Customer-to-Customer Interactions within Online Review Sites: A Typology of Contributors

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Abstract As the Internet has become an increasingly relevant communication and exchange platform, social interactions exist online in multiple forms. Based on the literature on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication, social exchange theory and transformative consumer research, we conduct latent profile analysis to understand who engages in eWOM communication as well as how and why they do so. In addition to the traditional dichotomy of "posters" and "lurkers", we show that another group is included, which multiplies the scope of the WOM through transmission. By identifying and describing two active customer groups in addition to lurkers, our study provides insights into important user groups. Both groups are central for the service provider to manage the community and for understanding who contributes to social capital. Reciprocity as important mechanism in virtual environments presents a key condition for the development of social capital. Our research contributes to the growing field of consumer articulations online by empirically investigating why individuals engage online in social capital generation.

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1 Introduction and research goals

Over the last years, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has received considerable attention from academics. eWOM is referred to as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004). An increasing number of empirical studies have researched the effects of eWOM messages on purchasing intentions (Park and Lee, 2009), product and brand choice (Senecal and Nantel, 2004), consumer attitudes (Lee et al, 2008), and on sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). Thus, there is numerous evidence that eWOM is beneficial for the company and offers them an effective marketing tool to compete in the marketplace.

However, eWOM is not only beneficial for companies, but also for the society at large. Sharing one's own experiences with other individuals online helps customers to connect with peers and builds social bonds (Belk and Llamas, 2011). These relational online interactions empower consumers to evaluate marketplace offerings and enable them to make better informed decisions (Kozinets, 1999). Thus, eWOM is a very effective consumption decision tool for individuals.

Whereas previous research has shown the relevance of eWOM for marketers and consumers (Huang et al, 2007), the literature lacks of empirical insights on the interdependence of individuals' eWOM behaviors in relation to their motives (Shao, 2009) and on the diversity of online interactions. This raises the following questions: Who are the individuals that are engaging in online activities and, therefore, in the generation of social capital for the public benefit? What are the applications that different user groups prefer? What drives them to serve the community on a regular basis?

To answer our research questions, we develop a framework based on the motivational psychology literature (Langens and Schmalt, 2008), social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1986). We followed a multi-step analysis approach – content analysis and latent profile analysis – to identify and differentiate groups of eWOM senders.

2 Method and results

We conducted an empirical study analyzing eWOM senders who posted hotel reviews on review sites (e.g., `TripAdvisor.com`). From a conceptual point of view, investigations of eWOM via online reviews are advantageous in that both first-order (e.g., writing a hotel review) and second-order eWOM (e.g., forwarding reviews and other content to friends) communication occur on these opinion platforms. We developed and programmed an online questionnaire and collaborated with a hotel review site, which posted the link transferring the participant to our online questionnaire at the end of the rating process. In total 693 site users participated in the study.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, we asked each respondent to explain in his own words the reason for writing the review. We used content analysis for analyzing the responses (Kassarjian, 1977). The results show that the written review was related to a positive experience for 48.5%, and to negative experiences for only 9.8% of the respondents. Nevertheless, the largest group of the consumers (i.e., 40.0%) was driven by altruistic motives without expressing any valence in their statements. The importance of giving something back to the community is also supported by the fact that 19.9% mentioned that they regularly read reviews and simultaneously expressed a desire to help other consumers.

In a second step, we used latent profile analysis to detect different underlying patterns of eWOM contributors. We used existing scales to measure the different activities and motives of the participants by using 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). To classify the respondents with regard to their activities on the review site, we measured the degree of various possible activities. As recommended by the literature to reduce the set of variables for the latent profile analysis (Bacher et al, 2010), we reduced the various activities through factor analysis to 3 components: passive activities (e.g., reading reviews and ratings), active 2nd-order activities (e.g., forwarding others' reviews), and active 1st-order activities (e.g., writing reviews). We tested by means of the latent profile analysis a wide range of potential classification solutions and computed proportional class assignments based on the Bayes estimators. We decided to stick with the 3-class solution. Table 1 provides an overview of the identified classes.

