Social Hubs: a Valuable Segmentation Construct in the Word-Of-Mouth Consumer Network

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - As marketers reflecting on word-of-mouth (WOM), we consider highly involved experts including opinion leaders and market mavens (Childers 1986; Feick and Price 1987) as key segmentation constructs in identifying those consumers who are responsible for the dissemination of marketplace information. But there is another class of consumers that is at least as influential in this domain that is not yet on marketers' radar screens. These are the consumers who direct social traffic we will call these consumers Asocial hubs. Social hubs provide access to a large number and broad variety of consumers. The objective of this research is to introduce these social hubs.

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For the social hub scale questions, Cronbach’s alpha of .85 indicates appropriate internal validity. Principle component analysis established discriminant validity as well as correlations with the market maven (r=.38), and opinion leader components (at r=.20-.22, p<.001 for all).

A second potential method of identifying social hubs adapted from Gladwell (2001) was also considered. For this method, 100 randomly generated surnames from a local telephone book were listed in the survey, and subjects were asked, “From this list of 100 names, please check those that are shared by someone you know.” The dependent variable was the total number of names recognized by each subject. Results ranged from zero to 87, with a mean of 12.0.

The correlation between the scale questions and the name recognition exercise is significant due to the large sample size (p<.001), but the effect size is marginal (r=.18). Of the three elements comprising the literary definition of social hubs, both the scale questions and the name recognition exercise address the first element. The second element is directly addressed with the scale while it is not addressed by the name recognition exercise, providing some support for proposition 1.

Proposition 2, that the social hub construct is positively correlated with the opinion leader and market maven constructs, was established via principle component analysis and component correlations.

Most demographic and media habit indicators have low correlations with the scale and the name recognition exercise and do not warrant serious consideration as indicators of this new construct. However results indicate that the social hub scale is correlated with the psychographic constructs of extroversion (r=.52) and altruism, the third element of the literary definition (r=.39, p<.001 for both). Given these analyses, it is concluded that the social hub scale is successful in establishing the first four propositions.

Method and Results–Second Study

An invitation to participate in this experiment was posted on a website for members of a university subject pool. Subjects who completed the experiment (N=179) were mailed a five-dollar money order.

At the beginning of the survey, a restaurant consumption scenario was described. Subjects were then asked how likely they would be to tell someone about this restaurant and how many people would you tell, followed by the social hub and opinion leadership scale questions.

To address proposition 5, low, medium, and high segments were created for each of the two scales, with medium defined as being within one standard deviation of the mean. Considering the dependent variable of the number of people you would tell, high social hubs would tell significantly more people (+3.3, p=.003) than low social hubs. However, this difference is not significant for opinion leaders. Therefore, proposition 5 is supported.

Summary

The objective of this research was to identify social hubs. Based on the literary definition, results indicate that a new six-item unidimensional scale is a viable method of identifying social hubs and that social hubs are correlated with but sufficiently distinct from opinion leaders and market mavens.

The value of social hubs in the consumer network was highlighted with the social hub scale being established as a superior
predictor of the number of people told about a consumption experience. This result exemplifies the significance of these social hubs in the marketplace, who can ultimately provide marketers with access to many consumers.

References