

Personal and Social Benefits: Consumer Beliefs towards Product Review Blogs

Mehdi Ghazisaeedi

Division of Industrial Marketing, e-Commerce and Logistics,
Lulea University of Technology, Lulea, Sweden

Abstract

Online blogs that offer reviews of products, services and technologies increasingly attract interest among public relations practitioners, as well as academic scholars. This paper reports on blog readers' perceptions of the personal and social benefits offered by these specialized blogs as a new communication medium. The study surveyed 169 Australian online consumers. A personal and social benefits (PSB) multi-item scale, traditionally employed in an advertising research context, is adapted and validated to gauge consumer perceptions and offer strategic directions across demographic segments. The findings suggest that the adapted PSB scale to measure perceptions towards blogging exhibits sufficient internal consistency as well as evidence of convergent and content validity. Factor analysis suggests that the construct in this instance is uni-dimensional, therefore the 10 items can be summed to provide an overall reflection of the PSB dimension of consumer beliefs toward blogs. While the findings cannot be generalized to an international context, the PSB scale adapted from an advertising context can be used as a survey tool to gauge perceptions of the personal and social benefits towards blogs in general and within a specific target audience. This study enables managers to focus communication methods to a range of customer groupings in diverse and appropriate ways. This study confirmed that while gender and education do not necessarily have an influence on PSB, it is inversely related to age. The study suggests that blogs would be appropriate for communicating with younger consumers while older consumers may be better reached through more traditional media, such as product reviews in newspapers and magazines

Keywords: personal and social benefits, blogging, product review blogs, online public relations, consumer beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Online blogs have emerged as an essential element of everyday life of many corporations and consumers alike. Blogs provide bloggers, single or multiple contributors, with a form of self-publishing and record keeping of knowledge, comments, opinions, and activities (Herring, Scheidt, Wright & Bonus, 2005). Blogs enable organizations to interact with their customers and empower customers to voice their own opinions (Mangold & Fauld, 2009). Blogging has transformed marketing communications from a one-way monologue to a multi-way dialogue, or as Blattberg & Deighton (1991) termed it: 'interactivity' to directly link individuals and organizations irrespective of the time and distance in the 'age of addressability'. The popularity of blogging is reshaping the media landscape. Blogs are currently one of the most widely adopted modern media tools on the web, which is perhaps due to their simplicity and ease of use and ability to self-publish with a low cost (Richardson, 2009). According to Nielsen Company (BlogPulse.com), a blog search engine that analyses and reports on daily activities in the blogosphere, there are over 170 million identified blogs in existence as of September 2011. A blog is an important way of distributing information and a form

of voluntary knowledge sharing (Wright, 2006; Droge, Stanko & Pollette, 2010). Most importantly, they encourage individuals to be active participants in the "collecting, reporting, sorting, analyzing and disseminating of news and information" which lead journalists to view blogs as a source of "news and public opinion" (Lasica, 2003). Blogs bypass traditional media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004) and make "frank one-on-one communication" (Perlmutter & McDaniel, 2005) possible.

A number of authors have analyzed blogs as a strong word-of-mouth (WOM) communication channel (Riegner, 2007; Dwyer, 2007; Kawamura, Nagano & Mizoguchi, 2008; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009; Lee & Youn, 2009; Droge et al., 2010). As a result, consumers refer to product review blogs when making purchase decisions (Riegner, 2007; Kawamura et al., 2008). Writing based on their own viewpoints, bloggers "can potentially have the key WOM-associated attributes of believability, credibility, likeability, and trustworthiness" (Droge et al., 2010). In general, product review blogs categorized as a user-generated content (Mutum & Wang, 2010), therefore it provides a more realistic picture of the products or services that are reviewed

