Perception of Source Credibility Within Touristic Virtual Communities: A Cross-Generational Examination

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Abstract. Online reviews are an important factor in the pre-purchase phase of tourist products, but lack social cues to enable an evaluation of the source's trustworthiness, leading to uncertainty towards the source itself. Drawing upon generational theory, generations differ in their attitudes towards the credibility of online information and their touristic purchase behaviors. A differentiation between actively and passively sought cues regarding source (e.g. profile pictures) and message characteristics (e.g. trustworthiness) is made, in order to better understand the attitudes towards online reviews. An eye tracking study with ten participants of Generation Y and seven of Generation Baby Boomer was conducted on the travel site Tripadvisor.com. Results show that Generation Y and Generation Baby Boomer differ significantly in their attitude towards user generated content. Generation Baby Boomer relies less frequently on reviews than Generation Y, reads reviews less frequently and seeks for elements indicating the level of source credibility. For both generations, message characteristics including factors such as the quality of the language, the length of a message and the congruence with personal interests represent the most important cues in the evaluation of source credibility. Generation BB does not pay attention to source characteristics at all but derives some of them, such as travel interests or the experience of a reviewer, from message characteristics.

Keywords: Source credibility · Electronic word-of-mouth · Eye tracking

1 Introduction

The rise of online booking and reservation systems has led to changes in the strategic and operational processes in travel agencies and destination management organizations, offering new opportunities for tourists in their purchase decision making processes and in the possibility to browse past experiences and reviews of touristic products [1]. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) functionalities, like online reviews, have been integrated in and transformed social media sites into active virtual online communities or touristic online review sites, such as e.g. TripAdvisor [2]. Travelers are given the opportunity to exchange and consume touristic experiences online through text, videos and photographs [3].

Due to the intangible character of experience goods, an evaluation of such products in the pre-purchase phase proves to be difficult. Hence, purchase decisions evolve around interpersonal influences, which are generated through online reviews and shared on virtual online communities [4]. In order to mitigate the prevailing feeling of uncertainty, consumers seek for online information about a product and for shared experiences by former customers, which leads to indirect purchasing experiences [5].

Since eWOM does not provide any nonverbal or contextual cues, consumers are confronted with the obstacle to base their evaluation about the credibility and integrity of a source on the information provided by the website. While a connection and significant tie-strength between information sender and receiver is remarkable in traditional word of mouth, no social connection can be recognized in eWOM. Even more, a main characteristic of eWOM is its indirect - and mostly public – communication, wherein no emotional connection between sender and receiver can be recognized [6]. This weak tie strength between information sender and receiver leads to a difficult assessment of a source's credibility. Therefore, cues for source credibility are sought to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Individuals browse and look for information displayed on the website, that provides them with cues about the reliability of a source. Such cues help in the assessment of the credibility of a reviewer and play an essential role in consumers' decision making processes [7].

This study investigates relevant information cues in online reviews of touristic products and how such cues are evaluated regarding the credibility of an information source in touristic virtual communities, based on the example of TripAdvisor. It is analyzed, whether user-generated content is relevant at all for these two generations, when booking a vacation online. In a further step, the study aims at investigating how source credibility is perceived differently by Generation Y and Generation Baby Boomer and through which factors such a difference is manifested. Since generations are said to have diverse attitudes towards online media and purchase behaviors, the question arises, whether this theory can also be applied to the topic of source credibility. Thus, the following research question is derived: *What are the differences in perceived cues for source credibility between Generation Y and Generation Baby Boomers in touristic community websites?*

2   Source Credibility Theory

Hovland refers to credibility as the degree of perceived believability of a set of information or a source [8]. Fogg and Tseng [9] describe credibility as "*a perceived quality (…), it does not reside within an object, a person or a piece of information.*" Hence, people who are described as credible are considered believable and information that is described as credible is regarded as believable information. Further, a distinction between source credibility and message credibility can be made.

