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# MODELLING THE INFLUENCE OF ONLINE MARKETING COMMUNICATION ON BEHAVIOURAL INTENTIONS

Empirical  
study

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## Keywords

Online Communication  
Consumer Behaviour  
Consumer Perceptions

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## JEL Classification

M31, M37

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## Abstract

*The present study addresses the manners in which potential consumers react to and examine online marketing communication efforts, and how their perceptions influence various decisions. By drawing from theories of consumer behaviour, several variables are taken into consideration, a model designed to integrate existing theories and a three-way study of online user behaviour in response to online marketing messages is defined and tested. The results of the study demonstrate that there are direct and positive links between the manner in which users perceive online marketing communication efforts, and direct and positive links between users' attitudes towards online communication and their intention to either further inform themselves, forward the information obtained, or even become loyal to the company.*

## 1. Introduction

Changes now perceived as fundamental in interpersonal communication brought by new media have led to an increase in brand power and word of mouth marketing, thus brand interactions have suffered changes both in the business - consumer relationship and in business to business relations, with implications for communication strategies. In order to develop communication strategies for the online environment, it is necessary to monitor the development of online communication tools and changes in consumer behaviour. At the same time, control losses occurring in conversations about brands, people, products or services (Brown et al, 2007) are due to the facilitation of communication between consumers brought by the Internet.

Furthermore, new communication efforts must focus on dialogue, given the interactive character of the online environment. Online media tools allow practitioners to maintain a dialogue with the consumers and influence them accordingly.

## 2. Consumer behaviour in an online communication context

Business orientation towards the consumer involves a focus on meeting his internal and external needs, a service which often involves setting standards and monitoring satisfaction in order to confirm consumer expectations. Investigating consumer behaviour requires a multidisciplinary approach, a simple registration and quantification of the acquisition and use in marketing being insufficient. An essential role in such investigations is played by psychology and sociology, from which the basic concepts and ideas stem. Knowledge of consumer behaviour provides the basis for marketing strategies and decisions, ensuring the efficiency of market segmentation, product positioning and other decisions regarding the marketing mix.

Studies examining the assessment of commercial practices by the consumer use surveys to determine consumer attitudes towards communication activities in general or communication activities through various media ( eg: Internet).

Reasons why users communicate via online can be functional or hedonistic (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Functional reasons are concerned with the exchange of useful information, while hedonistic reasons are concerned with obtaining a positive experience from interactions.

Previous studies in the field constitute a great contribution to the establishment of a conceptual framework conducive to the study of consumer behaviour in the online environment, by integrating constructs from related theories.

Considering the fact that within the online environment the consumer is not just a potential customer but also a user of information technology, overall impression of the consumer includes, in addition to company transactions and interactions related, search elements, comparison and evaluation of information, web page design and aspects regarding the company profile.

Theories of persuasion and behaviour influence facilitate the identification of obstacles related to the consumer, but the fragmented nature of the literature makes it difficult to generalize the dimensions of consumer behaviour, even when it is restricted to the online environment. However, each theory has evolved through addressing itself to a more specific problem by using a limited number of procedures. The Theory of reasoned action for instance (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), provides a framework for the measurement of attitudes regarding a certain behaviour in relation to the intention to manifest said behaviour, but if the attitudes and perceptions cannot be clearly distinguished or consumer expectations cannot be identified, the study results cannot serve as a basis in support of strategic options.

Consumer loyalty occurs as a behaviour determined and expressed over a period of time, characterized by repeated purchases and positive interpersonal brand or company interactions. It can be stated that loyalty as a variable in modeling consumer behaviour can be analyzed from two perspectives: an attitudinal (eg: loyalty as an affective dimension) and a behavioural perspective (Casalo et.al, 2010). Given the importance of the intention to become loyal in this environment, it is vital to examine the antecedent factors for this variable, as well as the results of the manifested intention .