by the blogger. Blogging as a citizen-generated media is a new occurrence and its greatest power relies on conveying unrestricted information and holding direct conversation (Hall, 2006). In public relations, blogs primarily offer a two-fold opportunity. Firstly, blogs can be applied as a tool to ascertain opinions, and secondly, to actively participate and offer opinions (Xifra & Huertas, 2008). Droge et al. (2010) argues that a blog and its readers' comments can somehow be viewed as a straw poll, as it may contain hundreds of readers' opinions. Blog readers can respond to posts directly by posting comments and weblog writers can get instant feedback and also help build a sense of community (Droge et al., 2010). By sharing thoughts, expressing opinions and offering suggestions and recommendations, bloggers form virtual communities create a sense of community, a mutual feeling of belonging and commitment, among blog readers (Agarwal, Liu, Tang & Yu, 2008). It is clear that this is a unique way of communicating, from both an individual consumer and an organizational perspective. As blogs are offering organizations this unique opportunity to engage with consumers, it is critical that the public relations professionals recognize the consumers' perceptions of the personal and social benefits of this communications medium. Kent (2008) notes that there are many advantages of blogs to organizations, such as a tool for message framing, persuasion, relationship building, and the fostering of trust. Critical, however, is that organizations understand consumer confidence in blogs. Recently much attention has been dedicated to blogging in both practitioner and scholarly journals (e.g. Schwartzman, 2005; Marken, 2006; Kent, 2008; Steyn, van Heerden, Pitt & Boshoff, 2008; Grundey, 2010) where the notion is supported that blogging is an important phenomenon that should be utilized to its full potential.

The Personal and Social Benefits Dimension of Consumer Belief

Consumer attitudes towards advertising in general has been the focus of a number of research studies (Andrews, 1989; Pollay & Mittal, 1993; O'Donohoe, 1995; Shavitt, Lowrey & Haefner, 1998), and attitudes towards a specific medium such as television (Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992; Mittal, 1994; Boush, Friestad & Gregory, 1994), Internet (Schlosser, Shavitt & Kanfer, 1999; Wang & Sun, 2010) and mobile (Tsang, Ho & Liang, 2004; Peters, Amato & Hollenbeck, 2007). The study of consumer attitudes towards advertising in blogs, as well as blogs as a marketing communication medium, is still in its infancy. Alwitt & Prabhaker (1992) state that studies of the dimensions of attitudes toward advertising may be more valid when focused on a specific medium.

Andrews (1989) makes a distinction between consumer *attitudes*, and consumer *beliefs*, towards advertising. Theoretically, *attitude* towards advertising is grounded in consumer *beliefs* toward advertising (Lutz, 1985; Andrews, 1989). Petty and Cacioppo (1981) describe *belief* as the information held by a person about other people or objects (e.g., blogs). However, they refer to *attitude* as the kind of feeling that this person or object evokes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). In other words, *belief* is a certain object explained by an attribute (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). For instance, belief toward product review blogs in general connects 'product review blogs' with a given attribute or characteristic (e.g., product review blogs lead to better products, services and technologies for the public). It has been established that beliefs influence attitudes and making the distinction between belief and attitude allows us to investigate the influence of a number of distinctive beliefs on a certain attitude (Muehling, 1987). Thus, beliefs can stimulate purchasing decisions. An example in case is the reaction of blog readers towards blogs written about products, services and technologies. Clearly, their beliefs play an important role in shaping their attitude towards the product review blogs. If a person's attitude or reaction to product review blogs is shaped by his beliefs, it would seem essential to know more about consumers' beliefs toward product review blogs, and more specifically, to determine personal and social benefits (PSB) of blogs as a key factor of consumer belief construct.

To measure the *beliefs* construct, Andrews (1989) refined the Bauer & Greyser's (1968) scale, which was later expanded by Alwitt & Prabhaker (1992). Alwitt & Prabhaker (1992) distinguished two classes of reasons for attitudes to television advertising: *Beliefs* ("what people know about television advertising") and *Functions* ("how it is relevant to them"). Alwitt & Prabhaker (1992) employed their 10-item scale to specifically measure perceptions of the 'personal and social benefits of advertising' (PSB) – as a key component of consumer belief.