There are various models explaining source credibility and its elements, with many based on the original model introduced by Hovland. This model consists of two factors, namely *perceived expertise* and *perceived trustworthiness*. The rating of these parameters lies in the subjective perception of the receiver. Source credibility is proven to have a positive effect on overall message credibility. Due to the intangible character

and the associated economic and psychological risks within touristic decision making, as well as the absence of physical cues within eWOM, source credibility plays an especially important role in the travel and tourism industry [10]. Perceived source credibility has a significant impact on the attitude, opinion formation as well as the future behavior of the message receiver [8].

Ayeh et al. extended the model of source credibility by including a consumers' attitude towards a product, brand or company through three factors: Trustworthiness, Expertise, and Homophily [2].

Trustworthiness is defined as "*the degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he/she considers most valid.*" [8] Mayer and Davis similarly describe trustworthiness as "*the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party*" [11]. Ohanian agrees with this definition, stating that trustworthiness describes the consumer's confidence in the reviewer providing honest and objective information. Trustworthy reviewers do not have any intention to mislead the customer and are willing to tell the truth based on their experiences. Thus, perceived trustworthiness can lead to a change in someone's attitude and has the potential to influence purchase intentions. It is assumed that perceived trustworthiness positively effects the attitude towards using eWOM as a source for travel planning [12].

Expertise is said to influence the credibility of a source immensely [8] and is defined as the extent "*to which user generated content contributors are perceived to be a source of valid assertions*" (p. 23). It is the degree to which someone considers the information provider to possess enough knowledge and skills in order to make qualified statements about a topic [12]. In the context of touristic eWOM, expertise is regarded as a component of the "*multi-dimensional construct of prior knowledge that includes the elements familiarity and past experience.*" [13] Someone who is considered an expert in a special field of interest is likely to produce more product- and purchase related messages than a non-expert. That is, an expert's opinion is taken into consideration more often than the opinion of non-experts. Due to their knowledge and degree of experience, experts are perceived as more influential and possess a higher degree of persuasion power than non-experts [14].

Homophily is an element which has derived from McGuire's "Source-Attractiveness Model" and is defined as the similarity between the sender and the receiver of a message regarding specific attributes [15]. The fundamental principle of social homophily can be found in Laumann's theory and represents the so-called "like-me principle" which states that individuals tend to establish relationships with people that are similar to them in their interests and attitudes and belong to an equal social status [16]. While in former times, homophily was rather regarded as a characteristic based on similar demographics, it is nowadays seen as a construct of shared mindsets and interests [17]. Individuals tend to interact with people that are like them. Hence, when reading reviews, consumers tend to seek for characteristics, mindsets and values of a reviewer fitting their own values. If similar values as well as similar preferences are recognizable, an increased extent of perceived homophily can be recognized [15].

Consumers tend to rather rely on eWOM created by people that have similar interests and mindsets. The perceived trustworthiness and expertise of an information source are determined by the congruence between the sender's and the receiver's mindsets [2]. Still, in online communication social homophily does not necessarily need to have an impact on credibility or attitude formation. A reason can be the lack of personal knowledge, which may be substituted by specific cues in online communication [14].

3   Source Characteristics as Cues for Source Credibility

As information providers are typically unknown within eWOM, individuals can only make assumptions about their intentions. Thus, they are searching for cues in order to assess the credibility of an information source, which subsequently determines the credibility of the review and the overall attitude. Source characteristics are often used to make judgements about the credibility of a source. Many consumer review sites allow a reviewer to display personal information. Such cues of information are an aid for readers in the formation of impressions and judgments [7]. The disclosure of identity information of a reviewer has an impact on the overall credibility of a message and its' source. It reduces uncertainty, which frequently evolves from the lack of social cues in online communication [18]. Moreover, the presence of social information leads to an increased perception of interpersonal warmth and affection [19].

A distinction between self-generated and system-generated cues can be made. Self-generated cues refer to information provided by the information sender, whereas system-generated cues include elements such as the reputation among other users [7].

