

Experts versus Friends: To Whom Do I Listen More? The Factors That Affect Credibility of Online Information

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Abstract. This study aims to examine how the relationship with an information source affects the perceived credibility of online information. We develop a general framework that explains how people perceive information credibility when they are familiar with the information source and/or when the information source seems credible. We then compare the associations of the model in two contexts, namely, online review and social media sites, to examine the difference. The result confirms that credibility of information is strongly mediated by credibility of information source than familiarity with information source in on-line review sites and vice versa in social media sites.

Keywords: Information Credibility, Information Source, Goal Similarity, Personal Similarity, Social Media Site, Review Site.

1 Introduction

In 2012, Facebook announced that it has reached one billion subscribers, which is equivalent to one out of seven persons in the world [40]. Moreover, the Social Media Report by Nielsen [29] stated that the total amount of time spent on social media in the United States has increased to 121 billion minutes in July 2012 compared with 88 billion minutes in the previous year. The rapid emergence of social media has resulted in the natural extension of its use as a marketing vehicle for businesses. The social media not only allows businesses to interact with their customers but also provides a platform in which customers gather. Customers form a community and behave as a tribe with shared interests [19]. With the founding of such strong, specified online communities, businesses can build a stronger brand power, collect additional ideas from their customers, and even support knowledge creation for organizations [6].

One of the advantages of social media as a marketing tool is that it delivers information with enhanced personal closeness [24]. It can be viewed as another form of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) but is more advanced because it lessens the level of anonymity incorporated in online world. eWOM has benefitted customers with its extensive product information with less bias; however, its credibility is sometimes questioned because of its anonymity. Nevertheless, users of social media can now enjoy the power of eWOM with less anonymity. Considering the level of anonymity

depending on websites (review versus social media websites), which information source (i.e., a renowned source vs. a person with whom the user has personal interaction, such as a social media friend) is more credible to the use of posted information is not clear. People usually perceive that information from the people they know is credible. However, numerous renowned bloggers and reviewers produce more influential information compared to the majority of a user's friends. Thus, it is doubtful that information from a social media friend is more influential than that from renowned bloggers because of a user's personal interaction with his or her friend.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how the relationship with an information source affects the perceived credibility of online information. We develop a general framework that explains how people perceive information credibility when they are familiar with the information source and/or when the information source seems credible. We then compare the associations of the model in two contexts, namely, online review and social media sites, to examine the difference. The result confirms that credibility of information is strongly mediated by credibility of information source than familiarity with information source in online review sites and vice versa in social media sites.

2 Theoretical Development

2.1 How People Believe the Words of Others

One of the challenges in Internet shopping is that all transactions are conducted without face-to-face interaction. Customers experience a level of ambiguity due to the impersonal online transaction, that customers are unable to see or touch the products, but should make a decision mostly based on the information on the web [23]. Although rich product information is now widely available in online, such as video simulation and consumer reviews, the credibility of the information on the web is not always easily assured [10].

To assist such customers with ambiguity and anxiety, leading online malls have devised various methods, especially to assure the credibility of the information source. For example, Amazon.com grants special labels to reviewers with high reputations, such as *Top 1000 Reviewer*, to verify the credibility of the information source. For another example, customers can browse all the reviews written by the same reviewer, to confirm the consistency in his information credibility.

These efforts to verify the credibility of information source have effectively benefited online consumers mainly based on the belief that people with experience and reputation would provide accurate and factual information [22]. Credibility refers to the accuracy, depth, and factuality of the information as well as the intention and knowledge of the information providers [34]. Information that is provided by a knowledgeable person is often perceived as factual. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The credibility of the information provider has a positive influence on the perceived credibility of the online information.

The credibility of the information is also influenced by the familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider. Familiarity refers to the acquaintance of an individual with a particular entity that is formed via previous and direct transactions between both parties [21]. Familiarity improves the understanding of a person toward particular information as well as the reasoning behind such knowledge, which reduces inaccuracies or misinterpretations. Additional knowledge or information is transferred between people who are familiar with each other than between people who are unfamiliar with each other [13]. The familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider reduces their uncertainty toward the provided knowledge and the perceived risks in the transaction [14]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider has a positive influence on the perceived credibility of the online information.

