

# ***Does Formal Authority Still Matter in the Age of Wisdom of Crowds?: Perceived Credibility, Peer and Professor Endorsement in Relation to College Students' Wikipedia Use for Academic Purposes***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores whether or not formal authority still matters for college students using Wikipedia by examining the variables of individual perceived credibility, peer endorsement and professor endorsement in relation to students' academic use of Wikipedia. A web survey was used to collect data in fall 2011. A total of 142 students participated in the study, of which a total of 123 surveys were useable for this study. The findings show that the more professors approved of Wikipedia, the more students used it for academic purposes. In addition, the more students perceived Wikipedia as credible, the more they used it for academic purposes. The results indicate that formal authority still influences students' use of user-generated content (UGC) in their formal domain, academic work. The results can be applicable to other UGC, which calls attention to educators' active intervention to appropriate academic use of UGC. Professors' guidelines for UGC would benefit students.

## **Keywords**

Wikipedia, authority, peer endorsement, credibility, academic use

## **INTRODUCTION**

A growing number of academics have begun to recognize the values of Wikipedia in recent years (Konieczny, 2012). However, they have long been skeptical about its credibility and uneasy about their students' use of Wikipedia due to its open editing mechanism. Previous studies have shown an overall low approval by professors regarding Wikipedia (Lim & Simon, 2011; Lim 2013), confirming the skepticism of academics regarding Wikipedia. By contrast, students' peer endorsement of Wikipedia is high (Lim & Simon,

2011; Lim 2013). Similarly, students reported positive past experiences with Wikipedia (Lim, 2009) or positive perceived credibility (Lim, 2013). Furthermore, despite professors' disapproval, previous studies have shown evidence of students' Wikipedia use for their academic purposes (Head & Eisenberg, 2010; Lim 2013). Does this evidence indicate diminished influence of formal authority (e.g., professors) on students' use, or on informational decisions involving user-generated content (UGC)? The literature shows inconsistent findings regarding the influence of formal authority on assessing or selecting Internet information, as described in the literature review.

On the other hand, previous studies have consistently shown that in the participatory Web 2.0 environment, lay people's social endorsement is a powerful factor affecting credibility judgments or source selections (Fu & Sim, 2011; Messing & Westwood, forthcoming; Metzger & Flanagin, 2011). In a similar vein, students' peer endorsement of Wikipedia is positively correlated with their perceived credibility and their general use of Wikipedia (Lim & Simon, 2011; Lim 2013). In addition, users' perceived credibility is correlated to non-traditional media use such as blogs or Wikipedia (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Johnson & Kaye, 2009). Given the different opinions or perceptions between students and professors regarding Wikipedia, it is useful to ascertain which factors contribute to students' academic use of Wikipedia among individual perceived credibility (for the self), peer endorsement (for others) and professor endorsement (for formal authority).

This study explores the following research questions: RQ1. Among individuals' perceived credibility, peer endorsement and professors' endorsement of Wikipedia, which factors contribute to students' academic use of Wikipedia? RQ2. Does formal authority still matter in students' use of Wikipedia for academic purposes?

The usefulness of this study lies in the following: The findings show that formal authority still plays a role in

students' use of Wikipedia within particular contexts (e.g., academic purposes) in the age of wisdom of crowds, where peer or social endorsement greatly influences users' informational decisions (Metzger & Flanagin, 2011). This evidence implies that experts' opinions, traditionally an important factor affecting credibility judgments, continue to be important for the crucial use of information. The results can be applicable to other UGC, which calls attention to educators' active intervention for appropriate academic use of UGC.

