

Product, services and technology review blogs: A proposed model to explain consumer scepticism

ABSTRACT

While much research has been conducted on consumer skepticism about advertising, limited attention has been focused on the relationship between gender and scepticism. As the Internet and new technologies continuously transform corporate communications, the relationship between gender and scepticism in new media such as the blogosphere begs further research. This article focuses on consumer scepticism of blogs that review products, services and technologies. Demographic variables – and particularly gender – are commonly employed to segment target audiences in an attempt to fit appeals specifically directed at males or females, or both. This article investigates three associated relationships: first, when gender is a significant predictor of consumer scepticism of blogs; second, when a relationship exists between scepticism as a predictor of the frequency of blogs accessed; and lastly, when scepticism is a predictor of the number of blogs visited. Data from Australia and South Africa provide the findings and offer guidance to practitioners for their new media selection and gender-based communication messages.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Internet technology and the plethora of new media channels have changed the landscape of marketing communications (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002). The ease of access to information, and the collaborative environment of Web 2.0 have enhanced consumer communications (Kozinets, Hemertsberger & Schau, 2008). Consumers can now easily produce and broadcast video, audio and text messages to a worldwide audience via online social media. These technological developments are bringing about a fundamental shift in power, and an upheaval in the traditional marketing communications equilibrium. Consumers are increasingly imposing themselves on the brand communications, which has profound implications for marketers globally (e.g. Abraham, 2005; Berthon, Hulbert & Pitt, 1999; Brockhoff, 2003; Dolan & Matthews, 1993).

Pitt, Berthon, Watson and Zinkhan (2002) suggest that marketers must be prepared to embrace the newly empowered consumer. Marketers should understand what these consumers have to say and moreover understand the technologies that allow consumers to say it so effectively – if managers want to manage proactively. This poses the question as to how marketers can successfully engage digitally empowered consumers to ensure that an organisation remains part of the online communication dialogue. According to Chen and Xie (2008:478), consumers' online reviews created by digitally empowered consumers have created a "new element in the marketing communications mix".

Marketing communications is rapidly being transformed from a one-way business-to-consumer monologue to a two-way dialogue and even a consumer-to-consumer model (Ballantyne, 2004; Hearn, Forth & Gray, 2009). To create and maintain dialogue, an organisation needs to know its audience, that audience's beliefs about the organisation in question and its communications, as well as their disbeliefs and scepticism in respect of communication media and messages. Because the marketer-consumer interaction has become dynamic and has affected marketing communications, it is essential to understand how consumers respond to social media, such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and others (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002).

Consumers generally view information from marketers cautiously. According to Calfee and Ringold (1988), consumers do not trust advertising unless there is reason for them to trust the claims made in the advertisement. Several studies (e.g. Andrews, 1989; Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992; Boush, Friestad & Rose, 1994; Darke & Ritchie, 2007) found that consumers are by and large distrustful of commercial advertising, often without overt motivation or rationale. While most scholarly work has focused on consumer scepticism towards advertising in the traditional media, this study focuses on scepticism towards social media, such as? product-review blogs.

The product-review blog has become an information channel that plays a role in the purchasing decisions taken by consumers (Chen & Xie, 2008). Though previous studies have focused on the credibility of blogs (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008), limited research has however been reported on scepticism regarding blogs (Van Heerden, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt

& Caruna, 2009). This study seeks first to explain consumer scepticism towards product-review blogs by investigating gender as a predictor of scepticism towards product-review blogs; then to investigate scepticism as a predictor of the frequency of product-review blog access and, finally, to investigate scepticism as a predictor of the number of product-review blogs accessed. These results will assist marketers to understand consumer scepticism towards product-review blogs.

This paper starts with a discussion of product-review blogs and scepticism and it then focuses on the relevance of gender as an antecedent to scepticism towards blogs. The next section discusses the suggested model and hypotheses. This is then followed by a description of the method and the results of consumer surveys conducted in two different geographical areas, namely Australia and South Africa. The results reflect two independent cases and are not intended as a comparative study because the samples are too different in nature. The article concludes by acknowledging the limitations of the research, explaining the managerial implications and suggesting avenues for future research.

