Different Drivers of Online and Offline Word of Mouth

Jonah Berger, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Word-of-mouth research has treated different types of WOM (e.g., online reviews and face-to-face discussions) as similar. In contrast, using data from over 6,000 consumers, we demonstrate differences in psychological drivers of online and offline WOM. More interesting products receive more online WOM than boring ones, but there is no relationship between interest and offline WOM.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009248/volumes/v39/NA-39

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Online Word of Mouth
Chairs: Yu-Jen Chen, University of Maryland, USA
Anna Kirmani, University of Maryland, USA

Paper #1: Different Drivers of Online and Offline Word of Mouth
Jonah Berger, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Paper #2: Linguistic Mimicry in Online Word of Mouth
Sarah Moore, University of Alberta, Canada
Brent McFerran, University of Michigan, USA

Paper #3: Temporal Contiguity and the Negativity Bias in Online Reviews
Zoey Chen, Georgia Tech, USA
Nicholas Lurie, Georgia Tech, USA

Paper #4: Persuading Others Online: The Consumer as Media Planner
Yu-Jen Chen, University of Maryland, USA
Amna Kirmani, University of Maryland, USA

SESSION OVERVIEW

General orientation and objectives: Research on online WOM has shifted from a focus on the role of consumers as information providers to a focus on why consumers talk about product experiences on the Internet. We examine how motivation affects consumers’ online posting decisions and how posting impacts both message posters and receivers, to better understand the new world of online interpersonal communication. The objective of this session is to study the relationship between the antecedents (e.g., motivation, consumption experience, target audience, and temporal proximity cues) and consequences of online posting on both posters’ behavior (e.g., online or offline, linguistic mimicry, posting frequency, where to post) and readers’ perceptions (e.g., perceived helpfulness and inferred poster’s motive).

Issues and topics to be covered: All four papers share a common focus on deepening our theoretical understanding of factors that influence consumers’ online posting behaviors, and how these behaviors influence downstream WOM effectiveness. Specifically, these papers focus on the role of motivation in affecting online WOM senders in terms of why they talk (papers 1, 2, 3, and 4), what they talk about (papers 2 and 3), and where they talk (paper 4). Each paper has a unique perspective on these topics.

The first paper, by Berger, examines whether there are different drivers of online and offline WOM. It proposes that online WOM requires a higher threshold for discussion, so there is a stronger link between whether something is interesting and whether it gets talked about online rather than offline. The second paper, by Moore and McFerran, introduces the notion of linguistic mimicry in online WOM and shows that copying others’ language use is dependent on whom forum posters are conversing with. Specifically, posters are more likely to mimic similar forum members than dissimilar others. Similarly, the third paper, by Chen and Lurie, investigates posters’ language but focuses on how readers infer posters’ motives by temporal proximity cues in a review (e.g., “today” or “just got back”). They show that when these cues are present, readers may infer that poster’s have a self-enhancement motive, which attenuates perceived helpfulness of a negative review. The last paper, by Chen and Kirmani, discusses how posters with an influence motive (e.g., self-enhancement or persuasion) make their decision of where to post on an online discussion forum. The results provide initial evidence that posters, depending on their message valence and consumption benefit, will use persuasion knowledge in strategically choosing a forum to maximize their impact.

These papers address commonalities and differences in the antecedents and consequences of online WOM, and build connections by providing a more complete picture of online WOM. This session will benefit WOM researchers by showing why, how, and where consumers share their experiences on the Internet, and will provide suggestions for marketing practitioners for developing strategies that encourage customers to talk about their experiences.

Potential audience: The session will appeal to researchers interested in the antecedents and consequences of WOM (online and offline) and more generally, to those interested in motivation, social influence, communication, and persuasion.

Potential contribution: This session makes theoretical contributions to research on WOM communication in marketing. While these four papers all feature factors related to posters’ motivation, each takes a unique perspective to explain the role of motivation in shaping diverse subsequent behaviors. Taken together, these papers substantively deepen our understanding of the role of different components in WOM and how each relates to the others.

State of completion: Data have been collected for the studies described in all four papers.

Different Drivers of Online and Offline Word of Mouth

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Word of mouth is frequent and has an important impact on consumer behavior. Consumers talk about new running shoes, write reviews about bad hotel stays, and share information about the best way to get out tough stains. But while recent research has shown that word of mouth (WOM) impacts everything from the products consumers buy to the drugs doctors prescribe, this research has treated different types of WOM (e.g., online reviews and face-to-face discussions) as the same. But are the factors that drive people to share online WOM (e.g., reviews, blog postings, and product ratings) the same as those that drive them to have face-to-face discussions, or might there different factors drive online and offline WOM?

Looking across prior papers hints at an intriguing possibility. More interesting New York Times articles are more likely to make the most emailed list (Berger & Milkman 2011). In contrast, however, more interesting products do not get any more face to face word of mouth (Berger & Schwartz 2011). These two papers relied on different datasets that used different subject populations, making it hard to directly compare their results, but might it be the case that interest plays a different role in online and offline WOM?

We suggest that there are some important differences in psychological drivers of online and face-to-face WOM. In particular, we suggest that face-to-face interactions may have a lower threshold for discussion. It is awkward to have dinner with a friend in silence, or ride in a car with a colleague without conversing, and so few things will be deemed too boring to talk about. In a sense, the outside option is to not talk at all, and talking about anything is better than that. With online WOM, however, the threshold for discussion is often higher. Most decisions to post a review or share a news article are not driven by the need to fill conversational space, but by the belief that there is useful or interesting information to be passed along. Con-
sequently, factors like interest may have a greater impact on online transmission. While more interesting products (e.g., iPads or Hollywood movies) may get more online WOM than their less interesting counterparts (e.g., Walmart and toasters) these types of products may get similar amount of offline WOM.