2.2 Similarities between the Readers and the Reviewers

Numerous studies have identified credibility and familiarity as important building blocks of interpersonal relationships [15]. Credibility implies the present belief about the other party, whereas familiarity implies previous behaviors and experiences [13]. Given the existence of trust between familiar parties, these parties tend to choose each other when they are presented with a wide selection of potential partners [15]. Although certain studies have simultaneously discussed familiarity and credibility, these two concepts are distinguished from each other.

The similarity–attraction theory is proposed for drawing out the antecedents of these two factors. This theory suggests that people tend to engage in highly positive social interactions with people who are similar to them in various aspects [4]. Such similarities, from demographics to self-esteem, have been extensively studied to investigate their effects on teamwork [11, 39]. The similarity–attraction theory emphasizes the vital role of the perceived similarity in the transfer of knowledge and affect from one stimulus to another [9]. An increase in the similarity between two people increases the tendency for knowledge, affect, and intention to be transferred between both parties [25]. Similar people tend to communicate often and understand each other easily, which produces better outcomes [35].

The present study focuses on the similarity between two people in terms of their goals and personalities. On the one hand, goal similarity highlights the differences between the review and social media sites in terms of the information perceiving and processing objectives of the information seekers. Customers who visit review sites aim to search for information on a specific product, whereas customers who visit social media sites aim to search for information on other aspects. On the other hand, personality similarity highlights the differences between the review and social media sites in terms of the relationship types between the information provider and the information seeker. No relationships are observed between information providers and information seekers on review sites, whereas these two parties regularly connect and communicate with each other on social media sites. Based on these concepts the following hypotheses are developed further.

Goal Similarity. Goal refers to the abstract benefit that is sought by people [17], which determines the salient pieces of information that are readily accessible to the information seeker in a particular situation [9]. People without definitive goals tend to utilize any information that they find without considering their importance [25]. Goal similarity refers to the degree to which two people are perceived to share a common goal. People who are highly similar in terms of their goals tend to seek for the same pieces of information.

The roles of the information provider (i.e., the reviewer) and the information seeker (i.e., the reader) in the online shopping context are clarified when they share a common goal [5], which improves their understanding of each other. For example, the reader perceives the comments of the reviewer as very useful and agreeable when they share the same goals, hence developing an affinity between the two parties. Goal similarity develops a mutual understanding between the reviewer and reader by facilitating an information exchange [18]. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The goal similarity between the information provider and the information seeker enhances the perceived familiarity of the latter with the former.

Similar goals facilitate the transfer of information among people and strengthens the foundation of relationships [36]. Goal similarity results in an affinity and mutual understanding that can improve the quality of the relationship [18]. The customer obtains the information that they seek by reading the comments of a reviewer who shares the same goal. Therefore, the information that is shared by the reviewer becomes highly credible. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: The goal similarity between the information provider and the information seeker enhances the perceived credibility of the former.

Personality Similarity. Personality similarity is an important factor in online transactions given its association with various business factors, such as leader–member exchange, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction [3, 27]. People with similar personalities easily and effectively communicate with each other [28]. Such similarity also increases the number of members in an organization [31] and reduces conflict and ambiguity in the roles of individuals [37]. Therefore, personality similarity improves the relationships among people.

In the online shopping context, the personalities of the reviewer and the reader are mostly reflected by their perspectives on a product that they have bought or are thinking of buying. Reviewers and readers with similar personalities can comfortably interact with each other by facilitating an open information exchange. Many studies have found that people from the same generation and with the same interests can easily communicate with one another. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: The personality similarity between the information provider and the information seeker enhances the perceived familiarity of the latter with the former.

This similarity allows both parties to evaluate each other positively [1] by enabling an individual to predict the behavior of other people, hence interpreting various behaviors and environmental events in a highly predictive manner [7]. Such predictability reduces conflict and ambiguity between the involved parties [37], which eventually

promotes trust. In the online shopping context, the reviewer and the reader share the same perception toward a product when their personalities are also similar, which greatly improves the perceived credibility of the reviewer. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: The personality similarity between the information provider and the information seeker enhances the perceived credibility of the former.

