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Identifying Effective Factors of Anonymity on the Credibility and Trustworthiness of Electronic Word of Mouth in the Metaverse

Azadeh Darvish[1]*

[1] .Ph.D Candidate, Department of Business Management, UAE Branch, Islamic Azad University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. azadedarvish93@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

The Metaverse, an immersive digital realm, has revolutionized the dynamics of communication and information exchange. In this context, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has emerged as a vital tool for information dissemination and opinion formation. However, the influence of anonymity on eWOM credibility and trustworthiness remains a complex and evolving facet of the Metaverse. This review paper explores the multifaceted factors that underpin the impact of anonymity on eWOM which studying each can help researchers to develop this field. Through the systematic review, databases were searched and out of 145 articles, 65 were selected for review. Community Norms and Culture, Platform Design and Policies, Trust-Building Mechanisms, Transparency and Accountability, Information Quality and Consistency, Moderation and Ethical Practices, Challenges and Future Directions influence anonymity and eWOM credibility. Information Adoption Model, Social Identity Theory, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Source Credibility Theory, Network Theory, Cue Utilization Theory, and Social Exchange Theory are among the studied theories in this field. Credibility Challenges, Trust Formation, User Perceptions, Ethical Considerations, and User Education influence anonymity on the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM in the Metaverse. ©**authors**

Introduction

The Metaverse, a virtual realm and immersive digital universe (OG, 2023), has emerged as a groundbreaking space where individuals from diverse backgrounds engage, interact, and share information (Ooi et al., 2023). Within this virtual realm, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has gained remarkable prominence as a powerful means of communication, influencing opinions, and shaping consumer behavior. eWOM encompasses the exchange of information, thoughts, and recommendations through digital channels, and it plays a pivotal role in guiding decisions related to products, services, and experiences (Ammari, 2022; Choi & Ahn, 2023; Lim, 2015). In this dynamic and evolving landscape, understanding the factors that influence the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM is crucial.

One key factor that significantly impacts the nature of eWOM interactions in the Metaverse is anonymity (Kohler et al., 2023; Bulchand-Gidumal & Melián-González, 2023). Anonymity allows individuals to communicate and express their opinions without disclosing their real-world identities, offering both opportunities and challenges (Ngo & Jaishankar, 2017; Safaev, 2022; Li et al., 2022). On one hand, anonymity can facilitate candid and open discourse, enabling users to share their experiences and perspectives freely (Forestal & Philips, 2022). On the other hand, it raises concerns regarding the reliability and authenticity of the information exchanged. The anonymity factor is a double-edged sword (Dhond et al., 2023), and its effects on the credibility (Wolfgang & Bhandari, 2023) and trustworthiness of eWOM within the Metaverse warrant comprehensive investigation.

The Metaverse represents a digital domain where individuals adopt virtual personas and often communicate under the veil of anonymity. This phenomenon introduces a complex set of issues concerning the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM. While anonymity can empower users to share candid eWOM, it can also create an environment where misinformation, deception, and manipulation thrive. As the Metaverse continues to expand and influence various aspects of our lives (Zhang et al., 2016), including commerce (Hossain et al., 2020), entertainment (Bushara et al., 2023), and socialization (Cho et al., 2014), it becomes crucial to identify and understand the effective factors that shape the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM in this context.

This review paper aims to address the critical gap in the existing literature by systematically exploring and analyzing the relationship between anonymity and eWOM within the Metaverse. By studying this complicated field, we seek to provide insights into the factors that enhance or diminish the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM in virtual environments. Through an extensive review of relevant studies, theoretical frameworks, and practical examples, we aim to shed light on the nuanced dynamics at play and offer valuable recommendations for researchers, marketers, and platform developers.

In summary, this paper endeavors to contribute to the understanding of how anonymity influences the perception of credibility and trustworthiness in eWOM within the Metaverse, ultimately advancing knowledge in the field and informing strategies for creating more reliable and authentic digital communication within virtual spaces.

Literature Review

Introduction to Anonymity and eWOM in the Metaverse

The emergence of the Metaverse, a vast digital realm comprising virtual environments, social spaces, and immersive experiences, has redefined the way individuals engage with information and interact with others. In this dynamic and multifaceted universe, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has become a dominant mode of communication, facilitating the exchange of opinions, recommendations, and experiences among users. One of the distinguishing features of the Metaverse is the prevalence of anonymity, which allows individuals to communicate without revealing their real-world identities. This characteristic

has profound implications for the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM within this digital landscape.

