ONLINE REVIEWS AS A MEANS TO BREAK THE TABOO IN E-MENTAL-HEALTH SERVICES

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Abstract. Online psychological counseling provides support for mental stress via Internet without requiring physical contact. However, both awareness and usage of this form of e-mental-health services remain low. To the best of our knowledge, research pertaining to the adoption of e-mental-health services from an online service marketing perspective remains scarce. We strive to address this gap and argue that online reviews can play a decisive role in reducing barriers. We thus investigate the influence of online reviews on the intention to use online psychological counseling. Based on the information adoption model (IAM), we address the influence of perceived argument quality and source credibility on information usefulness, information adoption, and usage intention. We quantitatively assessed data with a pre-tested structured online questionnaire. We displayed five images of actual online reviews and assessed all relevant constructs on 5-point Likert scales. We analyzed data by applying structural equation modeling (SEM) and found proof for all hypotheses. Our results stress the importance of online reviews for information adoption and usage intention, as both argument quality and source credibility significantly influence information usefulness, which leads to information adoption and positively influences usage intention.

Keywords: E-mental-health, Electronic word-of-mouth, Information adoption model

1   INTRODUCTION

Numerous new digital services have emerged in the healthcare sector in recent years. One example of such a service is online psychological counseling [2], which provides access to online-based counseling through video calls, chats, or emails [3]. Due to its confirmed effectiveness [4] and significant advantages, such as the low threshold of access [5], this form of intervention is considered to offer a suitable complement to conventional counseling or therapy [2]. However, both awareness and usage remain low [6], which might be caused by data security concerns, doubts about effectiveness, and fear of stigmatization [7–9]. It is thus essential to understand factors for acceptance and usage.

Online reviews are considered an important influence on the adoption of online services. The immateriality of services increases the perceived risk, which is why potential users increasingly rely on the experiences of others [10]. Against this backdrop, our study addresses the influence of electronic word-of-mouth in the form of online reviews on the intention to use online psychological counseling from an online services marketing perspective.

2   THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1   PSYCHOLOGICAL ONLINE COUNSELING

Literature discusses digital psychological services under the collective term "e-mental health" [11], which includes, for example, digital self-help programs, stress management applications, and online psychological counseling via video conference, audio telephony, or text-based email or chat [12].

In this context, Manhal-Baugus [14(p. 551)] describes online psychological counseling as *"a licensed mental health care professional providing mental health services via email, video conferencing, virtual reality technology, chat technology, or any combination of these."*

2.2   ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH AND ONLINE REVIEWS

Online reviews, as a widespread form of eWOM [15], represent previous users' perspectives and include opinions, information, and recommendations [16]. Following Jiménez and Mendoza [18], online reviews can be considered the most influential form of eWOM. Online reviews are perceived as more trustworthy and objective than advertising messages from companies [20] and, in some instances, are considered as credible as experiences shared by friends or family [21].

2.3   INFORMATION ADOPTION MODEL (IAM)

Sussman and Siegal [23] developed the Information Adoption Model (IAM) in an attempt to address factors influencing the adoption of information within computer-mediated communication [23,24]. The IAM posits that the perceived quality of an argument and the

credibility of the underlying source are determinants for the perceived usefulness of an information. Perceived usefulness finally leads to information adoption [23], which is defined as the *"extent to which people accept content that they are presented with as meaningful, after assessing its validity"* [25(p. 75)]. The new information can extend existing knowledge and thereby support decision-making [24].

3   CONCEPTUAL MODEL

To the best of our knowledge, research pertaining to the adoption of e-mental-health services from an online service marketing perspective remains scarce. We strive to address this gap with a multi-stage research project. This study represents the first step and addresses the role of eWOM for usage intention based on the information adoption model (IAM) (see Figure 1).
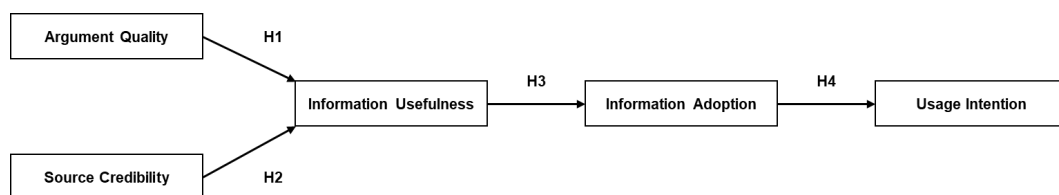

