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MEDIA MEETS RETAIL – RE-EVALUATING CONTENT QUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF B2C E-COMMERCE

Research in Progress

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Abstract

In the increasingly competitive Internet business landscape, content is more and more employed for marketing purposes. While online retailers are raising investments in content to promote their online shops, media companies are starting to monetize their content by building own e-commerce platforms. The rationale behind these content-driven commerce approaches is to create a satisfying online shopping experience and, thus, to foster customer loyalty. However, whether content is a suitable means to these ends has not yet been proven. One obstacle is that there is no measurement instrument that captures all relevant characteristics of content on a website. We seek to fill this gap by developing a unified content quality scale in the context of B2C e-commerce. In this paper, we report on the first two of five steps in the scale development process and provide an initial proposal for a formative-formative second-order content quality construct. In contrast to previous measures, our scale considers hedonic characteristics of content and thus contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept. Furthermore, both media companies and online retailers can benefit from this scale by applying it to evaluate the effects of their content-driven commerce approaches on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Keywords: Content quality, Content-driven commerce, Scale development, Hedonic IS use.

1 Introduction

As differentiating from competitors and retaining customers on the Internet becomes increasingly difficult, online retailers are raising their investments in content for their websites (Gurd, 2014). Content marketing, which in the context of e-commerce is also referred to as *content-driven commerce* or *narrative retailing*, is not only meant to provide customers with information necessary for their purchase decision, but is supposed to improve the whole online shopping experience (Alexander and Parsehian, 2014; Firnkes, 2014). Combining content and commerce seeks to change online shopping from a fairly goal-oriented process into a more hedonically motivated one. The online shops NET-A-PORTER and MR PORTER, for instance, publish their own online magazines, which allow customers to discover new products. However, creating content is costly and the return on investment is difficult to measure (Berger and Hess, 2015). While online retailers are beginning to generate their own content, media companies (i.e. content providers) vice versa are starting to leverage their content to drive sales (Spann, 2013). Against the background of the difficulties to generate revenues via advertising and paid content, e-commerce appears to be an attractive new revenue source (Forrester Consulting, 2012). Instead of providing customers with content and referring them to third parties to make purchases, more and more media companies want to utilize their content to initiate transactions on their own websites. However, adopting a transaction-based monetization approach requires media companies to ensure fulfillment of the orders they receive, which incurs additional costs.

As both media companies and retailers try to retain revenues by integrating content and commerce, it remains unproven whether the content of an e-commerce website does in fact influence sales. Although success factors of business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce have been thoroughly investigated, content's role has mostly remained unexplored in this context. A primary reason might be that there is no dependable instrument to measure the quality of content provided on the Internet. The existing approaches are subject to various shortcomings: First, most studies that evaluate commercial websites simply rely on *information quality* and sometimes relabel it as *content quality*. The information quality construct emerged from research on corporate information systems (IS) and focuses on utilitarian facets of content. Because customer behavior on the Internet is also influenced by hedonic motives (Bartl et al., 2013; Chiu et al., 2014), information quality alone cannot fully represent content quality in the online context. Second, most studies have measured content quality or information quality reflectively. We follow the argumentation of Schaupp et al. (2009) in that a formative measurement would be more appropriate. Further, the scales applied to measure content quality or information quality differ widely from study to study, "with no agreement on what constitutes a complete, yet parsimonious set of dimensions" (Lim et al., 2012, p. 349). While the measurements of other B2C e-commerce success factors such as service quality have undergone multiple revisions and advancements, content quality or information quality have received little attention. (DeLone and McLean, 2004; Nelson et al., 2005). Petter et al. (2013, p. 30) conclude that "few studies have explored the variables that affect Information Quality" and point out that this is a significant gap in IS research.

We seek to fill this gap and propose a unified content quality scale for B2C e-commerce websites. After revising the conceptualization of content quality, we systematically extracted relevant attributes from the literature and grouped these into four dimensions based on a framework by Wang and Strong (1996). To account for the direction of causality between content quality, its four dimensions, and the attributes, we adopted a formative-formative second-order structure for our instrument, which we seek to validate in the further course of this research project. There are two expected implications of our study. On the one hand, we offer a comprehensive perspective on content quality and its defining attributes. Our scale incorporates hedonic characteristics of content and thereby contributes to a better theoretical understanding of the concept, which can be transferred to other research settings besides B2C e-commerce. On the other hand, our scale will enable media companies and retailers to evaluate the interplays between content and commerce. Owing to its formative nature, our instrument specifically indicates which aspects of content quality must be improved in order to increase the content's effects on business outcomes.

