

Consumer Susceptibility to Social Influence and Tendency to Generate a Positive or Negative Message in Word of Mouth Communication

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Susceptibility to social influence is expressed by inclination for fulfilling others' expectations, as well as by tendency to acquire information on products through observation of other people's behaviour, and collecting opinions from them in active way. Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) is a specific form of social communication. Harrison-Walker as well as Mazzarol, Sweeney i Soutar treat the word-of-mouth as the process embracing discussions carried out upon the organization and its offer, during which a recommendation can be formulated. The message transmitted in the WOM communication can be of positive, negative or neutral character. The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between consumer susceptibility to social influence and the tendency to generate positive or negative message. In order to measure susceptibility to social influence the Interpersonal Influence Scale will be applied (Bearden, Netenmeyer, Teel 1989). After analyzing the literature, the following research hypothesis was formulated: the stronger the participant's susceptibility to social influence, the weaker tendency to generate a positive message and the stronger tendency to generate a negative one.

To verify the hypotheses the research based on CAWI method were conducted in the group of 1000 people (aged 15-50), reflecting the structure of Poland's population in terms of gender and place of residence, selected with random quota sampling. Only a minimal correlation was confirmed in case of the recommendation (positive opinion). There was no correlation between producing negative opinions and the susceptibility to social influence.

Key words: marketing communication, word of mouth, social influence

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

Studies and analyses focusing on the way of acquiring information by consumers proved that the word-of-mouth communication is characterised by the huge influencing power on consumers. From Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) through Alrcek and Settle (1995), as well as to the results of the latest research projects (Filieri, Raffaele & Fraser McLeay, 2014) it is evidenced that informal sources nature exert the bigger influence on the consumer behaviour than source of formal nature. WOM has a significant importance in the innovation diffusion process, as well as it wields impact on decision making regarding the purchase of the wide range of product categories (Schindler & Bickard 2003; Groeger & Buttle 2014).

According to the Nielsen research conducted in 2013 (28,000 respondents from 56 countries in the Q3 of 2013), 84 per cent of consumers globally trust recommendations received from their acquaintances and families, 68 per cent trust other consumers' recommendations placed in the Internet, while 62 per cent trust TV advertisements. For Polish consumers acquaintances also constitute the most reliable source of information. 65 per cent of Poles trust their friends and colleagues, taking their opinion into account when choosing products to buy, while only 27 per cent trust advertisements. The growing confidence in the informal sources of information accompanied by simultaneously shrinking influence of advertising shall induce the bigger interest in using the WOM communication for the marketing purposes.

The growing confidence in the informal sources of information accompanied by simultaneously shrinking influence of advertising shall induce the bigger interest in using the WOM communication for the marketing purposes. Consumers are more willing to generate positive messages than negative ones, but if they produce unfavourable information, it usually has a bigger impact than favourable content (Tkaczyk 2009).

From the message sender viewpoint the one of the most important functions of WOM communication is social function (Berger 2014). WOM is a series of social interaction, and there is no research to check the site of the sender of a message - whether its susceptibility to social influence can cause more or less likely to generate positive or negative opinion. After all, even a person who is not an opinion leader in the ordinary everyday conversations spread also positive and negative opinions.

This article is aimed at filling this gap and analysing the social impact on the inclination to generate both positive and negative messages through the WOM communication. The project was funded by the National Science Centre on the basis of the decision DEC-2012/07/D/HS4/01761.

2. Literature review

2.1 Word of mouth

In the professional literature two approaches to defining word-of-mouth can be found. The narrow concept focuses on consumers as the participants of the communication process and on products being subject to discussion (for example Arndt, Kotler). In the wide approach the organization's employees and stakeholders are usually added to the communication process. Carl (2006) classifies two types of the WOM: 'ordinary' and 'stimulated by organizations', pointing out that it doesn't have to be initiated by consumers, as they can be inspired by organization. Harrison-Walker (2001) as well as Mazzarol, Sweeney i Soutar (2007) treat the word-of-mouth as the process embracing discussions carried out upon the organization and its offer, during which a recommendation can be formulated.

The basic elements of the WOM process include the subject (message), entities (participants of the communication process – both consumers and organizations) and context, in which the information exchange is conducted (time of emergence and reception of the message, the way of transmission) (Tkaczyk, Krzyżanowska 2014).

