IS NEGATIVE EWOM TRUSTWORTHY? A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ITS KEY CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

Negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is not entirely true but we can find clues from its key characteristics. Based on the Lasswell communication model's "who said it" and "what content of it", we conduct a content analysis of negative eWOM for understanding its key characteristics. First, we examine whether the spreader of negative eWOM is a newly registered user. Second, we examine the number of lines of each negative eWOM, the quality of each negative eWOM, and whether each negative eWOM is accompanied by pictures or videos. The results indicate that only 9% of negative eWOM is posted by a novice, nearly 75% of negative eWOM messages are of quality, and less than 50% of negative eWOM has supporting pictures or videos, implying most of negative eWOM being trustworthy. Detailed findings and discussion are presented.

Keywords: Negative eWOM, the key characteristics of eWOM trust, content analysis

Introduction

The popularity and dissemination of the Internet has led to the emergence of a new form of word-of-mouth (WOM), namely electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is regarded as one of the most influential informal media for consumers, businesses, and the general public (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). Especially negative word-of-mouth, its influence is considered far higher than that of positive word-of-mouth (Park & Lee, 2009). Consumers can easily use negative eWOM to tell others their dissatisfaction and complaints about products or services during the consumption process. If businesses ignore or do not pay attention to such dissatisfaction and complaints, they will not only fail to retain customers, but their goodwill will thus be damaged. In a study on negative online reviews, Le & Ha (2021) reports such facts that sellers' feedback can moderate the impacts of negative reviews and their interactions with past customers might consequently influence their sales in the future.

However, negative eWOM is not entirely true and comes from real consumers. Sometimes it comes from a competitor's deliberate slander. Such a competitor usually hires some writers to spread negative news about its competitors' products on major forums, such as poor product quality or poor after-sales service, in order to discourage competitors and discredit their goodwill. A well-known example is the event of Samsung's Writer Rashomon, which occurred in the mobile01 (www.mobile01.com) forum in April 2013. Taiwan branch of Samsung is suspected of entrusting Pengtai Consulting Company to conduct product promotion. The methods include hiring of employees or part-time students, monitoring records of mobile01

website, and assigning employees to pretend to be customers to post purchase experience or write an article "Questions and Answers" in an attempt to influence online public opinion. The final purpose is to improve the brand image of Samsung while hit the brand image of competitors. Therefore, it is very important for businesses or consumers to distinguish the authenticity of negative eWOM in order to make appropriate sales or purchase decisions.

This study attempts to understand the key characteristics of negative eWOM and conduct a content analysis of a forum website based on these key characteristics. According to Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang (2012), the Lasswell communication model "Who (says) what (to) whom (in) what channel (with) what effect?" (Lasswell, 1948) plays a key role in understanding electronic communication processes. If we want to understand whether negative eWOM is believable, "who said it" and "what content of it" are especially important because the spreader of negative eWOM may be an employee of a competitor and the content of negative eWOM may lack the quality of argument and is thus not convincing. Based on above viewpoints, we conduct a content analysis of negative eWOM for understanding its key characteristics. First, we examine whether the spreader of negative eWOM is a newly registered user and calculate what percentage of negative eWOM is spread by such a user. Generally speaking, the spreader of an electronic WOM, no matter it is positive or negative, is a veteran who is very familiar with the operation and functions of the forum, and rarely is a newcomer who has just joined the forum. However, a user who is newly registered and never posts reviews is highly suspected to be an employee or a part-time worker of a company because he or she is trained as a real customer and in-time joins the forum to post negative purchase experience for hitting the goodwill of rival companies. Second, we examine the number of lines of each negative eWOM, the quality of each negative eWOM, and whether each negative eWOM is accompanied by pictures or videos. The reasons we do this are as follows: (1) if a negative eWOM has only one or two lines of text, it is not persuasive to consumers, (2) a negative eWOM with no quality, from the point of view of evidence, it will not affect consumers' purchase intentions or buying decisions, and (3) If a negative eWOM does not include pictures or videos, its persuasive power will be greatly reduced. In sum, the number of words (lines), the quality of the discussion, and the supporting pictures or videos attached to a negative eWOM will determine whether that negative eWOM is credible and convincing.

