The Importance of Similarity and Expertise of the Information Source in the Word-Of-Mouth Communication Process

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Abstract

Credibility is the extent to which the recipient sees the source as having appropriate knowledge, skills and experience and believe it as the transferor impartial, objective information. Source perceived as credible in addition to having a proficiency in a specific area, is more convincing than something less knowledgeable. However it must also be more robust - honest, ethical and trustworthy. Research clearly support the hypothesis that sources with the specific knowledge and / or reliability are increasingly more appealing and efficient than those with less knowledge or less reliability. Most consumers, when are looking for the best available offer on the market, are interested in opinions of other customers and their past experiences. Source credibility in the process of word-of mouth may depend on its characteristics - similarities and expertise (Wangenheim, Bayon 2003).

The aim of the article is to verify the hypothesis by which a consumer engaged in a particular product category will be more likely to use the expert's opinion rather than the opinion of a person like himself in the product decision making process. Verification of the hypothesis will be based on the analysis of the results of research conducted on sample of 1,000 Polish consumers, chosen at random. The study was carried out by CAWI method. The involvement in the product category and the propensity to use expert's opinion rather than the opinion of consumers similar to the respondents were investigated in 15 product categories.

Keywords: word-of-mouth, credibility, source of information, marketing

JEL classification: M30

1. Introduction

Contemporary consumers live in the information environment. They are bombarded with messages from all sides and no wonder that they try to filter all the inflowing information, paying attention only at limited messages (Mazurek, 2011). The main filter used by consumers is connected with the credibility of the information source.

The information source is the place where data and pieces of information required for taking the specified actions are derived from (Penc, 1997). The information sources can be classified according to various criteria. We can distinguish between internal and external sources, as well as personal and non-personal ones. "The sender or the source in the communication process is either a person or an organisation having any information and wanting to share it with another person or a group" (Penc, 1997, p.189). It may be either an individual (a paid proponent, for example a personage appearing in a company's advertisement; salesperson) or a non-individual entity (for example an organisation itself). The perception of the information source by the recipient has a fundamental influence on the way the message is received.

Taking the value of information into account, the sources can be divided into: credible, not much reliable, doubtful or subjective (Pieczykolan, 2005, p.74). Information coming from credible sources is true and dependable. Information derived from not much reliable sources is not fully verified, while subjective sources provide mainly rumours and hearsay.

Another approach to the classification of information sources used by consumers in the purchase decision-making process is based on the character of acquired information. According to this approach sources can be divided into (Tkaczyk, 2009): informal sources (for example friends, family and co-workers), media sources (for example press, radio, television), expert sources (advisors, seminars, conferences), analytical sources (statistics, scientific publications).

Contemporary consumers have nowadays easier access to the constantly growing knowledge resources. Thus it becomes more difficult to transfer information to consumers more efficiently than competitors do, using mainly advertising for such purpose.

For that reason companies reach for informal sources such as word-of-mouth that can be defined as the process including discussions around organisation and its offer, in course of which recommendations may occur (Tkaczyk, 2009).

The purpose of this article is to introduce the importance of similarity and expertise as the attribute of the information source credibility in the word-of-mouth communication process.

2.Literature overview
2.1 Credibility of source

The credibility of source as the concept dates back to year 400 B.C., starting from Aristotle and his *Rhetoric*. This construct in the modern communication models and Aristotle's *ethos* have the same roots – the trust toward the speaker. The theory of source credibility in the contemporary times was developed in early 1950s. Hovland and Weiss (1951/52) in their experiment regarding the perception of information made accessible by sources of high and low credibility proved that the source credibility would have a significant influence on the internalization of the transferred information. The application of the broadly taken source credibility concept in marketing is described by Metzger et al. (2010), as well as Pornpitakpan (2004). The most preferred approach to this concept in the marketing literature is related to supporting a product by a well-known personage (*celebrity endorsement*) (i.a.Ohanian, 1991, Myłek 2015, Grzegorczyk 2015), as well as credibility of information in the marketing communication process (i.a. Johnson and Kaye, 2009; Łodziana-Grabowska 2015).