The use of online media acts as a conscious effort of the consumer to meet a range of cognitive, affective and conative needs, such as information, entertainment, social or aspirational needs, or even escape from everyday reality. The benefit of such an approach in studying consumer behaviour in relation to marketing communication is to explain the factors that favor exposure to various media in terms of their expectations and the results of past approaches.

In addition to interpersonal communication activities, online consumer behaviour aims at using the platform or website as a tool in making a purchase, or communicating with the seller. On the one hand, consumers can make a relevant decision in accordance with their interests, or they can contact the company to express their satisfaction, ask for more information, or file a complaint.

The consumer's perception regarding the usefulness of the message is influenced by both the relevance of the information submitted and the

communication context. It is worth mentioning that in the most studies there is some confusion between usefulness and relevance (eg: Zeng et. al., 2009), although they differentiate between terms, they describe them as synonymous), although message usefulness involves more than matching the communication context available and the user's circumstances, being also formed by the user's specific information needs, perceptions of the brand, and a strong conative component. The relevance of the approach thus consists of the company's ability to arouse curiosity and novelty, while perceived usefulness also brings epistemic intake, an alternative that in the context of mental, physical or social conjecture is of interest to the consumer.

The informative character of the message is a multidimensional variable that can constitute real-time feedback, reciprocity and availability of information on request and personalization of informational content (Wojdyski, 2011). When the company applies a stimulus to show interactivity, the trader must be prepared to facilitate information requests in a timely manner. Measuring perceived informative character is used in consumer behaviour research for two purposes. The first is to determine whether the experimental stimuli (eg: technological characteristics conferred to a website) gives perceptions of informative character, and the second concerns the use of informative character as mediating variable through which different perceived stimuli affect other variables such as attitude or intention.

### 3. Conceptual model

Based on the literature consulted and the results obtained through exploratory research, we identified perceptions positively influencing attitudes and behavioural intentions of online users towards companies' communication activities in this environment. Thus, we propose a new conceptual and operational model regarding the influence of external factors in online communication activities on user intentions.

Effects of different persuasive techniques on attitudes were tested and confirmed in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Elaboration likelihood model - ELM), a theory that exemplifies training and can change attitudes as a result of the influence of persuasive arguments, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1984). Another similar model is the Heuristic-Systematic Model of Information Processing developed by Chaiken (1980).

One of the basic features that gives the usefulness of a communication message is informative character thereof. Both perceived usefulness and message informative character are fundamental beliefs, whose perceived power confers value to the communication message. This brings us to our first hypothesis:

H1: There is a direct and positive relationship between the informative character of online promotional messages and perceived usefulness of the promotional messages transmitted.

The level of trust in terms of promotional messages sent through the online social platform facilitates company performance, as trust is an intrepid confidence in acting on the advice source. Long-term relationships with consumers are founded on commitment and trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) or in a relationship of dependency and trust between transmitter and receiver. In examining the relationship marketing and social exchange theory in the online environment, trust is the central concept of trade relations, and lack of trust is a major impediment in the online trade relations. Sussman and Siegal (2003) found that the level of trust significantly influences user attitude in the context of online marketing communication, convictions involving trust covering both source credibility and trust in the message being sent (Ridings et.al., 2002). We thus present our second hypothesis:

H2: There is a direct and positive relationship between the level of user trust in the messages sent online by companies and attitude towards these messages.

In our proposed model, perceived usefulness refers to consumer perceptions of the outcome of an experience. The role of perceived usefulness in shaping attitudes has been extensively studied in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen, 1991)(Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985). This brings us to our third hypothesis:

H3: There is a direct and positive relationship between the perceived usefulness of the online promotional messages sent by companies and attitude towards these messages.

Recent studies aimed at beliefs in association with the communication activity or as predictor or mediator of attitudes towards a particular message (Mittal, 1994). The informative character of a message was considered as variable for the model as a normative belief (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Also, the informative character (informativeness) has been researched as a main dimension of attitude towards promotional messages by Durand and Lambert (Durand and Lambert, 1985) and Muehling (1987), which brings us to H4: There is a direct and positive relationship between informative character of online promotional messages sent by companies and attitude towards these messages.

