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The Impact of Marketers' Online Messages on the Perceived Credibility: Case of Moroccan Consumers of Cosmetic Argan Oil

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Abstract

In the digital world, and before the appearance of social media and online communities, marketers and companies were the main producers of information online and offline. During these times, their impact on the consumers' behavior is different from the impact that they have today because other factors have emerged in the online context. Nowadays, the information that they produce compete with other sources of information such as social media influencers and internet users. The receivers of information face a multitude of data and sources and grant different levels of credibility to the important quantity of online messages that they receive on a frequent basis. The purpose of this paper is to understand the perceived credibility of the online messages that come from official sources of companies. The credibility might be impacted by the strength of arguments used to define the message intended for the consumers online. For this article, we undertook a quantitative research using a questionnaire with 100 internet users. The questionnaire was answered based on two different scenarios of messages taken from official pages of companies that market cosmetic Argan oil in order to measure the impact of the official sources on the perceived credibility of the Moroccan consumer.

Keywords: Digital marketing, social media, credibility, consumers' behavior, terroir product

1. Introduction

Compared to traditional communication mediums, the cost of the digital channels is way lower (Mitchell, 2001). This aspect allows companies to reach out to their customers and prospects in new ways and more frequently. It also gave the possibility of a two-way communication with the company's audience. Although, even if marketers have the possibility to communicate from the same platforms as consumers, this does not grant them the same advantages. The internet users perceive the credibility of each source in a different way. Thus, marketers need to take into consideration that their message will not have the same impact on everyone and in the same way as other online messages from different sources.

The way the credibility is perceived by consumers and internet users does not depend on the source only but also on other factors such as the type of product and the characteristic of the information shared. Even though previous research examined the credibility of web-based information coming from marketers, the diversity of products, platforms, targets, etc. suggest

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT,** **ECONOMICS** and **ACCOUNTING**



19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

different behaviors and perceptions. Thus, researchers need to dedicate their research to a specific field in order to get relevant results.

This paper focuses on fast-moving consumer goods and more specifically on the cosmetic one. We have used the cosmetic Argan oil for the scenarios of our questionnaire. Our objective is to understand the impact online messages that come from the company or the marketers on the Moroccan consumers. To do so, we have undertaken quantitative research using questionnaires that included scenarios. The difference between these scenarios are the online messages that they included. One comes with strong arguments and the other with weak arguments.

2. Perceived credibility of online messages

The credibility of an online source of information is perceived when the internet user, which means the information recipient, considers this source as reliable, competent, and believable (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, an online source of information that is perceived as credible by a recipient, could be perceived differently by another recipient. That is why we speak about extrinsic properties (Johansen & Hovland, 2012). And it is only normal that the recipients take only the information that they consider credible (Wathen & Burkell, 2002).

There are two main dimensions that define the credibility of an online source of information. The dimensions are the perceived expertise and the reliability of the source. This means, the recipients try to evaluate the veracity of the information through the possible source's motivations (Hu et al., 2008; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Zhang & Watts, 2008). As the measurement of these dimensions can be difficult for the internet user, this latter one evaluates the veracity of the source's information through heuristic signs. These signs can be represented by the size of the message, the valency, and the consistency of information among others (Cheung & Thadani, 2010). These signs allow the internet user to evaluate the product of his or her interest and to also evaluate the credibility of the source (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006).

Therefore, if the receivers of an information judge the source as credible through the pre-cited heuristic signs, this information will be considered as useful. But in case the source is not seen as useful and trustworthy, the receivers reject the information. This leads to an absence of an impact on the consumer's behavior (Grewal et al., 1994).

From what was mentioned till here, we can conclude that the source of an information has an important impact on the perceived credibility and that a source that is perceived as credible could have a positive impact on the adoption of the online message (Ba & Pavlou, 2002).

As our paper focuses on marketers or companies as a source of information, our focus will be on the online messages that are published by them. In this context, it is important to note the messages that come from a company are always positive and subjective. Thus, it is very possible

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT,** **ECONOMICS** and **ACCOUNTING**



19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

that the internet users question the utility of such information as it is seen as a message that aims to increase the sales rather than to objectively inform the consumers. That is why they tend to give more credibility to the online messages coming from other internet users rather than those coming from the company because they consider them to be more objective (Kozinets, 2002; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). According to this, we can formulate the hypothesis of this paper as follow:

H1: the internet users do not perceive the credibility in the online messages coming from the marketers.

3. Method

3.1 Choice of methodology

For this paper, we have opted for the quasi-experimental methodology because, with our research, we are unable to apply a random distribution of the respondents (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Our objective is to create stimulus based on online messages that already exist on social media in order to manipulate the characteristics of the message and consequently the perception of the respondents on the source of the message. This way, we can measure the impact of the online messages coming from marketers on the perceived credibility based on messages with strong arguments, and others with weak arguments.