Anonymity as a Double-Edged Sword

Anonymity in the Metaverse serves as a double-edged sword, offering both advantages and challenges. On one hand, it provides users with a sense of freedom to express themselves candidly and without fear of repercussions. In a world where avatars and pseudonyms replace physical identities, individuals often feel liberated to share their thoughts and experiences openly. This freedom can foster vibrant eWOM communities and contribute to the richness of virtual discourse.

On the other hand, anonymity introduces inherent uncertainties. Users may question the authenticity of information shared by anonymous individuals, leading to doubts about the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM. Anonymity can facilitate the spread of misinformation, as it can be exploited by individuals with hidden agendas or nefarious intentions. Consequently, understanding the factors that influence how anonymity shapes eWOM credibility is essential.

Factors Influencing Anonymity and eWOM Credibility

1. Community Norms and Culture

Virtual communities within the Metaverse often develop their own norms and codes of conduct. Anonymity may be embraced and valued within some communities while viewed skeptically in others (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Mandryk et al., 2023; He, 2022; Garcia, 2023). The extent to which anonymity aligns with community values can impact the credibility of eWOM.

2. Platform Design and Policies

Metaverse platforms vary in terms of how they implement and enforce anonymity. Some platforms prioritize user privacy, while others may require verified identities (Qin et al., 2022; Sakhipov et al., 2023). The design and policies of the platform can influence user perceptions of eWOM credibility.

3. Trust-Building Mechanisms

Trust-building mechanisms within virtual environments, such as reputation systems and user feedback, can mitigate the concerns associated with anonymity (Yao et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Park et al., 2022). Users may place more trust in eWOM from individuals with a history of credible contributions.

4. Transparency and Accountability

Platforms that offer transparency features, such as the ability to report or block anonymous users, can enhance accountability (Pandey & Gilmour, 2023; Far et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2022). These features can contribute to a sense of security and trust among users.

5. Information Quality and Consistency

The quality and consistency of information shared through eWOM can override concerns about anonymity (Farhan, G. M., & Marsasi, 2023; Zinko et al., 2020). When users consistently find valuable and accurate information from anonymous sources, trust can be built based on the content itself.

6. Moderation and Ethical Practices

Content moderation and ethical practices implemented by platforms can help curb the spread of false information and malicious intent (Koroma et al., 2022; Kong et al., 2023). Effective moderation can contribute to a more trustworthy eWOM environment.

7. Challenges and Future Directions

While numerous studies have explored the impact of anonymity on eWOM in traditional online environments, there is a distinct need for research focused on the unique dynamics of the Metaverse (Pires et al., 2023; Ioannidis, S., & Kontis, 2023). As this digital landscape continues to evolve, researchers and practitioners must work together to develop strategies that maximize the benefits of anonymity while addressing its challenges. Future research should delve deeper into the interplay between anonymity, eWOM credibility, and user behavior within the Metaverse, ultimately guiding the development of more reliable and authentic digital communication in virtual spaces.

Method

Search Strategy and Data Sources

For this review paper, a comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant literature on the factors influencing the credibility and trustworthiness of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) in the context of the Metaverse. Multiple electronic databases, including but not limited to Google Scholar, IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, and ProQuest, were utilized to conduct a systematic search. The search was conducted from the inception of these databases to the present day, with a primary focus on scholarly articles, conference papers, and research reports.

The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including "Metaverse," "virtual worlds," "Electronic Word of Mouth," "eWOM," "anonymity," "credibility," and "trustworthiness." Reference lists of relevant articles were also reviewed to identify additional sources. To ensure the inclusion of the most recent research, the search was conducted in September 2023, and any pertinent articles published up to that point were considered which the number was 145.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for the articles selected in this review were as follows:
1. Relevance: Articles were required to address the impact of anonymity on the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM in virtual environments, particularly within the Metaverse.
2. Publication Type: Only peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and reputable reports were included.
3. Language: Articles in English were considered for inclusion.
4. Time: Articles published up to September 2023 were chosen for inclusion.

Articles were excluded if they did not meet the inclusion criteria or if they were duplicates. Additionally, articles that primarily focused on eWOM in traditional online environments outside the Metaverse were excluded unless they contained relevant insights applicable to the Metaverse context.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The selected 65 articles were reviewed systematically. Data extraction involved recording relevant information, including the title, authors, publication year, research objectives, methodologies, key findings, and theoretical frameworks. Each article was critically assessed to identify the factors and insights related to the influence of anonymity on eWOM credibility and trustworthiness within the Metaverse.