Methods

In order to understand whether negative eWOM is believable, this study conducts a content analysis based on the key characteristics of an electronic WOM. We choose negative eWOM of three leading brands of Android phones, hTC, Asus, and Samsung, as the material because the well-known event of Samsung's Writer Rashomon just happened on the phone discussion pages. Content analysis is a common method for investigating the written documents and communication artifacts, which might be texts of various formats including pictures, audio, or video (Babbie, 2001). This method has been extensively used in marketing, advertising, IS literature, and so on. Mobile01 discussion forum is chosen as the source of negative eWOM because of its popularity among people who like to write unboxing articles, post using comments, and share purchasing experience with 3C products in Taiwan. The content analysis,

therefore, was conducted by using the negative reviews of Android phones on this website. The negative reviews about the three brands of Android phone mentioned above were examined in early September 2019. The reviews were posted during the period of July 16th 2019 to August 15th 2019. We did not investigate the reviews for a long time because the reviews of one month might be an epitome of a whole year and can be representative for analyzing and understanding the key characteristics of negative eWOM, and thus we can further understand whether those negative online reviews are worthy of trust.

Results

In order to identify a disguised consumer who is asked and trained by his company to spread false negative comments about competitors on the forum, we need to define what user account is the newly registered account. According to our observations, most of such user accounts are registered within a week before the time of posting by using those accounts. Therefore, this study counts the negative eWOM message which was posted by such an account defined above. As shown in Figure 1, totally 124 negative eWOM messages about the three brands of Android phone were generated during the period we investigated and only 11 ones meeting the requirements were found in subsequent content analysis, nearly 10% (9%) of negative eWOM being generated by a newly registered user. That is, if we do not consider which brand of cell phone, only one out of about ten negative online reviews was posted by a novice. This rate is not at its high level but we do not ignore such a low percentage of negative eWOM coming from a novice appearing in a public opinion forum because we cannot rule out that such users pretend to be real customers and exist in the forum and try to post false negative reviews to attack opponents. Figure 1 further shows the data that no significant difference in percentage in question among the three brands of Andorid phone was found with that hTC, Asus, and Samsung got the rate of 3%, 17%, and 6% respectively, demonstrating that no matter what brand it is, its discussion board has the similar amount of posts by a newcomer who has just joined the forum. Even if Asus received a higher percentage of evidence, we can only suspect that there are competitors arranging on the discussion board to try to make attacks, which is higher than the other two companies.

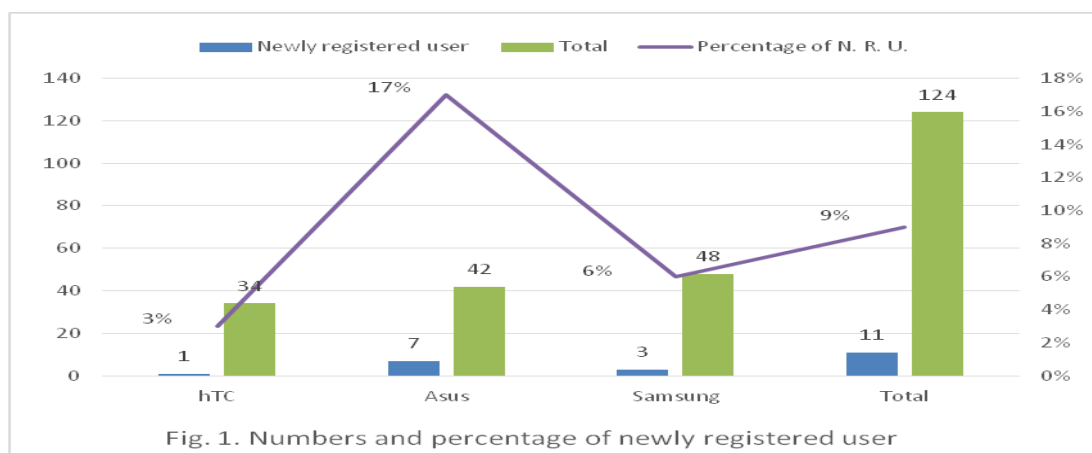Fig. 1. Numbers and percentage of newly registered user