3.1   Self-Generated Cues

Self-disclosure explains the phenomenon of individuals enclosing inner private and intimate information to a broader public within virtual communities. In a broader sense, it explains the phenomenon of conveying messages that are related to themselves and include thoughts, feelings and experiences. This also refers to individuals creating a so-called online identity – a special kind of social identity within virtual communities or web spaces [7]. Self-disclosure leads to an enhancement of interpersonal relationships; intimate relationships are built. A communication partner who encloses personal details is perceived as more credible. Credibility increases as the information enables the receiver to conform to the previous expectations about the sender [20]. Nevertheless, reviews including personal information are perceived as less credible than reviews providing no personal information at all [21].

Profile Picture. Within Uncertainty Reduction Theory, individuals avoid the feeling of uncertainty in interpersonal relationships. In order to reduce this feeling online, profile pictures are disclosed. This can reduce the feeling of uncertainty and transforms the impersonal relationship into a personal conversation [22]. The theory of Perceived Social Presence is regarded as an antecedent for this phenomenon, stating that sources including a profile picture are to be perceived of higher social presence than those

without. Social presence is defined as the extent to which a medium gives users the impression that their communication partner is psychologically present [23]. Moreover, physical attractiveness has an impact on the perception of source credibility. Physical attractive communication partners are perceived as more credible, as they are subjectively perceived as individuals possessing more expertise over a certain topic [24].

Gender. Women and men do not only differ in their attitude towards the credibility of a review, although each sex tends to rate articles by the opposite gender as more credible than articles written by the same sex [25]. However, other sources state that reviews not containing any information about the source's gender are perceived as more helpful than those giving information about the gender of the information provider [21]. Still, gender does not play such an important role as previously predicted and no significant influence is remarkable [26].

Location. When a review is related to a specific location, information delivered from sources living at or close to this location is considered more credible. It is assumed that the source has good knowledge of the esoteric aspects of the location. According to a study analyzing travel blogs and touristic virtual communities, individuals living close to a particular place, so called residents, have more influential power over this place than former tourists living further away [27]. Also, reviews by people living close to a specific hotel are perceived as being more credible [21].

Age. Consumers perceive a source being approximately of the same age as more credible. People have the feeling that they are confronted with the same wishes and problems and have similar mindsets [28]. A reviewer's age significantly impacts the perception of eWOM and is thus regarded as a central predictor of source credibility [26].

3.2 System-Generated Cues

Such cues include reputation as the endorsement of a reviewer by others. Reputation is regarded as the extent to which information receivers judge an information source to be honest and to have a concern about others. Reputation, a factor that heavily impacts the feeling of perceived credibility towards a particular person, is built through the collective view of others [29]. Reputation cues are aggregated opinions by others about a comment or a reviewer and serve as collective endorsements. Individuals are more likely to have a credible attitude towards a person if a comment is rated as helpful by a large number of peers and this information is displayed on the information source's profile or next to the comment [30]. Such popularity has a positive impact on the perceived level of source credibility [31]. This phenomenon is also referred to as the "Bandwagon effect". A reviewer who is endorsed by a large amount of people is rather trusted as a lot of other consumers trust him. The so-called bandwagon heuristic explains that opinions of the majority are taken for granted [32].

3.3   Additional Cues

Within virtual communities, especially TripAdvisor, additional cues will be considered as well. Travel frequency plays an important role and is another predictor for the level of perceived source credibility [26]. It is assumed that this cue influences source credibility, since it determines whether a source is experienced and therefor influences the level of perceived expertise. In addition, travel interest is understood to have a major impact on perceived source credibility [7]. It is assumed that travel interests influence the perceived feeling of homophily of an information receiver towards the source.

A list and summary of all operationalized factors regarding source credibility can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalization of constructs.

Construct	Definition/background	Operationalization
Trustworthiness	*"The degree of confidence in the communicator's intent to communicate the assertions he/she considers most valid"* [8]	Trustworthiness strongly influences overall perceived source credibility through: Profile picture, location, age, gender, travel interests, member since, number of visited places, helpful ratings on website [2]
Homophily/ trustworthiness	Homophily significantly impacts perceived trustworthiness of a source [2]	When I have the feeling that a reviewer is similar to me due the above stated characteristics, my feelings towards perceived trustworthiness is increased
Expertise	*"The extend "to which user-generated content contributors are perceived to be a source of valid assertions"* [8]	Expertise strongly influences perceived source credibility through: Profile picture, location, age, gender, travel interests, member since, number of visited places, helpful ratings on website. [2]
Homophily/expertise	Homophily significantly impacts perceived expertise of a source. [2]	When I have the feeling that a reviewer is similar to me due the above stated characteristics, my feeling s/he possesses expertise in the field is increased
Profile picture	Physical attractiveness is said to have an important impact on the perception of eWOM. [24]	Did you look at the physical attractiveness of the source? What did the profile picture tell you?

