count on social media and their real-world social status, suggesting that social media attractiveness can reflect a user's credibility. Followers, having voluntarily chosen to follow someone, are more inclined to trust the information disseminated by that source (Susarla et al., 2012).

Moreover, other factors such as source expertise and reputation—manifested through product popularity and brand image—can also activate a peripheral route with minimal information processing. As a result, during peripheral processing, messages that prioritize visual appeal or attraction over substantive argumentation tend to have a greater influence (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Stiff, 1986).

e-WOM

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) refers to all informal exchanges that occur through internet-based technologies regarding the use or qualities of specific products and services, as well as the entities providing them. This includes interactions between manufacturers and consumers, as well as conversations among consumers themselves. These interactions are integral components of the word-of-mouth process, distinctly separate from communications via mass media, as noted by Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) and Goldsmith (2006).

Compared to traditional word-of-mouth, e-WOM offers businesses a significant advantage by enabling them to better understand the variables that encourage consumers to share their opinions online and assess the influence of those remarks on others (Cantallops & Salvi, 2014). However, the use of technology for expressing opinions about products can also pose challenges for businesses, as they lose control over this feedback (Yang, 2017). To mitigate this risk, companies are increasingly working to gain influence over customer reviews by creating virtual spaces on their websites where customers can post comments and share their thoughts about the company's offerings (Vallejo et al., 2015). Nieto et al. (2014) assert that consumers have significantly greater confidence in customer reviews than in claims made by the product's manufacturers or sellers. Consequently, online reviews are likely to exert a stronger influence on consumers' purchase intentions and decisions compared to offline reviews (Tham et al., 2013).

Over time, online consumer reviews and the sharing of opinions have evolved into highly effective communication tools within marketing. Fan et al. (2021) collected data through the Sina Weibo platform and found that unstructured information elements in e-WOM, along with spatial error models, offer a more comprehensive understanding of consumer cluster formation than traditional metrics based on objective city qualities and non-spatial models. Given its substantial influence, it is crucial to develop a solid understanding of e-WOM and its effects on consumers' purchasing intentions, which ultimately influence businesses' sales ratios and profitability(Nuseir, 2019; Pradana et al., 2022).

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is defined as an individual's willingness to purchase a product in the future (Zhang et al., 2018). The exploration of factors influencing purchase intentions has garnered considerable interest among researchers within the domain of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication studies. For example, Park et al. (2021) highlight the substantial effect of e-WOM on enhancing purchase intentions for luxury brands. Huang et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between consumer attitudes and purchase intention, while Prendergast et al. (2010) examined attitudes toward online forums in relation to purchase intention. Additionally, Nekmat and Gower (2012) analyzed the influence of three specific factors—perceived blogger credibility, perceived organizational credibility, and levels of disclosure—on purchase intention. In a related study, Elwalda and Lu (2016) explored the correlation between online consumer reviews (OCRs) and purchase intention, whereas Daowd et al. (2021) focused on the relationship between e-WOM and purchase intention.

Further expanding on this concept, purchase intention can also be understood as a buyer's inclination to acquire goods from sellers on social commerce platforms (Sohn & Kim, 2020). Bai et al. (2008) characterize purchase intention as a customer's preparedness to procure products or services from a particular website. This intention encapsulates the degree of a customer's confidence in their decision-making when considering a specific item (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020). Moreover, it is posited that information about a product derived from e-WOM sources significantly influences consumers' attitudes toward the brand and subsequently their purchasing intentions (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2021).

Research Hypotheses

A total of five hypotheses have been developed to investigate the relationships among all variables, as depicted in Figure 1. First, this study analyzes the effects of various factors: argument quality, information accuracy, source credibility, and source attractiveness on e-WOM through two distinct routes. Subsequently, it examines the influence of e-WOM on consumer purchase intention.

Argument Quality & e-WOM

Argument quality refers to the persuasive strength of the argument presented within a message's content. It can also be seen as the degree to which recipients consider the argument when forming or maintaining their opinions (Teng et al., 2014). One study indicated that higher argument quality positively affects the adoption of online reviews (Xu & Yao, 2015), while research by Chang and Wu (2014) found that argument quality negatively influences e-WOM messages. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H1: Argument quality has a positive influence on e-WOM.

Information Accuracy & e-WOM

Information accuracy can be described as the degree to which the information presented accurately reflects the corresponding real-world situation or state of affairs (Filieri & McLeay, 2014).Li et al. (2017) highlight the importance of information accuracy in determining the value of information dissemination, noting that various factors influence the resilience capacity and potential disruption at different levels. Consequently, companies should strategically plan the distribution of information before delivering it to users through e-WOM

channels. In this context, information quality is evaluated based on the variability and impartiality of the information source. A source exhibiting lower bias and variance is considered to provide more accurate information to users. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H2: Information accuracy has a positive influence on e-WOM.

