Look Who’s Talking! Technology-Supported Impression Formation in Virtual Communities

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The growing availability of consumer-generated information on the Internet about products, services, and companies has increased market transparency. Power is shifting from producers to consumers who share their knowledge, experiences, and opinions. However, this abundance of readily available information also comes at a cost. How do you distinguish an expert from a fraud? Who is credible and trustworthy, and who isn’t? In this paper, we investigate how consumers form impressions of senders in the context of word-of-web recommendations within virtual consumer communities. Specifically, we focus on the role of the technological interface.

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1. What are the media habits of “cultural creatives”?
2. How do they understand the role of their values in their media habits?
3. What challenges would they expect marketers to have in reaching them?
4. What forms of marketing are consistent with their values?

The second phase of this study involves structured interviews with ten “cultural creatives.” Potential informants are being approached outside stores where organic foods are sold, and screened using Ray’s criteria. Demographic diversity is being sought for a theoretical purposive sample with maximum variation. Each interview begins with a written media habits questionnaire, addressing each media type, including new forms such as podcasting and online communities. Each of the four research questions guides a section of the interview, following McCracken (1988). In the final section, informants are asked to imagine a marketing environment consistent with their values and needs as consumers. They are then asked to compare this projected scenario with marketing resources currently available. Analysis is concurrent with data collection.

Preliminary Findings

Completed interviews confirm that these individuals consume media very selectively and that they are skeptical of mainstream media for values-based reasons. The most salient values informing their media consumption decisions relate to the importance they attach to truthfulness, spiritual purity, education, and connections with people around the world. These informants interpret financial incentives and corporate ownership as an inevitable loss of objectivity and credibility in media content. They want uncompromised honesty in reporting, and they believe that while marketers are not usually deliberately or overtly deceptive, accuracy is reduced because “there are motives that are not for the bigger picture.” These interviewees envision ideal media environments in which they can access accurate information easily via light or sound, without being “bombarded,” which is their experience of the current media environment.

Each of these informants spontaneously talked about personal transitions from former mainstream media consumption habits to more selective media habits. These transitions occurred 5-15 years prior to the interviews, and involved discoveries of specific information about media ownership and psychological impacts of mass media. These informants applied their values to this new information to arrive at new meanings of the role of media in their lives and in the world, catalyzing more selective search behaviors. This suggests a developmental process of personal evaluation of media use driven by the application of personal values to new information received about the media and its impacts. Parallel developmental processes may operate in other contexts where consumers apply personal values to new information received.

References


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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The growing availability of consumer-generated information on the Internet about products, services, and companies has increased market transparency. Power is shifting from producers to consumers who share their knowledge, experiences, and opinions via virtual communities, electronic discussion forums, online opinion platforms, chat rooms, and weblogs. However, this abundance of readily available information also comes at a cost. How do you distinguish an expert from a fraud? Who is credible and trustworthy, and who isn’t? We form impressions of others based on cues such as age, gender, manner of dress and speech (e.g., Hamilton & Huffman 1971). But how do we construct and evaluate impressions in an online environment that lacks social cues normally present in face-to-face settings?

Cyberspace is in many ways distinctly different from the physical world. Two characteristics stand out. Firstly, interaction takes place through a technological interface, i.e., a computer, mobile phone, or an interactive television with Internet access. This means that the primary relationship is not between the sender and the receiver of information, but rather with the technology-mediated environment (Hoffman & Novak 1996). The second defining characteristic of cyberspace is its textuality. Communication and interaction online is based on the written word, audio, images, icons, and hyperlinks to other Web sites. This allows for new ways of self-presentation in which the physical self does not necessarily have to coincide with the digital self (Schau & Gilly 2003).