The interest in the issue of source credibility has risen together with the development of the Internet and the snowballing increase of information. Scientists are first of all interested in the credibility of information sources in the virtual environment and its influence on consumers' behaviour (Sussman and Siegal, 2003; Zhang and Watts, 2008), with special regard to credibility of reviews appearing in the Internet (Shan, 2016; Filieri 2015, Liu and Park 2015).

"Credibility means the range in which the recipient perceives a source as having adequate knowledge, skills or experience and believe this source passes impartial and objective information" (Meriam-Webster Dictionary, http). There are two important aspects of this attribute: expertise (proficiency) and dependability (Hovland and Weiss, 1951/52).

"Expertise is special skill or knowledge, knowledge of something, proficiency in evaluating something" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, http). We may assume it is a kind of authority based on exceptional knowledge of a certain issue. "Dependability means deserving trust, credibility, honesty, justness; ability to depend on somebody or something" (Meriam-Webster Dictionary, http).

The source perceived as credible, and additionally having some expertise in a certain field is more convincing than somebody less familiar with the same issue. However, it must be also dependable – honest, ethical and trustworthy. The research findings unambiguously confirm the hypothesis that the sources obtaining certain knowledge or/and reliable are more convincing and effective than the sources with smaller knowledge or less reliable (Hovland and Weiss, 1951/52; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Information coming from the credible source has an impact on beliefs, opinions, attitudes and/or behaviour through the internalization process. Internalisation means adopting values, norms, social rules and opinions having been imposed for some time from outside and recognizing them as own, making internal. Internalization allows adapting opinions passed by a credible message sender thanks to the belief that such opinion is precise, adequate and free of mistakes. As soon as the opinion or attitude is internalized by the recipient, it becomes the part of the system of beliefs and is likely to be preserved even if the source or the message is forgotten. The credibility of source is particularly important if negative opinions or attitudes to a given product, service, company or issue occur among consumers. In such case a credible source is able to refute counter-arguments (Pornpitakpan, 2004). In view of the fact that attitudes and opinions resulting from the internalization process become the part of the individual's belief system, marketing experts are eager to use sources of high credibility. For that purpose companies use various techniques to transfer this feature to their source, for example train salesforce or employ highly-educated specialists (i.e. physicians or engineers) to present products. Sources are selected on the basis of their knowledge of a specific area.

2.2 Credibility of source vs. word-of-mouth

The concept of source credibility in the context of word-of-mouth is not very intensively exploited. The report generated with the use of keywords 'credibility of source' and 'word-of-mouth' from the Web of Science, i.e. the database containing the most frequently quoted sources of scientific information included in the Journal of Citation Report, shows 132 items. The distribution of publications regarding credibility of source and word-of-mouth in years 1992-2016 is presented in Figure 1.
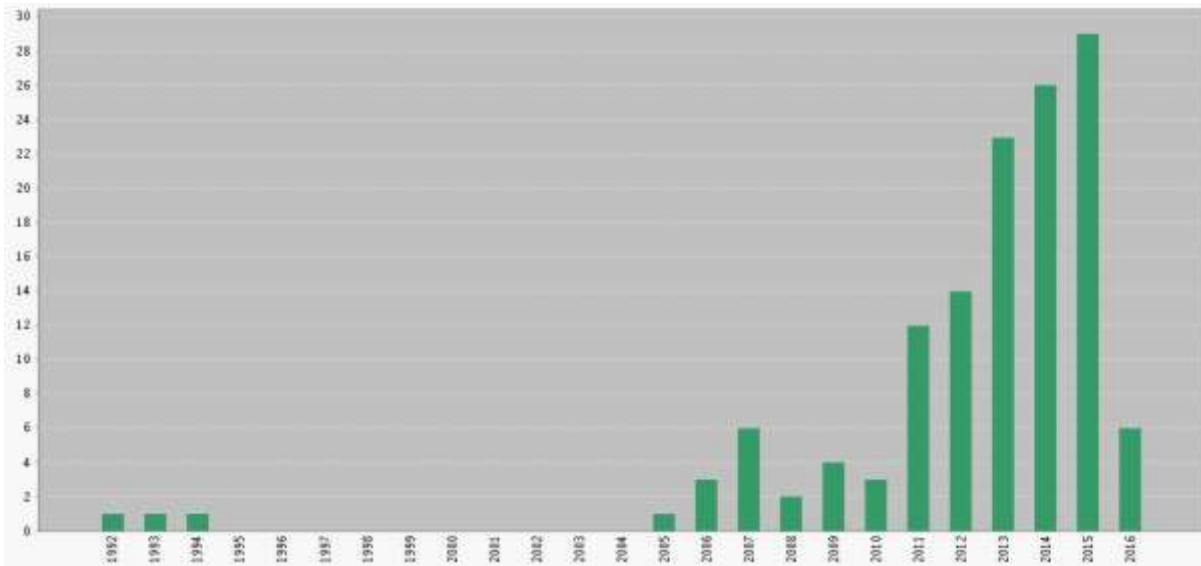