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*continued*)

Construct	Definition/background	Operationalization
Location	When a topic of discussion is related to a specific place, input which is delivered from sources living at or close to the destination is considered more credible [27]	Is (and why) the location of a reviewer important to you? Does it matter whether s/he lives at the place of interest or not?
Age	Consumers are likely to have a high feeling of perceived credibility when the information source is approximately of the same age [26]	Is (and why) the age of a reviewer important to you? Do you consider sources of similar / different ages as important?
Gender	Women and men do not only differ in their attitude towards credibility of a review, but each sex also tends to rate the opposite genders' articles as more credible than same genders' articles [25]	Is (and why) the gender of a reviewer important to you? Do you perceive a male or a female source as more credible?
Travel interests	Travel interests have an important impact on perceived source credibility. It is assumed these have an effect on the perceived feeling of homophily of an information receiver towards the message source [7]	Which role do travel interests play for you? Are you looking for travel interests similar to your own?
Member since		Do you consider the duration of the reviewers' membership?
Number of visited cities	Travel frequency plays an important role and can predict perceived source credibility [26]	Is (and why) the frequency of previous travel activities important to you?
Endorsement	Individuals are more likely to have a credible attitude towards a person if a comment is related as helpful by a large number of peers and this number is displayed on the information source's profile or next comment [30]	Is (and why) the helpfulness rating important to you? Do you consider sources more credible when they are endorsed by other people?

3.4 Message Credibility

Message credibility, in contrast, consists of the factors *Content*, manifested in the clarity and valence of the message, and *Consensus,* whether someone agrees because the own values fit the ones of the sender of a message. The latter consists of receiver judgment and review consistency [33].

Although a distinction between source and message credibility is made, these two kinds of credibility are interlinked. Credible sources are expected to provide credible information and credible messages are likely to be written by credible sources. When consumers are confronted with purchase decisions, purchase related messages – such as eWOM in the form of online reviews – are sought. Moreover, evidence which helps in the evaluation of an information source's credibility, is looked for. Positive characteristics of an information source can lead to an increase in the perceived credibility of the content delivered in a message, which again leads to an increased likelihood of the information receiver to accept the message. Most sources tackling the issue of source credibility prove, that a source, which possesses a high degree of perceived credibility, is more persuasive than a source being perceived as non-credible. A review provided by a source which possesses a high degree of credibility leads to more favorable behavioral intentions, whereas a source perceived as non-credible, leads to the opposite behavior [8].

4   Generational Attitudes Towards EWOM

The term generation describes a set of people born within the same time span. Each generation spans approximately twenty years and slowly transforms into the next generation. During their life span, each generation experiences similar events and is exposed to similar external influences in the form of historical or social events. Thus, members of a generation develop similar shared values that evolve through these experiences. All members of a generation are understood to possess similar personality traits, also referred to as "peer personality" [34].

4.1   Generational Approach Towards Online Media

Different generations employ different ways to handle, use and evaluate eWOM. There are some remarkable differences between different generations in their attitude towards online media and eWOM. While older generations are less likely to use eWOM in a purchase decision making process, younger generations tend to use travel reviews more frequently, especially in the middle of the planning process to limit alternatives to choose from, and consequently select the best available product [26].

Within this study, a focus will be put on Generation Y and Generation BB. It will be examined how these two generations differ in their behavior regarding the evaluation of source credibility in touristic eWOM. Although studies have made clear that different generations view online information differently, only little research has been conducted regarding the difference between the two generations in perceived cues for source credibility.