1. THE ROLE OF PRODUCT-REVIEW BLOGS

Information about products, services and technologies drives marketing communications efforts as organisations need to communicate relevant information to the target audiences. It is the responsibility of the marketing-communications function to provide consumers with easy access to information that will enable them to make informed decisions. In recent years, the integrated marketing-communications processes had to be remodelled in response to rapid developments in the new media environment. New Internet technologies now provide access to information in ways that were either impossible or ignored by the traditional mass media (Dunning & Wymbs, 2001; Hiebert, 2004; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The introduction of Web 2.0 enables consumers to communicate more easily with other consumers. Consumers rely on such Internet technologies to access information – which include product evaluations by other consumers – and then to offer their own opinions regarding products, services, and technologies. The access to an abundance of information resources facilitates sound decision making, which reduces risk and enables consumers to exercise increased control over their selected brands. Consumers are no longer fulfilling their former passive roles as they are increasingly being empowered. This is a significant development in the digital age (Harrison, Waite & Hunter, 2006).

Social media – such as blogs – have grown exponentially into a popular means of communication. A blog can also be seen as a form of self- or personal publishing and record keeping of comments, employing an opinioned writing style, and also activities that may either attract or distance blog users (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Most blogs fit this definition and have little or no commercial or organisational impact whatsoever. A smaller number of blogs enable those individuals with more expertise – albeit only presumed ‘expertise’ to comment on advanced and specialised phenomena, subjects, industries, technologies, products, and services. In this way, blogs often reach extremely large audiences and may become enormously influential. Online reviews balance the available information. An interesting study by Mackiewicz (2009) explains that the online consumer reviewers use various ways to communicate their own expertise to their audience. This

is essential in that it allows them to voice an opinion on a particular matter, one which contributes to the level of credibility.

Blogs, while both enabling organisations to communicate with consumers, and empowering consumers to communicate back to the organisation, further also allow consumers to voice their opinions to one another (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). When blogs provide information on the activities of organisations, and evaluate their products, services and technologies, this may be associated not only with the type of credibility typically accorded public-relations activities, but also that generally accorded word-of-mouth communication. These blogs are collectively referred to as 'product-review blogs' (Seo & Croft, 2008; Steyn, 2009). Broadly, the following types of product-review blogs currently exist: first, blogs that are initiated and moderated by corporate companies and their agents; second, blogs initiated and moderated by independent bloggers but backed by corporate sponsors who expect positive blogging in return for their sponsorship; and lastly, independent bloggers who neither accept nor acknowledge any form of corporate sponsorship or incentives in return for positive blogging.

Information offered in these blogs needs to be considered to be very credible for them to achieve 'informative status' with the consumer (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). As blogs grow in popularity as a communication medium, the extent and the nature of consumers' beliefs and also their scepticism towards blogs are likewise becoming increasingly relevant to marketers. Obermiller and Spangenberg (2000) hold that when organisations invest in effective marketing communications with the marketplace, there is significant benefit to be derived from understanding consumer scepticism. The more sceptical consumers are when examining marketing claims made in a more critical manner, the less likely they will be to accept such claims at face value (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998).

2. CONSUMER SCEPTICISM

Consumers tend generally to be sceptical towards advertising claims (e.g. Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Calfee & Ringold, 1988; Moscardelli & Liston-Heyes, 2005; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000; Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005; Thakor & Goneau-Lessard, 2009). Sceptics doubt the substance of communications (Mohr, Eroglu & Ellen, 1998). *Scepticism* is the human trait of doubting or having a questioning attitude or state of mind. Mohr *et al.* (1998) explain scepticism as "a cognitive response which varies depending on the context and the content of the communication". *Attitudes* refer to a general disposition in the processing of communication messages. Attitudes that reflect scepticism are those that result when consumers approach these messages (such as in advertising and blogs) with an informed, discerning mind, or even with a predisposition towards either rejecting (disbelieving) or accepting (believing) the message (or the medium, or spokesperson, or other source) (Boush, Friestad & Rose, 1994).

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) – in one of the most widely accepted definitions – define scepticism towards advertising as a "general tendency towards disbelief of advertising claims". These researchers developed a nine-item scale to measure scepticism towards advertising.

Two of their studies on scepticism turned the attention, firstly, towards consumer socialisation in the family to determine the effect on scepticism across generations and secondly, towards determining whether consumers became socialised into a particular belief and then developed a tendency for being sceptical (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000). More recently, Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan (2005) focused on investigating the effects of scepticism towards advertising in responses to advertisements.