To create the stimuli, we had to define first the product of our research using netnography (Kozinets, 2002). This method is adapted to our research as we are studying online messages. It helped us select the most common product within the cosmetic group of products, the source of information and to familiarize with the language of the consumers online. Using the non-participatory observation, we ended up choosing the cosmetic Argan oil as the product of the experiment of this paper.

After defining the product, we did a thematic analysis using a combination of a participatory observation and non-participatory observation to define the most common characteristics of the selected product. The question that was asked in an online Facebook group called “La testeuse” is “What are the things to which you pay attention when buying a cosmetic Argan oil?”. The results of this analysis and of the manual coding we undertook showed that the Moroccan consumers give importance to the composition of the Argan oil, the way the oil was produced and the physical characteristics of the oil. With these characteristics and a fictive brand name we called AO, we were able to elaborate our stimuli.

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS and ACCOUNTING**



19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

3.2 The preliminary evaluation

Afterwards, we proceeded to a preliminary evaluation to define the measuring scale of our variable, then, following the Churchill paradigm, we used an exploratory factor analysis and a confirmatory factor analysis to validate the scale.

We used 2 forms to collect our data. These forms have different scenarios, but the questions are identical. And to collect the answers online, we have used Google Form. For the scenarios, we used a fictive brand that we named HV. The purpose of this is to keep the focus of the respondents on the messages and not the notoriety of a brand. Our target group was Moroccan women with access to the internet and social media. To attain our target, we shared our forms on Facebook groups that have a community of Moroccan women.

3.3 Measurable variables

For this research, we have an independent variable (IV) which is represented by the online messages, and a dependent variable (DV) which is represented by the perceived credibility. For the first variable, the arguments of messages were manipulated to understand the differences of the impact of the messages on the perceived credibility with the strength of arguments changes. Thus, the first scenario comes with messages that have strong arguments and the second scenario comes with messages that have weak arguments.

The perceived credibility which is a dependent variable is related to the message, but also to the source of this message. If this latter one is considered as credible, then there are more chances for their messages to be seen as credible (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). To measure this variable, we used a unidimensional measurement scale of Flanagin and Metzger (2000) because it measures the credibility of different types of online messages (Abdennadher, 2015; Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). The scale has 5 items and are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Items of the unidimensional measurement scale of Flanagin and Metzger.

Items of the measurement scales	
Item 1	I think that the information is credible
Item 2	I think that the information is objective
Item 3	I think that the information is complete
Item 4	I think that the information is precise
Item 5	I think that the information is believable

Source: (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000)

The respondents were asked to show their level of agreement based on a 5-points Likert scale: 1 for “strongly disagree”; 2 for “disagree”; 3 for “neither agree nor disagree”; 4 for “agree” and 5 for “strongly agree”. For this research, we followed Frikha (2019) recommendations to define the sample size. According to different statisticians, in order to have a reasonable and satisfying size (Frikha, 2019), we need to consider at least 10 respondents for

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS and ACCOUNTING**



19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

each item. We decided to go with 20 respondents for each item which we consider that a sample size of 100 participants is enough for this research.

4. Results

4.1 Results of the exploratory factor analysis

Table 2. The Principal component analysis and the reliability analysis of the perceived credibility (N=100).

Items	Loadings	Communalities
PC_item1	0.842	0.858
PC_item2	0.774	0.625
PC_item3	0.739	0.794
PC_item4	0.666	0.863
PC_item5	0.857	0.902
% of variance explained		70.639
Eigenvalue		3.032
Cronbach's alpha		.837
KMO		.707
Bartlett's test of sphericity		
Approx. Chi-square		262.119
Degree of freedom(df)		10
Significance level		0.000

Source: Own research.

As from the data collected for our research, the exploratory factor analysis shows satisfying results. The communalities of all the items are exceeding 0.5, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) is equal to 0.707 which is also higher than 0.5 (Kaiser & Rice, 1974), the Cronbach's alpha is equal to 0.837 which is higher than 0.8 which is satisfying for a fundamental research (Nunnally, 1978) and the significance level is lower than 0.05. The measurement scale of Flanagan and Metzger is unidimensional. The percentage that explains one component is 70.639% which is acceptable because it is superior to 60% (Malhotra, 1999).

4.2 Results of the confirmatory factor analysis

Before we proceed to the next step, which is a confirmatory factor analysis, we started with a normality test. The results of this test presented in table 3 are satisfying. They are not null, and they are within the accepted values which are -1.5 and 1.5 for Kurtosis and -2 and 2 for Skewness (asymmetry).

Table 3. Normality test of the distribution of the variables.

