Is It Possible for "Electronic Word-of-Mouth" and "User-Generated Content" to be Used Interchangeably?

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Abstract
The advance of web 2.0 that facilitates contents to be created, shared and exchanged through online platforms has led to profound changes in consumer behavior. Modern consumers appreciate nonprofessional-produced contents as they are perceived to be more trustworthy. As a result, electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and user-generated content (UGC) have become two of the most frequent researched objects over the last ten years in marketing area. However, extant studies have confounded these two concepts which may cause significant academic problems. In this paper the authors aim to disentangle eWOM and UGC by comparing their fundamental attributes. Findings prove that despite sharing similar attributes, eWOM and UGC are two distinctive concepts with different scope and meaning. It is thus concluded that eWOM and UGC cannot be used interchangeably. The results of this study provide important implications for future research.
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1. Introduction
The advent of web 2.0, which has enabled Internet users to easily produce and distribute home-made contents, has resulted in a proliferation of non-professional contents in cyberspace. Every 60 seconds 510,000 comments posted, 293,000 statuses updated, and 136,000 photos uploaded on Facebook in 2016 (Schultz, 2019); every 60 seconds 300 hours of video uploaded to Youtube in 2017 (Smith, 2019); approximately 730 million user reviews and opinions generated on TripAdvisor in 2018 (Lock, 2019). Scholars have used various terms to describe this phenomenon, including Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), User-created content (UCC), User-generated content (UGC), and others. Whilst a number of researchers (e.g., Bruns, 2016; Brost, 2013; Arnhold, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008; Stoeckl, Rohrmeier, & Hess, 2007) have concluded that the two terms UCC and UGC are interchangeably used to a large extent, there exist inconsistent opinions about the two concepts, eWOM and UGC, in terms of scope and meaning. With regard to meaning, Hautz, Füller, Hutter, & Thürridl (2014) argue that eWOM and UGC are significantly different from each other and therefore they cannot be deemed the same. In a similar sense, Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian (2012) assert that UGC is not identical with eWOM. On the contrary, other authors state that eWOM and UGC are the two names of the same concept (e.g., Bahtar & Muda, 2016; Yu & Zou, 2015; Yu et al., 2014). In respect of scope, Owusu, Mutshinda, Antai, Dadzie, & Winston (2016, p.25) contend that "UGC is a form of eWOM", whereas, Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian (2012, p.103) insist that "UGC is broader than eWOM". This inconsistence leads to confusion for researchers and may engender considerable problems in certain aspects of academic research (i.e. study of the motivations for creating eWOM or UGC requires an explicit clarification of its meaning and forms). Hence, this article aims to illuminate whether eWOM and UGC can be interchangeably used by scrutinizing their definitions to identify the key features of each concept, thereby a comparison will be conducted to attest whether the different characteristic(s) exist(s).

2. Web 2.0 as a platform
In recent years, the world has witnessed an unceasing expansion of contents produced by Internet users on online platforms (e.g., social networking sites, wikis, review sites, content sharing sites, blogs and internet forums). Rather than just being a "place" for people to read and download, the Internet nowadays has become a realm for users to interact and create contents in multiple ways (e.g., photo, audio, video, text, blog, etc.) thanks to web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 is a concept which is used to represent the second generation web tools that are different from the first one with dissimilar attributes (Horzum & Aydemir, 2014). Contrary to Web 1.0 which limits users to the passive viewing and download of copyrighted information (Liburd & Christensen, 2013; Liburd, 2012), Web 2.0 creates users who actively take part in generating viewed contents, through which it satisfies the Internet users' wish to share their lives with others as well as their need for visibility and public statement of opinion in the form of small comments, ''likes'' and smileys etc. (Liburd & Christensen, 2013; Liburd, 2012). In essence, Web 2.0 encourages Internet users that were previously passive to engage in creating databases (Yi, 2014), everyone has now been given the chance to voice their opinion and spread information to all interested parties.

3. Elaboration of eWOM's definitions

A review of the definition of word-of-mouth (WOM) is of utmost to fully master the meaning of eWOM. Arndt (1967) was one of the first scholars to define WOM in marketing and communication literature:

Table 3-1: Selected definitions and approaches to define eWOM

Defintion	Source
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, p.39
Any statement based on positive, neutral, or negative experiences made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product, service, brand, or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (through websites, social networks, instant messengers, news feeds, etc.	Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013, p.39
Consumption-related communication on the Internet, which can be diffused by many Internet applications such as online forums, electronic bulletin board systems, blogs, review sites, and social networking sites	Goldsmith, 2006, p.410
All informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers	Litvin et al., 2018, p.461
eWOM is the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process between potential, actual, or former consumers regarding a product, service, brand, or company, which is available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet	Ismagilova et al., 2017, p.18

Source: authors' elaboration, based on literature cited

"oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as noncommercial, regarding a brand, a product, or a service." (Arndt, 1967, p.1967).