2 Previous Research

The literature on content quality and information quality on the Internet can be divided into two major research streams. In the first stream, content quality or information quality is modelled as a separate construct that directly influences customer perceptions or attitudes. The second stream encompasses studies in which content quality or information quality is employed as a lower-level dimension of overall website quality. We will now provide an overview of these two literature streams, which serve as a basis for our scale development.

The most prominent theory in research on B2C e-commerce to include information quality as a separate construct is the DeLone and McLean (D&M) model of IS success (DeLone and McLean, 1992, 2003). Like the model itself, the information quality construct it contains stems from traditional IS contexts. It is rooted in the research on the value of IS (Ahituv, 1980; Gallagher, 1974), computer user satisfaction (Bailey and Pearson, 1983; Doll and Torkzadeh, 1988), and user information satisfaction (Ives et al., 1983). Beginning with the seminal work of Zmud (1978), these studies have identified various attributes of information quality such as timeliness, accuracy, or relevance. Many applications of the D&M model in the B2C e-commerce context have based their information quality measurements on this work (e.g. Brown and Jayakody, 2009; Kuan et al., 2008; Park and Kim, 2003).

Which of the information quality attributes are most important to IS users has been assessed by Wang and Strong (1996) in two surveys. Based on the results, they conducted two sorting studies to group the 20 most important attributes into four categories: intrinsic quality, contextual quality, representational quality, and accessibility quality. This categorization has improved the understanding of information quality and has found wide application in the literature (Katerattanakul and Siau, 1999; Lee et al., 2002; Lim et al., 2012; Webb and Webb, 2004). Nelson et al. (2005) abandoned the accessibility category and represent the remaining three categories solely by the attributes accuracy, completeness, currency, and format. Their reduced framework has been transferred to the e-commerce context by Chen and Cheng (2009), Hsu et al. (2012) as well as Xu et al. (2013).

It is questionable whether information quality measurements from corporate IS settings are fully suitable for the B2C e-commerce context, given that the users are not internal employees but external customers (Webb and Webb, 2004) whose system use is mostly voluntary (Molla and Licker, 2001). First studies have proven that hedonic content attributes such as entertainment also contribute to online customer satisfaction (Chen et al., 2013). This does not necessarily render traditional measurements of information quality obsolete, but does require their careful adjustment. Although in the early stages of B2C e-commerce research, some authors developed new measurements instead of adopting existing scales (e.g. McKinney et al., 2002), the application of these measures is relatively rare and, like previous instruments, they focus only on utilitarian aspects of information quality.

Besides the research on content or information quality, several overall website quality scales that comprise information quality have been proposed. The WebQual index by Barnes and Vidgen (2002) incorporates an information category that is based on the work by Bailey and Pearson (1983) as well as Wang and Strong (1996). Aladwani and Palvia (2002) developed a perceived web quality instrument that includes two content quality dimensions: general content quality and specific content quality. The general content quality construct is similar to most information quality constructs in the literature on the D&M model, whereas specific content quality measures the availability of certain pieces of information such as product details or customer policies. Another often-cited measure for the evaluation of website quality is WebQual by Loiacono et al. (2007), which consists of twelve dimensions, three of which are related to content quality: informational fit-to-task, tailored information, and ease of understanding. These resemble the information quality attributes usefulness, customization, and understandability. This instrument omits other common attributes such as timeliness or accuracy of information.

We may summarize that website quality measures either integrate informational aspects only partly, or are based on the same sources as separate information quality constructs and thus suffer from the same shortcomings. Overall, our literature review has fostered the impression that previous research disagrees on the attributes that should be used to measure content or information quality (Lim et al., 2012; Petter et al., 2013). Therefore, we seek to consolidate existing measurement approaches in order to obtain a unified content quality construct that is specifically adapted to the B2C e-commerce context.