As the volume of information increases, searching and identifying information relevant to the user's needs is difficult and tedious. Thus, consumers prefer interfaces in which information can be filtered automatically. According to Friestad and

Wright (1994), the knowledge gained from persuasion is assimilated in traditional learning process, specifically after passing through one's own filter and focusing on certain parts and characteristics of the message. In this case, in the information filtering process, consumers draw conclusions from their perception of the relevance of the message to their specific needs. This brings us to H5: There is a direct and positive relationship between the relevance of promotional messages sent by companies online and attitude towards such messages.

With regard to influencing intentions, links between variables were formulated in accordance with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), a psychological model used to examine relationships between variables and the individual's intention to exhibit a certain behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The theory is relevant to the present study as, participation in online communication is a volitional behaviour and the ongoing research purpose within the present paper is to investigate the intentions of members to assimilate the information conveyed by the companies in this environment, to distribute it or to become loyal to the transmitting company. Lately, TPB has often been used to explore variables that affect the behaviour of Internet users (Park and Yang, 2012). Considering behavioural intention in the three dimensions proposed, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H6: There is a direct and positive relationship between attitude towards messages sent by companies online and the intent to use the information submitted.

H7: There is a direct and positive relationship between attitude towards messages sent by companies online and the intent to distribute the information.

H8: There is a direct and positive relationship between attitude towards messages sent by companies online and the intent to become loyal to the company.

A view of the links between model variables is shown in Figure 1.

#### 4. Model testing

To ensure the uniformity of the investigated groups of Internet users in Romania, 1097 valid questionnaires were retained after data collection, the final sample used including 1097 subjects. The pre-testing of the survey was conducted electronically through an online platform (www.esurveyspro.com), following the same methodology, for proper research. Following pre-testing, the final version of the survey was distributed through four social platforms, email and in printed form with a filter question concerning Internet use.

#### 4.1. Construct validity

Exploratory factor analyses were performed, as well as confirmatory analysis, which serves to confirm the role of exploratory analysis by checking the exact load factors corresponding to the items on the latent variables and model confirmation, considering all relationships and correlations between latent variables using the WARP-PLS 4.0 software.

After testing measurements in terms of internal consistency shown in Table 1, each construct is valid, composed accuracy coefficients ranging from 0.898 (construct that measures the usefulness of information) and 0.979 (measuring attitude construct), composed accuracy coefficients exceeding 0.70 threshold recommended. In the case of Cronbach alpha and average variance extracted, note that all values are greater than the critical recommended threshold of 0.7.

Discriminant validity is checked using correlations among latent variables in Table 2, and the P values associated to correlations between latent variables. All correlations between latent variables are significant, and p-value is less than 0.001 for all cases, thus respecting the principle of discriminant validity.

In statistics, the severity of multicollinearity in partial least squared (PLS) analysis is quantified by the variance inflation factor (VIF) between latent variables in the model. In Table 3, the VIF is calculated for each column of latent variables (predictor) with respect to the latent variables in each row (criterion). In this case, VIF Character informativ- attitude- = 5.246 ( 5.246 = 2.29), so the standard error for the informativeness variable coefficient 2.29 times higher than it would be if the predictor variables were not correlated with other variables. According to the proposed hypothesis, the attitude variable presents seven correlations.

#### 4.2. Structural equation model

The structural model was based on the PLS regression algorithm (structural equation modeling by means of the partial least squares method) and includes the connection coefficients (standardized coefficients) and R squared for each endogenous variable (used to quantify the variation of the variables which can be explained by variation in other variables). The results are shown graphically in both Figure 2 and Table 4.

As seen in Table 4, all hypotheses are confirmed, a significance level  $p < 0.001$ , respected under all indices and ascertained by the accuracy of the related coefficients.

The results report an average path coefficient APC = 0.552 with  $p$ -value  $< 0.001$ , and average R squared AR = 0.481 with  $p$ -value  $< 0.001$ , and an average Variance Inflation Factor AVIF = 3.317. Therefore, with a  $p$  value of APC and ARS which does not exceed 0.05 significance and

AVIF at a value lower than 5, the model has predictive and explanatory capacity.