Table 1 Overview of the 3 classes

	Overall		Class 1 Lurkers			Class 2 Creators			Class 3 Multipliers		
	n	%	n		%	n		%	n		%
Class size	693	(100)	382		(55.1)	94		(13.6)	217		(31.3)
Activities	$\bar{x}$	(ξ)	$\bar{x}_1$	$Sig.$	(ξ_1)	$\bar{x}_2$	$Sig.$	(ξ_2)	$\bar{x}_3$	$Sig.$	(ξ_3)
Passive	5.11	(1.29)	4.55	***	(1.27)	5.99	***	(0.76)	5.73	***	(1.00)
Active second-order	2.33	(1.36)	1.72	***	(0.76)	1.65	***	(0.61)	3.71	***	(1.41)
Active first-order	4.64	(1.69)	3.66	***	(1.44)	6.61	***	(0.48)	5.51	***	(1.12)
Booking hotels/travels	3.56	(2.12)	3.07	***	(1.97)	3.76		(2.32)	4.35	***	(2.04)
Motives	$\bar{x}$	(ξ)	$\bar{x}_1$	$Sig.$	(ξ_1)	$\bar{x}_2$	$Sig.$	(ξ_2)	$\bar{x}_3$	$Sig.$	(ξ_3)
Altruism based on positive experiences	5.61	(1.14)	5.19	***	(1.18)	6.21		(.73)	6.08	***	(0.90)
Altruism based on negative experiences	4.68	(1.59)	4.22	***	(1.54)	5.38	***	(1.44)	5.20	***	(1.46)
Venting negative feelings/ retaliation	1.86	(1.26)	1.71	***	(1.06)	2.15	*	(1.41)	2.01		(1.45)
Social bonding	2.39	(1.48)	2.06	**	(1.19)	2.10	***	(1.20)	3.10	***	(1.77)
Economic incentives	1.73	(1.26)	1.62	***	(1.09)	1.43	**	(0.86)	2.06	***	(1.57)
Intrinsic fun and enjoyment	2.76	(1.60)	2.38	***	(1.31)	3.01		(1.59)	3.31	***	(1.78)

Means and standard deviation in brackets.
$Sig.$: Significance of difference between overall mean and class mean.
$p < .1 : *; p < .05 : **; p < .01 : ***$.

Compared with the passive activities ($F = 108.13; p < .001; \eta^2 = .24$), the other two activities variables, active second-order activities ($F = 301.03; p < .001; \eta^2 = .47$) and active first-order activities ($F = 285.68; p < .001; \eta^2 = .45$), significantly contributed to the separation of the 3 classes. The first and largest class contains more than half of the participants in our sample. The members of this class - the lurkers - are more interested in passive activities ($M = 4.55; SD = 1.27$) than in the active 1st-order ($M = 3.66; SD = 1.44$) or active second-order activities ($M = 1.72; SD = .76$). The second class – the creators – represents the smallest class of the sample (13.6%). This class is primarily interested in the two core activities on the review site: reading ($M = 5.99; SD = .76$) and writing reviews ($M = 6.61; SD = .48$) and much less interested in second-order activities ($M = 1.65; SD = .61$). The third class contains almost one-third of the sample. The members in this class - labeled multipliers - are characterized by high means of their passive activities ($M = 5.73; SD = 1.00$)

and active first-order activities ($M = 5.51; SD = 1.12$). In addition, multipliers exhibit comparably greater interest in second-order activities ($M = 3.71; SD = 1.41$).

3 Discussion

The advent of the Internet has created a vast multitude of methods for sharing information, communicating with others, and expressing oneself. As stated by various scholars, prior research has largely ignored the specifics and potentially different manifestations of eWOM communication (Libai et al, 2010). To address this problem, we developed a framework that integrates first- and second-order eWOM. Based on this, we conducted a classification and motivational analysis of eWOM participants within the context of online hotel reviews. The results of the latent profile analysis reveal 3 classes of individuals, namely lurkers, creators and multipliers with regard to eWOM activities.

In our study, altruism-related motives clearly outranked the social bonding motive. This result can be linked to the characteristics of the environment in which we conducted our study - online review sites.

Furthermore, the notion of exchange and reciprocity appears to be increasingly important in the virtual field and should be further investigated in future research (Chan and Li, 2010). Individuals who are reading other people's opinions and experience reports may perceive a social debt and feel obliged to give something back to the community (Blau, 1986). Travelers can amortize this debt by contributing reviews in return.

Identifying and profiling contributors is an important issue for managers, particularly in the context of virtual communities (Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Sonnenbichler and Bazant, 2012). With regard to WOM research, practitioners show increasing interest in stimulating favorable customer-to-customer communication (Kumar et al, 2010).

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