Carefully studying this possibility is hampered, however, by data availability. One could imagine comparing the relationship between the amount of interest a brand evokes and the amount of WOM it receives online and offline, but aggregate data introduces selection issues. If certain types of people are more likely to share WOM online, than it might be those doing the talking, rather than the channel, that is driving any observed patterns in online vs. offline data.

We avoid this difficulty by using a unique individual level dataset from the WOM marketing firm KellerFay. It contains over 35,000 brand and product mentions from a nationally representative sample of approximately 6,000 people who recorded all the WOM they shared, as well as the channel they shared it through (e.g., face to face or online) over a one day period. By looking people that talk both online and off, and controlling for variation at the individual and product levels, we can examine the causal impact of channel (i.e., online vs. offline) on WOM.

We compiled a list of all the brands and products mentioned by the survey respondents and then had independent raters code them based on how interesting each product or brand would be to talk about (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). Different raters’ ratings were highly correlated (r = .68) and we averaged across raters to create a product interest score for each product. We then examined how this related to online and offline WOM.

Consistent with our theorizing, results indicate that interest plays a different role in driving online and offline WOM. While more interesting products received more WOM online than less interesting products (p < .01) there was no relationship between interest and face-to-face WOM (p > .70). Further, to ensure that our results were not driven by outside raters rating how interesting the products were, we also conducted a follow-up study (Study 2) where participants recorded what they talked about in a given day but then rated interest themselves. We find the same results. While more interesting products get more online WOM than more boring ones, there is no relationship between interest and offline WOM.

Taken together, these two studies deepen our understanding of the drivers of word of mouth. While a great deal of research has shown that WOM has important consequences, less is known about why people talk about and share certain things rather than others. Accordingly, this work shows that there are some important differences in what leads people to talk face to face versus share things online.

Linguistic Mimicry in Online Word of Mouth

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

New digital media has changed WOM radically in terms of how and with whom consumers share consumption experiences. We now converse with thousands of other consumers through online forums, email, text messages, and websites such as Amazon.com. There are documented consequences of WOM for firms and consumers (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006). However, past work has not focused on WOM as a conversation (only as a single interaction; but see Cowley 2007) or on how specific language use in WOM impacts consumers (Moore 2012). We address these gaps in the literature by introducing linguistic mimicry to consumer research. This allows us to break down language into specific parcels and to examine how mimicking WOM language (and being mimicked) affects the flow and content of online interactions.

Linguistic mimicry measures how closely individuals match others’ word use in conversation. New software can calculate linguistic mimicry between two or more individuals engaged in conversation in terms of style (e.g. article, pronoun, conjunction use) and content (e.g. use of emotional, cognitive, social words) (Pennebaker et al. 2007). As with behavioral mimicry (e.g. mannerisms, talking speed), linguistic mimicry acts as a “social glue” that both reflects and creates bonds between people. For example, higher levels of linguistic mimicry increase romantic interest between individuals who are speed dating (Ireland et al. 2011) and increase group performance and cohesion (Gonzales, Hancock, and Pennebaker 2010). However, work in this new area is largely correlational, and has examined neither the consequences of mimicry in a marketing context, nor variables that predict linguistic mimicry. Using field and experimental data, we examine the causal relations between social variables that predict mimicry, levels of linguistic mimicry, and consequences of mimicry.

We expect linguistic mimicry to be influenced by similarity; for example, forum members who live in the same location should mimic one another more than they should mimic those do not share this characteristic. In addition, mimicry should impact consumers’ attitudes and behavior. Consumers should feel a greater sense of affiliation with those they mimic (Jefferis, van Baaren, and Charttrand 2003), which should increase posting frequency within a forum and information sharing outside the forum (e.g. Twitter). Being mimicked by others will also have important consequences. Individuals who are mimicked by similar others will likely feel more group affiliation and post more frequently, while those who are mimicked by dissimilar others will likely feel less affiliation and post less frequently. We examine these predictions in two studies, one using online forum data and a second using experimental data.

In study 1, we downloaded an entire product review forum from a parenting discussion site (1386 posts, 241 users). We coded how much personal information users disclosed about themselves (e.g. location, gender) and their children (e.g. gender; names, ages, or birthdates) in their profile, such that higher numbers indicate more disclosure. We also calculated how similar consecutive posters were to one another, personally (i.e. same gender or not) and in terms of their children (i.e. same gender or not). We then calculated mimicry of linguistic style (e.g. articles, pronouns) and content (e.g. cognitive words, emotion words) for consecutive posts; that is, how much an individual mimicked the post immediately prior to theirs. Personal similarity and self disclosure predicted mimicry. The more similar a poster was to the poster immediately preceding them, the less they mimicked this individual’s linguistic style (e.g. articles, pronouns) and cognitive word use, but the more they mimicked positive linguistic content (exclamation marks, assent words). Similar levels of self disclosure also predicted decreased mimicry of cognitive words as well as decreased mimicry of non-fluencies (e.g. uh, um).

In study 2, we extended the inquiry into a lab setting. We asked undergraduate seniors (N = 102) to think of a recent positive or negative visit to a well-know chain of coffee shops. Next, participants read a positive or negative online review of the chain, allegedly written by an undergraduate at another college (dissimilar) or at their college (similar); they then wrote a review of their own. In this study, participants’ linguistic style and content mimicry was predicted by the interaction between similarity, participants’ evaluations, and the other writer’s evaluations. First, regardless of similarity, individuals were least likely to mimic linguistic style when the audience had positive but they had negative evaluations of the coffee shop. Con-