The Alwitt & Prabhaker's (1992) 10-item PSB-scale was adapted in this study to measure the *personal and social benefits* (PSB) construct in the blogging context. This study specifically addresses consumer perceptions of the personal and social benefits of blogs that review products, services, and technologies, and how these relate to demographics. The PSB scale can improve assessing the effectiveness of blogs, as it can provide public relation managers with a good measurement of the personal and social view on blogs and the consumers' beliefs about the benefits of blogs. Thus, in this paper, by employing the amended scale among online consumers the perceptions of the personal and social benefits of blogs were tested. Also, some aspects of

the psychometric properties of the amended scale are addressed. Further, the scale data is then analyzed against blog usage levels, and across selected basic demographic descriptors of the sample. This study offers guidelines to public relation practitioners for the use of blogs across demographic segments. The paper discusses some managerial implications for public relations professionals and concludes with an acknowledgement of the limitations of this research and suggestions for further research.

METHOD

Data collection was conducted by a professional online research firm using their pre-recruited online consumer panel in Australia. The survey was conducted via email and the sample was drawn to roughly represent the age and gender demographics of the Australian online population. For the purpose of this study, individuals under eighteen years and above fifty years of age were excluded. An email invitation was sent to a list of 400 identified individuals to invite them to participate in the survey. A total of 169 usable responses were received. The questionnaire consists of the following: First, demographic items including gender, age and education. Second, frequency and volume of blog reading. Third, a measurement of the *personal and social benefits* (PSB) dimension of consumer beliefs. A 10-item scale refined by Alwitt & Prabhaker (1992) scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 = 'I strongly disagree' and 7 = 'I strongly agree'. Lastly, an overall measure of truthfulness of blogs

(on a 4-point Likert-type scale anchored on 1 = 'Very untruthful', through 4 = 'Very truthful').

RESULTS

Respondent demographics are shown in Table 1. There were slightly more males than females, the age groups were more or less evenly spread, and around two-thirds of the respondents had been educated beyond high school.

Table 1: Respondents – Basic Demographics

Category	% of Total
Male	52.7
Female	47.3
18 – 29 years	30.8
30 – 39 years	34.3
40 – 49 years	34.9
High school not completed	16.6
High school completed	18.3
Beyond High school	65.1

The responses to the 10-item PSB scale items, means and standard deviations, are reported in Table 2. The Cronbach alpha computed for the scale was .94 (Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992, reported an alpha of .86), which indicated that the scale possesses high internal consistency. A principle components factor analysis was applied, which led to the extraction of a single factor explaining 66% of the variance. This led us to conclude that PSB toward blogging in this context is a uni-dimensional construct, and that the scores on the 10 items could be summed to produce an overall PSB score, where a low score would indicate a low level of PSB.

Table 2: PSB Scale – Means and Standard Deviations

Items	Mean	Std. Dev
1. Blogs are a good way for consumers and customers to learn about what products, services and technologies are available.	4.78	1.34
2. What is written in blogs results in better products, services and technologies for the public.	4.37	1.28
3. In general, blogs represent a true picture of the products, services and technologies they write about.	4.31	1.34
4. Consumers and customers can trust brands that are written about in blogs more than brands not written about in blogs.	4.00	1.34
5. What is written about products, services and technologies in blogs can help raise the standard of living.	4.09	1.34
6. What is written in blogs can help consumers and customers find products, services and technologies that match their personalities and interests.	4.66	1.32
7. Blogs can help consumers and customers know which brands have the features they are looking for.	4.77	1.41
8. Blogs can give consumers and customers a good idea about products, services and technologies by talking about the kind of people who use them.	4.66	1.32
9. Blogs can help consumers and customers to buy the best brand at the price paid.	4.56	1.30
10. Consumers and customers will generally be willing to pay more for products, services and technologies that are written about positively in blogs.	4.08	1.33
Note: Cronbach Alpha for Scale: .94		