Figure 1. Distribution of publications on credibility of information sources in the word-of-mouth context in years 1996-2016
Source: Web of Science (2016.04.30)

The issue of source credibility in the word-of-mouth aspect wasn't very interesting for researchers until the popularity of social media exploded.

First three publications (Feick and Higie 1992; Sobczak and Bowers 1993; Stern 1994) addressed the influence of recommendations in advertising on consumer behaviour with the use of sources of diverse credibility. The most frequently quoted sources (above 100 quotes) focus on the influence of reviews appearing in the Internet on sales volume, considering the credibility of their authors (Forman, Ghose and Wiesenfeld 2008), the conceptualization of WOM within online communities (Brown, Broderick and Lee 2007) and the blurring lines between word-of-mouth and formal communication in the virtual environment (Mayzlin 2006).

According to the research conducted by Ying and Chung (2007) the credibility of source is higher if the source generates both positive and negative information on a given product. The unilaterally favourable and unfavourable information lowers the sender's credibility.

The research projects conducted by scientists from various countries (for example Sundaram 1998, Kelman 1961) indicate univocally that the impact of a favourable opinion on the purchase decision making depends first of all on the perception of informal sources of information, as they are regarded as the most credible or among the most credible ones.

The credibility of source in case of word-of-mouth may also depend on its features – similarity and expertise. The similarity is reflected by perceiving other person (a message sender) as similar to a message recipient. The similarity may be manifested in the behavioural aspects (a source and a buyer has similar purchase preferences) or psychological aspects (a buyer subjectively perceives a source as similar to oneself).

The expertise is the power resulting from the knowledge of a source (a message sender) and their experience, including professional activities. In the research projects addressing the influence of similarity and expertise of the source on proclivity to change a service provider in the energy industry (Wangenheim and Bayon, 2003) it was proven that the higher is intensity of both features, the bigger impact of the generated opinions on the change of a supplier can be observed. It was also noticed that:

- the influence of similarity is stronger in case of a big risk of socio-psychological nature
- the influence of exprtise is bigger in case of a big risk of financial and functional nature

Having reviewed the literature on word-of-mouth and source credibility it is found that there were neither representative samples nor wider product perspective in the research addressing the consumers' proclivity to use sources characterized by similarity and expertise in the word-of-mouth communication process. The consumer engagement in the product category wasn't either confronted with preferences regarding the choice of the information source. Taking the above into account, the following research questions:

- In what product categories are consumers more willing to use opinions of people similar to themselves and in what categories they prefer experts' opinions?
- Does the proclivity to use opinions expressed by similar people or experts depend on demographic and socio-economic variables?
- Will the consumer engagement in the product category increase their proclivity to follow sources perceives as professional ones in the word-of-mouth communication process?

3. Methodology

In order to answer the above research questions, under the NCN grant "The word-of-mouth communication influence on the purchase decision-making process" DEC-2012/07/D/HS4/01761 the CAWI survey was conducted with the group of 1,000 respondents selected by the stratified sampling method, out of the population of Poles aged 15-50 (variables considered in sampling included gender, place of residence and education). The selection of age group was determined by the requirements of the research method as well as the lacking sufficient representation of people aged above 50 years using the Internet. The research was conducted in August 2014. The sample included 50 per cent male respondents and 50 per cent female respondents.