3.1 Product-review blogs and scepticism

The lessons learned from scepticism towards advertising in traditional media are invaluable in an attempt to better understand scepticism towards new media and especially towards product-review blogs. The applicability of the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) scepticism-measurement scale was recently validated within the context of blogs and blogging. In a study among business-to-business (B2B) bloggers, Van Heerden *et al.* (2009) measured the level of scepticism among these bloggers towards their peers (i.e. other B2B bloggers). The original scepticism scale was applied in this new context where it demonstrated sound psychometric properties which indicated that this scale could indeed be used in the blogging context. The nine items used to measure scepticism were found to be unidimensional and could be summed to represent an individual's composite level of scepticism towards blogging. A high level of scepticism towards the blogs of other bloggers was found in this study.

While this study suggests that the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) scepticism scale can be applied in the context of blogs and blogging, only limited research has as yet been conducted to determine the relationship between gender and scepticism, and of the effect of scepticism on blog usage, such as frequency of blog access and the number of blogs accessed. The next section focuses on gender as an antecedent to scepticism.

3.2 Gender as antecedent to scepticism

Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) developed a model that illustrates relationships in terms of antecedents where certain personality traits like cynicism and personal self-esteem, together with consumption experiences reflected in age and education, are likely to have a direct effect on advertising scepticism. Much scholarly work has been done on the effects of demographics on variables associated with scepticism, such as socialisation (Mangleburg, Grewal & Bristol, 1997; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1979; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000), risk perceptions (Smith & Rosenthal, 1995), emotional distress (Toffoli & Laroche, 2002), attention to advertising cues (Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1991) and persuasion or 'persuasibility' (Meyers-Levy, 1988). Persuasibility is affected by persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which refers to beliefs and the reasons why certain consumers are more easily persuaded to trust advertising claims. Consumers who are easily persuaded tend to have lower levels of scepticism and are therefore more likely to trust advertising claims.

In respect of web credibility, Johnson and Kaye (2004) used demographics as a predictor. Gender, as a demographic element, is often used to segment audiences. Gender is associated with unique interests and knowledge guiding respective judgments (Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1991). *Judgment* refers to a particular belief and trust in something. In context of this study it refers to a belief and trust in respect of blogs. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) noted that previous studies had found gender differences in terms of persuasibility. They further mentioned that social role theory could explain why women generally tend to be easily persuaded. The transfer of advertising scepticism may thus vary according to gender. This is rooted in the different socialisation and generational processes. In their 2000 study, Obermiller & Spangenberg predicted gender differences in the intergenerational transfer of advertising scepticism. In the present study, the model posits a relationship between gender and scepticism. The aim is however to determine whether scepticism can be predicted by gender.

This leads to the formulation of the first hypothesis:

H1: Gender significantly predicts blog readers' level of scepticism towards product-review blogs.

The Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) nomological network for advertising scepticism illustrates relationships. The previous section referred to the antecedents of advertising scepticism. Scepticism, in turn, is seen as a construct that influences or that is being influenced by an individual's attitude towards advertising in particular. This in turn influences a customer's processing of advertising information and of advertising appeal. In this study – based on the work of Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) – the second part of the model posits a relationship where scepticism may affect the frequency with which consumers access product-review blogs, as well as the number of such blogs they access. Consumers with a low level of scepticism may more frequently access such blogs and further also access a greater number of such blogs.

When consumers have been socialised to be distrustful of and sceptical towards advertising messages, they may also exhibit the same attitude towards blogs. This leads to the formulation of the next two hypotheses:

H2: A lower level of scepticism towards product-review blogs significantly, and positively, predicts the frequency with which consumers access these blogs.

H3: A lower level of scepticism towards product-review blogs significantly, and positively, predicts the number of such blogs that consumers access.

The hypotheses are summarised in the model shown in Figure 1. This figure illustrates the conceptual relationships proposed by this model and which will be investigated empirically by analysing the hypotheses.