An additional independent, but conceptually related, construct in this study is an overall measure of perception of *truthfulness* of blogs. Truthfulness has

been found to significantly vary across television advertising (Brucks, Armstrong & Goldberg, 1988; Boush *et al.*, 1994). If TV advertising in general is perceived to be less than truthful about the products it

communicates, consumers are more likely to counter-argue with an individual commercial (Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992). In a different but conceptually related context, if consumers believe product review blogs are less than truthful about products in general, they are more likely to counter-argue with an individual blog. The validity of the scale was further explored with 2 additional tests. To assess the content validity of the scale, the summed means of the PSB scale was tabulated against the respondents overall evaluation of blogging's truthfulness as provided by the respondents on a four-point scale (see Table 3). A simple linear tabulation and visual inspection of one phenomenon against another independent, but conceptually related phenomenon has been regarded by some scholars (cf. Carman, 1990; Pitt, Watson & Kavan, 1995) as a good, practical indication of content validity. The PSB scale seems to possess good content validity, as respondents who have a positive perception towards blogs (score higher on

the PSB scale) also believe that blogs are more truthful.

The convergent validity of the scale was assessed by means of a regression procedure (see Table 3) with the mean PSB score as the predictor variable, and perceptions of truthfulness of blogs as the criterion. Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham (2006) explain that the "extent to which indicators of a specific construct converge or share a high proportion of variance in common" as evidence of convergent validity. Other scholars (cf. Carman, 1990; Pitt *et al.*, 1995) indicated evidence of convergent validity as a high correlation between the construct studied and an independent but conceptually related construct. In the regression conducted the resulting R^2 was significant at 0.32, with $F=79.1$ ($p < 0.0001$), which denotes that the respondent's score on the PSB scale is highly correlated with their overall assessment of blogging's truthfulness as a related but independent construct.

Table 3: Aspects of the Blogging PSB Scale Validity

Q: Taking into account everything you know or have heard of about online blogs that review products, services, and technologies, please indicate whether you feel these blogs are generally truthful, or untruthful.				
Response:	Very Untruthful	Untruthful	Truthful	Very Truthful
Number of respondents	8	26	127	8
Mean PSB Score	2.70	3.62	4.61	6.20

RSquare	0.321
RSquare Adj	0.317
Root Mean Square Error	0.490
Mean of Response	2.79
Observations (or Sum Wgts)	169.0

Analysis of Variance

Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio
Model	1	19.020	19.020	79.132
Error	167	40.139	0.240	Prob > F
C. Total	168	59.159		<.0001

With PSB as the criterion variable and the demographic descriptors (gender, age and education) as predictor variables, a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted (see Table 4).

Table 4: Summary of ANOVA Procedures – Demographics as Predictor-, and PSB as Criterion Variables

Gender	Number	Mean	R ²	F Ratio	Prob > F
Female	80	4.47	0.001	0.214	0.649
Male	89	4.39			
Age	Number	Mean	R ²	F Ratio	Prob > F
18-29	52	4.72	0.04	3.322	0.0387
30-39	58	4.41			
40-49	59	4.19			
Education	Number	Mean	R ²	F Ratio	Prob > F
< High school	28	4.16	0.025	2.124	0.1227
High school	31	4.22			
> High school	110	4.55			

The following observations can be made from Table 4. First: the PSB dimension of consumer beliefs towards blogs seem totally unrelated to gender – there are no significant differences ($F(1,169) = 0.214$, $p = 0.649$) between males and females. Second: age seems to have a significant impact on PSB when it comes to blogging ($F(2,169) = 3.322$, $p = 0.0387$). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD (Honestly Significant Difference) test indicated that the mean score for the 18-29 year age group (mean 4.72) was significantly different from the 40-49 year age group (mean 4.19). The 30-39 year age group (mean 4.41) did not differ significantly from either the 18-29 or 40-49 year old groups. Third: education lacks a strong relationship with PSB, as there are no significant differences ($F(2,169) = 2.124$, $p = 0.1227$) between those *without* a high school qualification, *with* a high school qualification, and those with *more than* a high school qualification.

To establish whether the frequency with which respondents accessed blogs and the number of different blogs they accessed over a period, would impact on their PSB scores, respondents were asked the following 2 questions: first, the frequency with which they read online blogs that review products, services, and technologies (Blog Frequency), scored on a 6-point scale anchored on 1 = never, through 6 = very frequently (daily); second, an open-ended question phrased as 'Roughly, how many online blogs that review or discuss products, services, and technologies do you visit in an average month?' (Number of blogs accessed).

