The Experiential Information Exchange in Electronic Word-Of-Mouth Communications

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This research indicates that the attraction in disseminating a certain topic is dependent on the experiential nature of information on Bulletin Board Systems. Compared to cognitive posts, experiential posts demonstrate a contagion effect. That is, when in-and-between posts focus on experiential information at the early stage of communication, more experiential posts appear at the later stage of the discussion on the same topic. Additionally, the involvement of opinion leaders in positive posts also promotes the dissemination of experiential information. Implications of this research can be extended to design and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of electronic word-of-mouth communication.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is usually viewed as a credible and objective diffusion mechanism for information (e.g., Gilly et al. 1998). While WOM has been traditionally spread among acquaintances through personal “contagions” (Barlas and Huang 2009), the Internet has dramatically increased the scale of WOM communication (Dellarocas 2003). Examples of such electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communications include online product review forums, internet discussion groups, instant messaging, chat rooms, mailing lists and Web logs. As an important format of e-WOM, Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) can easily facilitate individuals in their communication with people who have similar interests, experiences, or attitudes, regardless of differences in location, socio-economic background, or personal relationships (e.g., friends, acquaintances). One major purpose of this paper is to investigate participants’ information exchange behavior that has no basis in an existing (or trusted) relationship.

A very large percentage of the consumers who post their consumption experiences on BBS do so with little deliberate intention of “evangelizing” or “persuading” others. These consumer-generated-messages (CGMs) may or may not have an intended “target” within his or her trusted social network, yet his or her archived opinions may have a lasting impact on the awareness, trial, and purchase behavior of other consumers. Some of the CGMs can be very insightful and initiate a passionate response to the focus topic. Therefore, BBS are much more than just the buzzword-of-the-week sites, because they cannot be forced and are often a natural process. Furthermore, evidence from both marketing and social psychology has supported the role of experiential processing in decision-making and behavior. According to the cognitive-experiential self-theory (CEST) (Epstein et al. 1996), people process information by two parallel but interactive systems: one operates by context-specific, heuristic rules; whereas, the other operates by abstract, general rules guided by analysis and logic. The former deals with information that is affective in nature, and is associated with crude and emotional aspects; the latter processes information that is cognitive in nature, and is associated with refined and rational aspects. WOM is usually generated by cues that serve both systems. In accordance with CEST, this paper defines experiential information as imprecise emotional or sensual reactions to subjective characteristics drawn from the consumption of products or services. Cognitive information, however, concerns the objective features, utilitarian functions and economic values of the product or service.

Specifically, this paper argues that the experiential versus cognitive aspects of the information communicated are similar to some extent to the characteristics of goods in consumption. It crystallizes as “goods” entities, the meaning of which crucially depends on the context and on irreducibly subjective elements, such as a pleasant message, a joke that makes everyone laugh, or a story centered around the course of consuming a product or service. The idea of social exchange in WOM (and e-WOM) depicts communicators entering an interaction as having an endowment of resources that are, subsequently, transferred to the other parties. This obscures the fact that WOM communication generates something that did not exist before, and that communicators act as co-producers of this something—recreational consumption information. The normative significance of the correspondence of experiential information may help to explain why recreational consumption information is important for our sense of well-being (Barlas and Huang 2009; Huang and Barlas 2009).

In addition, the advent of the Internet has made it possible to increase the experiential processes with browsers, including viral marketing, online advergames, and interactive advertising (Fong and Burton 2006; Porter and Golan 2006; Winkler and Buckner 2006). Indeed, the information contained in CGMs on BBS underlies both experiential and cognitive processes. By using the social relationship matrix and multilevel modeling methods to study individuals’ CGMs on an online travel forum, this paper aims to answer the question of how the experiential versus cognitive CGM influences online information exchange behavior. Different from previous research on the topic of information search and Internet that mostly used “review” websites (e.g., the review section of Amazon, Rotten Tomato, etc.), the context of BBS adopted in this paper appears to be less structured than “review” websites, which creates a different information exchange dynamic. Also, BBS is more prone to an actual discussion than “review” websites (though people sometimes reply to each other in a review section of a website), which creates a more natural setting.

This study employed publicly available data from a major online travel forum for independent travelers, Travelblog.org. The data downloaded in this research were from the “Oceania Travel Forum” that contained 205 threads and 497 posts. There were 119 participants involved in discussions during the period of 2004-11-26 to 2007-11-19. Results from aggregated analysis suggest that, compared with cognitive posts, experiential posts generally had a higher proportion at the beginning of the discussion ($M_{1}=5.4$), and this advantage enjoyed a systematic increase as time went by ($M_{2}=6.3$, $\chi^2=9.48$, $p<0.002$). In other words, the more experiential posts a thread had, the more discussion on the topic under this thread occurred. Further analysis from the multilevel model illustrates that the more positive posts a thread contained, the more likely this thread had higher ratings on the experiential contents of its posts ($t=2.21$, $p<0.05$). Interestingly, opinion leaders’ participation led to a significant increase of experiential information in discussions, especially among those positive posts ($t=3.08$, $p<0.01$).

One major contribution of this research is to demonstrate that people exchange experiential more than cognitive information on BBS. Jointly, according to experiential information transmission characteristics and the incidental variances in the BBS, marketers can make use of this “recreational consumption information” to create favorable e-WOM communication for both customer acquisition and retention. Moreover, aspects of the Internet also lend themselves well to e-WOM communication. We may not know that person, but we relate to—and often trust—posts originated from their experiences, especially for those virtual participants viewed as opinion leaders or “mavens.” Consequently, an extensive implication of this paper is to help marketers generate proactive WOM contents in order to unleash advocacy among enthusiasts (or opinion leaders) who will exercise influence or social-currency among certain networks and communities.

REFERENCES