The survey was conducted for 15 various product categories (starting from pure products, going through hybrids and ending up with pure services). The proclivity to use opinions passed by the source characterised by similarity and expertise was analysed in two ways. In the first instance 7-point Likert scale was applied to the following general statements:

(1) When purchasing something I willingly use opinions of people like to me, who have similar preference and values
(2) When purchasing something I willingly follow advice of people who have a substantial knowledge on the given product category

Secondly, for each product category respondents might indicate their preferences on the semantic differential scale, where on one hand they could select the opinion of a person similar to them and on the other - the opinion of an expert.

The engagement was defined as the range of consumer's interest in the decision making regarding the purchase of a given product (Mittal 1989/1995). For the measurement of the product category engagement the modified PDI (Purchase Decision Involvement) scale including 5 phrases was applied with the use of 7-point Likert scale, where 1 meant "I definitely disagree' and 7 meant 'I definitely agree' with the certain statement. The scale was adjusted to 15 various product categories. For each product the average value of scale was calculated.

The following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The proclivity to follow other people's opinions (similar to consumer or experts) depends on demographic variables (age, gender).

H2: The proclivity to follow other people's opinions (similar to consumer or experts) depends on socio-economic variables (income, education, place of residence, number of people in a household, personal situation).

H3: The proclivity to use professional source of information increases together with the engagement

if the product category.

4. Results

The filtering question for each product category was whether respondents purchased a product in a given category within last 6 months. For further analysis only statements made by respondents who purchased a given products were taken into account.

In case of the majority of product categories respondents used their own experience in purchase. It was mostly used in the purchase of groceries (79.9 per cent of respondents) and apparel (71.2 per cent). Exceptions from this rule included the choice of film in the cinema, purchase of mobile phone, computer, educational services, hotel and airline services, where the respondents most often used the Internet as the main source of product information. In case of legal services the dominant source was the opinion of family and friends. The most popular sources of information used by consumers in purchase are presented in Table 1.

N=1000	What sources of information do you use most often in purchase?				
	Own experience	Opinion of family and friends	Advertisements in TV, radio, press	Internet	Contact with salesperson
groceries	**79,70%**	38,10%	15,80%	8,70%	23,00%
cosmetics	64,80%	34%	17%	24%	23%
apparel	71,20%	28%	7,90%	21%	22%
film in the cinema	31%	36,60%	**34,40%**	39%	6%
meal in restaurant	62,70%	43,10%	4,60%	11,60%	13,80%
hairstyling services	66,40%	35,50%	2,80%	6,10%	9,40%
mobile phone	41%	32,40%	7,80%	**56,60%**	**35,40%**
computer	38,50%	33,70%	4,50%	49,40%	**35,40%**
furniture	37,70%	23,50%	7,40%	21,70%	27,80%
car	41,40%	39,20%	4,10%	31%	22,90%
hotel services	23,90%	27,50%	6,60%	44%	9,70%
educational services	26,40%	30,50%	6,30%	36,40%	11%
airline flight	18,20%	21,70%	6,50%	34,90%	9,50%
medical services	52,30%	**51,80%**	2,20%	19,60%	13,30%
legal services	21,50%	33,70%	2,50%	18,30%	12,10%

Table 1. Sources of information in the purchase decision-making process in particular product categories
bold indicates the highest value in the column, the color red indicates the highest value in a row
Source: own research

Among the respondents who indicated the use of the Internet when searching the information the Internet browsers were the most popular source, apart from the categories of film in the cinema and apparel. When choosing a film to see in the cinema the respondents most often (18.8 per cent) followed opinions found in the social media and blogs and additionally learned from advertisements published in websites and social media. In case of apparel the respondents most frequently used online shopping pages (16 per cent). The most preferred Internet sources in purchase of various product categories are presented in Table 2.

