SYNTHETIC REVIEW: IMPACT OF ONLINE COMMENTS ON SMARTPHONE CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The intent of this study is to explore the linkages between online comments and smart phone choice.

Design/methodology/approach: A robust interdisciplinary literature review was conducted following a step-by-step search from a number of indexed databases. The first search was based on selected key words. Later themes which were germane to the research study used as the search criteria. After screening and reviewing 413 research papers, 71 research papers were selected based on some inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Findings: The outcome of this study is a linear framework in which all the five constructs are linked in a sequential manner namely motives to seek online comments, content of online comments, perceived credibility, perceived helpfulness and smart phone choice to explore the nature of smart phone choice process after reading online comments. This paper also identifies gaps and suggestions for the same.

Research limitation/ implication: This research study does not extend an understanding on prelaunch smart phones" choice because online comments for such smart phone are not available on product review websites. This study not only provides an overview of the current status of knowledge within the domain of consumer network and buying behavior, but also serves as a salient guideline for future research directions.

Originality/value: This is a first kind of study which explores the choice of a mixed category product based on online consumers experience in emerging market such as India.

Key words: Online comments, Smartphone choice, Motivators, Perceived credibility, Perceived helpfulness

INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing options, customers still remain apprehensive about the choice of their smart phone. Many customers prefer to view the comments of actual users available on product review websites. It is evident that online consumer reviews are representative of the general consumer base (Dellarocas et al., 2007) and reveal preferences of early buyers, which ultimately affect prospective buyers in making brand or product choice (Li and Hitt 2008; Zang et al., 2010). In addition, product reviews accurately reflect product quality, discuss technical glitches, and thus are influential (Chen et al., 2005) in making wide product choices and price and quality comparisons (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Netzer et al., 2012). Online information becomes more important especially when the potential buyers lack experience of a product or service and need reassurance or further information before making their product purchasing decision (Sweeny et al., 2008). Smartphone contains both hedonic and utilitarian features (Chen and Dholakia, 2014) which are continually updated. Therefore, customers read online comments on product review websites in order to update themselves.

The extant literature uses various titles for online consumers feedback about a product such as peer reviews (Punj, 2013), product reviews (Mudambii and Scuff, 2010), consumer feedback (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), user generated content (Netzer et al., 2012), online product reviews (Li and Hitt, 2008; Dellarocas et al., 2010), online customer product reviews (Forman et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2005), product recommendation (Pavlou and Gefen, 2004; Senecal and Nantel, 2004), expert reviews (Chen and Xie, 2005). Names regarding review text may be different for researchers, but customers perceive review text as a pool of information without any distinction in nomenclature for their decision making. Hence, this study uses the term „online comments", defined as the amount of online product reviews, opinions and various forms of word of mouth in a digital environment. The term smart phone choice is used on account of the selection of a smart phone which has great performance, least problems and worth to buy for a price.

This study is an attempt to develop a conceptual framework for smart phone choice based on the assumption that customers seek online comments, read and evaluate them to make a smart phone choice. The focus is on the process aspect of the phenomenon to answer to what extent and in what ways do the online comments (Content) impact a customer's decision in making smart phone choice.

On the basis of above discussion following research questions have been developed (1) how are online comments on product review websites evaluated by customers to adjust their perception to make a smart phone choice? (2) What is the perceived value of these online comments in the eyes of the customers? And (3) how do the customers decide which piece of information facilitates their product choice? The next section discusses the literature leading our research constructs and conceptual framework, followed by research methodology, leading to discussion and conclusion of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The receivers' propensity to act on online information is the combination of personal and interpersonal characteristics which are associated with the message and the situation surrounding the communication (Sweeny et al., 2008). Considering this fact, this study presents present the literature in the form of five main constructs as follows.

a*) Motives to Seek Online Comments*

Motivation to seek online opinion may vary across online mediums and purchase contexts (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006); hence there is a need to get insight into the motives to seek online comments for smart phone choice. Motives are defined as „psychological forces that defines the directions of the persons behavior" (Jones et al. (2000: 427). The most widely acknowledged study regarding motives to seek online information is by Hennig- Thurau and Walsh (2003), who mentioned eight motives to seek eWoM including risk reduction, reduction in search time and learning about new products in the market. Subsequent studies investigated prime motives to seek online information in their own way, ignoring the fact that motives may be different depending on the type of product and cultural differences. There are many researches applicable in different context by Ha (2002), Bailey (2005), Horowiz and Goldsmith (2006), Sweeney et al. (2008), Khammash (2008), Zhang et al. (2009), Mudambii and Scuff (2010) on motives. These studies commonly discussed motives such as reducing pre-purchase risk, to get assurance, gaining product experience, information source. Although, many motives are discussed by researchers but the prime motives for an Indian customer in context to smart phone choice may be different. Hence, there is a need to investigate the motives to seek online comments.

b) Content of Online Comments

It is difficult to choose a smart phone solely based on product specification due to the complexity and updates involved in. Besides, customers don't understand the terminology in product specification clearly. Hence, they are likely to believe in product performance and quality narrated by anonymous customers.