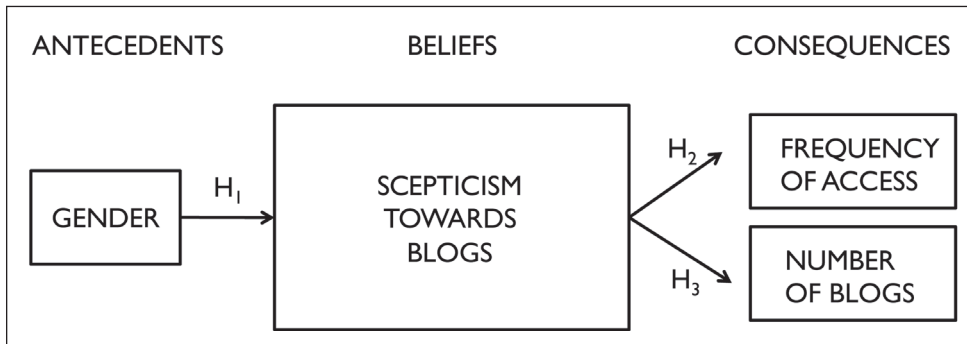


Figure 1: Model and hypotheses

3. METHOD

In this section the methodology of the study undertaken to test the outlined hypotheses is described. Consumer surveys were conducted in both Australia and South Africa. In Australia, data collection was conducted by a professional online research firm using their online consumer panel. Though the sample was drawn to be generally representative of the demographics of the Australian online population, individuals younger than 18 years, and 50 or older were excluded. A total of 400 panel members were invited via email to participate in a short online survey. While no monetary incentive was offered, panel members who completed the survey did nevertheless qualify for a small number of member points that accumulated over time and which could subsequently be redeemed for prizes. Upon completion of the fieldwork, a total of 169 usable questionnaires had been received, which yielded an effective response rate of 42.25%.

In South Africa, 129 third-year university students from a specific faculty at a particular institution were invited to participate in the survey. This approach was followed for reasons of convenience. All the students who were invited obliged and completed the survey. Four of the completed questionnaires were omitted because of incomplete data. The effective response rate was 100%, while the completion rate was 96.9%.

The questionnaire comprised four questions. First, the nine items in the Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) scale scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = 'I strongly disagree' to 7 = 'I strongly agree', amended to reflect scepticism towards product-review blogs rather than the original test in an advertising context. The items in the scale were phrased so as to get a high level of agreement, which would in turn indicate a low level of scepticism towards product-review blogs. Second, an overall item measuring the respondents' perceptions of the truthfulness of blogs was scored on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = 'Very untruthful', to 4 = 'Very truthful'. Third, there was a single item requiring respondents to report the frequency with which they read product-review blogs. Blog access frequency was scored on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = 'Never', to 6 = 'Very frequently (daily)'. Finally, another single-item scale

measured the number of product-review blogs accessed by participants in an average month. This open-ended question was phrased as follows: "Roughly, how many online blogs that review or discuss products, services, and technologies do you visit in an average month?"

The single-item scales were deemed passable, and even preferable, to measure these constructs. According to Rossiter (2002), a single-item measure is appropriate if an object or specific attribute being evaluated or measured is fairly concrete, straightforward, and unambiguous (e.g. blog-visitation frequency and number of blogs accessed during a specific time).

All the South African students were between the ages of 18 and 29 years, and the gender split was 68.8% female and 31.2% male. Data were weighted to be more representative of the student population of 43.9% male and 56.1% female. At 52.7% male and 47.3% female, the Australian sample closely represented the national online population, while age was spread roughly equally across the three groups (18-29, 30-39, and 40-49).

4. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics of the nine-item scepticism-scale items for both countries are reported in Table 1. To confirm unidimensionality, the items were also subjected to a principal components analysis, which in the South African sample led to the extraction of a single factor explaining 56.83% of the variance. In the Australian sample, a single factor emerged explaining 77.82% of the variance. The internal consistency reliability as indicated by Cronbach Alpha computed on the South African data was 0.90, and 0.96 for Australia. Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) reported an Alpha of 0.86, which indicates that the scale applied to the South African and Australian samples possessed a high internal consistency.

Scepticism towards blogging in this context is a unidimensional construct. The scores on the nine-item scale were subsequently calculated into an overall scepticism mean score where higher scores denote lower levels of scepticism. The overall scepticism mean score in South Africa was 4.14 (SD, 0.98) with a mean of 4.59 (SD, 0.96) among males and 3.94 (SD, 0.92) among females. The level of scepticism among males was significantly lower than among females ($p < 0.0001$). In the Australian sample, the overall mean score was 4.29 (SD, 1.21) with no significant difference between the mean score for males of 4.27 (SD, 1.17) and 4.32 for females (SD, 1.25).