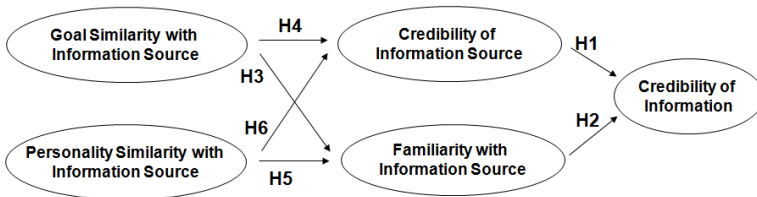


Fig. 1. Research Model

2.3 Comparison between Review and Social Media Sites

Review and social media sites mainly differ in terms of the objectives of their users. On the one hand, people visit review sites to shop, and they search for relevant information on a specific product before making the purchase. On the other hand, people visit social media sites to share information, such as their educational background, family, work, and origins, with their close friends [20].

Such differences in the objectives of review and social media site users also generate differences in the attitudes of reviewers and readers. In review sites, the reviewers are responsible for publishing quality reviews of a particular product [12]. These reviewers are often treated as professionals by their readers who find their reviews useful. These reviewers rely on the quality and credibility of their reviews to protect their reputation. Readers in review sites place more emphasis on the credibility of reviewers. To verify if the credibility of the reviewer is more pronounced in review sites rather than in social media sites, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: The credibility of the information provider produces a much stronger mediating effect in review sites rather than in social media sites.

The reviews in social media sites are often written in conversational or casual tones. However, readers continue to take these reviews seriously, and their purchasing decisions are influenced by their familiarity with the reviewer rather than by the quality of the reviews that they are reading. People tend to believe information that comes from someone whom they are closely affiliated with [14]. Given that social media sites connect people that are personally affiliated, the reviews that are published in these sites, whether positive or negative, are perceived as friendly conversations. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H8: The familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider produces a stronger mediating effect in social media sites rather than in review sites.

3 Data Collection

3.1 Item Development

Studies on information accuracy and objectivity are reviewed to collect data on information credibility. These studies explain the key concepts that are used in this study [34, 38]. Studies on business trust are reviewed to collect data on information provider credibility given that such credibility reflects the sincerity of the information provider in helping the information seeker [10, 26]. Studies that measure the depth and frequency of the information seeker–provider interactions are reviewed to collect data on the familiarity of information seekers with the information providers [13, 21]. Major business studies are reviewed to collect data on goal and personality similarities. Most of these studies describe the similarities between supervisors and their subordinates or the similarities among the peers within a firm. Such information is modified to fit in the electronic commerce context [8, 25, 35, 36].

3.2 Data Collection Process

The data was electronically collected. The online questionnaire was built and 400 potential subjects were invited through emails, social networking sites, and review sites. The questionnaire described what review sites and social media sites were with examples (Tweakers.net and Facebook.com, respectively) to provide a clear idea of two different types of websites. The questionnaire clearly asks subjects to consider the reviews of reviewers on the review sites and the comments of their friends on social media websites they often visit.

A mobile phone was selected as an experimental product for a subject to collect and evaluate information to purchase one. A mobile phone is considered a personal product that most people need and use, at least, in developing and developed countries. Although there are different kinds of mobile phones, people tend to personalize and use them for a couple of years, especially for smart phones. For these reasons, people are likely to seek information about potential mobile phones they will purchase.

To measure *credibility of information*, questions, for example, “The consumer reviews information on review sites (or social media site) do not contain any false information about mobile phone.” were asked. To measure *credibility of information source*, questions, for example, “I trust reviewers at review sites (or my friends at social media sites) when they post something on the review sites (or the social media sites),” were asked. To measure *familiarity with information source*, questions, for instance, “I do often exchange information with reviewers at review sites (or my friends at social media websites),” were asked. To measure *goal similarity with information source*, questions, for instance, “to me, the information about a mobile phone provided by reviewers at review sites (or my friends at social media websites) is important,” were asked. To measure *personality similarity with information source*, questions, for instance, “I feel similarity with people on review sites (or my friends on social media sites),” were asked.