## RELEVANT LITERATURE

College students generally know that the use of credible information for their academic work is important to them (Biddix, Chung & Park, 2011). As a result, it is necessary to discuss factors affecting credibility judgments in order to examine students' academic Wikipedia use. First, authority is traditionally one of the major criteria for assessing the credibility of information (Dochterman & Stamp, 2010; Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008; Sundar, 2008). Yet, the literature shows inconsistent findings with respect to its influence on Internet users' credibility judgments. Some authors find or argue that Internet users tend not to use authority, or authority has become less important than before in credibility judgments on the Internet (Lackaff & Cheong, 2008; Lankes, 2008). However, other studies reveal that authority still influences credibility judgments of social media or the selection of search results (Schwarz & Morris, 2011; Sundar, Xu, & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2009). Similarly, although adults or college students like and use Wikipedia, they have reserved attitudes toward Wikipedia as a trusted source (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Lim, 2009). Students' reserved attitudes toward Wikipedia may have something to do with their professors' disapproval of Wikipedia. In fact, (Sundar et al., 2009) found that online users are generally influenced by peer endorsement cues. However, authority cues influence users' decisions when such cues are inconsistent. By the same token, according to Pure and his colleagues (2013), in the social media environment, credential expertise (formal authority) is complemented by lay people's experiential expertise (social endorsement). This evidence indicates that UGC users may still be influenced by experts' opinions on their credibility judgments or use of UGC.

Second, individuals' aggregated experiences or opinions about a topic influence people's credibility judgments or source selections for UGC (Metzger & Flanagin, 2011). People tend to perceive information as credible if others do so (Metzger et al., 2010). Similarly, (Fu & Sim, 2011) found that online video users tend to view videos with a higher number of views than those with a lower number. In other words, social endorsement becomes a factor affecting the credibility judgments and source selections of UGC users. Finally, previous studies have shown that perceived credibility is related to the use of blogs or Wikipedia (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Johnson & Kaye, 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

The data were collected using a web survey. The study sample consisted of undergraduate students from several courses at a large public university in the Midwestern United States in fall 2011. A total of 123 surveys were usable for this study. The measurements were developed and drawn from the credibility literature (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Lim, 2013). *Academic use* was defined as the frequency of Wikipedia use for academic purposes, which was measured in a 5-point scale. *Peer endorsement* was defined as peers' or friends' acceptance of Wikipedia. Four items measured this concept. *Professor endorsement* was defined as professors' acceptance of using Wikipedia, which was measured using three items. These items were measured using a 7-point scale with the anchors "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

## KEY FINDINGS

**Sample Characteristics.** The mean age of the respondents was 19.3 years old. Approximately, two-thirds (65.9%, N=81) of the respondents were first-year students and sophomores, and one-third (34.1%, N=42) were juniors, seniors and other-classified students.

**Results.** A regression was performed to answer the research questions. A two-tailed test under  $\alpha=0.05$  was used. RQ1. Both individuals' perceived credibility ( $\beta=.258$ ,  $p<.031$ ) and professors' endorsement of Wikipedia ( $\beta=.233$ ,  $p<.009$ ) were positively related to students academic use of Wikipedia. A zero-order correlation between peer endorsement and students' academic use was positive and significant. However, the effect of peer endorsement on students' academic use of Wikipedia became minimal or insignificant when all three variables of perceived credibility, peer and professor endorsement were considered (Table 1). RQ2. The results indicate that formal authority still influences students' Wikipedia use for academic purposes.

Variable	$\beta$	p-value	Zero-order correlation	Part correlation
Perceived credibility	.258	<b>.031*</b>	.451	.177
Peer endorsement	.160	.152	.365	.116
Professor endorsement	.233	<b>.009*</b>	.349	.214
N=117		$R^2=.256$		

Dependent variable	p* < .05
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Table 1. Regression analysis on academic use

**CONCLUSION**

The findings show that the more professors approved of Wikipedia, the more students used it for academic purposes. The more students perceived Wikipedia as credible, the more they used it for academic purposes. The results imply that formal authority still influences students' use of UGC in their formal domain, academic work. In fact, despite the positive perceived credibility of Wikipedia among college students, they generally display credibility concerns about Wikipedia by reporting that people should be cautious about believing Wikipedia information (Lim, 2013). This evidence may also indicate the influence of professors' opinions regarding Wikipedia on students' credibility concerns about Wikipedia. This poster session will further present detailed measurements, the implications and limitations of the study, and a few suggestions for further research.

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