Source Credibility & e-WOM

The source credibility is considered a crucial factor, as credible sources tend to inspire greater trust among information recipients (Hussain et al., 2017). Several studies
(Kapoor et al., 2020; Teng et al., 2017); Teng et al. (2014) have demonstrated a positive correlation between source credibility and the persuasiveness of e-WOM messages. Similarly, Yan et al. (2016) suggest that source credibility plays a key role in determining whether individuals consider e-WOM information worthy of attention and adoption. Conversely, Fan and Miao (2012) found no significant relationship between source credibility and e-WOM message influence. Based on these contrasting findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Source credibility has a positive influence on e-WOM.

Source Attractiveness & e-WOM

Source attractiveness can be defined as the degree to which a source is perceived as engaging or appealing by the audience (Kok Wei & Li, 2013). Research by Teng et al. (2014) has established a positive relationship between source attractiveness and the effectiveness of e-WOM. The perceived appeal of online reviews, for instance, can influence the acceptance of the information they present. Similarly, Teng et al. (2017) demonstrated that source attractiveness contributes positively to the persuasiveness of e-WOM messages. In light of these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Source attractiveness has a positive influence on e-WOM.

e-WOM & Purchase Intention

According to Syafaruddin (2016), engaging with e-WOM significantly influences consumers' intentions to purchase products. Similarly, Elseidi and El-Baz (2016) indicated that e-WOM communication positively influences both brand image and purchase intention, with brand image also playing a role in shaping consumers' purchasing decisions. Furthermore, (Nofal et al., 2022); Wang et al. (2018) discovered that e-WOM positively affected consumer purchase intention both directly and indirectly through perceived value. In a similar vein, Bataineh (2015) highlighted the significant role of e-WOM in shaping brand image and purchase intention among consumers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forth:

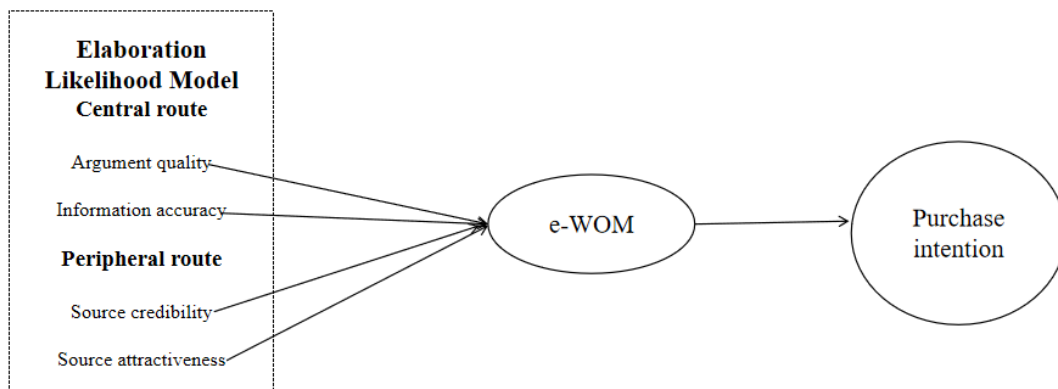**H5:** e-WOM has a positive influence on consumer purchase intention.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Method

This study employs a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional approach, utilizing a random sampling technique to select participants from the Sina Weibo users in China. Participants will respond to the questionnaire items using a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaires will be distributed to target respondents through the Wenjuanxing platform and then collected. Utilizing a self-administered online questionnaire allows for broader geographical coverage within China while minimizing research expenses. The returned questionnaires and data processing will be analyzed using Smart-PLS Software.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research investigated the influence of persuasive information on e-WOM and its ensuing influence on consumer purchase intention within the Chinese cosmetics market, utilizing Sina Weibo as the platform for analysis. Rooted in the ELM, the study posited that central route processing, defined by argument quality and information accuracy, alongside peripheral route processing, marked by source credibility and source attractiveness, would significantly shape e-WOM. The findings affirm these hypotheses. Specifically, the analysis demonstrates that argument quality, information accuracy, source credibility, and source attractiveness each bear a positive and statistically significant relationship to e-WOM. These results underscore the importance of both message content and source characteristics in determining the persuasiveness of communications disseminated on social media. Moreover, the study confirms e-WOM's substantial influence on consumers' purchase intention within the cosmetics market, highlighting its critical role as a mediator between persuasive information and consumer behavior.

These findings offer several implications for marketers and businesses. To enhance consumer engagement and stimulate purchase intention, companies should prioritize developing high-quality, persuasive content that resonates with their target audience on social media. This involves crafting messages that are both well-reasoned and accurate, delivered by sources perceived as credible and attractive. Companies should specifically focus on elevating the argument quality of their marketing communication, ensuring the information presented is accurate, current, and relevant to consumers' needs. Furthermore, leveraging credible and appealing influencers or brand ambassadors can significantly amplify the effectiveness of e-WOM campaigns. By strategically managing both the content and

delivery of persuasive message, businesses can effectively harness the power of e-WOM to positively influence consumer purchase intention.

In conclusion, this research augments the existing literature by empirically establishing the significant influence of persuasive information on e-WOM and, consequently, on purchase intention within the context of the Chinese cosmetics market on Sina Weibo. Although constrained by its focus on a specific market and platform, the study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online consumer behavior and lays the groundwork for future research to investigate these relationships across other product categories and social media environments.

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