	Internet sources			
	Advertisements on websites and in social media	Internet browsers	Opinions in social media and blogs	Online shopping websites
groceries	3%	5,80%	3,90%	3,80%

cosmetics	7,10%	16,10%	13%	13,70%
apparel	7,60%	12,50%	7,90%	16%
film in the cinema	**14,40%**	29%	18,80%	6,20%
meal in restaurant	3,30%	7,70%	6,00%	3,10%
hairstyling services	1,40%	4%	3,30%	1,40%
mobile phone	8,30%	**42,70%**	**26,40%**	**38,10%**
computer	6,80%	35,70%	21,30%	33,60%
furniture	3,40%	12,80%	4,50%	15,40%
car	4,40%	23%	14,80%	10,80%
hotel services	8,70%	34,40%	17,70%	13,00%
educational services	7%	26,10%	14,30%	11,70%
airline flight	6,10%	25,70%	11,90%	10,80%
medical services	3,10%	14,10%	8,10%	5,20%
legal services	2,80%	14,50%	7,20%	4,20%

Table 2. Internet as the source of product information
bold indicates the highest value in the column, the color red indicates the highest value in a row
source: own research

For the purpose of the H1 hypothesis verification Spearman rho correlation coefficients were calculated for dependent variables (proclivity to use opinion of a similar person, proclivity to use expert's opinion) and independent variables (age, gender). No correlation between variables was confirmed. The similar procedure was applied in case of the H2 hypothesis and there was no correlation either. For that reason both H1 and H2 hypotheses were rejected.

In order to analyse the distribution of proclivity to follow opinions of similar people and experts depending on the product category the semantic profile for 7-point scale was developed, where 1 meant preferences to use opinion of a person similar to respondents, 7 meant preferences to use expert's opinion and 4 meant the comparable proclivity to use both sources of information. The preference profile for personal sources of information is presented in Figure 2.
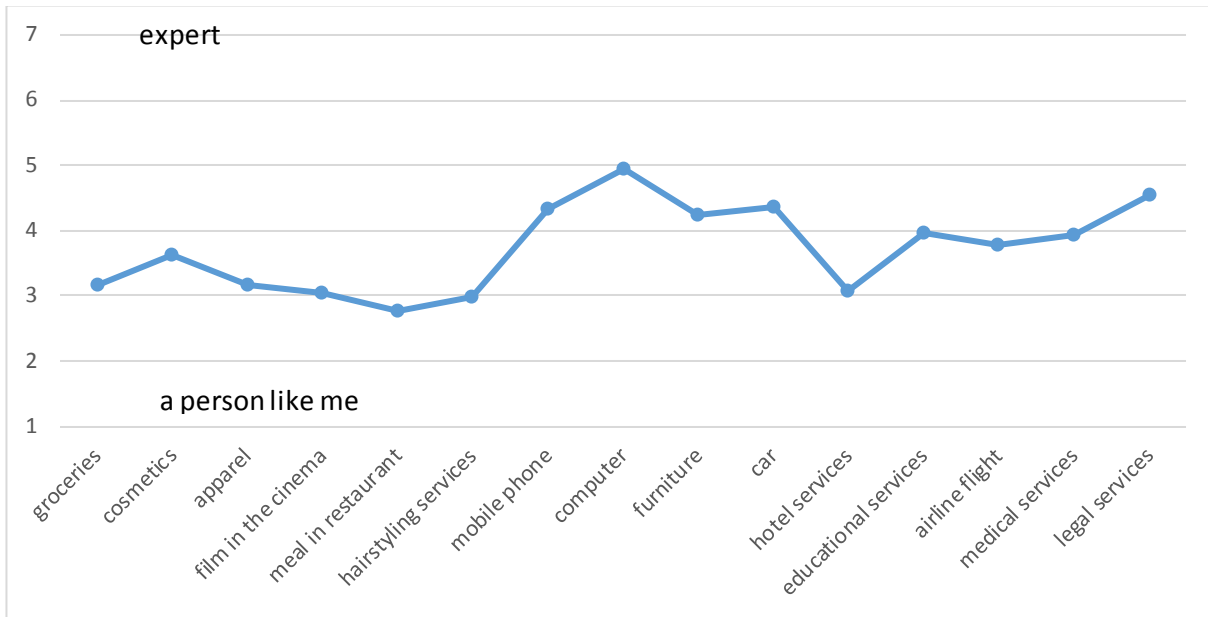
Figure 2. Profile of preferences regarding the use of personal sources of information on attributes of similarity and expertise