## 5. Conclusions

From a practical standpoint, the model developed provides organizations with the means of predicting the success of communication approaches and of evaluating the results of communication efforts through the characteristics analyzed. In both environments (real and virtual) attributes that ensure effective communication approaches are multidimensional and interdependent. We believe that model results confer practitioners a clearer view of the fundamental beliefs concerning the characteristics of messages sent by the company.

A first limitation of quantitative research is to the representativeness of its results only in Romania, the sample being restricted to Romanian Internet users.

Second, the research has a consumer-oriented approach, thus communication between organizations was neglected.

Another possible limitation of the research is the restricted number of variables describing the social and demographic characteristics of respondents, leading to the possibility of grounding a limited number of strategic proposals based on respondent characteristics investigated in the model. In different contexts, other variables such as prior experience or socio-cultural and religious boundaries may provide additional results. However, since the uniformity of social and demographic groups was maintained, further model results will be presented in future work, studying the effects of different control variables (eg. Gender, Age, Income, etc.), and multi-group analysis will be performed, to see the strength of predictive variables in each of the cases. In doing so, communication strategies can be proposed for each particular group.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Study Measures

Figure 1. The influence of online marketing communication on behavioural intentions

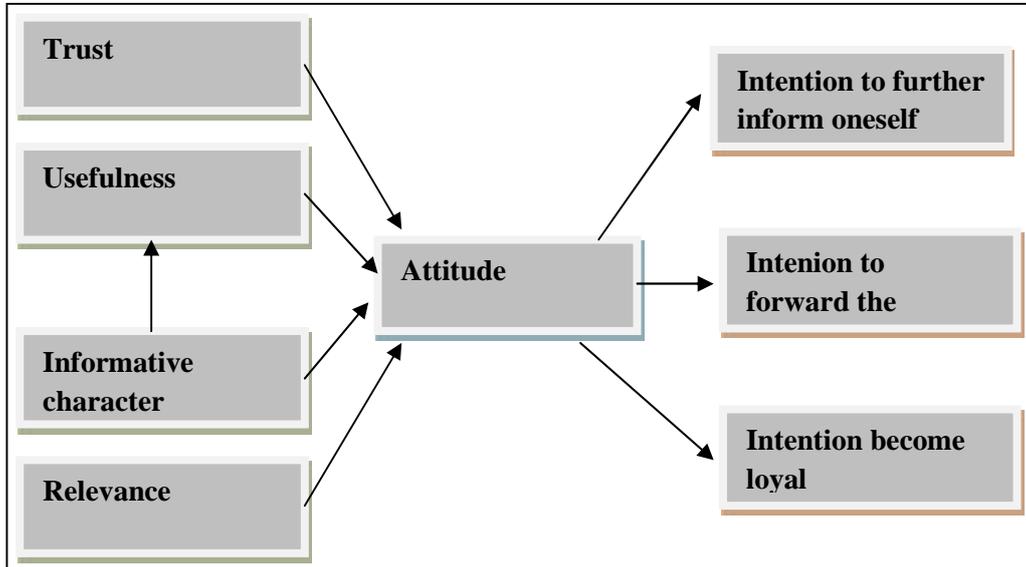
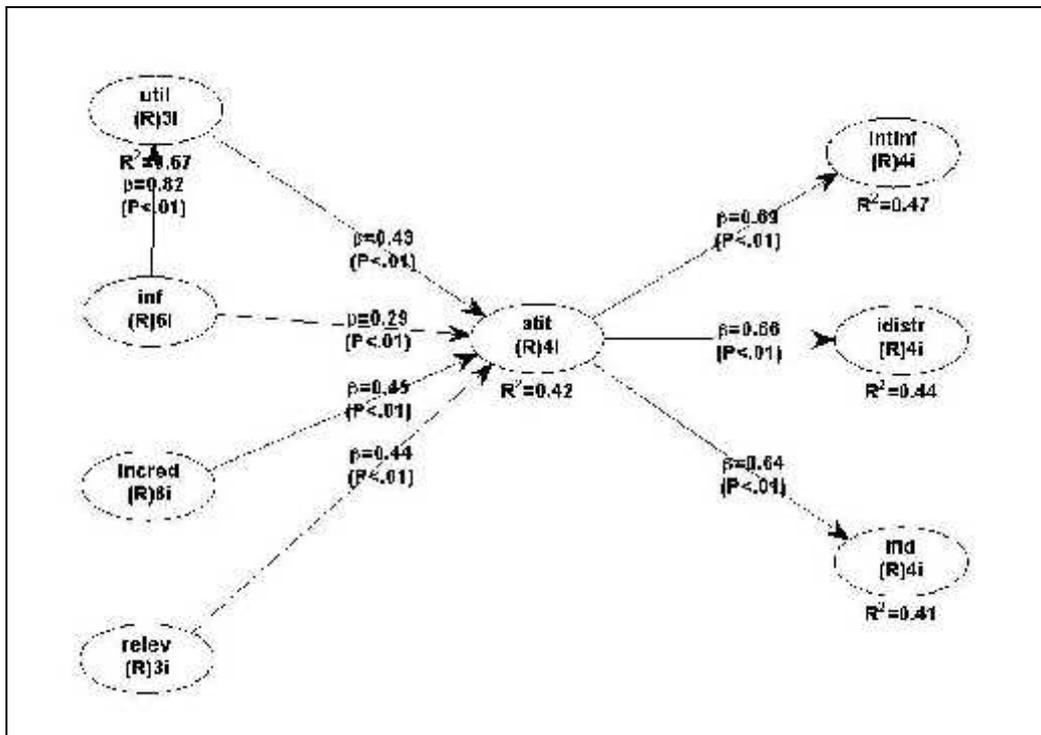