3 Scale Development

Our methodology is based on the latest guidelines on scale development in IS research and comprises five steps (MacKenzie et al., 2011). The first two steps are part of this paper. In step one, we reconceptualized content quality concerning the B2C e-commerce context, delineated it from related constructs, and defined four lower-level dimensions. Second, we systematically searched the literature to identify attributes of content quality that correspond to our conceptualization, and grouped these along with their respective items into the four dimensions. Subsequently, we determined the causal relationships between content quality, the dimensions, and their attributes. The assessment of content validity of the items is going to be step three. Fourth, we are going to specify a measurement model to evaluate and refine the scale in a first large-sample survey. The fifth step is going to include the validation of the scale in an extended nomological context. The full process is depicted in Figure 1.

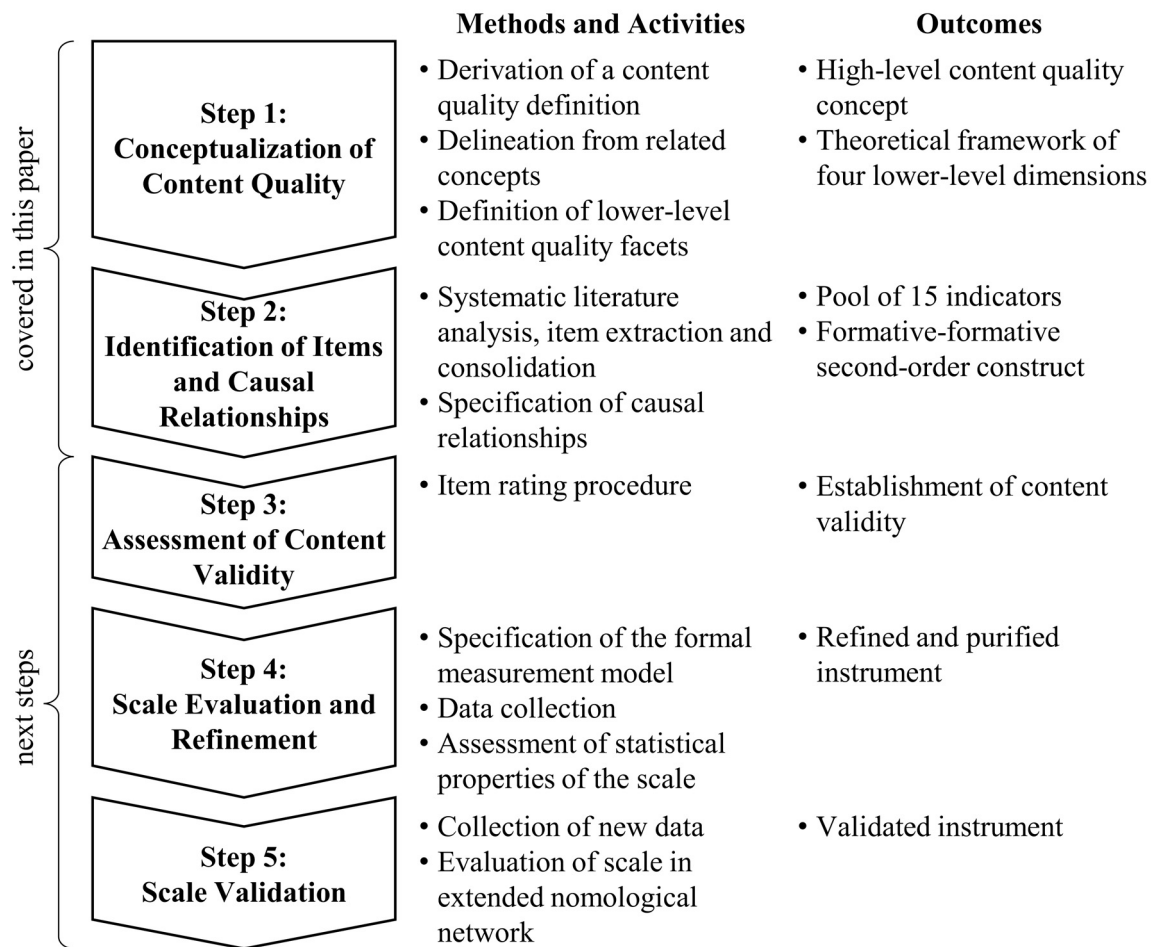


Figure 1. Scale development process

3.1 Conceptualization of content quality in the context of e-commerce

Traditionally, information quality denoted the quality of the output an information system provided to its users. It was conceptualized as the perception of certain attributes that determined the information’s value to users (Gallagher, 1974; Zmud, 1978). Some studies have transferred this conceptualization more or less unadapted to the e-commerce context (e.g. Brown and Jayakody, 2009; Park and Kim, 2003). However, DeLone and McLean (2003) state that, in the context of e-commerce, information quality refers to the presented content. Although the notions of content and information are often used interchangeably (e.g. Brown and Jayakody, 2009), they are distinct concepts. Following the definition by Hess (2014) and Berger et al. (2015), content is the representation of public communication, i.e. communication that addresses an infinite group of recipients. It can be represented in the modalities text, graphics, audio, or video (Adelaar et al., 2003). Content can carry information but may also fulfil other purposes such as entertainment or education. Building on these considerations and previous conceptualizations of information quality, we defined content quality as the customers’ perceptions of the public communication conveyed by an e-commerce system.

To enable a comprehensive examination of the influences of content quality on various e-commerce success measures such as customer satisfaction or loyalty, we decided to model content quality as a separate construct instead as a subdimension of website quality. Most studies to investigate content quality or information quality as a separate construct have perceived it as one of three quality dimensions besides system quality and service quality, as is proposed by DeLone and McLean (2004).

It is therefore reasonable to ensure compatibility of our content quality conceptualization with their framework. Thus, we had to delineate content quality from system quality and service quality, especially because the differences between these concepts have occasionally been blurred in the past (Bressolles et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2012). System quality represents the “structural characteristics of an e-commerce system and taps into its performance dynamics such as availability, adaptability, and response time” (Xu et al., 2013, p. 780). Thus, the design of a website, which describes how content is made available to users (Huizingh, 2000), and its navigability, which ensures that users can find the content they want (Palmer, 2002), are attributes of the system itself and not of the content it provides (Lee and Kozar, 2006; Lin, 2007a). In contrast, the content’s inner structure, its format, and its layout are