Table 5: Summary of Regression Procedures – Blog Frequency and Number of Blogs Accessed as Predictor, and PSB as Criterion Variable

Predictor Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	R ²	F Ratio	Prob > F
Blog Frequency	3.92	1.48	0.16	31.23	<0.0001
Number of Blogs Accessed	7.42	12.29	0.07	11.97	<0.001

Table 5 reports the means and standard deviations on these items as well as the summary of the regressions on the PSB. Both these items indicate a significant relationship between the frequency with which respondents access blogs, and PSB ($R^2 = .16$, $F(1,169) = 31.23$, $p < 0.0001$), and the number of blogs respondents access, and PSB ($R^2 = .07$, $F(1,169) = 11.97$, $p < 0.001$).

CONCLUSION

Tools shape the disciplines and the fields of marketing communications, and public relations are no exception. Communication scholars (e.g. Hiebert, 2005) have noted the effects that new technologies such as the internet have on marketing communications in the recent past, and will have in the future. Popular social media such as Facebook and Twitter as well as blogs that review products, services and technologies will continue to perform as important vehicles in transferring messages from organizations to the public. Blogs have the potential to change the face of marketing communications and public relations. However, it is possible that the impact they have may be directly related to readers' perceptions of the personal and social benefits offered by these blogs.

In summary, the findings suggest that the adapted PSB scale to measure perceptions towards blogging exhibits sufficient internal consistency as well as evidence of convergent and content validity. Factor analysis suggests that the construct in this instance is uni-dimensional, therefore the 10 items can be summed to provide an overall reflection of the PSB dimension of consumer beliefs toward blogs. While gender is unrelated, and education has a very weak relationship, PSB is inversely related to age. Younger participants tend to be more positive in terms of attitude towards blogs than older individuals. The final section of the paper addresses the managerial implications, limitations and future research directions suggested from the results of this study.

Managerial Implications

A number of implications for public relations professionals are suggested. First, the PSB scale, adapted from an advertising context, can be used as a survey tool to gauge perceptions of the personal and social benefits towards blogs in general within a possible target audience. Alternatively, it can be applied to review the organisation's efforts to use blogs as vehicles to influence a group of internet

users. Second, while this research studied consumer perceptions of blogging in general, managers may employ the scale to gauge perceptions of a particular blog, or type of blog, or within some other specific context. Third, this study enables managers to target communication efforts to varied customer groupings in appropriate ways. For example, the results of this study suggest that blogs would be appropriate for communicating with younger consumers while older consumers may be better reached through more traditional media, such as product reviews in newspapers and magazines. However, the result of this study shows that gender is unrelated, and education has no relationship to PSB, therefore this study in some circumstance confirms Droge et al. (2010) arguing that "a blog and its community can be viewed as a type of market segment determined by *community* and not by more traditional bases such as demographics".

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research presented in this article has a number of limitations that will be briefly discussed and a number of avenues that can be pursued for further research. First, the scale used in this study was directly adapted from an advertising measurement context. Even though the scale proved to be valid and reliable in the context of blogs it was not specifically developed to measure consumer perceptions of the personal and social benefits offered by blogs. The scale could be further refined since there may be other aspects of blogging that are currently not included in the scale. Qualitative exploratory research could provide invaluable insight into refining the scale. Second, the findings cannot be generalized to an international context as it was conducted only in Australia.

A multi-country comparison to determine the effects of cultural differences calls for further research. Also, a longitudinal study of attitudes towards blogs in general and within a particular cultural and demographic setting can monitor changing attitudes over time. Third, the focus of this study is on consumer perceptions of blogs written about organizations, their products, services and technologies that communicate messages not necessarily initiated or sponsored by these organizations. It was beyond the scope of this study to measure the differences within company-sponsored and independent blogs. Further research involving blog clustering will be useful in identifying attitudes towards blogs and differences can be explained between these two types of blogs. Finally, this study does not attempt to tie the PSB dimension of consumer beliefs towards blogs to any well-defined multi-item constructs in a rigorous way. It would be a worthwhile exercise to link perceptions of the personal and social benefits of blogs in general to other constructs, such as personality traits.

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