Figure 2. Structural equation model estimates



**Table 1. Internal consistency**

Construct	Composite reliability	Cronbach Alpha	Average Variance Extracted
Trust	0.959	0.948	0.795
Usefulness	0.898	0.827	0.748
Informativeness	0.962	0.952	0.809
Relevance	0.904	0.841	0.760
Attitude	0.979	0.971	0.921
Intention to inform oneself	0.933	0.904	0.776
Intention to distribute	0.938	0.912	0.791
Intention to become loyal	0.925	0.891	0.755

**Table 2. Correlations among latent variables**

	Trust	Usefulness	inf	relev	atit	intinf	idistr	ILoyal
Trust	0.891	0.572	0.649	0.431	0.594	0.469	0.464	0.456
Usefulness	0.572	0.840	0.615	0.444	0.686	0.524	0.447	0.439
Inf	0.649	0.615	0.899	0.393	0.592	0.441	0.394	0.431
Relev	0.431	0.444	0.393	0.872	0.695	0.508	0.434	0.388
Atit	0.594	0.686	0.592	0.695	0.960	0.685	0.658	0.628
Intinf	0.469	0.524	0.441	0.508	0.685	0.881	0.418	0.427
Idistr	0.464	0.447	0.394	0.434	0.658	0.418	0.889	0.423
ILoyal	0.456	0.439	0.431	0.388	0.628	0.427	0.423	0.869

**Table 3. Variation inflation factors (VIF)**

	Trust	Usefulness	inf	relev	atit	intinf	idistr	ILoyal
Trust								
Usefulness								
Inf								
Relev								
Atit	3.762	2.794	5.246	1.466				
Intinf								
Idistr								
ILoyal								

**Table 4. Path coefficients and p values**

	Trust	Usefulness	inf	relev	atit	intinf	idistr	ILoyal
Trust								
Usefulness			0.818 p < 0.001					
Inf								
Relev								
Atit	0.449 p < 0.001	0.431 p < 0.001	0.295 p < 0.001	0.438 p < 0.001				
Intinf					0.686 p < 0.001			
Idistr					0.664 p < 0.001			
ILoyal					0.637 p < 0.001			