4.2   Generation Y

Regarding the aspect of trust in online media and eWOM, members of Generation Y are more likely to exhibit trust than former generations [35]. However, Generation Y is

considered a generation that is the most careful of all generations in online social networks. They are more likely, than any other generation, to consider perceived risks before engaging in online activities [36]. From this perspective, it can be understood that Generation Y is the more careful generation that might check for source credibility cues more thoroughly. Professional advice does not play a significant role for Generation Y; it is considered the least important factor [37].

Regarding their holiday behavior, Generation Y takes shorter vacations but therefore tends to go on holiday more frequently. Travel reviews are mainly used in the planning process to narrow down alternatives and to create a set of options to choose from. Moreover, reviews are mainly used in order to reduce uncertainty [26].

4.3   Generation Baby Boomers (BB)

Generation BB has grown up with mass marketing and has seen the rise of the internet, networks and television. This generation is characterized by their revolutionary outlook as they have experienced constant social change. They are frequent travelers who prefer new and distant countries. BB tend to travel a lot and have ambitious plans for the future. Moreover, internationalization of trade, food and culture has played an important role and determined their lives [38]. Also regarded as the Generation 50 plus, the grey generation or the third generation, they can be defined as a generation that is mobile, interested in and rapidly adapting to changes and new trends [39]. Although people expect this generation to be put off from new technologies, sources state that they are experienced in using such technologies and are quick adapters, as they have been confronted with technological and other social changes throughout their whole life [40]. Members of the BB generation are longing for more input in the buying process and seek for control within it. Unlike Generation Y, they are mainly searching for products that offer good value. They look at actual features and characteristics of a product whereas image-related messages are not taken into consideration [41].

The BB generation utilizes the Internet more and more often in purchase decision processes; especially in the process of vacation planning [42]. Although the number of those consumers seeking online information in the pre-purchase phase has been increasing over the last years, only few BB purchase online [43]. One reason, why many senior citizens are put off from using the Internet for shopping purchases, is a lack of confidence in online media [44]. However, although senior citizens rarely do shop online, they often use the Internet as a medium to get informed about products and to search for information needs [45]. Still, there is a remarkable difference compared to Generation Y regarding the relevance of eWOM in travel related topics, as older consumers are less likely to read other travelers' reviews [26]. Members of the BB generation are, when utilizing reviews, less likely to evaluate the credibility of an online source and tend to accept information without checking for cues indicating the reliability of the source. They focus on the actual message and search for cues identifying message credibility, whereas cues indicating the credibility of the source itself are not taken into consideration [46].

5   Methodology

The main goal of this study is the examination of the role of source credibility in eWOM in the touristic context, focusing on how Generation Y and Generation BB differ in their perceived cues for source credibility. In this context, the role of source as well as message characteristics, such as content with regard to the perception of source credibility, will be examined. Since attentional behavior is compared with self-reported behavior, a distinction between actively and passively sought cues is made (cf. Table 2).

Table 2. Framework for eye tracking analysis

Actively sought	Actively sought within AOI	The characteristic is sought within the eye tracking experiment and per the post-test questionnaire also a characteristic which has been paid attention to
	Actively sought somewhere else	The characteristic is not sought within the AOI but per the post-test questionnaire it is a characteristic which is regarded. It can be derived that it is fixed to another item or characteristic
Passively sought		The cue is sought within the experiment but per the post-test questionnaire it represents a cue which has not been paid any attention to

Relevant characteristics were marked as areas of interest (AOI). AOIs represent zones on a website that are significantly meaningful. The following AOIs were created: *Profile picture*, *Location*, *Member since*, *Endorsement* and *Message characteristics* (the actual message and the subject headline). For these AOIs, the following measures were calculated: *Time to first fixation*, *fixation count* and *visit duration*.

5.1   Experiment

The experiment was conducted utilizing a Tobii T60 Eyetracker using the travel website TripAdvisor.com. The procedure followed a standardized process including the following steps [47].

