Opinion Seeking in Consumer Networks

Seung Hwan (Mark) Lee, University of Western Ontario, Canada
June Cotte, University of Western Ontario, Canada

Our research focuses on identifying who are the opinion seekers in a network, and who people approach for opinions in a network. In two field studies, results demonstrate that network centrality is positively related to the degree to which central people seek opinions from others, and the degree to which others approach central people for opinions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The importance of social communication in explaining consumer behaviour has been highlighted across a wide variety of research streams (e.g., Childers 1986). What is known from prior research is that consumers tend to rely on their social networks (e.g., like a network of friends) as resources for product information, evaluations, and recommendations to make better purchase decisions (Brown and Reingen 1987; Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001). Given the importance of social networks in the consumer’s search process, it is surprising that research has largely ignored the effect of consumer’s position in a social network on opinion seeking behavior. Studies in this domain have generally ignored the possibility that where a consumer is located within a social network may influence the degree to which that consumer seeks opinions from others. For instance, will the opinion seeking behavior of a consumer be any different if he is strategically connected to others in the network versus if he is not strategically connected? Will a consumer increase her propensity to seek out opinions knowing she is in a better network position to reach those who could help her with her information search? These research questions suggest that as a discipline we do not have a thorough understanding of how network positions influences the opinion seeking behavior of consumers. Therefore, our research focuses on both the structural properties of the social network (network centrality), and the outcomes of those relational characteristics (e.g., how the social links affect opinion seeking behavior).

Opinion seeking is the act of searching out advice from other consumers (Flynn et al. 1996). Our research investigates how occupying a certain network position affects the extent to which consumers seek the opinions of others, as well as the extent to which consumers are approached by others for their opinions. One of the ways in which individuals can occupy such an advantageous position is to become central in a network (Lee, Cotte, and Noseworthy 2010). Network centrality is measured by examining the number of direct relationships an individual has with others, or by assessing the extent to which an individual links otherwise unconnected cliques or individuals (Freeman 1979). Thus, centrality can be defined by the number (quantity) of ties or the configuration (strategic location) of ties. In this paper, we focus on two common measures of network centrality: degree centrality and betweenness centrality.

Occupying a central position, through either degree or betweenness centrality, reflects greater social capital (Burt 2000). Individuals located in central positions have unique social advantages; they can take advantage of their network structure for information and resources (Coleman 1990). We propose that those who are centrally located in a network will exhibit a greater tendency to seek opinions than those who are on the periphery of the network. By tendency, we mean the frequency with which central people approach others for their opinions. In addition, we propose that central individuals are more likely to be approached for opinions than those residing in the periphery.

To test our theory, we conducted two network studies using social network analysis. One of the main strengths of social network analysis is that it enables researchers to locate the structural position of individuals in a network (Lee et al. 2010). In study 1, we examine a brand community made of primarily young adults. We measure an individual’s opinion seeking behavior for a product associated with the brand community. In study 2, we extend our theory to a different type of a social network (a seniors’ social club), and measure opinion seeking behaviors for a service associated with this club.

The results of two field studies provide strong support for the positive association between network centrality and opinion seeking, as well as, network centrality and opinions sought. With regards to degree centrality, out-degree centrality was positively related to both opinion seeking measures. However, this was not the case for in-degree centrality. The results support the notion that people who rated themselves as central (social perception) were associated with having higher opinion seeking tendencies, while people who were central (as rated by others) did not have higher opinion seeking tendencies. In contrast, for the opinions sought measure, a positive relationship was found for in-degree centrality, but not for out-degree centrality.

With regards to betweenness centrality, the data reveals positive relationship with both opinion seeking and opinions sought. Results from the two field studies reveal that those occupying a high betweenness position are most likely to take advantage of their brokering opportunities to seek opinions from others; but it also opens up opportunities for others to seek opinions from them. This is an important finding because it emphasizes the social benefit (i.e. increased opportunity to seek out diverse information) from occupying a betweenness central position. However, it is possible that they may also face social costs or burdens as others may come to depend on them for information.

Concluding, this research contributes to the literature by recognizing that there are unique opportunities and advantages of occupying a central position in a social network. Overall, the findings suggest that centrality is positively related to both opinion seeking and opinion approachability. We have firmly demonstrated the importance of both the number of social ties and the position of those ties in the flow of opinions through a social network. Future researchers can continue to advance on this understanding in both face-to-face and online social networks and communities. The growth in peer-to-peer technologies is fuelling growth in virtual social networks, and the opinion-seeking and opinion-sharing that attend those communities.