	Minimum	Maximum	Skewness	Kurtosis

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS and ACCOUNTING**



19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

Perceived Credibility				
PC_item1	1	5	-0.048	-1.110
PC_item2	1	5	0.146	-0.665
PC_item3	1	5	-0.250	-0.697
PC_item4	1	5	0.087	-0.184
PC_item5	1	5	-0.169	-0.891

Source: Own research.

For this research, we have taken into consideration two criteria to evaluate the reliability and the validity of our variables. These two criteria are the Jöreskog Rho which needs to be superior to 0.7 and the convergent validity need to be superior to 0.5 (Hair et al., 2009). Our results are presented in table 4 and show that the confirmatory factor analysis is satisfactory with CR equal to 0.888 and AVE equal to 0.620.

Table 4. The confirmatory factor analysis of the perceived credibility (N=100)

Variable	Items	Δ_i (estimate)
Perceived Credibility	PC_item1	0.901
	PC_item2	0.657
	PC_item3	0.709
	PC_item4	0.685
	PC_item5	0.940
Rh� of J�reskog (CR)		0.888
Convergent validity (AVE)		0.620
MSV		0.884
ASV		0.620

Source: Own research.

4.3 Hypothesis test: Direct relationship using analysis of variance (ANOVA)

To test the direct relationship between the marketer's messages online (the independent variable) and the perceived credibility (the dependent variable), we have used the analysis of variance ANOVA. The independent variable was manipulated to have messages with strong arguments and other messages with weak arguments.

To use ANOVA, we first verified the three conditions that need to be respected. Firstly, and according to the normality test that was done previously, the dependent variable is normally distributed. Secondly, we did a Levene test to verify the equality of variances. Results showed that the significance level is equal to 0.207, which is higher than 0.005. Thus, we will not reject the null hypothesis because the result is not significant. We can then conduct a one-way ANOVA analysis. Thirdly, there should be an independence of answers between the respondents. Thanks to Google Form, the tool used to collect answers, we were able to guarantee that the answers of each respondent was not influenced by the answers of the others.

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS and ACCOUNTING**

19-21 November 2021

Paris, France



The result of ANOVA shows that the messages coming from the company, or the marketer online do not have a direct impact on the perceived credibility ($F = 0.239$, $Sig. = 0.626$). The results show that Sig. is higher than 0.05. This means that there is no difference between the online messages with strong and online messages with weak arguments.

Table 5: Analysis of variance ANOVA.

Hypothesis	Arguments	Mean	SD	Means difference	F	Sig.
H1	Strong	2.8160	0.78438	-0.088	0.239	0.626
	Weak	2.9040	1.00305			

Source: Own research

5. Discussion

In the online context, the consumer faces a multitude of information, opinions and experiences coming from different sources. These sources can be web influencers, internet users or marketers and their messages can be positive, negative and with strong or weak arguments. All these characteristics influence the consumer's perception of the online message he or she is confronted with.

Our research aims to understand the impact of the online messages coming from marketers on the perceived credibility by the consumers using one characteristic which is the strength of the arguments. To do so, we have used a direct relationship between these online messages and the perceived credibility (H1) in order to discuss the theoretical model presented above.

The hypothesis of this paper stipulates that the internet users do not perceive the credibility in the online messages coming from the marketers because they think that these messages are subjective. To evaluate this, we have presented messages with strong arguments and other messages with weak arguments to see if there would be a difference. Our results showed that there is no difference between these two types of messages (Means vary between 2.82 and 2.90). These results also confirm our hypothesis, and thus, confirm our theoretical findings.

6. Conclusion

Nowadays, social media platforms are giving many new possibilities to companies. They can reach a big audience with minimized costs compared to the traditional platforms. But at the same time, the companies' information is competing with other sources of information such as the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and User Generated Content (UGC). In fact, these sources are known to have a bigger impact on the opinion and behavior of other consumers.

The marketers face another challenge which is the perceived credibility by the internet users. Compared to the messages coming from other consumers, the marketers' messages do not

8th International Conference On Opportunities and Challenges In **MANAGEMENT,** **ECONOMICS** and **ACCOUNTING**



19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

receive as much credibility. Our paper came to confirm that the internet users do not perceive credibility in the online messages coming from the company. Though, according to our results, consumers do not completely reject this source of information. In reality, they can use the marketer's information, but they will also need other sources to confirm the validity of that information because the former source is considered to be subjective while the latter source is seen as a real and objective experience.

In this perspective, we believe that marketers need to set new online communication marketing strategies in order to find a way to face the different challenges. Marketers need to find out how to use the social media platforms in a way that is adapted to the internet users online behavior and the way they perceive the different sources of information depending on the products they are marketing.

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8th International Conference On Opportunities
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19-21 November 2021

Paris, France

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