- **Pre-test questionnaire.** The questionnaire included questions about the participants' online shopping behavior and their vacation behavior.
- **Task scenario.** Participants were asked to act like in a real-life situation and in case they were currently planning a seven-day trip to their preferred destination on TripAdvisor. Therefore, all had to think about their travel destination, travel party composition and travel dates before they started the experiment and write this down.
- **Post-test questionnaire.** This includes questions about topics that cannot be directly observed. These are rather related to feelings and opinions. On a four-point Likert scale (1 – not applicable to 4 – applicable), participants were asked if they have looked at reviews provided by former customers and which cues they had sought in order to evaluate the source credibility. The first part covered attitudes

towards source and message characteristics during the experiment, the second part asked about general attitudes towards these. The third part aiming at attitudes regarding Ayeh's model of source credibility, followed by questions regarding factors influencing personal vacation decisions and perception towards source credibility. The last part asked for demographic data.

- **De-Briefing interview.** In order to develop a better understanding of what the participants have done and experienced during the experiment.

5.2   Participants

In total, twenty people were tested within the experiments, ten from Generation Y (17–38 years old) and seven[1] from Generation BB (50–72 years old) using a randomized sample. Generation Y consisted of eight females and two male participants with 60% spending more than five hours online per day; nine travel several times a year, with none booking offline and all being familiar with TripAdvisor. Recommendations by friends (3.2), virtual communities (3.1) and destination websites (3.0) were the most frequently consulted sources for Generation Y in the process of vacation planning, via travel agencies the least (1.3). Generation BB consisted of four females and three male participants with 71% spending 1–2 h online per day; four travel several times a year, booking their holidays online (7), direct (4) and via a travel agency (2). Destination websites (3.3) and virtual communities (2.3) and recommendations by friends (2.1) were the most frequently consulted information sources for travel planning, travel agencies (1.9) and social media (1.4) the least.

6   Results

Regarding the aspect of source credibility, it can be recognized that for both generations, source characteristics play a less important role than message characteristics. Regarding the metrics gained from the AOIs, it could be derived that the review itself was the element which was most often fixated, first fixated and represented the highest visit duration. Combining these observations with the results from the post-test questionnaire and the de-briefing interviews stating that message characteristics are the most frequently mentioned characteristic regarding source credibility, it can be derived that message characteristics represent for both generations more valuable and reliable cues in the evaluation of source credibility than source characteristics (cf. Figure 1). While it is remarkable that source characteristics are sought by some members of Generation Y, they are not at all referred to by Generation BB. This goes along with Liao und Fu's statement reporting that BB mainly focus on the actual message and search for cues

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[1] The original sample constituted of ten participants. Two participants had to be omitted due to reporting over-confident IT-skills and already asked a lot of computer-usage related questions in the pre-test questionnaire stage. One participant was over-strained in the trip planning stage and chose "any" hotel, in order to finish the task "somehow".
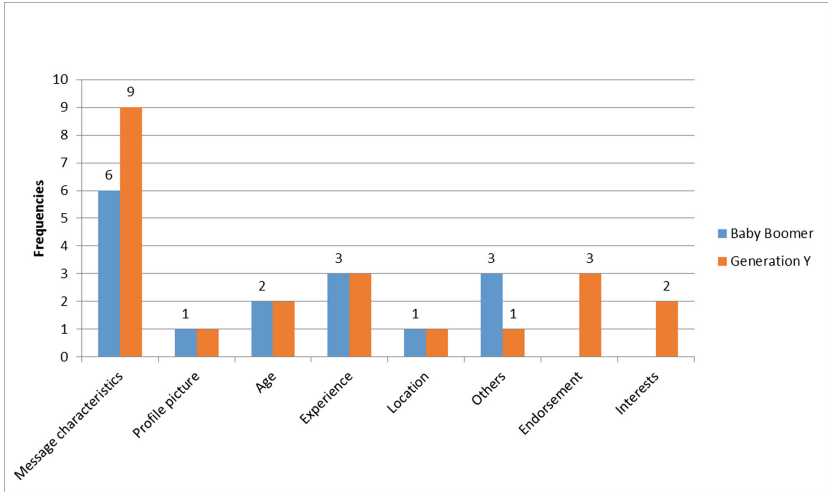
Fig. 1. Source credibility cues by generation

identifying message credibility whereas cues giving information on how credible the source could be are almost not sought at all [46].