4 Data Analysis

The sample comprised 70 subjects, in which 50% were male and 50% were female, 92.9% were aged between 12 and 25 years, 95.8% were from Netherlands, and 100% managed social media accounts, such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents Demographics

Gender	Freq. (%)	Age	Freq. (%)	Nationality	Freq. (%)
Male	35 (50)	12-19	31	Netherlands	67
Female	35 (50)	20-25	34	Belgium	1
Total	70 (100)	26-35	2	Germany	1
		36 and older	3	USA	1
		Total	70 (100)	Total	70 (100)

4.1 Measurement Model

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the four data sets, and the SPSS 17.0 software was used to test the convergent and discriminant validities of the items. The items within a set are divided into five major components (Table 2) with factor loading values ranging from 0.6 to 0.9. The convergent and discriminant validities of the items are justified given that they satisfy the baseline factor loading value [16]. A Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to verify the internal consistency of the items. The Cronbach's alpha values of all items range from 0.72 to 0.86 (Table 2), which satisfies the minimum prescribed value for social science studies (alpha = 0.7) [30]. The correlations among most constructs in Table 3 are below 0.7, which indicates that multicollinearity is not a potentially serious problem in the model [2].

Table 2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Items	Review Site					Social Media Site				
	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
GoS1	.139	.032	<u>.873</u>	-.001	-.131	.146	-.071	<u>.884</u>	.073	.022
GoS2	-.071	-.001	<u>.905</u>	.053	-.050	.185	.087	<u>.847</u>	.178	-.135
GoS3	.132	.098	<u>.839</u>	.047	.159	.136	.179	<u>.827</u>	.107	.109
CtS1	.035	.081	.123	<u>.785</u>	.250	-.204	<u>.780</u>	-.018	.074	.143
CtS2	.015	.077	.046	<u>.865</u>	.233	.007	<u>.827</u>	.102	.109	.188
CtS3	.050	.101	-.059	<u>.897</u>	-.119	-.064	<u>.789</u>	.089	.056	.137
Fam1	.010	<u>.704</u>	.005	.127	.071	.071	-.270	.193	<u>.552</u>	.327
Fam2	.023	<u>.893</u>	.053	-.047	.031	.173	.116	.167	<u>.729</u>	.180
Fam3	.021	<u>.871</u>	-.070	.015	.108	.094	.273	.181	<u>.796</u>	.004
Fam4	.172	<u>.615</u>	.170	.176	.076	.133	.051	-.051	<u>.806</u>	-.194
Cre1	.387	.036	-.077	.176	<u>.602</u>	-.041	.367	.013	.091	<u>.757</u>
Cre2	.218	.020	.015	.129	<u>.776</u>	.180	.212	.066	.011	<u>.705</u>
Cre3	.028	.239	-.020	.076	<u>.798</u>	.002	.026	-.074	.008	<u>.801</u>
CrI1	<u>.899</u>	.116	.088	-.014	.063	<u>.842</u>	-.159	.158	.162	.003
CrI2	<u>.893</u>	.094	-.004	.040	.033	<u>.762</u>	-.214	.151	.111	-.026
CrI3	<u>.628</u>	.056	.177	-.032	.409	<u>.824</u>	-.072	.169	.053	.200
CrI4	<u>.846</u>	-.037	.042	.096	.248	<u>.844</u>	.130	.049	.137	.009
Cronbach's Alpha	0.851	0.730	0.833	0.715	0.872	0.851	0.725	0.801	0.714	0.860