This definition associates WOM with a communication process that comprises three components: the communicator (source of information), the message and the receiver; in which the communication's content pertains to a certain commercial entity. The information providers and receivers are believed to have some existing professional, social, or family ties (Tham, Croy, & Mair, 2013). Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the communication is about commercial organizations, the information providers are not commercial motivated or at least they are perceived as being unbiased from the receivers' view.

The appearance of web 2.0 has seminally changed the way people communicate, interact as well as the way information is disseminated. The relationships between individuals has been exploded from micro to macro level thanks to the ability to develop new interpersonal relationship via online social networks (Sarma & Choudhury, 2015). At the same time, information is diffused with "speed of light" across online platforms without any spatial or temporal boundaries. As a consequence, Web 2.0 broadens WOM communication networks (Fotis, 2015) and the term "eWOM" began to be used widely.

Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler (2004) propose one of the most widespread definitions of eWOM:

"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, p.39)

This approach links eWOM to the dissemination of commercial entity-related information on the Internet. The information providers here can be understood as Internet end-users who have consumed or may consume a particular product/service in the future, and may not be acquaintances of the information receivers due to the anonymous and interactive nature of the Internet. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) also emphasize the emotional aspect of eWOM, however, it is considered as limiting as this approach classifies eWOM into two stages: positive and negative. Wang & Rodgers (2010, p.212) argue that the valence values of eWOM "are often beyond a simple dichotomy". Some eWOM can contain both positive and negative valences while some can be fundamentally neutral. For example, a tourist who has visited a tourism destination can write only facts about that place without any negative or positive valence.

To surmount this limitation, Kietzmann & Canhoto (2013) introduce a new definition of eWOM (see table 3-1) which is basically similar to the one proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). Nonetheless, Kietzmann & Canhoto (2013) supplements that eWOM can be neutral instead of being merely positive or negative, in other words, eWOM can be emotional-oriented or informational-oriented.

To the other extreme, Goldsmith (2006) gives emphasis to the diffusion of eWOM on the Internet based on web 2.0 applications by interpreting eWOM as:

"[…] consumption-related communication on the Internet, which can be diffused by many Internet

applications such as online forums, electronic bulletin board systems, blogs, review sites, and social networking sites." (Goldsmith, 2006, p.410).

This approach draws attention to the conveyance of information characteristic of eWOM. In this way, it is understood that eWOM merely requires content conveyance by users (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan (2008) develop a definition of eWOM based on the traditional concept of WOM:

"all informal communications directed at consumers through Internet-based technology related to the usage or characteristics of particular goods and services, or their sellers". (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2018, p.461).

This approach once again stresses that the content of eWOM communication has to appertain to products/services or companies/organizations and be available on the Internet. Unlike other authors that restrict information providers to those who have consumed or may consume a particular product/service in the future, Litvin et al. (2008) include producers as communicators of eWOM. Germane to this judgment, Lindgreen & Vanhamme (2005) argue that there have been more and more companies that have adopted viral marketing practices, which has blurred the boundary between commercial messages and WOM.

In a more recent definition, beside reaffirming the limit of eWOM's content and its availability on the Internet, Ismagilova, Dwivedi, Slade, & Williams (2017) consider eWOM as "a dynamic and ongoing information exchange process":

"eWOM is the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process between potential, actual, or former consumers regarding a product, service, brand, or company, which is available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet." (Ismagilova et al., 2017, p.18).

In fact, there is no denying that eWOM is a "dynamic and ongoing" process as online messages can spread spontaneously. Notwithstanding, the association of eWOM with an "information exchange process" may hold true for some contexts, but not for all: according to Cheung & Lee (2012), individuals own different patterns in the way they present and exchange opinions through eWOM. People with good consumption experiences may simply post compliments on products or services to reward the providers without seeking any information exchange. Therefore, it is more reasonable to regard eWOM as an information dissemination process than an information exchange process as once the information is made publicly available, it is an information dissemination per se.

Interestingly, whilst being independent of commercial influence is a salient characteristic of traditional WOM, it seems to be ignored in eWOM definitions. The fact that consumers have effects on each other through communication, which is highly valued by marketers, has long been proven by numerous social researchers. The advent web 2.0, on the one hand, has empowered consumers to amplify their influences on a much larger number of audiences. On the other hand, marketers have also been given opportunities to manage interpersonal influence through opinion leaders and the like. Consequently, it can be said that eWOM can either be dependent or independent of commercial purposes.