6.1 The Role of Message Characteristics

Message characteristics play the most important role, also in the evaluation of source credibility. This goes along with Moran and Muzellec [33] stating that message and source credibility are interlinked. When it comes to message characteristics, the following characteristics are paid attention to by both generations:

- Grammar and spelling
- Length of a message
- Congruence with personal interests

Moreover, and in contrast to Generation Y, Generation BB mentions to pay attention to the level of the objectiveness of a message. A message has to be coherent, conclusive and justified so that a source can be regarded as credible. Moreover, statements praising everything as extremely good are not regarded as being credible and have a negative influence on the perceived level of source credibility.

6.2 The Role of Source Characteristics

Figure 2 sums up the insights gained from the eye tracking data and post-test questionnaires regarding the role of source characteristics.

Regarding the role of source characteristics, a differentiation between those source characteristics sought within the relevant areas (factor *Endorsement* until *Member*

	Generation Y							Generation BB			
	Time to first fixation	Visit Duration	Fixation Count	Actively within AOI	Actively regarded but sw. else	Influence on elements of SC	Passively regarded	Actively within AOI	Actively regarded but sw. else	Influence on elements of SC	Passively regarded
Endorsement	74,22 sec	0,37 sec	11,14 sec	44% (4 out of 9)	11% (1 out of 9)	TW 3 out of 4 EP 3 out of 4	34% (3 out of 9)	0%	0%		0%
Profile Picture	88,86 sec	0,24 sec	6 sec	22% (2 out of 9)	0% (0 out of 9)	TW 2 out of 4 EP 2 out of 4	44% (4 out of 9)	0%	0%		0%
Location	124,06 sec	0,34 sec	2,25 sec	20% (2 out of 10)	20% (2 out of 10)	TW Median=1 EP Median=1	20% (2 out of 10)	0%	25% (1 out of 4)	TW 0 EP 2 out of 4	0%
Member since	248,35 sec	0,33 sec	1,67 sec	11% (1 out of 9)	22% (2 out of 9)	TW Median=2 EP Median=3	22% (2 out of 9)	0%	0%		0%
Travel Interests					40% (by 4 out of 10)	TW Median =3 EP Median=3			17% (by 1 out of 6)	TW Median 4 EP Median 4	
Age					30% (by 3 out of 10)	TW Median = 2 EP Median = 3			29% (by 2 out of 7)	TW Median = 2 EP Median = 2	
Gender					Not regarded at all	No influence			Not regarded at all	No influence	
Number of visited cities					10% (by 1 out of 10)	TW Median = 3 EP Median = 3			14% (by 1 out of 7)	TW Median = 4 EP Median = 4	

Fig. 2. Summary of source characteristics (TW - Trustworthiness, EP - Expertise)

Since) and the source characteristics not regarded within those areas but regarded somewhere else, such as the message itself, is made (*Travel interests* until *Gender*).

Although less frequently referred to than message characteristics, source characteristics tend to play a more important role for Generation Y than for Generation BB. Similarly to what has been discovered within the eye tracking analysis, the factor *Endorsement* represents a cue which is most frequently sought and fixated. Moreover, an impact on source credibility, with both a remarkable effect on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise can be recognized. This goes along with findings from the post-test questionnaire and the eye tracking analysis. Moreover, the factor *Duration of Membership* – although representing the highest time to first fixation and lowest fixation count – plays an important role influencing the perception of source credibility, since it affects the level of perceived expertise to a large extent. The factors *Endorsement* and a reviewer's *Profile picture* are factors that are frequently sought passively; these two were sought within the eye tracking experiment but not stated as being regarded within the post-test questionnaire. Following Just and Carpenter's [48] eye-mind hypothesis, it can be derived that they could have a subconscious influence on the level of perceived source credibility.

The source characteristics *travel interests*, *number of visited cities*, *age* and *gender* were not clearly discernable in the eye tracking experiment. Since these characteristics were not sought within the relevant areas of interest, it is derived that they are fixed to message characteristics, such as the content itself, and not as a singular characteristic. Interesting factors are *travel interests* and the *age* of a reviewer. Although only

regarded by one participant, the number of visited cities is another factor that plays an important role in the perception of source credibility.

