

The Influence of Electronic WOM on Chinese Gen Z Consumers' Green Consumption

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Abstract. The study explored the influence of electronic word of mouth (electronic WOM) on social media and its impact on Chinese Generation Z (Gen Z) consumers' green consumption. Existing research on the influence of electronic WOM on social media towards Chinese Gen Z consumers' green product purchase decisions has been relatively limited. This study applies an exploratory qualitative method to conduct in-depth interviews with 30 Chinese Gen Z consumers in China. The findings suggest that electronic WOM on social media directly influence Chinese Gen Z consumers' green consumption. Traditional offline word of mouth (offline WOM) moderates the relationship between electronic WOM on social media and green consumption intentions. The result of this study will contribute word of mouth theory and provides applied social media marketing recommendations for green product manufacturers in mainland China.

Keywords: electronic WOM, Chinese Gen Z consumers, green product, green consumption

1. Introduction

With the development of IT technology, social media has entered the web 3.0 era. Social media information sharing influences consumers' attitudes and the purchase decision process [1]. Social media information sharing is an important source of information that influences consumers' purchase intentions in the new media environment [2] and plays a vital role in consumers' daily life and consumption. Green development is the future direction of China's development, and green consumption has received increasing attention from companies and consumers recently. It is crucial to understand the factors that influence consumers to purchase green in the new media environment [3]. Research has shown that companies need to incorporate the fact that social media influences consumer decision-making processes into their social media marketing strategies, while changing traditional marketing and communication approaches [4]. Social media is playing an increasingly important role in marketing [5]. For Chinese green product manufacturing companies that previously focused on traditional marketing, it is essential to understand the importance of social media and the online information dissemination that social media provides. However, previous research on the influence of social media information sharing in Chinese consumers' green product purchase decisions has been relatively limited. Therefore, this paper explores the relationship between social media information sharing and Chinese consumers' green purchasing decisions in an exploratory study.

2. Theoretical Lenses

2.1. Social Media

Social media is specialized software built on Web 2.0 that supports users in creating content and communicating [6]. Social media has evolved from portal web 1.0 to web.2.0 in the age of social media, and now web.3.0 in the age of intelligent media, which plays an increasingly important role in the marketing communication of individuals [7]. Social media platforms have become consumers' primary information sources in the new media age [8]. In addition, social media offers new opportunities for accessing information. In addition, the rapid development of online communication through social media has led to a growing interest in social media information sharing among scholars [9]. People want to gain a sense of

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belonging by connecting with others. After acquiring physical and security needs, people strive to achieve Maslow's third category-Belonging [10]. The emergence of social media has fulfilled people's quest for a sense of belonging, with social media being a significant platform through which customers obtain information, knowledge, and various opinions [11]. Compared to traditional media, social media information has more significant proliferation and flexibility [12]. The development of Web 2.0 technologies has facilitated the development of social media and is the basis for its continued operation and growth [13]. Studies have shown that social media platforms are crucial for consumers to access information about products and new concepts [1]. Consumers become friends on social media and thus identify a possible trusted source, which can significantly influence the user's purchase intention [14]. Therefore, in marketing communications, social media could influence purchasing decisions.

2.2. Electronic WOM on Social Media

Electronic word of mouth is a new form of information sharing on social media [12]. Internet created platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu to spread online information through social media. With the emergence of social media platforms, this form of communication has become particularly important, making social media information dissemination the most influential source of information on social media [1]. The advent of social media has enabled people to access or share information about organizations or products and to influence other consumers [11]. Consumers use their positive or negative information shares to inform other consumers' purchasing decisions [12]. Social media online information sharing is the review of products or services offered by a wide range of users on the Internet [15]. Consumers are more likely to listen to and trust the networks of their close relationships [11]. Post-purchase online information sharing by consumers provides an opportunity for organizations to address issues that may influence consumer decisions. Positive social media online information sharing is a compelling and free advertisement for companies [16]. Consumer social media information sharing provides a significant opportunity for companies to predict consumer decisions [17].