Source: own research

Unequivocal preferences for expert sources when gathering opinions on products appear in case of the category of mobile phones. Preferences for information sources of high level of similarity apply to the category of meals in restaurant. The detailed distribution of preferences to use personal sources of information when gathering opinions on products is presented in Figure 3.
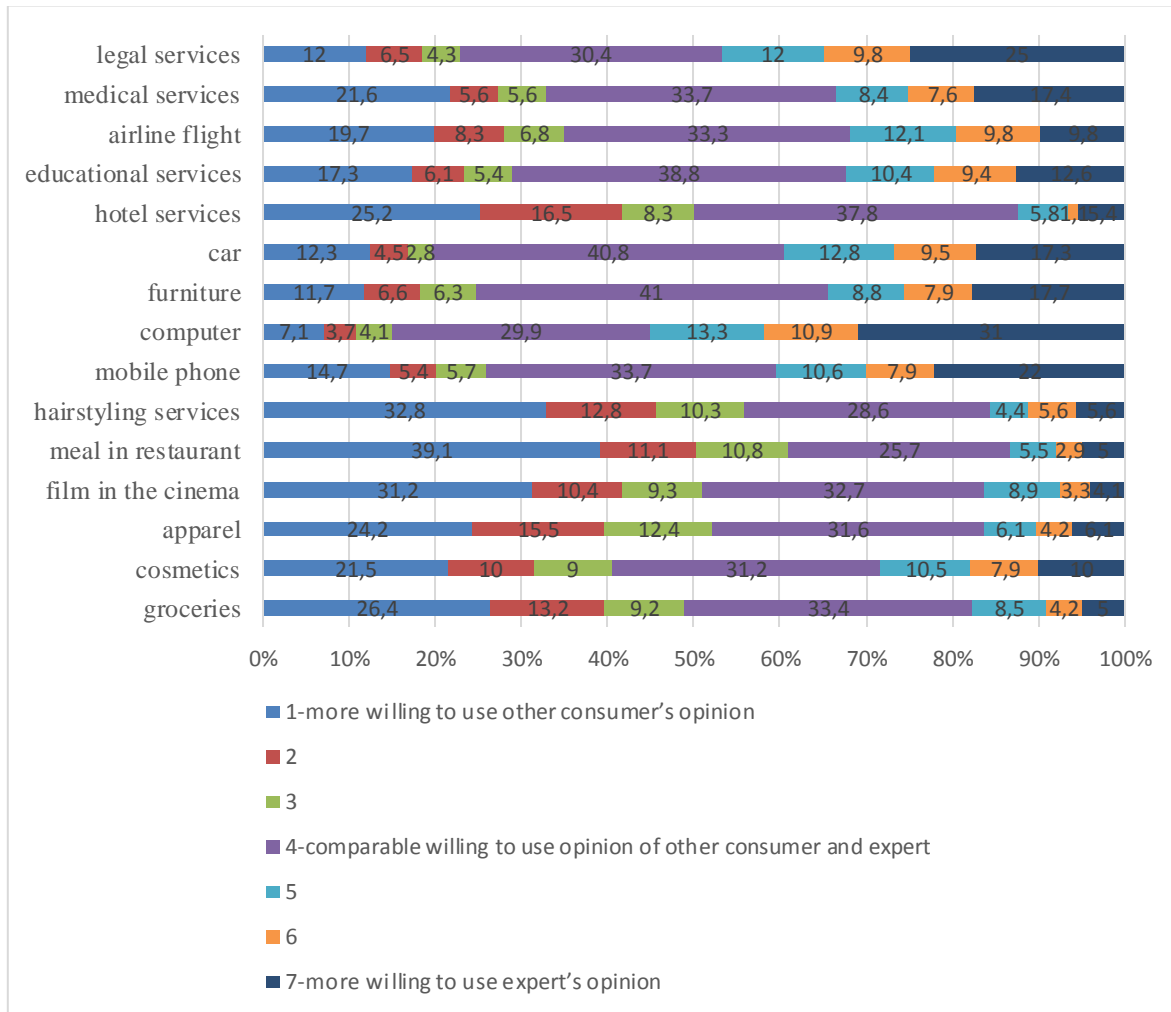
Figure 3. Distribution of preferences for using personal sources when gathering opinions on products
Source: own research

For the purpose of the H3 hypothesis verification the average values of engagement in purchase were calculated for each analysed product category. Next the correlation coefficients between the proclivity to follow opinions of people similar to the respondent and the level of engagement in the product category purchase, as well as between the proclivity to use expert's opinions and the level of engagement in the product category purchase were calculated. The results of the above calculations are presented in Table 3.