Figure 2 shows the numbers of lines of each negative eWOM message posted on the discussion forum. It demonstrates the richness of statement on each event that one consumer experienced a dissatisfaction with the usage of a cell phone and share it with other people. As shown in this figure, a large proportion of negative eWOM messages have less than five lines of text, with that hTC, Asus, and Samsung got the frequency of 17 (34), 21 (42), and 26 (48), respectively. This shows that a negative eWOM message is not necessarily a long story; it might be just a momentarily emotional relief, which is expressed in short words. In addition, only a few negative messages that have more than 25 lines of words are found with that the three brands of cell phone separately shows the number of 1 (hTC), 4 (Asus), and 1 (Samsung) on the legend "26~." These messages are posted largely due to a common fault of a part but described in detailed text. The purpose is to win the approval of other consumers, and then get the manufacturer's response or gain more bargaining chips with the manufacturer.

Fig. 2. Numbers of lines of each N. eWOM
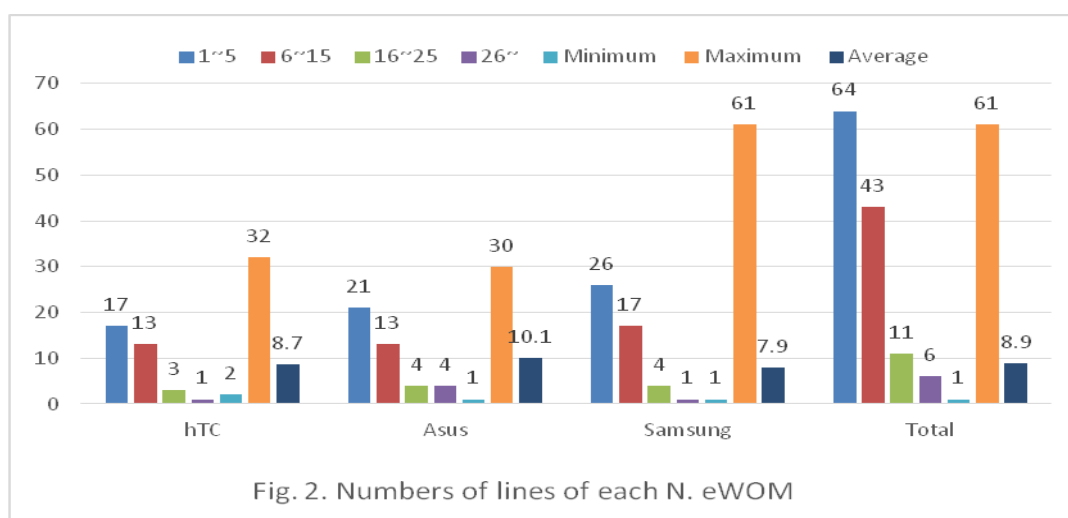
In figure 2, the average line of text on each negative message is 8.9. Examining it further, we find that hTC, Asus, and Samsung got the number of 8.7, 10.1, and 7.9 respectively. Above data are not as high as expected. That is, a negative eWOM message does not necessarily have to be expressed in detailed text. As long as the statement within the message is clear or there is sufficient argument, such an electronic WOM is still convincing to consumers. Some of the messages, however, are still close to or more than 10 lines of text, which are higher than average, demonstrating that negative eWOM messages are sensational than normal ones, needing more words or texts to attract other consumers to notice for its final purpose.

