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Are You Connected ? Portrait of the Virtual Connector in Online Cultural Communities

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This study provides an exhaustive profile of virtual connectors. According to the literature, some people have many friends and contacts in different environments. These people play an influential role with their friends; they are known as 'connectors'. This article investigates connectors in virtual artistic communities. Using information from a database of 32,254 Internet users, this study profiles virtual connectors according to socio-demographic variables and demonstrates that virtual connectors account for approximately 12% of Internet users who subscribe to a mailing list. In addition, virtual connectors are generally opinion leaders, mavens and have a greater propensity to be innovators.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conceptualization

The attention level of a consumer is higher when a message comes from a reference or a member of a group rather than from an ad or a salesperson (Gremier et al., 2001). In fact, according to Ramsey (2005), 90% of American consumers consider word-of-mouth one of the best information sources, twice as much as advertising or editorial sources. People's opinions are also widely available on the Internet. Given the above, it would be advisable for companies to identify people who are likely to engage in electronic word-of-mouth advertising, i.e., find virtual connectors

There are three types of influencers in traditional word-of-mouth: mavens, opinion leaders and innovators (also called early adopters). Mavens are considered an excellent source of information for any kind of product or service (Slama and Williams, 1990). They know the best places to shop and are knowledgeable about many kinds of products. Moreover, according to Sundarham et al. (1998), mavens engage in word-of-mouth out of altruism, for the pleasure of sharing information and to reinforce their image in their community.

Contrary to mavens, opinion leaders are usually specialists in one particular product (Feick and Price, 1987; Goldsmith B., Flynn and Goldsmith E., 2003; Clark and Goldsmith E., 2005). They influence other consumers (Rogers and Cartano, 1962) and shape their purchasing behavior regarding specific products (Flynn and al., 1996). In fact, the literature has identified a small but positive correlation between mavens and opinion leaders (Feick and Price, 1987).

Lastly, innovators are consumers who are early adopters of a product (Rogers, 1995). This psychological trait is common to all consumers, but to a different degree. Some people are more innovative than others. (Midgley and Dowling, 1978). Goldsmith (2001) describes innovators as purchasers who are always searching for new products and are less concerned about price. However, contrary to mavens, they limit their purchases to one product category in particular (Goldsmith et al., 1996).

All types of influencers play a major role in word-of-mouth. By using their networks, some influencers, such as mavens and opinions leaders, can reach substantially more people than regular consumers. Although we know that mavens, innovators and opinion leaders can influence people, we do not know if they act as connectors by actually networking with others.

Method and Procedures

We worked with four different types of cultural companies. Each one gave us its database of email subscribers. A total of 32,254 emails addresses were obtained. Data collection was divided into two parts: The first part consisted of a conventional survey where various socio-demographic and psychographic variables were used to define profiles, such as maven, opinion leader and innovator. The second part consisted of an experiment whereby an email was sent to the 2,744 study participants for whom we had received a full profile.

Part I: Gathering information from subscribers

As a first step, an email was sent on behalf of each of the companies that supplied us with a database. We asked the subscribers from the cultural companies to participate in our survey. Participants received the email in a format similar to the one used

by the company to which they were subscribers. This technique was used to ensure that our substitution would not be classified as spam.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part contained questions on participants' involvement and interest in the cultural community to which they belong and measured their profiles against the characteristics of mavens, opinion leaders and innovators. The second part of the questionnaire contained a series of socio-demographic questions to obtain a clearer profile of survey participants

Part II: The experimental phase

Two weeks after sending out the initial questionnaire, an email was sent to the 2,744 study participants for whom we had a full profile. Regardless of the artistic community to which they belonged, all emails were written in a similar manner. All emails were sent from a common server, but always on behalf of the cultural company. The purpose was to assure participants that they were receiving email from the company they subscribed to- and not from a third party.

The server then tracked participants who opened the email and forwarded it to other consumers and, if so, to how many. Of the 2,744 emails sent, 1,402 (or about 51%) were opened.

When reading the email, study participants were invited to send the information to friends. To forward the email, the participants simply had to click on a link in the email. The link then opened a Web page on which the participants were asked to enter their name and email address. To avoid creating any bias that would have inflated the number of connectors, no incentive was offered for sending emails. Of the 1,402 emails opened, 168 were forwarded to friends. The people likely to circulate word-of-mouth advertising electronically are called virtual connectors. The 168 connectors represent approximately 0.5% of the initial database of 32,254 email addresses in Part I and correspond to 12% of active members in the cultural community, i.e., the 1,402 people who opened their emails.

Major Findings

To discover if socio-demographic variables affect email distribution, we analyzed the socio-demographic profile of connectors by comparing connectors' results with those of non-connectors. Using the Chi-square method, we found that there are no significant socio-demographic differences between connectors and non-connectors. Then, we performed an Anova analysis with the three factors: opinion leader, maven and innovator and we have found that connectors are characterized as opinion leaders as well as mavens and possess features of innovative personalities. In addition, the t-test analysis has demonstrated that connectors receive more personal emails per day and take more time to answer their personal emails. Connectors have three emails addresses compared to two for non-connectors, but they do not have more contact names in their email address book than non-connectors. Also, connectors are faster than non-connectors to open their emails. This study demonstrates the importance of viral marketing for companies and enabled companies to identify their connectors.

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