The findings from the selected articles were synthesized and organized into thematic categories to provide a coherent and comprehensive analysis of the effective factors of anonymity on

eWOM credibility. The synthesis involved identifying recurring themes, theoretical models, and empirical evidence. The relationships between these factors and their impact on eWOM credibility and trustworthiness were examined and discussed.

Quality Assessment

Given the nature of a review paper, formal quality assessment tools, such as those used in systematic reviews of empirical studies, were not applied. However, the credibility and relevance of each source were carefully considered during the data extraction and synthesis process. Peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals and conferences were given preference in the synthesis of findings.

Ethical Considerations

This review paper is based solely on the analysis of publicly available scholarly literature, and no primary data collection from human subjects was involved. As such, ethical approval was not required for this research.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations of this review. Despite a systematic search strategy, it is possible that some relevant articles may have been missed. Additionally, the quality and rigor of individual studies may vary, and this review relies on the accuracy and reliability of the sources included in the analysis.

The methodology outlined in this section ensures a systematic and comprehensive approach to identifying and synthesizing relevant literature on the factors influencing the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM in the Metaverse, with a particular focus on the role of anonymity. This approach allows for a rigorous examination of the existing body of knowledge in order to provide valuable insights and recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and platform developers in the Metaverse space.

Findings

Certainly, there are several theories and frameworks related to the topic of credibility and trustworthiness of information in online environments that can be applicable the factors influencing eWOM credibility in the Metaverse, particularly in the context of anonymity. Some of these theories are studied in some research. *Information Adoption Model* derived from the Diffusion of Innovations theory, focuses on how individuals adopt and process information. It considers factors like information source, message content, and recipient characteristics, which can be influenced by anonymity. This model is applied in different studies related to this field (Efendioğlu, 2022; Kohler et al., 2023; Camilleri et al., 2023). *Social Identity Theory* explores how individuals categorize themselves into social groups and derive their sense of self from these group affiliations. In the Metaverse, where avatars and pseudonyms are prevalent, anonymity can impact how users identify with and trust one another (Jain et al., 2023; Pei et al., 2022; Păuceanu et al., 2023). *Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)* posits that individuals process persuasive messages through two routes: central (high elaboration) and peripheral (low elaboration). The anonymity of the source can influence which route is taken and subsequently affect the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM (Erkli, 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Jayawardena et al., 2023). *Source Credibility Theory* (Ohanian, 1990) examines how the perceived credibility of the information source influences the acceptance of the message. Anonymity can make it challenging to assess source credibility, impacting trust in eWOM (de Boissieu & Baudier, 2023; Haikel-Elsabeh, 2023; Dobbelstein et al., 2023). *Network theory* explores how social connections and relationships influence information diffusion. Within the Metaverse, where anonymity can impact the strength of social ties, network theory can help explain eWOM dynamics (Song et al., 2023; Trim et al., 2023). The *Cue Utilization Theory* was used to explain how the

consumer uses product cues to rate a product before making a purchase decision (Lim et al., 2021). This theory suggests that individuals rely on various cues to assess the credibility of information. Anonymity can affect the availability and relevance of cues, influencing perceptions of eWOM trustworthiness (Kakaria, 2023). *Social Exchange Theory* focuses on the rational calculations individuals make in social interactions. In the context of anonymity, users may engage in eWOM based on perceived benefits and risks, impacting their trust in the information source (Choi & Ahn, 2023; Jain et al., 2023).

These theories provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the complex interplay between anonymity, credibility, and trustworthiness of eWOM in the Metaverse. These studies need to be researched more and be applied to explore how anonymity influences eWOM dynamics and trust perceptions within virtual environments.

The Impact of Anonymity on the Credibility and Trustworthiness of eWOM in the Metaverse

1. Credibility Challenges:
- **Source Credibility:** Anonymity can make it challenging for eWOM recipients to evaluate the credibility of the source. Without knowing the real identity or affiliations of the person behind the message, it's harder to determine whether the information is trustworthy or biased (Kohler et al., 2023; Efendioğlu, 2023).
- **False Information:** Anonymity provides cover for individuals who may spread false or misleading information intentionally. This can undermine the reliability of eWOM content and lead to the dissemination of inaccurate details or rumors (Wang et al., 2023; Ziakas, 2023).

2. Trust Formation:
- **Building Trust:** Anonymity can also work in favor of eWOM in some cases. In virtual environments, where people often use pseudonyms or avatars, trust can be built based on the quality and consistency of the information shared, rather than the real-world identity of the source (Darvish et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).
- **Community Norms:** Virtual communities often develop their own norms and codes of conduct. In some cases, anonymity may be widely accepted and even encouraged, fostering a sense of trust within the community (Teng etal., 2023).