attributes of content quality (Ahn et al., 2004). Service quality, on the other hand, denotes the customers’ assessment of their interactions with the vendor on the website (Xu et al., 2013). All personal communication with customers is therefore part of the service quality domain, while public communication is captured by content quality. Service quality attributes are commonly adopted from the initial SERVQUAL scale by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and include responsiveness, reliability, and empathy (DeLone and McLean, 2003; Lee and Kozar, 2006; Lin, 2007a).

A thorough conceptualization encompasses the identification of a construct’s lower-level facets (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Although content quality or information quality have also been modelled as unidimensional constructs before, we agree with Wang and Strong (1996) and built our conceptual framework of content quality on the four information quality dimensions they have identified. We also followed Nelson et al. (2005) in discarding the accessibility quality dimension, because it is a characteristic of system quality rather than of content quality. We adopted the remaining dimensions intrinsic quality, representational quality, and contextual quality and, if necessary, adapted them to the context of B2C e-commerce. As in the original categorization, in our framework, intrinsic content quality is the extent to which content has a value in its own right, given that it conveys information that represents the truth (Wang and Strong, 1996). To define representation quality, we slightly generalized the conception by Nelson et al. (2005) and described it as the extent to which the presentation of the content facilitates its reception. For contextual content quality, on the other hand, we relied on the definition by Lim et al. (2012), which was specifically developed for the e-commerce context and denotes the extent to which the content facilitates online shopping for customers. In sum, these three dimensions cover the relevant utilitarian aspects of content quality. However, past studies have demonstrated that hedonic motives play a central role in consumers’ decisions concerning the adoption and use of IS (Lowry et al., 2013; Venkatesh et al., 2012). Specifically, both content consumption and shopping on the Internet have been proven to be at least partially hedonically motivated (Carlson and O’Cass, 2010; Chiu et al., 2014). To address the emotional aspects and the self-fulfilling value of an online shop’s content, a new dimension called hedonic quality was built, which represents the extent to which the content evokes enjoyment (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; van der Heijden, 2004).

3.2 Item generation and identification of causal relationships

To generate items for our content quality construct, we systematically analyzed the literature, following the recommendations by Webster and Watson (2002). Using both the database Business Source Complete by the online library EBSCOhost, which covers all important IS, media, and marketing outlets, and the AIS Electronic Library, which provides access to the proceedings of IS conferences, we conducted two searches. These targeted B2C e-commerce success and the quality of websites, information, or content in this context. We excluded all papers that were concerned with the success of e-learning, e-health, or e-auction systems, that examined website design, or that specifically focused on the quality of customer reviews, assurance seals, or health information. Among the remaining papers, we performed a backward search. As a result, we obtained 143 papers, which we subsequently classified into the two literature streams described above. Building two concept matrices, we extracted all items of information quality and content quality constructs applied in these studies.