Schau and Gilly (2003) have demonstrated that consumers make active use of signs, symbols, material objects, and places to construct a digital self on their personal Web site. In this paper, we want to extend their research into online self-presentational strategies by looking more closely at the receivers’ side. The objective of our research is to investigate how consumers form impressions of senders in the context
of word-of-web recommendations within virtual consumer communities (Kozinets 2002). Specifically, we focus on the role of the technological interface. According to Foucault (1977), technology can be considered as a disciplinary mechanism that is embedded in power devices. Examining how technologies are used to form and manage digital impressions, may help us to understand how individuals influence each other online. Gaining systematic insight in this process is necessary for improving and developing tools that aim to aid consumers in their assessment of online contributions (e.g., reputation systems, member profiles, contribution accounts).

Method
The virtual community that serves as our focal research site is broadly organized around health issues. Its topics of interest include health, medication, pregnancy, nutrition, beauty, psychology, and sexuality. The community has been developed by a French independent company that exploits it by means of advertising. The community generates a total of 60,000 new postings per day (posted by French-speaking users worldwide) in its many discussion forums, chat rooms, and weblogs.

Our exploratory inquiry consisted of 3 semi-structured interviews; with the CEO, a moderator, and a back office technician. These interviews have given us insight in how the technological interface is constructed, managed, and used to exert control over member profiles and contributions by the administrators. Furthermore, we have conducted two online focus groups and follow-ups with animators (total of 18 informants). Animators are members selected by the administrators to serve as volunteer moderators. They play an important role in the day-to-day problem detecting and solving related to member behavior. Their extensive knowledge of community dynamics due to their double role as members and moderators has proven a valuable source of information. Combined with detailed observations and content analyses of the virtual community under study, this first round of data collection has given us a deep understanding of the process of technology-supported impression formation in virtual communities.

Next, we will systematically examine technology-supported impression formation in the context of word-of-web recommendations. Which signals are consulted and how are they interpreted? Does the impression formation strategy differ between member types (e.g., long-time versus short-time members, posters versus lurkers). Does it differ with the decision process at stake? We intend to collect data by means of an online survey among the members of the community under study.

Preliminary findings
Based on our first round of data collection, we can draw some preliminary conclusions of the interplay between technology and impression formation.

Technology uniforms impression formation. All members have the same tools at their disposal that serve as common references to form impressions on others; e.g., username, avatar, signature, personal web page with photo’s and hyperlinks, administrator-controlled member type label, orthography, emoticons.

Technology speeds up impression formation and makes it more reliable. Members have continuous and exhaustive access to all contributions of any member. Members’ past on the community is transparent.

Impression formation technology are self-nurturing. Members share tips to master the technology and they develop new tools, e.g., introducing group labels aimed at impression management.

Technology destabilizes impression formation. Technology enables members to have multiple identities, while it simultaneously serves as an identifier by means of, for example, orthographic style or IP address. Members who build multiple identities that are too different risk to loose their reputation. Similarly, if technology shows that formed impressions do not correspond with reality, for example by exposing markers of true identity, the backlash may be severe and technology is used as a release tool to express extreme ‘corrected’ impressions.

It is clear that the administrators play an important role in the dynamics of the impression formation process. They interfere by creating status, e.g., by introducing member type labels based on the number of contributions (regular, loyal, bronze, silver, and gold member), and by appointing members to be forum animators. Understanding the differential effects of the various technologies (member-controlled, administrator-controlled, administrator-bounded) on impression formation will aid both managers and consumers in optimizing the power of virtual communities as credible, trustworthy, and expert information sources. Our final aim is to contribute to this goal.

References
When A Good Impression Goes Bad: The Effect of Goal Changes on Repeated Attitudes

Extended Abstract

Past consumer research has shown consumption goals impact product information processing, weighting and retrieving, which results in variances in the reported attitudes (Huffman and Houston 1993; Markman and Brendle 2000). However, the extant research has only examined how goals impact an initial attitude (Garbarino and Johnson 2001; Huffman and Houston 1993). In reality, a consumer’s goal can change from time to time. It remains unclear whether attitudes formed under different consumption goals impact each other. For instance, when consumption goals change, will the prior goal-driven evaluation influence the later evaluation? If yes, why and in which direction (i.e., assimilating or contrasting)?