3. User Perceptions:
- **Perceived Risk:** Anonymity can lead to perceived risks for eWOM recipients, especially in contexts where the stakes are high (e.g., financial decisions). Users may be more cautious when evaluating anonymous eWOM (Efendioğlu, 2023; Grover et al., 2023; Efendioğlu, 2022).
- **Balancing Act:** Users often engage in a balancing act between valuing the authenticity of anonymous perspectives and being wary of potential deceit. This balance can vary depending on the context and the user's familiarity with the virtual environment (Gutierrez et al., 2023).

4. Ethical Considerations:
- **Ethical Responsibility:** Anonymity raises ethical questions regarding responsibility and accountability for eWOM content. Addressing these ethical concerns is essential for maintaining trust in the Metaverse (Chariatte & Ingenhoff, 2023).

5. User Education:
- **Digital Literacy:** Educating users about the potential risks and benefits of anonymous eWOM can empower them to make informed decisions and better assess the credibility and trustworthiness of content (Wadhar et al., 2023).

In summary, the findings of this review paper would provide a comprehensive understanding of how anonymity influences the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM in the Metaverse. It would highlight the key factors and challenges associated with anonymity, highlighting the complex dynamics of digital communication within virtual environments and offering valuable insights for researchers and practitioners in this emerging field.

Discussion

In this review paper, we delve into the multifaceted implications of anonymity on the credibility and trustworthiness of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) within the rapidly evolving landscape of the Metaverse. It is evident that anonymity plays a pivotal role in shaping the way users perceive and engage with eWOM content in virtual environments. Our analysis underscores the dual nature of anonymity, where it can both hinder and foster trust. The challenges associated with source credibility and the potential dissemination of false information are critical concerns that require vigilant attention from platforms and users alike. However, the flexibility of anonymity in building trust based on the quality of information, community norms, and verified identity systems provides opportunities for constructive interactions within virtual communities.

Furthermore, our examination highlights the nuanced perceptions of users in the Metaverse regarding the trustworthiness of anonymous eWOM. We find that the perceived risks associated with anonymity, particularly in high-stakes situations like financial decisions, often necessitate a cautious approach among users. Striking a balance between valuing the authenticity of anonymous perspectives and guarding against deceit is a dynamic process influenced by the specific context and the user's familiarity with the virtual environment. As we consider the importance of moderation practices and transparency measures in maintaining trust, it becomes evident that platforms must adapt to the unique challenges of the Metaverse by implementing effective content moderation strategies and user-reporting mechanisms. Finally, our review underscores the ethical responsibility that anonymity places on all stakeholders, including policymakers, in addressing issues related to accountability and trust in the Metaverse. In conclusion, our synthesis of existing literature and practical examples reveals the intricate interplay of factors shaping the influence of anonymity on eWOM credibility and trustworthiness, offering valuable insights for platform design, user engagement, and policymaking in the ever-expanding realm of the Metaverse.

Conclusion

The Metaverse, a dynamic and immersive digital realm, has ushered in a new era of communication, interaction, and information sharing. At its heart lies Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), a powerful means of disseminating opinions, recommendations, and experiences within virtual environments. One of the defining features of eWOM in the Metaverse is anonymity, allowing users to communicate without revealing their real-world identities. The impact of anonymity on the credibility and trustworthiness of eWOM is a multifaceted and critical aspect that this review paper has explored in depth.

Implications and Future Directions:

The findings of this review have significant implications for researchers, practitioners, and platform developers in the Metaverse. Understanding the factors that influence eWOM credibility in the presence of anonymity can guide the creation of more reliable and authentic digital communication within virtual spaces.

Future research directions include the need for more empirical studies in the Metaverse context to validate the insights drawn from existing literature. Additionally, the development of effective moderation practices, user education initiatives, and platform policies should be prioritized to address the challenges posed by anonymity and enhance eWOM credibility.

In conclusion, this review paper has contributed to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between anonymity and eWOM credibility in the Metaverse. As the Metaverse continues to evolve and influence various facets of our digital lives, it is paramount to navigate the complexities of anonymity to foster a trustworthy and authentic virtual communication environment. This understanding, gleaned from the synthesis of existing knowledge, serves as a foundational resource for future research and practical applications within this emerging digital landscape.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no competing financial interests or known personal relationships that would influence the report presented in this article.

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