While the nine-item scepticism scale was developed by Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) in the context of advertising, the Van Heerden, *et al.* (2009) study demonstrated sound psychometric properties when the scale was applied in a blogging context. However, to confirm the convergent validity of the scale in both countries, a regression procedure was performed taking the summed scepticism score as the predictor variable, and perceptions of truthfulness of blogs as the criterion. Overall evaluation of the truthfulness of blogging was provided by respondents on a four-point scale, where 1 = 'Very untruthful' through to 4 = 'Very truthful'. The truthfulness construct is an independent yet conceptually related construct that is expected to be highly correlated with scepticism. In the regression conducted for South Africa, the resulting R^2 was 0.18, with F –

27.17 ($p < 0.0001$), while in Australia the R^2 was higher at 0.36, with $F = 95.72$ ($p < 0.0001$). This confirmed convergent validity of the scale in both countries in that respondents' scores on the scepticism scale are also sufficiently correlated with their overall assessment of the truthfulness of blogging.

The argument for the validity of the scepticism scale hinges on approaches taken in marketing and management information systems. For example, in their validation of the well-known SERVQUAL Scale, which measures service quality, its developers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988) correlated their measures of service quality using the scale with a separate overall measure of perceived service quality. Likewise, in management information systems, Pitt, Watson and Kavan (1995) used an adapted version of the SERVQUAL Scale as an indicator of system satisfaction, and correlated this with an overall assessment of the service quality of the IT department's service. Thus, a correlation of the scepticism scale was used with an overall single item assessing the extent to which the respondent sees the blog to be 'truthful'.

Table 1: The scepticism toward blogs – descriptive statistics

Items	South Africa		Australia	
	Mean (n=125)	SD	Mean (n=169)	SD
1. One can depend on getting the truth in most product-/services-/technology-review blogs.	4.12	1.32	4.24	1.35
2. The aim of blogging is to inform the reader.	4.70	1.39	4.57	1.42
3. I believe that most of these blogs are informative.	4.42	1.31	4.39	1.45
4. Most of these blogs are generally truthful.	4.14	1.19	4.31	1.37
5. These blogs are a reliable source of information about the quality and performance of products and services.	4.21	1.31	4.22	1.40
6. Blogging is truth well told.	3.79	1.40	3.92	1.32
7. In general, these blogs present a true picture of the product/services/technology they write about.	4.26	1.26	4.40	1.36
8. A reader can feel accurately informed after reading these blogs.	4.13	1.33	4.20	1.29
9. Most of these blogs provide readers and consumers with essential information.	4.26	1.29	4.40	1.35
Overall scepticism scale score.	4.14	0.98	4.27	1.21

Cronbach Alpha for Scale: South Africa: 0.90, Australia: 0.96

The model and its associated hypotheses were analysed by means of a simple linear regression procedure. In the first half of the model, *gender* was the predictor variable and *scepticism* the

criterion, while in the second half, *scepticism* was the predictor variable and both *frequency of blog access* and *number of blogs accessed* were the criterion variables.

The results of the regression analysis are presented in Figure 2. For the Australian data, all the path coefficients are significant except for the impact of gender on scepticism. However, scepticism has a high level of predictability on the frequency of accessing blogs ($R^2=0.24$, $t=7.34$, $p<0.0001$) and a weaker but significant level of predictability on the number of blogs accessed ($R^2=0.09$, $t=4.11$, $p<0.0001$). There is some evidence (small yet significant) that gender impacts scepticism in South Africa ($R^2=0.09$, $t=-3.58$, $p<0.0001$). While scepticism's impact on the frequency of blog access is rather weak ($R^2=0.06$, $t=2.91$, $p<0.01$), its impact on the number of blogs accessed is not significant.

Focusing on the weaker links in the model, the standardised regression coefficient for the link between gender and scepticism in Australia is not significant even at the 0.10 level ($p=0.78$), and it therefore appears as though gender does not provide a substantial explanation of consumer scepticism towards product-review blogs. It could be that other demographic variables may explain the variance. Similarly, in South Africa the standardised regression coefficient for the link between scepticism and the number of blogs accessed is not significant at the 0.10 level ($p=0.13$). All other links are significant.