The literature supports the powerful influence of online consumer-to-consumer communication on the customers (Schindler and Bickart, 2012) which ultimately leads to product sales (Chen et al., 2008; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Clemons et al., 2006; Ghose and Ipeirotis, 2011) and product choice (Huang and Chen, 2006; Chen et al., 2008; Archak et al., 2011). It is mentioned that customers select the recommended product twice as often as customers who do not consult any recommendations (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). The information in the reviews found to be more influential for experience goods than search goods (Huang et al., 2009) but no evidences found for mixed category products so far.There have been number of researches to get an insight into the influential nature of product reviews using different methodology such as „content analysis approach" of product review text (Pan and Zhang, 2011; Schlosser, 2011) and „text mining

approach" (Cao et al., 2011; Archak, 2011; Ghose and Ipeirotis, 2011; Korfiatis et al., 2012; Li et al 2010; Xu et al., 2011) in the past. The most comprehensive and conclusive research study is found by Robinson et al. (2012) which not only raised questions on these approaches, but also identified various other factors which make an online opinion text more or less persuasive.

c) Perceived Credibility of Online Comments

Despite of arguments on the credibility of online reviews, they are perceived to be more credible and useful than information generated by marketers (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Bronner and Hoog, 2010). Online reviews are trusted because they reduce uncertainty in both social and business interactions (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008). Therefore, the role of perceived credibility arises as a prime determinant in smart phone choice after reading the content of online comments. Perceived credibility defined in terms of perception that comments are true, believable or factual Cheung et al. (2009) and the judgments concerning the believability of the reviews (Hong and Park, 2012). In the past, many research studies have investigated the role of source credibility on review credibility (Cheung et al., 2009; Pornpitakpan, 2014; Fan et al, 2013) but some delimit or negate its role (Filieri, 2015; Jensen et al., 2012) arguing that technology separates the reviewer from the review, and potential buyers are left to rely on characteristics of the review itself to determine its credibility. It is accepted in the literature, if perceived credibility of eWoM is more; customers prefer to adopt eWoM (Cheung et al., 2009; Fan and Miao, 2012; Lee and Koo, 2012). For this reason this study concern with „perceived credibility of online comments" only rather than focusing on source credibility i.e. product review website credibility.

The existing literature focuses on „argument quality" (Park and Kim 2008; Racherla et al., 2012; Fan et al., 2013) and review valence (Kusumasondjaja et al., 2012) and two-sidedness (Schlosser, 2011) to evaluate the credibility of the online information. The most comprehensive study is found by Jenson et al. (2012) which accommodate most of the characteristics of perceived credibility, such as *Lexical Complexity*, use of long words and sentences, professional terms, technical jargons, a little repetition of words in reviews; *Two sidedness of reviews*, presence of both positive and negative arguments; *Affect Intensity*, love, hate, despises words in the reviews. Their study used a controlled experiment which may not contribute adequately to our understanding of how online customer reviews are understood in real life situation.

d) Perceived Helpfulness of Online Comments

Perceived helpfulness is used as a reflection of information credibility (Chen et al., 2008) and considered to be a second-order formative construct, manifested by perceived source credibility, perceived content diagnosticity, and perceived vicarious expression of the product review (Li et al., 2010). Reviews are considered to be more helpful if they have stronger effects on consumer choice than other reviews (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) and facilitate consumers purchase decision (Mudambi and Schuff, 2007). The helpfulness of reviews is

defined in terms of information diagnosticity (Cao et. al., 2011), level of ambiguity (Jiang and Benbasat, 2004) and evaluation of product quality and performance clearly (Li et al., 2010) in the literature. The more a review is complete, accurate, based on facts, and relevant to consumer needs; the more helpful it would be in assessing the quality and performance of intended product or service (Filieri, 2015).