The message transmitted in the WOM communication can be of positive, negative or neutral character. The process participants can act as sources (senders) of the message, its recipients, as well as intermediaries; they can play either active or passive role in the communication process. The message can be passed on orally or in written, face-to-face or with the use of devices such as phone or computer. The message can be produced in the real time, in the form of a conversation, or with a certain delay, for example in the form of posts published on discussion forums. It can be unilateral or bilateral in nature. All the elements of the WOM process can interact with one another. The nature of relationships between the communication process participants is likely to influence the message character and the way it is transmitted. The message character can also determine the way of transmission. Consumers are more willing to generate positive messages than negative ones, but if they produce unfavourable information, it usually has a bigger impact than favourable content (Tkaczyk 2009; Tkaczyk & Krzyżanowska 2014).

World literature in the fields of social and managerial sciences has been addressing the term WOM (word of mouth) since 1955 (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Currently, 4,425 scientific texts exist on this subject (Web of Science database, accessed 2015.02.27), including 71 that have been cited more than 100 times. Additionally, since 2010, more than 200 texts have been published on this subject annually in the English language (Cheung & Thadani 2012; Breazeale 2009, Lin and Liao 2008).

The importance of WOM has gained new prominence with the emergence of the Internet and the differentiations in forms of expressing opinions, which include social media, review websites, reviews of products on weblogs and discussion forums (Cheung & Thadani 2012). At present, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is distinguished from classic WOM in the extant literature (Tkaczyk & Awdziej 2013; Tkaczyk & Krzyżanowska 2014; Cheung & Thadani 2012).

Regardless of the motives of purchase decision making and the approach to the purchase process itself, the recommendation implied as favourable opinion or reference may have a considerable influence in almost each stage of purchase. The impact exercised by the source on the message recipient is explained with the use of classic models of social influence. Within the framework of these models the informative and normative influence of the source is often categorized (Deutsch & Gerrard, 1955). In the WOM communication both effects can appear. The informative impact emerges, when the information is accepted as a fact proving the real status/situation, while the normative influence is manifested through fulfilment of the source's verbalized expectations by the message recipient. The strength of the recommendation impact depends on numerous factors, including the level of intensity regarding both informative and normative influence. The results of studies conducted in the field of sociology (Deutsch & Gerrard, 1955; Lascu & Zinkhan, 1999) and marketing (Gilly, 1998; Yale & Gilly, 1995) indicate that the source characteristics and the perceived type of purchase (product of frequent, periodic or occasional purchase) belong to the most important determinants of informative and normative influence. The source characteristics may comprise

its various features – reliability, attractiveness, professionalism and similarity.

Specific factors influencing the communication process can be grouped into two categories: conditions regarding entities, i.e., the message sender and its recipient (economic, psychological, demographic and social factors); and conditions related to the product as the subject of a message (Tkaczyk 2009).

In case of the entity-related elements actually there are no studies trying to describe the impact of social factors on the message sender. The contemporary research findings focus on the influence exerted by economic and demographical factors on the message recipient (Galetta 1995).

2.2 Susceptibility to social influence

Susceptibility to social influence is manifested by a willingness to meet others' expectations, as well as a tendency to acquire information about products by observing other people's behavior and actively soliciting opinions from them (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989; 1990). Thus, it is logical that increased susceptibility to social influence translates to a stronger tendency to accept other people's opinions. However, the question emerges of whether increased susceptibility to social influence also results in a rise in the willingness to produce opinions, and whether it strengthens this manner of generating positive or negative views. In the extant literature on the subject, one can find a number of research studies regarding the social impact of producing opinions (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Richins and Root-Shafter, 1988), but few studies have analyzed the influences on emerging positive and negative opinions (Shu-Chuan and Yoojung, 2011). Moreover, the studies mentioned were usually limited to a narrow context applied to small sample groups (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Bakshy, 2012; Senecal & Nantel, 2004).

Within the framework of classical social influence models the influence is categorized as either informative or normative (Deutsch 1955; Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel 1989) In the Word-of-mouth communication both types can be found. The informative influence occurs when the information is accepted as the fact proving the actual state, while the normative impact is observed as the fulfilment of the source's verbalised expectation by the recipient. The power of the WOM communication influence depends on many factors, including the level of informative and normative impact. The results of the sociological and marketing research projects suggest that the source characteristics and the perceived type of purchase (i.e. product of frequent, periodical or occasional purchase) are one of the most important conditions of the informative and normative influence. The source characteristics may include its various features, but the most often its credibility and attractiveness. The numerous studies conducted by scientists in various countries (for example Sundaram, Kelman) indicate interchangeably that the impact of the WOM communication on the purchase decision making depends first of all on whether informal sources are perceived as the most credible or one of the most credible.

Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel (1989) have suggested that studies examining the differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence based on gender and age be performed. The literature linking gender to susceptibility to influence is sparse informational approach with women. However, another study suggests that men tend to ask more questions of negotiation partners (Neu, Graham and Gilly 1988) implying susceptibility. On the other hand, several studies have suggested that in everyday interactions men reveal dominance and women submissiveness (Lakoff 1975), even through subtle verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Kimble, Yoshikawa and Zehr 1981) 43. It has also been posited that females are more open to influence from others and more dependent (Tedeschi, Schlenker and Bonoma 1973).

In the case of the entity-related elements, there are actually only a few studies that have attempted to describe the impact of social influence on the message sender, chiefly in a narrow context (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel and De Groot, 2001; Ye and Wu, 2010; Aral and Walker, 2012).

On the basis of the available literature, and having defined the research gap, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do demographic and socioeconomic variables have an impact on susceptibility to social influence?
2. Does susceptibility to social influence have an impact on the tendency to generate a positive WOM message?
3. Does susceptibility to social influence have an impact on the tendency to generate a negative WOM message?

3. Method

In order to find answers to these research questions, the research, which was based on the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method, was conducted among a group of 1,000 people selected with the use of the stratified sampling method out of a population of Polish men and women aged 15-50 (variables considered in sampling included gender, place of residence and education). The selection of the age group was driven by the lack of sufficient representation of people above 50 years of age who use the Internet. Gender of the sample is broken down as follows: 52% female and 48% male.

In order to measure susceptibility to social influence, a 12-element interpersonal influence scale was applied (Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence, CSII, Bearden, Netenmeyer, Teel 1989), and it was then expanded with five additional questions addressing social influence and susceptibility to opinions occurring on the Internet. Answers were included in the seven-point Likert scale. For the 12-element scale, the Cronbach's alpha index reached 0.885. In the case of the extended scale (17 elements), the index totaled 0.889. Distribution of average and standard deviation for the scale measuring susceptibility to social influence presents Table 1.

Statement	Average	Standard deviation	N
1. I often advise other people in order to help them in choosing the best product.	4,51	1,669	1000
2. If I want to become similar to somebody, I often buy product brands they use.	2,76	1,945	1000
3. It is important for me to buy products and brands other people like.	3,29	1,907	1000
4. In order to make sure that I buy right brands or products I often observe what other people buy and use.	3,46	1,813	1000
5. When buying the latest fashion products, I make sure that my friends and colleagues will accept my choice.	2,90	1,812	1000
6. I often identify myself with other people through the purchase of the same brands and products they buy.	2,88	1,841	1000
7. Unless I have some experience with a product, I often follow my friends' advice before purchase.	4,41	1,741	1000
8. When buying I choose products that in my opinion are likely to be accept in my environment.	3,20	1,865	1000
9. I like to know what brands and products create an impression on others.	3,31	1,890	1000
10. I often use information received from my friends and family before I buy a product.	4,24	1,665	1000
11. If people see me using a product, I buy a brand others expect me to use.	2,78	1,798	1000
12. I obtain a certain affinity to a group through buying products and brands this group possesses.	2,88	1,890	1000
13. When buying I often follow advice given by people who have a considerable knowledge on the given product category.	4,70	1,737	1000

14.	When buying products I often follow advice given by people like me who have similar preferences and values.	4,30	1,742	1000
15.	I often follow advice and comments placed in the Internet.	4,55	1,774	1000
16.	I am willing to share opinions on products and services in the Internet.	3,80	1,824	1000
17.	I believe that opinions about products and services placed in the Internet forums, blogs and social media are reliable source of information.	4,23	1,598	1000

Table 1. Distribution of average and standard deviation for the scale measuring susceptibility to social influence

In the course of the research the research model was developed and two research hypotheses were formulated.

H1: The susceptibility to social influence increases the tendency to generate a positive informal message.

H2: The susceptibility to social influence increases the tendency to generate a negative informal message.

The research model is presented in Figure 1.