Table 3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

	Review Site					Social Media Site				
	GoS	CtS	Fam	Cre	CrI	GoS	CtS	Fam	Cre	CrI
GoS	1					1				
CtS	0.09	1				0.13	1			
Fam	0.12	0.22	1			0.32**	0.17	1		
Cre	0.02	0.29*	0.25*	1		0.06	0.38**	0.17	1	
CrI	0.16	0.12	0.17	0.43**	1	0.33**	-0.15	0.31**	0.08	1
Mean	4.04	3.23	1.92	4.06	4.48	4.04	4.8	4.05	4.30	2.45
(SD)	(0.97)	(1.21)	(1.32)	(1.42)	(1.61)	(0.97)	(1.45)	(1.51)	(1.19)	(1.47)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2 Structural Model

LISREL 8.71 was used to test the structural model fit. Most statistics in the model indicated a marginally adequate fit (Table 4). The AGFIs and RMRs were lower and higher than the recommended level, respectively. Such gap was deemed acceptable for the analysis given the small sample size of the study. The other indexes, such as GFI and RMSEA, all showed an acceptable fit. The results of the hypotheses testing are presented in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 as well as in Table 5. The credibility of the information provider has a significant effect on the credibility of information in review sites ($b = 0.51, t = 3.30, p < 0.01$) but shows an insignificant effect on the credibility of information in social media sites ($b = -0.10, t = -0.69, p > 0.10$), which partially supports H1. The familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider has a significant effect on the credibility of information in social media sites ($b = 0.36, t = 2.07, p < 0.10$) but shows an insignificant effect on the credibility of information in review sites ($b = 0.05, t = 0.42, p > 0.10$), which partially supports H2.

Table 4. Exploratory Factor Analysis

Fit Index	Recommended Level	Structural Model	
		Review Site	Social Media
Absolute Fit Measures			
Chi-square test statistic (χ^2 ; <i>df</i>)		155.65: 112	123.64: 112
<i>p</i> -value	> 0.10	0.00403	0.21292
Goodness-of fit index (GFI)	> 0.80	0.79	0.83
Root mean square error of app. (RMSEA)	< 0.08	0.075	0.039
Root mean squared residual (RMR)	< 0.05	0.093	0.10
Incremental Fit Measures			
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)	> 0.80	0.71	0.76
Normed fit index (NFI)	> 0.80	0.78	0.80
Parsimonious Fit Measure			
Normed chi-square	1.00 ~ 3.00	1.39	1.10

Goal similarity shows a significant effect on the familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider in social media sites ($b = 0.37, t = 2.14, p < 0.10$) but shows an insignificant effect on such familiarity in review sites ($b = 0.06, t = 0.40, p > 0.10$), which partially supports H3. Goal similarity shows an insignificant effect on the credibility of the information provider in both review ($b = -0.13, t = -0.62, p > 0.10$) and social media sites ($b = -0.05, t = -0.36, p < 0.01$), which does not support H4.

Personality similarity shows a significant effect on the familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider in social media sites ($b = 0.25, t = 1.60, p < 0.10$) but shows an insignificant effect on such familiarity in review sites ($b = 0.15, t = 1.11, p > 0.1$), which partially supports H5. Personality similarity shows a significant effect on the credibility of the information provider in both review ($b = 0.39, t = 2.63, p < 0.01$) and social media sites ($b = 0.57, t = 4.03, p < 0.01$), which supports H6.