We answered the above two questions by relying on Selective Accessibility Model (SAM, Mussweiler 2003) proposed in social judgment literature. The model suggests that whether the evaluation target is judged as similar or dissimilar to the comparison standard will decide whether the contrast or assimilation effect will be resulted. If the target is judged as similar, the assimilation effect will be observed, but if the target is judged as dissimilar to the comparison standard, the contrasting effect will happen. Based on SAM, we argue that an initial positive (bad) attitude formed under a certain consumption goal can be used as a comparison standard, makes the later evaluation of the same object under a conflicting goal worse (better) off.

The current paper suggests that consumers use the relationship between consumption goals as a way to judge similarity or dissimilarity between the current and prior evaluations, (not only judging the applicability of the stored attitudes as suggested in extant attitude literature). Such judgment can be made quite quickly and colors the new evaluating process. In particular, we predict when two conflicting consumption goals activated at different times, attitudes reported under the later consumption goal would be judged as dissimilar to the initial attitudes formed under the earlier consumption goal, resulting in contrast effect. Our prediction was supported with two lab experiments.

Experiment 1 was a 2 (Consumption goal: Best driving experiment vs. economy to drive) by 2 (Timing of the attitude: First time Initial attitude vs. Second time later Attitude) mixed-design experiment. All participants were asked to learn the information of a luxury car (faked brand) and reported their attitudes towards under one consumption goal (i.e., initial attitude), and after a 10-min filler task, they were asked to read information again, and reported their attitude under a different consumption goal (i.e., later attitude). We found that when evaluation was made under economy goal, the later attitude was poorer than the initial attitude; but when evaluation was made under performance goal, the later attitude was better than the initial attitude. A clear pattern of contrast effect between evaluations under conflicting consumption goals were demonstrated in Experiment 1.

In Experiment 2, we demonstrated that the contrast effect was more robust when the cognitive resource was limited. In this one factor (cognitive load: high-rehearsing 7 digits vs. low-rehearsing 2 digits) design experiment, all participants first reported their initial attitudes under performance goal (the same car information as in Experiment 1 was used), and after a filler task were asked to reported their attitudes under economy goal (i.e., later attitude). Cognitive load was manipulated before the second time evaluation. Results revealed that though the initial attitudes reported under performance goal remained same, compared to participants under low cognitive load, those under high cognitive load evaluated the car less positively under economy goal. Our results in experiment 2 suggested that the comparison to the initial attitudes happened as a default, which was consistent with SAM.

Taken together, the current research suggests that when contextual cues (in this research, consumption goals) are salient, consumers can depend on the relationship between those cues to come up with an initial judgment and adjust from there. More specifically, when contextual cues are in conflict, the prior evaluation can serve a comparison standard rather than an anchoring point, resulting in a contrast effect that impacts attitudes reported later.

References


Understanding Consumers’ Perceptions of Fashion

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Extended Abstract

Despite the prevalence of fashion in the consumer market, previous research on fashion has primarily focused on the characteristics, motivations and behaviors of fashion innovators/leaders (e.g., Cassill and Drake, 1987; Goldsmith Flynn and More, 1996; Goldsmith, Moore and Beaudoin, 1999). Therefore little is known about the meanings of fashion to the broader range of consumers and their perceptions of fashion. This research attempts to fill this void.
The major objectives of this article are twofold. First, we aim to provide a conceptual foundation for understanding consumers’ perceptions of fashion. Second, as one of the first attempts in the literature, we develop and assess the validity of the consumer fashion orientation (CFO) scale that measures the different orientations toward fashion across consumers.

Based on a review of the literature as well as qualitative research inquiries (20 interviews), we identified three fashion orientations/focuses adopted by consumers toward fashion.

**Brand focus:** More than any other consumer brands, the fashion brand sustains itself on the image of the brand rather than aspects inherent to the product (Auty and Elliott 1998). It appears that many consumers use fashion as a way to communicate their status. In this regard, fashion serves as a symbol or sign. Moore (1995) stressed the positive association with brand, quality and status if the fashion brand is perceived to have a distinctive image. Auty and Elliott (1998) found that consumers perceive branded fashion items to be of higher quality therefore a better conveyer of their self-image.

