From Why and What to Where I Post: Online Poster Behavior

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This study examines online posters behavior in terms of how consumers decide which forums/ websites to post their product experience. We show that two factors, the posting motive and the valence of posting message, might affect site choice decision. Specifically, when posters’ salient motivation is being influential, they tend to choose a website with higher heterogeneous opinions and consumers (e.g., a product category website). When posters’ salient motivation is affiliation, they tend to choose a website with higher homogeneous opinions and consumers (e.g., a brand website). The predicted direction, however, will be opposite when the message is negative.

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Suppose you want to tell others about your recent experience with a new Nikon digital camera. You are a user of the Internet, and you have been on various websites related to digital cameras. Among the numerous websites and online discussion forums that provide digital camera discussion platforms, which type of website might you choose to post your review: a heterogeneous audience, product category website, such as Digital Photography Review, or a more homogeneous audience website that is focused on the Nikon brand, such as Nikonauts.com?

There is a large amount of research on word of mouth (WOM) in general (Dichter 1966; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Ward and Ostrom 2006) and online word of mouth in particular (Godes and Mayzlin 2004). Although research has addressed the importance of online consumer communication, the focus of previous research has been on the effectiveness of online WOM from the information receiver standpoint (Mayzlin 2006; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006). Some researchers have examined why people might participate in online communication (Ward and Ostrom 2006; Schau and Gilly 2003) or what the content of such communication might be (Schlosser 2005); however, they have not related this to where to post. For instance, Schlosser (2005) finds that online posters tend to provide more negative product reviews than do lurkers (those who only read reviews). However, her research setting is limited to post behavior on a single website rather than dealing with multiple sites.

In this paper, we examine how consumers’ motivation to post (why) as well as the valence of the message (what) affects the decision of where to post. We define posters as people who use the Internet to post public product related information or experience. Such product information could be on a discussion site, a forum, or a bulletin board, but not private communication such as E-mail or personal website. In terms of where to post, we compare two types of online forums: 1) a more heterogeneous audience forum frequented by category users with varying brand preferences (e.g., a product category forum); and 2) a more homogenous forum of consumers who like the specific brand. We examine two motives that might lead consumers to participate in online posting: 1) the motive to influence others’ behavior and 2) the motive to affiliate with others. The motive to influence others reflects consumers’ desire to persuade others to their own point of view (Engle and Blackwell 1982), to build a reputation as an opinion leader (Robertson, Zielinski, and Ward 1984), or to be seen as knowledgeable. The motive to affiliate with others reflects a desire to associate with others who have similar interests, especially in the case of relevant reference groups, e.g., brand users.

We predicted that, in general, consumers with an influential motive will be more likely to post on the product category forum because of its heterogeneous audience that provide more potential impact of the post (H1a). In contrast, consumers with an affiliative motive may be more likely to post on a brand forum, since this satisfies their relatedness needs to affiliate with others with similar brand interest and attitude (H2a). Moreover, we propose that the relationship between social motives and the choice of where to post is moderated by the valence of the message (e.g., positive or negative). Specifically, H1a and H2a are based on the positive valenced message. However, the salient and diagnostic nature of negativity effect of message could lead to different posting outcomes (Ahuwalia, Burnkran, and Umanova 2000; Shiv, Britton, and Payne 2004). That is, when the message is negative valenced, posters with influential motive may switch to a brand website either to warn or affect those brand lovers (H1b). Those with affiliative motive might less likely to choose a brand website to avoid weakening relationship with other brand lovers (H2b).

We conducted two studies to test our hypotheses. In Study 1, we manipulate the motivations as well as the message valence by asking participants to imagine the product experience depending randomly assigned conditions. Specifically, the scenario was that participants were instructed to imagine their digital camera (e.g., Nikon D700) experience as either good or bad and were asked to choose a website to post their experience (in the control motive condition) or to make their post have as much impact as possible (in the influential motive condition). Then, participants indicated which website is more appealing to them to post their D700 experience on a seven-point scale (1= definitely Nikonians.com, 2= definitely Nikonians.com?, 3= definitely Nikonians.com, 4= definitely Digital Photography Review, 5= definitely Digital Photography Review, 6= definitely Digital Photography Review, 7= definitely Digital Photography Review). The result of the 2 (motive: influential vs. control) x 2 (valence: positive vs. negative) between-subjects ANCOVA with Nikon familiarity as a covariate supported our predictions. First, as suggested by H1a, when posting positive messages, consumers’ where to post decision shows no difference between influential motive and control motive, namely, they are as likely to post on a product category website (Ms=5.9 and 5.4, respectively; F(1,55)=.89, p=.35). Second, as suggested by H1b, when posting negative messages, posters whose primary motive is influential were more likely to choose a brand site than posters in the control group were (Ms= 4.2 and 5.3, respectively, F(1,55)=3.62, p<.06).

The proposed Study 2 will include the second posting motive, affiliation motive, and conduct the experiment in the similar manner as we did in the study 1. While the Study 1 focuses on testing only hypothesis 1, the Study 2 attempts to test H1 and H2 simultaneously. We further include two posting options for participants. First, participants will have the alternative to choose not to post to reflect their low involvement in the study or low posting motivation. Second, we provide a new forum option, an anti-brand forum with homogeneous negative brand attitude audience. This allow us to further explore H2b in whether consumers choose not to post negative message on a brand is driven by punishment avoidance (if similar posting preference on a product category forum and on an anti-brand forum) or by affiliation with similar others (if higher posting preference on an anti-brand forum than on a product category forum).