Similar to the study by Aladwani and Palvia (2002), the next step was to filter the items. Thus, two independent raters assessed each item and decided whether it applied to our conceptualization of content quality. Disagreements were discussed among the raters, which helped to sharpen the definition of the concept and its delineation from related constructs. We then clustered items that measured the same content quality attribute, but were worded differently. For instance, both “The content of this website is current” from Lin (2007b, p. 511) and “The information provided by this website is up to date” from Chiu (2014, p. 114) are measures of timeliness and were therefore sorted into the same cluster. At the end of this procedure, we had identified 42 clusters, each of which represented one attribute of content quality.

To create a comprehensive and yet parsimonious instrument to measure content quality, we had to decrease the number of attributes. To do so, an expert panel of four experienced researchers from the fields of IS, marketing, and communication science assessed each item cluster. The experts decided to exclude all attributes that referred to specific pieces of content such as customer policies or contact information and assigned the remaining attributes to the four lower-level dimensions of content quality we had defined previously. The experts then merged attributes with overlapping domains within each dimension to increase parsimony without harming content validity. Whenever possible, the decisions were based on the findings of previous research. Readability and clarity, for instance, were subsumed under understandability, which is empirically supported by McKinney et al. (2002). After these steps, the number of clusters was reduced to 15. Based on the item wording guidelines by DeVellis (2012), we selected one item from each of these clusters as a measure for the respective attribute. If necessary, we carefully adapted the selected items to the B2C e-commerce context. Because contextual content quality can only be assessed after a purchase, these items were formulated in the past tense. Our initial proposal for a second-order content quality construct is summarized in Table 1.

Dimension	Attribute	Item
Intrinsic quality	Accuracy	The content on the website is accurate.
	Timeliness	The website provides current content.
	Consistency	The content on the website is free of contradictions.
Contextual quality	Detailedness	The website provided content at an appropriate level of detail.
	Relevance	The content on the website was relevant to my purchase.
	Sufficiency	The website provided an adequate amount of content for my purchase.
	Customization	The content on the website was tailored to my situation.
	Informativeness	The content on the website was informative to my purchase decision.
Presentational quality	Organization	The content on the website is well organized.
	Understandability	The content on the website is easy to understand.
	Format	The content on the website is well laid out.
	Multimedia	The website uses text, images, graphics, audio, or video effectively.
Hedonic quality	Entertainment	The content on the website is entertaining.
	Creativeness	The website provides creative content.
	Attractiveness	The content on the website has aroused my interest.

Table 1. Initial proposal of a content quality scale

Given this hierarchical structure, we had to define the causal relationships between the 15 indicators, the four first-order quality dimensions, and content quality (MacKenzie et al., 2011). These relationships can either be formative or reflective (Jarvis et al., 2003). Reflective indicators are caused

by their focal construct. In this case, a change in the construct should be reflected by a change in all of its measures. On the other hand, formative indicators are causes of the focal construct. Thus, a change in the construct does not lead to a change in its measures, but a change in any of the measures induces a change in the construct. By definition, reflective indicators strongly correlate with each other and therefore are interchangeable. In contrast, deleting or replacing a formative indicator means altering the focal construct' domain.

The first empirical examinations assumed a reflective relationship between information or content quality and its attributes (Ahn et al., 2004; McKinney et al., 2002). With formative measurement approaches becoming more important, this assumption has been questioned (Dickinger and Stangl, 2013; Schaupp et al., 2009). We carefully applied the decision rules by Jarvis et al. (2003) to identify the causal relationships in our content quality conceptualization. Concerning the four dimensions of information quality, we concluded that each covers a different lower-level domain of content quality. A change within intrinsic quality, for instance, is not necessarily associated with a change in contextual quality. Accordingly, these dimensions neither inevitably covary nor are they interchangeable. Instead, the four dimensions are defining characteristics and, as a result, are formative indicators of content quality. For the relationships between the dimensions and their attributes, we applied the same reasoning. Using the example of consistency and timeliness, it is evident that the content can be consistent but at the same time outdated. Updating the content would not make it more consistent. Therefore, we also specified the relationships between the four content quality dimensions and the attributes as formative. Taken together, the causality flows from the 15 content quality attributes to the four content quality dimensions and from the content quality dimensions to content quality. This conceptual structure is equivalent to a formative first-order, formative second-order (Type IV) model, as described by Jarvis et al. (2003).