**Trend focus:** Trend aspect is inherent in the definition of fashion. One of the very early definitions of fashion states that “Fashion is the prevailing style at any given time” (Nystrom, 1928). Adopting the current trend is a way for consumers to communicate their desire to be “a part of the community”. According to Simmel (1904), social tendencies are essential for the establishment of fashion, namely the need of becoming a part of the group on the one hand and the need for uniqueness on the other. Miller et al. (1993) emphasized the desire of consumers to be current by adopting styles that will identify themselves as up-to-date with the people whom they admire in a given situation.

**Design focus:** It appears that for many individuals, the actual design is another important aspect of fashion and that is what they focus on when it comes to fashion consumption. Many consumers wish to communicate their uniqueness via what they wear (Tian, Bearden and Hunter, 2002). A unique design is usually the answer for individuals who have such concerns when approaching fashion.

A total of 5 studies were conducted in developing and validating the CFO scale.

**Study 1: Item development.** Besides gleaning on published research related to fashion consumption, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with undergraduate students in a southeastern university to generate a pool of items for CFO. A total of 33 items were generated (11 items for each dimension).

**Study 2: Initial item refinement.** The content validity of these items was assessed according to Bearden et al. (1989). After eliminating items that did not receive the appropriate categorization by at least two of the three judges used in this study, 23 items remained (9 items for brand focus, 7 items each for trend and style focuses).

**Study 3: Item refinement.** Each item was formatted into a seven-point Likert-type response scale in the questionnaires. A sample of 98 undergraduate business students (45 females) was used in this study. Based on the data, items that did not have corrected item-to-total subscale correlations above .40 were deleted. Items that did not have statistically higher correlations with the dimension to which they were hypothesized to belong in comparison with item correlations with remaining dimensions’ total scores were also deleted (Bearden et al. 1989). These analyses resulted in a reduced scale of 15 items (5 items each dimension).

**Study 4: Scale validation-latent structure, reliability and discriminant validity.** A non-student sample of 133 consumers (64 females, average age 36) was used to validate the CFO scale. Respondents were recruited by students as an extra credit assignment. Using this data, first, the latent structure and reliability of the scale were assessed. Results show that the three-factor oblique model provided a better fit relative to five more restricted competing models. The hypothesized model was the only model to exhibit acceptable fit. Within the CFA setting, reliability of each dimension was calculated using the procedures outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981) based on the work of Werts, Lin, and Jöreskog (1974). The reliabilities for the three dimensions ranged from .894 to .954 and the variances extracted ranged from 64 to 80.4 percent, which are highly satisfactory. In an effort to establish scale construct validity, we also conducted discriminant validity tests of the measure by analyzing CFO along with need for uniqueness and fashion innovativeness as pairs of constructs in a series of two-factor CFA models (Bagozzi and Phillips, 1982). The results provided evidence for discriminant validity.

**Study 5: Further scale validation-nomological validity.** A sample of 243 non-student respondents was used to further validate the scale by focusing on the nomological validity of the scale. We developed our tests based on the established models of fashion clothing consumption (e.g. O’Cass 2004). Age and gender of consumers were included as control variables in our tests. Our test of antecedents revealed that materialism and involvement were positively related to CFO. Moreover, our tests of the consequences found that individuals who are high on CFO scale also had higher self-confidence, tended to spend more and made more impulse purchases. Our results also showed interesting differential effects of the CFO dimensions. While all three dimensions of CFO were positively correlated with impulse buying tendency, only brand focus was significantly correlated with level of spending, and only design focus was significantly correlated with self-confidence.

This research offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study provides an important contribution to current fashion research by first attempting to focus on consumers’ perception of fashion. CFO may fit into a broader theory of fashion and fashion consumption (Miller et al. 1993). As such, CFO should be useful in empirical studies of consumers’ purchasing and consumption patterns of fashion products. This study also offers many important implications to fashion retailers to better understand and segment their market.

**References**