Figure 3 is the presentation of numbers and percentage of negative eWOM with quality. According to Lee, Park, & Han (2008) and Park, Lee, & Han (2007), how online reviews influence consumers depends on the quality of the reviews. The reviews that are logical, persuasive, and with enough reasons based on specific facts about the products are more likely to influence consumers than the reviews that are subjective, emotional, and even deficient in the quality of supporting their evaluation with reasons based on the facts about products. Therefore,

we examined the negative eWOM messages in the forum and gave the ratings of each message on whether it is of quality based on the rules of the two literatures. As shown in this figure, totally 124 negative eWOM messages were examined and 90 negative ones conforming to the rules in subsequent content analysis, nearly 75% (73%) of negative eWOM being of quality. In other words, if we do not consider the brand of cell phone, approximately three fourths of negative eWOM reviews we investigated are quality reviews. After further comparing the three brands of Android phones, we found that there is no significant difference among them, with that hTC, Asus, and Samsung got the rate of 68%, 71%, and 77% respectively, demonstrating that consumers have the similar quality of posts about complaint when using a cell phone regardless of what brand it belongs to.
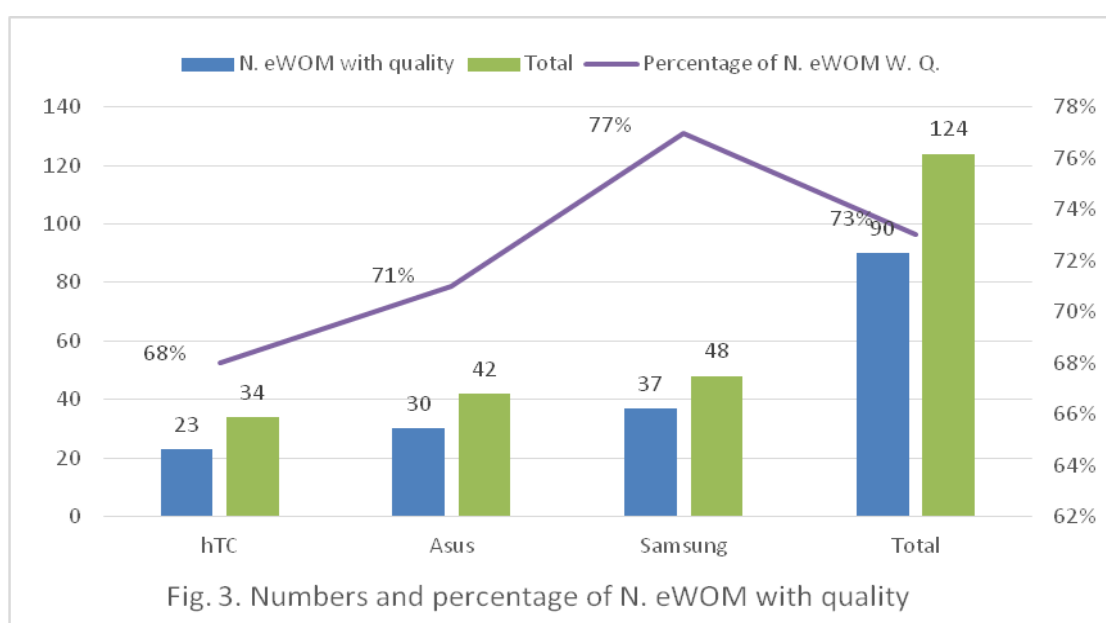