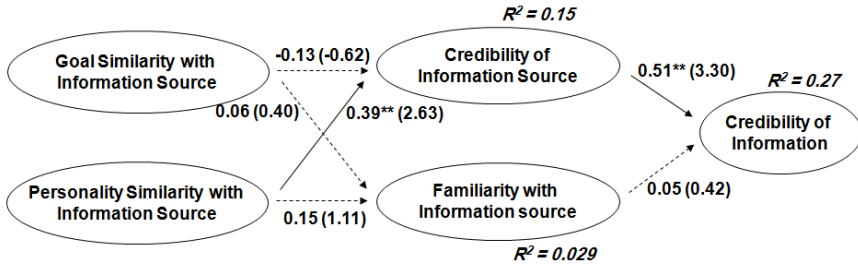


Fig. 2. Professional Review Site

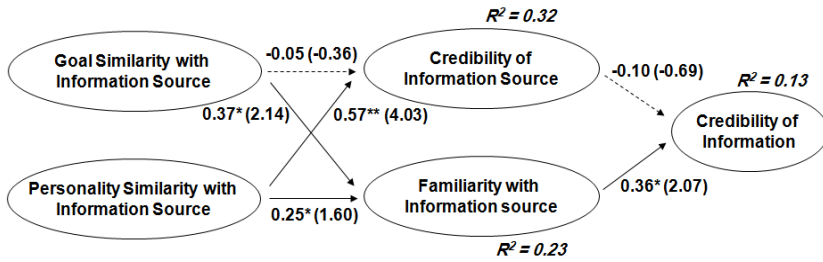


Fig. 2. Social Media Site

Table 5. Hypotheses Test Summary

Hypotheses	Review Site	Social Media
H1 Info. Source Credibility → Info. Credibility	S	NS
H2 Info. Source Familiarity → Info. Credibility	NS	S
H3 Goal Similarity → Info. Source Familiarity	NS	S
H4 Goal Similarity → Info. Source Credibility	NS	NS
H5 Personality Similarity → Info. Source Familiarity	NS	S
H6 Personality Similarity → Info. Source Credibility	S	S
H7 Mediating effect of Info. Source Credibility is stronger in Review site than in social media.		S
H8 Mediating effect of Info. Source Familiarity is stronger in Social media than in review site.		S

S: supported; NS: not supported.

H7 was tested by comparing the mediating effects of information provider credibility in review and social media sites. Given that the path from information source credibility to information credibility is insignificant, the former does not produce a mediating effect on the latter in social media sites. The opposite is observed in review sites, in which the information source credibility produces a mediating effect from personality similarity to information credibility. Therefore, H7 is supported.

The mediating effects of the familiarity of the information seeker with the information provider in review and social media sites are also compared. No mediating effect is observed in review sites given that all paths to and from the variable are insignificant. However, information source familiarity produces a mediating effect from goal and personality similarity to information credibility in social media sites. Therefore, H8 is supported.

5 Discussion

The result indicates that the credibility of information between review sites and social media sites are mediated by different constructs that are also affected by different antecedents. The credibility of information on review sites is mediated by the credibility of information source, while the credibility of information on social media sites is mediated by the familiarity with information source. It means that people tend to rationally evaluate information by whether they can trust information source on review sites. Meanwhile, they tend to rely on their relational familiarity with information source to evaluate information on social media sites. This result confirms the idea of dual processes by Petty and Cacioppo [32]. In persuasion literature, there are two distinct routes – one is *central route* based on the rational consideration of arguments central to the issue and the other is *peripheral route* based on peripheral cues. For example, when information is posted about a certain product, in some cases, people analyze information directly relevant to central issues of the product, in other cases, peripheral cues such as who posted and when read (whether a close friend posted or whether a reader just have nice food or is hungry) are triggered to reach a decision of being or not being persuaded [33]. It implies that there is a stimulus to trigger one route against the other. Coinciding with this dual processes idea, the result confirms that people tend to use the central route to evaluate information when they read information posted by anonymous reviewers on review sites. Meanwhile, they use the peripheral route to evaluate information on social media sites.

As hypothesized Goal Similarity and Personality Similarity with Information Source positively influence on Familiarity with Information Source at social media websites. Although Familiarity with Information Source is related to peripheral route, Goal Similarity ($b=0.37$) plays more significant role on building Familiarity with Information Source than Personality Similarity ($b=0.25$). It implies that posters can increase the familiarity of readers by posting important and relevant information to the readers. However, for review sites, only Personality Similarity with Information Source positively influences on Credibility of Information Source, which is a surprising result. It suggests that posters can increase Credibility of Information Source by revealing their personal lives. One explanation of this surprising result can be derived from the sample size ($n=70$) and the composition of the respondents within the sample. The sample size can be considered small and the composition of the sample implies a need for caution in interpreting the result, because more than 90 percent of respondents are from the age group between 12 and 25. Yet, this study opens different perspectives and factors influencing on the credibility of information between online review and social media sites.

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