The extant literature demonstrates two perspectives, i.e. subjective and objective. As per the subjective perspective, the review source and review content, both affect helpfulness of reviews. On other hand objective perspective favors voting ratio, i.e higher the number of votes, the more helpful a review will be. Considering the subjective perspective, the influence of source credibility is found to be lesser than argument quality on the helpfulness of reviews (Filieri, 2015; Chen and Hob, 2015). The objective perspective also has been questioned on account of Winner circle bias, reviews with more accumulated votes get more attention than reviews with fewer votes and early bird bias, and the first reviews to be published tend to get more votes (Li et al., 2013) in past researches. Therefore, this study is focusing on the helpfulness of the content, leaving the issue of the credibility of product review websites for assessing perceived helpfulness of online comments. The research study by Huang et al. (2015) has shown a more integrated view on review helpfulness by considering not only the quantitative factors (such as word count), but also qualitative aspects of reviewers including reviewer experience, reviewer impact, reviewer cumulative helpfulness.

e) Smartphone Choice

Smartphone is a mixed category product and its experiential and utilitarian features are evaluated subjectively and objectively (Hamby et al., 2015). Being a technology based product, the majority of literature on smart phone choice is available in Information System (IS) and related disciplines. The higher the level of experiential feature and positively-valenced reviews, the stronger is the intention to try the reviewed product (Hamby et al., 2015). Smartphone experiential dimension matters a lot for its choice and sale. Despite this fact, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research on the issue of smart phone choice after reading online consumer's experience so far.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Given the research questions in the introduction section, a conceptual framework (Figure No.1) is proposed for smart phone choice. The major underlying premises of the model are (1) customer seeks online comments of smart phones available on product review websites due to conflicting decision making (2) customer read the content of online comments carefully and evaluate it (3) online comments are helpful in smart phone choice if perceived to be credible (4) customer choose smart phone based on the perceived value of smart phone attributes and the users experience in the online comments. The following section details out the definition and the link between various constructs used in

the proposed framework.

Insert Fig. No. 1 about here

METHODOLOGY

A systematic and exhaustive interdisciplinary literature review was conducted using twin approaches. The first approach included an electronic search based on key words such as online product reviews, user generated content, online recommendation, online consumer reviews and expert reviews from Indexed databases at EBSCO, ProQuest, JSTOR, Emerald, Springer link and Science Direct. Next, most frequently cited publications were added to the literature collected in the first round of search.

The search ended with 413 research papers, whose abstract were screened in order to eliminate articles beyond the scope of this study. The inclusion criteria for the paper published in scholarly and peer reviewed journals were: investigations in business-to-consumer (B2C) setting as well as consumer- to-consumer (C2C) setting, and published between 2000 to 2014 or close to being published. The exclusion criteria were: entirely conceptual or theoretical background containing no description of research design exclusively focused on investigation of eWoM in the form of recommendation agent.

DISCUSSIONS

Though, prior researches have attested the role of social influence on smart phone choice, to the best of our knowledge, there is no evidence of research which has raised the issue in the smart phone choice based on online consumers experience in the form of online comments available on product review websites.

The literature review reveals five constructs which are crucial to understand the process of smart phone choice after reading online comments. The first construct „Motives to Seek Online Comments‟ shows the trends of listing and categorization of motives in different contexts. Over time, this listing and categorization have generated too many items and categories which have led to confusion. Therefore, a further research is needed which meaningfully accommodates most of these items for this research. The second construct „Content of Online Comments attest the role of online reviews for search and experience product choice but remain silent about mixed category products. Moreover, there have been many approaches, claiming one approach superior to another in analyzing the reviews, hence suggests a need to explore the content of online comments to make a smart phone choice more effectively. The third

construct „Perceived Credibility of Online Comments‟ clearly highlights the role of argument quality, two-sidedness. However, the literature is inconclusive about the factors responsible for arguments quality in the reviews. Moreover, there is contradiction regarding two sidedness reviews. The fourth construct „Perceived Helpfulness of Online Comments‟ looked into subjective and objective measures for review helpfulness. The existing literature investigates perceived credibility and perceived helpfulness of experience and search category products reviews, but remains silent on mixed category products reviews so far. And, the literature clearly indicates the link between perceived credibility and perceived helpfulness of online comments. Hence, there is an opportunity to explore this information in context to smart phones choice. The fifth construct i.e „Smartphone Choice‟ has its roots across various domains and unable to conclude clearly the factors responsible for the choice of smart phone. The literature on this construct clearly mentioned the role of social influence, but unable to explore it considerably. Moreover, marketing literature suggests smart phone selection based on hedonic as well as utilitarian dimension but does not explore the issue of social influence and perceived value so far. Such exclusion limits our current understanding of the choice of a product like smart phones.

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Annexure 1