Fig. 3. Numbers and percentage of N. eWOM with quality

"Pics or it didn't happen" is a phrase common used in online forums. That means other people doubt whether an electronic WOM is true when someone posts it but it is without pictures or videos. Specifically for negative eWOM, if no pictures or videos are attached, the authenticity of the message will be doubted. Therefore, we examine how much negative eWOM are with evidence (i.e., picture or video) and whether the percentage of such eWOM messages is high or not. It can be seen from Figure 4 that out of 124 negative eWOM we investigated, only 52 of that are with pictures or videos, accounting for less than 50% (42%) of the total. Even if we examine them from individual brands of cell phone, only Asus has achieved 50% (21 in 42). The companies of hTC and Samsung have just obtained 41% (14 in 34) and 35% (17 in 48) respectively. This tells us that whatever brand of cell phone it is, not every negative post about it has supporting information to be proved. However, nearly 50% of the data also means that a large number of negative posts still have a certain degree of credibility for consumers to refer to.
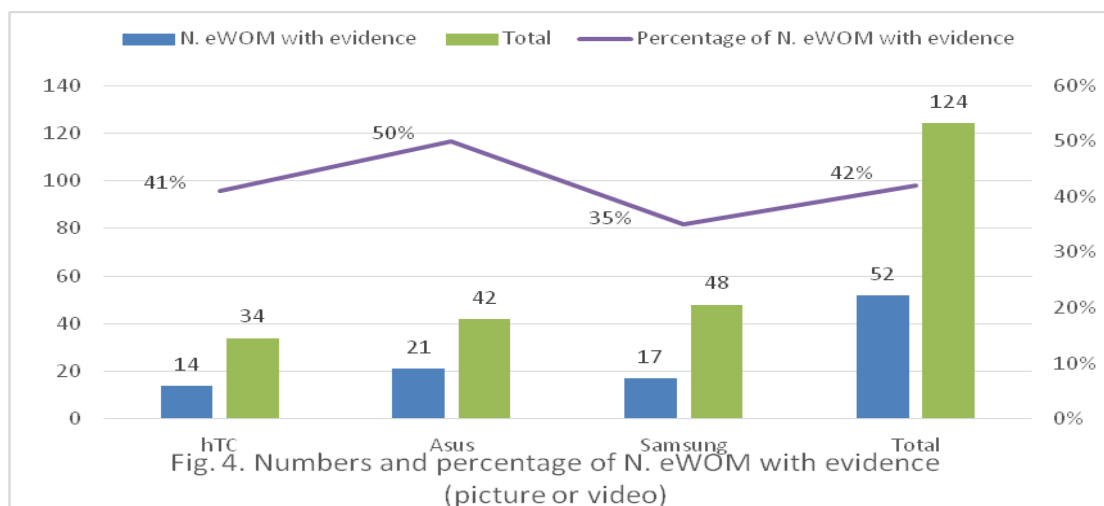
Fig. 4. Numbers and percentage of N. eWOM with evidence (picture or video)

Discussion

The first question in this study is to understand what percentage of negative eWOM is posted by a newly registered user. The result tells us the fact that the ratio of negative eWOM messages spread by a novice to those by a veteran is relatively low (1:9), and most of users who left unfavorable comments, wandered around on various boards to look for topics of interest, and have already existed in forum for a while. Although this 10% of messages were posted by a novice, we cannot be sure that these posts are made by users who are pretending to be real consumers by opponents, because the authenticity of a post has no absolute relationship with the registration time of the user who spreads that post. We can only reasonably suspect that a user who has just registered and has never posted a message may be not a real customer of a brand, but maybe an employee of the rivals of that brand, in order to immediately write negative news for discrediting the goodwill of that brand. So companies are best to know this possibility, do not ignore this key characteristic of negative eWOM, and should develop adequate strategies to conquer its potential lethality.

The second question of this study tries to understand how many lines of text are in a negative eWOM, what percentage of negative eWOM messages are of quality, and whether negative online reviews always have pictures or videos attached to the review itself for consumers to refer to. The results show that a large part of negative eWOM messages have less than five lines of text, and approximately three fourths of negative online reviews are of quality, and less than 50% of negative eWOM messages have supporting pictures or videos. This implicitly indicates that a negative eWOM message is not necessarily a long story; it might be just a few short sentences for venting consumers' momentary emotion. However, as long as it is of high quality, it is still convincing even if there is no picture or film to support. Facing the increasing rate of social media use, the companies should know the fact that the dissemination of negative eWOM message is unavoidable but they also need to establish adequate strategies in order for the sales and credit of their products not to be harmed by those negative messages.

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