Figure 1. Conceptual model

3.1   ARGUMENT QUALITY

Argument quality is defined as *"the persuasive strength of arguments embedded in an informational message"* [26(p. 811)] and describes the extent to which recipients consider the content of an argument to be persuasive in order to perform a certain behavior. Reviews from other users might be considered qualitatively high and thus lead to the information being considered useful [27]. Following the IAM, we assume the perceived quality of online reviews to influence the perceived usefulness of an information:

H1: Perceived argument quality related to online reviews in the context of online psychological counseling positively influences perceived information usefulness.

3.2   SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Source credibility is defined as *"the perceived ability and motivation of the message source to produce accurate and truthful information"* [28(p. 240)] and thus describes the extent to which online reviews are perceived as credible [29]. Credible sources enable readers to attach meaning to the information they receive [30]. As a result, they are encouraged to accept and embrace this information. Sources that are perceived as not credible increase the perceived risk of consumers and subsequently lead to them not following the recommendation [27]. The fact that online reviews are often anonymous [27] and can be

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manipulated by companies [31] reinforces the role of the credibility of the source in this context [32].

H2: Perceived source credibility related to online reviews in the context of online psychological counseling positively influences perceived information usefulness.

3.3 INFORMATION USEFULNESS

Information usefulness describes the extent to which an information received is considered useful and valuable. Following the information adoption model, the usefulness of information is a predictor of information adoption [23]. If an information embedded in online reviews is considered useful, potential users might have a greater intention to accept that information and take it into account for further decision-making [33].

H3: Perceived information usefulness related to online reviews in the context of online psychological counseling positively influences information adoption.

3.4 INFORMATION ADOPTION AND INTENTION TO USE

Information adoption is defined as *"a process in which people purposefully engage in using information"* [33(p. 233)]. It has been argued that the information adoption model is limited to explaining the characteristics of information adoption and does not address further behavior of recipients [34]. Erkan and Evans [34] thus extended the model by developing the information acceptance model (IACM), which further includes need for information, attitude towards the information, and intention to purchase or use. Erkan and Evans [34] describe the process of information acceptance as a decisive factor for purchase intention. Song et al. [35], for example, report a positive correlation between the acceptance of information from electronic word-of-mouth on travel platforms and the booking behavior of young travelers. Following the IACM, we thus propose a positive influence of information adoption (information acceptance in IACM) towards intention to use:

H4: Information adoption related to online reviews in the context of online psychological counseling positively influences intention to use.

4 RESEARCH METHOD

In the first section of our quantitative online survey, we provided information on online psychological counseling and assessed basic awareness and willingness to use. We then exposed participants to five images of actual online reviews related to an online psychological counseling service. We then assessed argument quality [36], source credibility [23,35], information usefulness [33,37], information adoption [27,38], and our outcome variable usage intention [34,35] on 5-point Likert scales.

5 RESULTS

We obtained 280 completed questionnaires (71 % female). We analyzed data by applying structural equation modeling (SEM) with the software SmartPLS. We found strong support for H1, indicating a positive influence of argument quality on information usefulness (β = 0.486, t = 10.519, p < 0.01). H2, proposing a positive influence of source credibility on information usefulness, also proved significant (β = 0.414, t = 8.670, p < 0.01). We further found support for H3, proposing a positive influence of information usefulness on information adoption (β = 0.590, t = 13.025, p < 0.01). Finally, we also found a positive influence of information adoption on intention to use, lending support to H4 (β = 0.595, t = 13.125, p < 0.01).

6 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Our results stress the importance of online reviews for information adoption and usage intention. We found support for all hypotheses: Both argument quality and source credibility significantly influence information usefulness, which leads to information adoption and positively influences usage intention.

We contribute to existing literature by demonstrating the importance of online review quality and credibility for adopting psychological online services. We thereby contribute to prior applications of the information adoption model by applying it to an e-health context. We further provide valuable insights for providers to increase user acceptance by incorporating online reviews into their online marketing efforts.

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