Product category	Number	Average value of engagement in purchase	Spearman rho coefficient	
			Opinion of similar people (1)	Opinion of experts (2)
apparel	N=494	4,26	**0,255****	0,123*
airline flight	N=163	4,46	**0,242****	0,185*
grocieries	N=417	4,53	0,116*	**0,220****
cosmetics	N=498	4,56	0,116*	0,047
furniture	N=397	4,60	0,98	0,107
meal in restaurant	N=426	4,76	0,101	0,062
hairstyling services	N=453	4,76	0,099	0,155**
hotel services	N=325	4,89	0,111	0,075

car	N=236	4,92	0,169*	**0,174***
educational offer	N=354	4,94	**0,297****	0,264**
mobile phone	N=483	5,00	0,148*	**0,155****
film in the cinema	N=320	5,05	0,184**	**0,205***
computer	N=377	5,08	0,131*	**0,145***
legal services	N=116	5,09	0,069	0,157
medical services	N=442	5,13	0,07	0,09

Table 3. Engagement in purchase of a product category vs. proclivity to follow opinions of similar people o r experts

* statistical significance level 0.05

**statistical significance level 0.01

(1) When purchasing something I willingly use opinions of people like to me, who have similar preference and values

(2) When purchasing something I willingly follow advice of people who have a substantial knowledge on the given product category

Source: own research

There are no grounds for accepting H3 hypothesis, because the most engaging product categories don't generate the biggest proclivity to use expert's advice. In case of medical and legal services no statistically significant relations were found between the engagement in the product category and the proclivity to use the expert's advice. Meanwhile in case of the much less engaging product, such as groceries, the proclivity to search for advice of both a person similar to the consumer and an expert grows together with the engagement in this product category. The similar situation occurs in case of apparel and airline flight, where the weak statistically significant relation was found between the engagement in the product purchase and the proclivity to follow the opinion of an expert or a person similar to the consumer.

5. Summary and conclusions

Consumers most often use their own experience in the purchase decision-making process. In nearly all product categories on the second place they follow opinions of their family and friends. As for the Internet sources consumers often use browsers and opinions published in social media, forums and blogs. In the word-of-mouth communication process consumers may choose between using the information sources characterised by attributes of similarity or expertise. The proclivity to follow experts' opinions is higher in case of products perceived as similar to one another, technically complex, where the specialist knowledge is necessary to compare offers and consumers lacks such knowledge. Good examples of such products are cars or computers. The proclivity to use opinions expressed by people similar to the consumer is higher if it regards products in case of which a choice made by consumers strongly depends on their individual preferences (meal in restaurant, film in the cinema, apparel). In some product categories the engagement in the purchase increases in general the proclivity to use personal sources of information characterized by both similarity and expertise (apparel, airline flights, groceries, cars, educational offer, mobile phones, film in the cinema, computers). In these product categories it doesn't matter whether the information on the product will be provided by an expert or another consumer, still there will be high proclivity to follow other people's opinions. The clear proclivity to prefer similar consumers' opinions was confirmed only in case of the engagement in the purchase of cosmetics, while experts' opinions were visibly preferred in the category of hairstyling services. For cosmetics manufacturers willing to use the word-of-mouth to support product sales it is recommended to focus on engaging ordinary consumers in creating recommendations, in the form of both traditional grapevine and information published in social media, blogs and forums. It can be achieved through reference programs (remuneration for recommendations) or competitions and prize competitions. In case of hairstyling services the higher consumer engagement may be stimulated by the participation of celebrities, professionals (for example stylists) and their recommendations published in websites or social media.

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