Generation BB, in contrast does not regard source characteristics at all. No participant regarded any source characteristics within the relevant areas but rather derived some of them from the message itself. *Travel interests* as well as the *number of visited cities* play an important role for Generation BB. Also, according to the findings of the de-briefing interview, the experience of a reviewer is rated as important.

6.3   The Impact of Homophily on the Perception of Source Credibility

The factors *trustworthiness* and *expertise*, which represent the antecedents of *source credibility*, are determined by *homophily*, according to what Ayeh et al. [2] state within their model of source credibility. Within our study, the influence on the factors *trustworthiness* and *expertise* was examined, by taking generational differences into account. Whereas Generation Y defines homophily as the similarity in *travel interests*, Generation BB manifests homophily in the similarity of *age* and *gut feeling*; also the *level of education* was mentioned to be a factor indicating the degree of homophily.

According to Generation Y, homophily has an important impact on the perceived level of trustworthiness, the perceived level of expertise and the perception of overall credibility. In contrast, Generation BB regards the influence on the perceived level of trustworthiness as most important, whereas the impact on expertise and overall credibility is regarded as minor.

7   Summary

The following contributions to literature were made. It is notable that Generation Y and Generation BB differ in their attitude towards eWOM – Generation BB relies less on reviews than Generation Y. Moreover, we can confirm that Generation BB tends to be less concerned about source credibility and source characteristics.

For Generation Y, message characteristics represent the most important cue regarding to source credibility. Parts of the relevant message characteristics are the length of a message, the style of writing and the congruence with personal interests and purposes. Although source characteristics are regarded as less important, these are sought cues which influence the perceived level of source credibility. *Endorsement* is a factor that is most frequently sought and has a high impact on the perceived level of source credibility, by influencing both – the level of perceived trustworthiness and the level of perceived expertise. Although not as frequently sought, *duration of membership* is another important indicator influencing the level of perceived expertise. Furthermore, *travel interests* and *age* of a reviewer influence the level of perceived source credibility. However, they are not sought within the areas providing actual source characteristics but are expected to be derived from the message itself, which again proves the influence of message characteristics and the review itself. Moreover, it is remarkable that some characteristics, such as the reviewers' profile picture, are

frequently passively sought which could result, following the eye-mind hypothesis, in a subconscious influence on the perceived level of source credibility.

Similar to Generation Y, Generation BB regards message characteristics as most important factor in the evaluation of source credibility. They also pay attention to the length of the message, the writing quality as well as the congruence with personal interests and purposes. Moreover, the degree of objectiveness within statements plays an important role in the evaluation of source credibility. Source characteristics on the other hand do not play any important role. They are rarely sought and when sought are not derived from the areas providing this information, but are derived from the message itself. Among those characteristics, *travel interests* as well as the *number of previously visited cities* of a reviewer are important factors influencing the level of perceived source credibility.

Moreover, the degree of homophily between a reviewer and a review reader is said to influence source credibility. Both generations agree that homophily influences the level of perceived trustworthiness towards an information source; however, its impact on perceived expertise and overall credibility seems controversial, with Generation Y reporting these factors as being more influential regarding to source credibility than Generation BB.

8   Limitations and Further Research

This experiment comes with several limitations. In particular, the small number of participants limits its explanatory power. Generation BB had to exclude three participants due to several reasons. Within the brief window of testing, we were unable to recruit new participants on such a short notice. Still, timing and testing this generation needs double the preparation and testing time than actually planned and needs to be prepared with extensive care. The test scenarios opted for an unstructured exploration by the user on TripAdvisor, which led to completely different search paths through the website, and consequently made comparing and harmonizing all relevant areas of interest challenging.

Further research should put emphasis on the message characteristics and investigate the elements of message credibility in further detail. Ayeh et al.'s model of source credibility was not applied to the factor message characteristics, which represents another field for further investigation. Additionally, further studies could examine the influence of online search behavior of Generation BB and focus further on the perception of source credibility. Moreover, other generations such as Generation X, may be taken into account.

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