2.3. Electronic WOM on Social Media and Traditional WOM

Social media information sharing influences consumer decisions. Consumers search for online information on social media to support their purchase decisions by getting advice and comparing different options [15]. Consumers evaluate several options and make a final decision [13]. Social media online information sharing is usually an asynchronous process, where the sender and receiver of information are separated by space and time [11]. Whereas traditional offline information sharing is usually a process of sharing information between two or more interest groups. Social media online information sharing has unlimited reach on the internet [17]. Traditional offline communication originates with the sender of the message. The receiver of the message knows the sender of the message. The receiver of the information knows the sender of the information and the credibility of the content of the information [18]. The credibility of the source of information can influence consumers' attitudes toward a product or service [5]. Some scholars argue that the anonymity of social media messages may have a negative impact on their credibility. Regarding the credibility of information sources, the credibility of social media online information dissemination is lower than that of traditional offline information sharing. Social media online information dissemination and traditional offline information sharing communication influence consumers' purchasing behaviour and intention, and the credibility of information sources is an important factor in distinguishing between online and offline information dissemination.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Context

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach to explore the impact of social media information sharing on Gen Z consumers' green consumption. Chinese Gen Z consumers, our research audience, are generally referring to the generation born between 1995 and 2009, when the Internet was rapidly gaining popularity in China. This generation is known as the "indigenous of the Chinese Internet." They are a generation that grew up influenced by the development of the Internet and the rapid spread of

smartphones and tablets (Duffett, 2020). In China, Gen Z is estimated to be 260 million people, accounting for 18.4% of the total population in 2020 (Sun, 2022). Exploratory qualitative methods are best suited to answering the "what" and "how" questions. Before the interviews, we informed all respondents of the background of the study, aims, and objectives. Before conducting the interviews, each participant was invited to sign an interview consent form and provide a definition of a green product to ensure a common understanding of the topic under discussion. We also developed a semi-structured interview guide with key questions to serve as a guide for the interview discussion. Participants were asked if social media online information sharing influenced their green consumption. What were the main factors considered when choosing a green product. Several questions were asked during the interviews to ensure that participants were fully considered. Follow-up questions were asked for elaboration or clarification when needed. In-depth interviews were conducted in December 2022 with 30 Chinese Gen Z consumers in China. The interviews lasted 60 minutes per respondent and were designed to investigate the influence of social media information sharing on Chinese Gen Z consumers' green consumption.

3.2. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

More female than male was interviewed (20 women and 10 men). The respondents ages between 21 and 28 were from mainland China. All participants in the study had experience using social media in their daily lives. This study explored how social media information sharing influences the green consumption of Gen Z consumers. For exploratory qualitative research, larger sample sizes do not represent greater applicability, and depth may not be thoroughly analysed as attitudes may be sacrificed [16]. Our in-depth interviews were designed to obtain as much data as possible, with information becoming repetitive or no longer providing new directions and questions [19].

3.3. Qualitative Data Analysis Procedures

This research begins by landing the interview material level by level, generating concepts from the interview information, continually comparing the interviewee interview material with the concepts, and systematically asking generative theoretical questions related to the concepts, developing theoretical concepts, and establishing relationships between concepts. This is followed by theoretical sampling and systematic coding of the information. The coding process begins with open-ended logging, associative logging, and core logging. Finally, the proposition of the study is constructed and summarized.

4. Findings

4.1. Electronic WOM on Social Media Influence

Respondents were asked about their social media use during green consumption. They typical social media platforms they used are WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongs, and TikTok. All respondents use WeChat, and 80% of them use Weibo, 60% of them use Xiaohongshu and TikTok. Typical responses were, "I use WeChat every day, I read my friends' moments and other people's information shared on Social media," "I joined a green consumption WeChat group," "I get a lot of information about green products on social media, which makes me more aware of green products and remanufactured products," etc. Respondents were asked how often they use social media and the purpose of using social media. All respondents indicated that they use social media several times a day. Over 85% of respondents said that social media was their primary information source about green products. The time respondents spend using social media via their smartphones ranges from a few minutes to several hours per day. Social media helps them learn and understand new concept quickly. Online information sharing on social media significantly impacted respondents' intention to purchase green. The following quotes show the extent to which social media information sharing influenced Gen Z consumers' green purchase intentions." Social media information sharing has given me a better understanding of green products" "I subscribe to channel for green products and low carbon consumption. Learning about low carbon and green in the media is interesting. I tend to buy green products now." "I see many green consumption habits on social media". More than 90% of participants said that online social media sharing had a positive impact on their green consumption and purchasing green. Gen Z consumers also use online social media sharing to support their green purchasing. In this process,

social media information sharing is the respondents' initial source of information about green products or green consumption and directly influences their green purchasing intentions. The data also shows that respondents also refer to offline information sharing from acquaintances to make their green purchase.