3.3 Next steps

The remaining steps of the construct development process seek to empirically test the validity and reliability of the scale. In step three, we have to ensure content validity of the items. Content validity encompasses two aspects: each indicator must actually represent a part of the domain of its focal construct, and a construct's whole domain must be covered by all its indicators (MacKenzie et al., 2011). We are confident that our extensive literature review and the subsequent attribute selection process by a panel of experts already assures comprehensive coverage of each construct's domain (Petter et al., 2007). To address the first aspect of content validity, we are going to employ the item rating procedure outlined by Hinkin and Tracey (1999). Step four of the scale development process comprises the analysis of the statistical properties of the instrument. This requires the specification of a formal measurement model. In the case of formatively specified measurement instruments, the model must include reflective indicators for each construct so as to ensure identification (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). The result is a multiple indicators and multiple causes (MIMIC) model. After collecting data in a survey among students of a public German university, estimating the MIMIC model is going to allow us to assess the validity of the formative measurement instrument using common fit indices. An individual indicator can be considered as valid if it significantly influences its focal construct. The validity of a whole set of indicators can be determined by examining the construct-level error term (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Because multicollinearity can be a problem for the estimation of the MIMIC model, the variance inflation factors of all formative indicators should also be evaluated. Based on the results of these tests, the measurement instrument may be refined. Finally, the refined instrument should be integrated into an extended nomological context, i.e. it should be tested whether the relationship between the instrument and other constructs is in line with the predictions of existing theories. A suitable context to test the scale we propose here would be the adaptation of the D&M model by Kim et al (2012). In their model, they investigated the influence of system, service, and information quality on utilitarian and hedonic shopping value as well as on intention to repurchase, which fits the rationale of content-driven commerce.

4 Expected Contribution

With our proposal of a new measurement instrument for content quality, we seek to provide both theoretical insights and a valuable tool for practitioners. Previous research has often called for the advancements of existing content quality or information quality scales owing to a lack of consensus on how these concepts should be measured. But to our best knowledge, no study has systematically investigated the conceptual foundations as well as the defining characteristics of content quality since Wang and Strong (1996). Most existent studies that are based on their framework have chosen to represent the lower-level dimensions of content quality by single attributes (Nelson et al., 2005; Xu et al., 2013). In contrast, our instrument covers the full conceptual domain of each dimension with several formative indicators and thereby contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the properties that denote the value of content on the Internet. Furthermore, the proposed scale takes into account hedonic characteristics of content, which have largely been neglected in former studies despite the fact that the hedonic use of IS is becoming increasingly important (van der Heijden, 2004). Besides the theoretical developments, our careful analysis of the direction of causality between the different levels of content quality and its specification as a formative-formative second-order construct may lead to a sounder methodology in content quality measurement.

We hope that unifying the various measurement approaches of content quality and information quality may also increase the comparability of future research results. Although our scale has been developed for the context of B2C e-commerce, its multidimensional structure enables a straightforward adjustment to other research settings. Users of the scale can adopt the universal dimensions intrinsic quality, presentational quality, and hedonic quality as they are proposed here, and focus on the identification of the attributes that are dependent on the setting in which they want to apply the instrument for the contextual quality dimension. Possible areas of application include business-to-business, e-learning, and news websites.

Practitioners in both media companies and online retailers can take advantage of the proposed instrument in several ways. First, they can investigate whether or not investments in content are worthwhile. The efforts of integrating content into transaction-based revenue models are based on the assumption that an increase in content quality also leads to higher customer satisfaction and stronger customer loyalty. However, there is a threat that customers draw on the rich content of one website to inform themselves about products and services, but make their purchase at another website because it offers lower prices. Our content quality scale will enable the reliable investigation of content quality's effects on customer attitudes and behavior. Second, media companies and online retailers can apply our instrument to identify potential for improvement concerning their websites' content quality. Owing to its formative nature, the scale explicitly indicates how customers perceive certain aspects of the content provided and how an improvement of these aspects would influence the overall impression of the content. For instance, customers may think of the content of an online shop as very informative and relevant, but may at the same time have the opinion that it is poorly presented. Online retailers and media companies can use this detailed knowledge to allocate investments in content for their websites more efficiently.

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