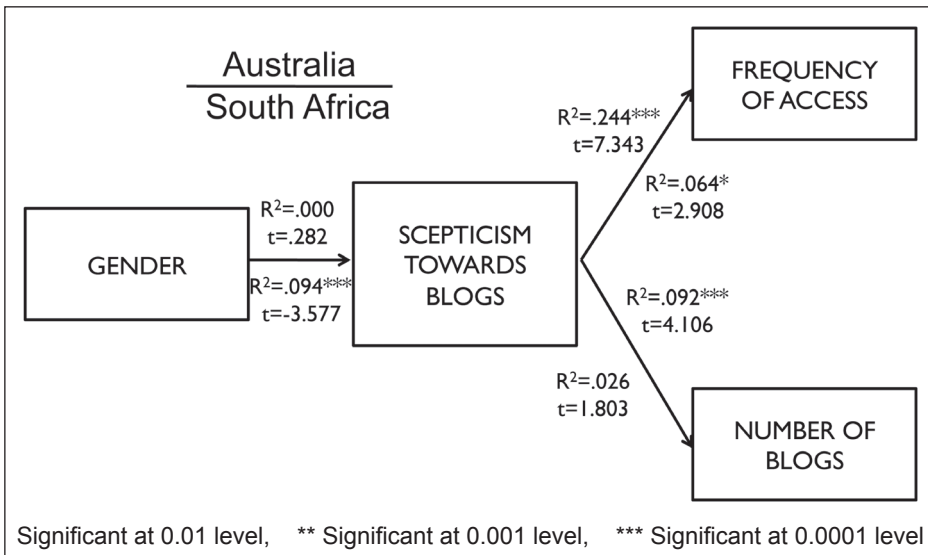


Figure 2: Results for the Path Analysis

(Figures above the lines are for Australia, and those below the lines are for South Africa.)

These findings provide sufficient support for the model, or parts thereof, in terms of the underlying theory, the hypothesised relationships, and for the model's predictive ability. While H1 is tenable

in South Africa, it is not for Australia. H2 is tenable in both countries, while H3 is tenable only in Australia.

The results of this study therefore indicate that scepticism may be a predictor for the frequency of blogs accessed. It would therefore be appropriate to consider a model in which gender and country are used as moderator variables instead of antecedents. This will provide us with the opportunity to look at the strength of the relationship between scepticism and frequency of blogs accessed when moderated by gender and country.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In both Australia and South Africa the research confirms that the Obermiller and Spangenberg scepticism scale is applicable in the context of blogging in that it exhibits robust psychometric properties.

Furthermore, principal component analysis confirms that the scepticism construct is unidimensional, where scores on the nine items comprising the scale can be summed to provide an overall indication of an individual's scepticism toward blogs and blogging. In South Africa, the overall level of scepticism among males is significantly lower than among females, while in Australia there is no significant difference between the levels of scepticism for males and for females.

In Australia, gender seems to have insignificant predictability regarding the level of scepticism towards product-review blogs, while in South Africa there is little yet significant evidence that gender does impact on scepticism.

In Australia, scepticism seems to have a significantly high level of predictability regarding frequency of accessing blogs and a weaker but significant level of predictability regarding the number of blogs accessed. In South Africa, the impact of scepticism on the frequency of accessing blogs is rather weak and not highly significant, while its impact on the number of blogs accessed is not significant.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The research presented in this article is subject to a number of limitations. First, the study included some respondents with limited experience of product-review blogs. It might therefore be worthwhile to repeat a similar study in the future once Internet users have gained more experience regarding this relatively new concept of 'product-review blogs'. This would then determine whether an increase in usage does in fact have an effect on scepticism. Second, the demographic profiles of the Australian and South African samples differ, and no attempt was made to assess various aspects of measurement equivalence, which thus disallows a direct comparison between the two countries. Third, while the scepticism scale adapted from the context of advertising to do service in the context of blogging does possess robust psychometric properties, no specific efforts were made to ensure that no aspects of scepticism unique to blogs and blogging had