4.2. Traditional Offline WOM Influence

The study found that Gen Z consumers refer to offline information sharing from acquaintances at the green purchasing. More than 70% of respondents said that in addition to social media information sharing, offline information sharing from acquaintances also influences their green purchasing decisions. The following quotes show the extent to which traditional offline information sharing influenced Gen Z consumers' purchase intentions for green products. "If the information is from a merchant, it is not necessarily that credible, and I would also refer to the advice of offline acquaintances." "If the advice of an offline acquaintance says it is as good as the information shared online on social media, it increases my intention to purchase green. If it is inconsistent, I will consider whether to buy". Thus, the findings suggest that offline information sharing from acquaintances influences the green purchasing. Alternatively, traditional offline information moderates the relationship between social media information sharing and purchase decisions. Overall, two main categories that emerged from this exploratory are as follows. Electronic WOM on social media will directly influence Chinese Gen Z consumers' green purchase intention. Traditional WOM moderates the effect of social media information sharing on green purchase intentions.

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide practical insights into how social media information sharing and traditional offline information sharing influence the green consumption decisions of Chinese Gen Z consumers for green product manufacturers who target Gen Z consumers in China. Firstly, the study identifies the significant influence of social media online information sharing on the green purchasing decision of Gen Z consumers. This finding is consistent with the existing literature, in which online social media information sharing is a significant factor in informing consumers about green products and influencing their green consumption [18]. A key finding of this study is that social media online information sharing has a direct impact on the green purchase intentions of Gen Z consumers in China. Secondly, this study investigated how different types of information sharing influence Gen Z consumers in their green consumption decision-making process. The findings indicate that social media online information sharing directly impacts consumers' green purchase intentions. However, offline information sharing of Gen Z consumers' acquaintances moderates the influence of social media information sharing on purchase intentions for green product. This finding validates previous research that has established customers turn to various information to compare options [15]. Moreover, our research further finds that traditional offline information sharing moderates influence of social media online information sharing on green purchase intentions for green products.

6. Implications for Practice

This study provides managerial implications for Chinese green product manufacturing companies who target Chinese Gen Z consumers. The findings of this study provide valuable information for marketers of green product companies who need to be more active on social media marketing. The study shows that online information sharing on social media directly impacts the green purchasing behavior of Gen Z consumers, with WeChat, Weibo, and short video platforms being the leading social media platforms used by Gen Z consumers. Chinese green manufacturers should increase their marketing efforts on social media information sharing via WeChat, Weibo and short video platforms to promote updated knowledge and information about green products and induce green consumption habits among Gen Z consumers. In addition, the study also found that traditional offline information sharing moderates the influence of social media information sharing on green purchasing of Gen Z consumers. Green manufacturers could combine social media marketing with offline activities, such as green-themed interactive activities, to drive online traffic to offline and conduct face-to-face offline information sharing sessions and promotion, adopting a combination of online and offline promotion methods to achieve the best marketing and promotion results.

7. Conclusion

This exploratory study provides insights into the impact of social media information sharing on consumers' green purchasing for companies targeting Chinese Gen Z consumers. The result of this study provides a basis for further research on green consumption. The limitations of this study are mainly in the relatively narrow scope of the study. This study was conducted on 30 Chinese Gen G consumers in China. This paper covers a limited group of respondents, and the findings may be related to the background of this group. Therefore, future research should further expand the scope and sample size to understand better the green consumption. finally, future research could explore the relationship between online and offline information sharing and their impact on green purchase among different groups of Chinese consumers.

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