# Perceived Credibility of Bloggers and Blog Posts on Conventional and Alternative Medicine

Sharon Greenberg
Bar-Ilan University
Dept. Information Science
Bar-Ilan University, Israel
972-3-5318351

sgreenbe@gmail.com

Eti Yaari
Bar-Ilan University
Dept. Information Science
Bar-Ilan University, Israel
972-3-5318351

yaariet@mal.biu.ac.il

Judit Bar-Ilan
Bar-Ilan University
Dept. Information Science
Bar-Ilan University, Israel
972-3-5318351

barilaj@mail.biu.ac.il

## ABSTRACT
This poster presents the results of a study that examine the how users view the credibility of blog posts on conventional and alternative medicine posted in different types of blogs.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.4 [COMPUTERS ANS SOCIETY]

## General Terms
Experimentation, Human Factors.

## Keywords
Blog genre, credibility, medical information, criticism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For hundreds of years, the medical field was a discipline limited only to medical professionals. One of the changes brought about by the Internet is that this type of information is now accessible by anyone in Western society. No longer it is the case that the doctor knows everything and the patient knows only what the doctor tells him. Today, often the patient arrives to the doctor with information and is able to have a serious discussion about types of treatment, recuperation and prevention.

Currently, an increasing number of people spend many hours on the Internet, and a substantial amount of their information originates there. One of the more popular search topics on the Web is health and medicine [4]. Therefore, it is vitally important to examine what are the factors that influence their readiness to rely on this information? Whether they view the information as "credible"? According to the Wikipedia [2], "[c]redibility refers to the objective and subjective components of the believability of a source or message." An extensive review on credibility was published by Rieh and Danielson [5].

## 2. THE STUDT SETUP

This study examined the perceived credibility of blogs on the Internet and the medical information published in them as perceived by the readers of these blogs. Since credibility of information is a broad and general concept, we narrowed the examination to the perceived credibility of the blog, the author of the blog and its message. The blog posts studied provided medical information, both conventional and alternative. We created six different fictitious blogs in four genres: personal blog of a male, personal blog of a female, blog of a male expert in alternative medicine, blog of a female expert in alternative medicine, blog of a society on diabetes and blog of a company marketing products for diabetes treatment and care. Each blog contained two blog posts, one on a new conventional and one on a new alternative treatment. We recruited 361 Internet users, aged 20 or above who read blogs regularly, through Facebook, Twitter, email and blog invitations. Each blog was viewed by approximately 60 participants. After reading the blog posts, the participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire that measured on a scale of 1 to 6 their perceived credibility of the blog owner and the blog posts, loyalty to the blog, willingness to recommend the information to friends and relatives and willingness to share the information with the physician. They were also invited to tell us what in the posts they read influenced their opinion. The questionnaire was based on a questionnaire that studied the credibility of different genres of websites [3].

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative data of the study revealed that there were statistically significant differences in the perceived credibility of the blog owner and the message appearing in the post among the various genres of the blogs. This difference was significant only for posts that presented information about the alternative treatment. The experts' blogs (male or female) and the blog of a society were perceived as more credible than the other genres examined. In addition, statistically significant differences were found in the perceived credibility of the author of the post when considering conventional versus alternative posts. The authors of the alternative posts were perceived as more credible. Similarly there was greater willingness of the readers to recommend the alternative post compared with the conventional one.

The qualitative data collected in the study indicated that skepticism, which can be seen as perceived incredibility was voiced in many statements - in 180 out of the 588 comments. The large amount of statements that expressed skepticism - mainly towards companies – pointed to an interesting phenomenon: among the participants in the study, in parallel with the high levels of Internet use as a source of information, there is considerable of skepticism towards information available on the Web. In other words, to put it positively, the users have a well-developed level of criticism. Skepticism was not reported in previous studies on Web information credibility. Eshet-Alkalai and Amichai-Hamburger [1] found that adults demonstrated higher levels of informational skills than young people did when they were asked to critically evaluate information (news items) from the Internet. They claimed that people who have well developed informational skills generally possess critical thinking, are always ready to cast doubt on the quality of information found, and are not tempted to accept the information as self-evident even when it appears to be "authoritative" and valid. It is plausible that the participants in our study demonstrated a higher level of criticism toward the text they read because they are older and thus have acquired critical thinking as a result of their life experience. On the other hand, it is possible that the Internet is a less natural environment for them and they demonstrate more skepticism toward it and toward its content. In our study the average age of the participants was 39.4, the age of the youngest participant was 20, while the age of the oldest participant was 76, while the participants in previous studies were usually young college students.

## 4. CONCLUSION

To sum up: it seems that users apply skepticism as a way to deal with the lack of certainty as to the credibility of the information in spite of their desire and readiness to use this information.

## 5. REFERENCES

[1] Eshet-Alkalai, Y. & Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2004). Experiments with digital literacy. CyberPsychology & Behavior. 7(4): 421-429.

[2] Credibility. (2011). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Credibility&oldid =413087716

[3] Flanagin, A. J. & Metzger, M. J. (2007). The role of site features, user attributes, and information verification behaviors on the perceived credibility of web-based information. New Media & Society, 9; 319-342.

[4] Fox, D. & Jones, S. (2009). The social life of health information. PEW Internet and American Life. http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2009/PIP _Health_2009.pdf

[5] Rieh, S. Y. & Danielson, D. R. (2007). Credibility: A multidisciplinary framework. In Cronin, B. (Ed.), Annual Review of Information Science and Technology. Vol. 41. 307-364.