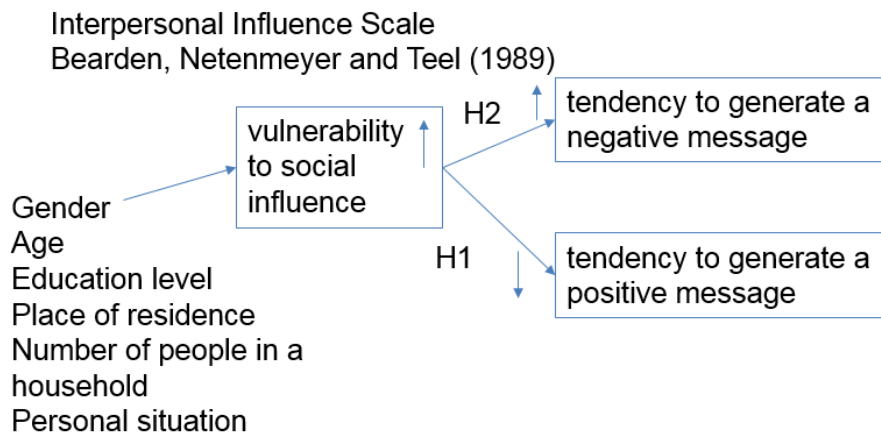


Figure 1. Research model

4. Results

No relationship between demographic or socioeconomic variables and susceptibility to social influence was found. Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients did not exceed 0.1 in the case of any analyzed variable, with $p < 0.05$.

The only difference occurred in case of the personal situation described as “divorced,” where susceptibility to social influence was significantly lower than in other groups.

According to the expectations the respondents were more willing to encourage to purchase a product than to discourage from it (see Figure 2).

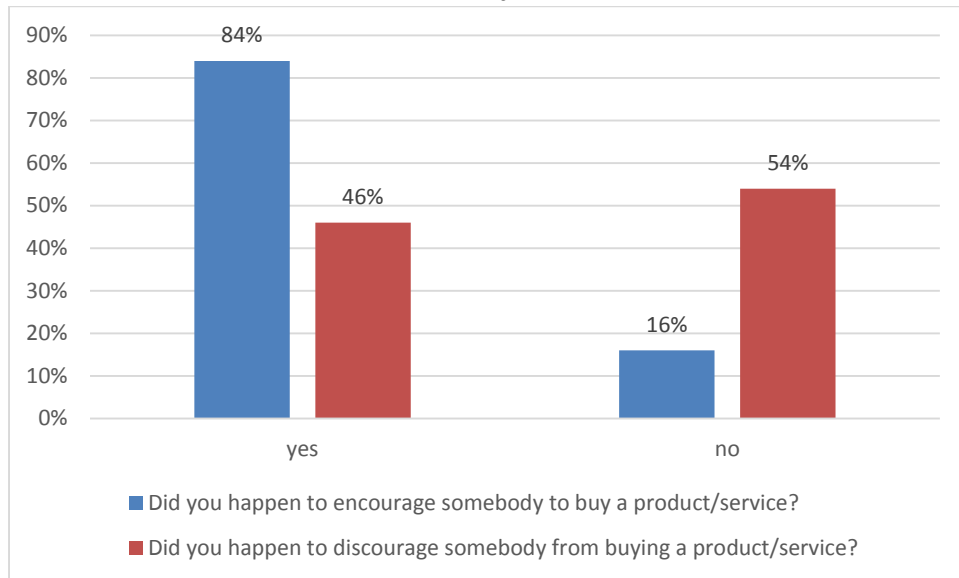


Figure 2. Susceptibility to generate positive and negative informal messages within last 6 months

Both hypotheses (H1 and H2) were tested with the use of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. In the case of H1, the results indicate very weak correlation ($\rho = -0.121$), with substantial statistical relevance ($p < 0.01$). In the case of H2, no relationship was confirmed ($\rho = -0.090$ with $p < 0.05$).

5. Conclusions

The susceptibility to social influence is not dependent on the majority of demographical and socio-economic variables. Only the personal situation has minimal influence on the susceptibility to social influence. The smallest susceptibility to social influence is declared by divorced people, while singles admit to be the most susceptible to such influence. The possible explanation of the above situation is the difference in life experience, which in case of divorced people is likely to lower the susceptibility to social influence due to their lower trust to social environment.

The relationship between the susceptibility to social influence and the tendency to generate positive informal messages is minimal. There is no correlation between producing negative opinions and the susceptibility to social influence. Poles aged 15-50 are more willing to recommend products to buy than to discourage from their purchase and this tendency is not dependent on gender. If any, negative messages are relatively more willingly passed by older people (aged 35-50) than younger (15-34). This situation can be also explained by the difference in life experience and willingness of older people to protect friends and family from making the wrong choice.

The research project was aimed at determining relationships between the susceptibility to social influence and the tendency to generate positive and negative informal messages. Only a minimal correlation was confirmed in case of the recommendation (positive opinion). An interesting issue would be to extend the research model to analyse the willingness to generate informal messages in the context of various product categories.

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