been omitted. Qualitative exploratory research may have been a worthwhile exercise to increase both the face and content validity of the scale in the context of blogging. Fourth, this study measures consumer scepticism towards blogging, and not the scepticism among the creators of these blogs towards their peers. It also does not measure scepticism among other users of these blogs, such as communication decision makers, PR managers, and other stakeholders. Fifth, the research was conducted among online consumers in Australia and among students in South Africa. It is unknown whether the findings can be generalised to a broader domestic and international context. Sixth, the model only tests the effects of a limited number of constructs as antecedents and outcomes. The model should be expanded to include more demographics and psychographic antecedents, such as personality, values, attitudes, interests, or lifestyles and more outcome variables as measurements. Seventh, the direction of causality may be questioned between scepticism and the extent of blog usage. While the assumption that has been made that the level of scepticism affects both the frequency of accessing blogs and the number of blogs accessed, the causal relationship may also work in reverse. Finally, this study does not attempt to tie scepticism towards blogging rigorously to any other well-defined multi-item constructs. Doing so may have shed further light on the manifestations of the blogging scepticism issue and on its role in a broader context of behaviours.

7. *MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS*

The findings of this research hold a number of implications for both marketing communications managers and for public relations professionals. Where gender significantly impacts on the level of scepticism (i.e. in South Africa), managers and bloggers targeting the more sceptical gender, should be sensitive to the fact that their target audience could possibly be more sceptical than expected. As the scale demonstrated, sound psychometric properties – when applied in a blogging context – could be applied as an effective measurement to gauge the level of scepticism within a specific target audience for the organisation's blogging efforts, or in its efforts to use bloggers as vehicles to reach and influence a specific group of Internet users. This can be done for consumers in specific demographic, cultural, and geographical groups, or for specific products, services, and technologies. While the research reported here studied our scepticism model as applied to blogging in general, the model may also be used to gauge scepticism towards a particular blogger, or type of blog, or within any other specific context.

In instances where levels of scepticism are too high, blogs may not be the most appropriate means of targeting that specific consumer segment. There may be ways of identifying means of lowering scepticism levels so as to make blogging a more effective medium. These may include reader and non-reader education on the value, credibility and popularity of product-review blogs among peers. As product-review blogs are moving from 'buzz-word' status to a more respected, credible and trustworthy form of reference for consumers, practitioners should continue to support consumer education. As the model has demonstrated, scepticism has a significant impact on blog usage, which further underlines the importance of lowering consumer scepticism, which, in turn, will lead to an increase in the use of this valuable marketing communications tool.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A number of avenues for future research are suggested by the findings of this study. First, it would be worthwhile to ascertain the effects of additional constructs in the model and in the demographic and the psychographic variables and also the personality traits, such as cynicism and personal self-esteem. Furthermore, additional variables could be added as outcomes of this scepticism model. Second, different levels of usage by product-review blogs among consumers may be caused simply by the fact that there are leaders and laggards in the adoption of a new technology. A better understanding is needed of the demographics the psychographics, and of the behaviours of consumers at different levels of this technology-acceptance continuum. Such an understanding will be invaluable in the education of consumers to lower their levels of scepticism towards these blogs. Also, if communications-targeting efforts through these blogs were to be successful in the future, it would be valuable to know more about these consumer characteristics. Third, while this study was conducted only in two countries and in a narrow demographic context, it would be worthwhile to extend this research to other demographics, countries and diverse cultures. Fourth, a longitudinal tracking study of blogging scepticism within a particular cultural and demographic setting would over time provide insight into the trajectory of this blogging scepticism model. Fifth, this model would benefit from using multi-item scales to measure additional constructs built into the path analysis. Finally, while the results of this study indicate that scepticism is a predictor of the frequency of blogs accessed, it would be worthwhile to test a model in which gender becomes a moderator rather than an antecedent. This will provide an opportunity to explore the strength of the relationship between scepticism and frequency of blogs accessed when moderated by gender.

Social media, such as blogs, as well as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, will continue to perform an increasingly important role not only in transferring messages from organisations to their stakeholders, but also to educate consumers regarding products, services and technologies. It is essential to understand scepticism towards such media and to break down the barriers that may prevent their usage. Marketing communications and the public relations sector should be actively involved in developing the potential of social media as a knowledge-management tool (Xifra & Huertas, 2008). The impact that social media will in the future have on marketing communications may be directly related to the levels of scepticism with which they are viewed by their target audiences.

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