Based on the above discussion, the following features of eWOM are identified:

- Information dissemination
- Potentially unknown provider and receiver relationship
- Commercial entity-related content
- Online availability

4. Elaboration of UGC's definitions

UGC has been widely recognized as an important phenomenon since 2005 (Bruns, 2016). Being considered as the "broadest term" (Colistra, Buchman, & Duvall, 2017; Holton, Coddington, & Dezúñiga, 2013), there is no yet a formal and unanimous definition of UGC.

Krumm, Davies, & Narayanaswami (2008) state:

''UGC comes from regular people who voluntarily contribute data, information, or media that then appears before others in a useful or entertaining way ...'' (Krumm, Davies, & Narayanaswami, 2008, p.10)

This approach focuses attention on the content contribution of ordinary people voluntarily. Regular people are understood as Internet end-users, who are not conventional media producers. As stated by Krumm et al. (2008), contents contributed by regular people must be the first to appear, which means that UGC should be an original that has not been created before. The limitation of this approach is that it frames the purposes of creating UGC only to be useful or entertaining for content consumers, whilst overlooks other motivations such as expressing oneself or achieving fame.

Similarly, Tang, Fang, & Wang (2014) define UGC as:

"media content created by users to share information and/or opinions with other users". (Tang et al., 2014, p.41).

This approach suffers the same limitation as the previous one that it limits the motivation to generate UGC within sharing "information and/or opinions", neclegting other motivations.

In the same vein, Daugherty et al. (2008) define UGC as:

"media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals." (Daugherty et al.,

2008, p.18).

Bruns (2006) proposes:

"User-generated content (UGC), sometimes also referred to as user-created content (UCC), is a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially cocreated by "users"—that is, by contributors working outside of conventional professional environments." (Bruns, 2016, p.1).

Table 4-1: Selected definitions and approaches to define UGC

Defintion	Source
Three central characteristics of UGC: - Publication requirement - Creative effort - Creation outside of professional routines and practices	OECD, 2007, p.18
UGC comes from regular people who voluntarily contribute data, information, or media that then appears before others in a useful or entertaining way	Krumm et al., 2008, p.10
Media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals	Daugherty et al., 2008, p.16
UGC usually applied to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users	Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61
Media content created by users to share information and/or opinions with other users	Tang, Fang, & Wang, 2014, p.41
User-generated content (UGC), sometimes also referred to as user-created content (UCC), is a generic term that encompasses a wide range of media and creative content types that were created or at least substantially cocreated by "users"—that is, by contributors working outside of conventional professional environments	Bruns, 2016, p.1
UGC comprises three characteristics as follow: 1. UGC is characterized by a degree of personal contribution 2. UGC must be published 3. UGC is created 'outside the realm of a profession and professional routines	Naab & Sehl, 2017, p.1258

Source: authors' elaboration, based on literature cited

As can be seen from the above approaches, there is a unanimity among authors that being created outside the commercial market context by users is a significant feature of UGC. Here, conventional professional producers refers to professional writers, publishers, journalists, licensed broadcasters, etc. that create content for commercial purpose. Stoeckl, Rohrmeier, & Hess (2007) believe that the majority of UGC generators are amateurs without monetary motivation. UGC is perceived as "non-professional grassroots movement outside institutional context and without expectation of remuneration or profit" (Arnhold, 2010, p.30). UGC can thus be interpreted as a result of the integration of the user into the media production process (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Nevertheless, the content of UGC should not be understood to be entirely amateur although it is not produced by professional media producers, it may still be well generated by skillful and professional-level knowledgeable users (Bruns, 2016). Bruns (2016) goes a step further than previous authors in specifying what is considered as creative content, accordingly, creative content can be totally newly created or can be a product of the collaboration with existing contents. Even so, the minimum amount of creative effort is not easy to define because it depends on the context (Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD), 2007).

Despite the fact that UGC is generated and disseminated through web 2.0 platforms, it can be said that the above presented definitions have not addressed an element that UGC must be publicized in cyberspace. This void is filled by the definition of UGC offered by OECD in 2007, which was also adopted by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) and Naab & Sehl (2017) (see table 2). Accordingly, any content in order to be regarded as UGC should possess three central characteristics:

a) Publication requirement: UGC is required to be made available through publicly accessible transmission media. In accordance to this requirement, e-mail, two-way instant messages and the like are excluded (OECD, 2007).

b) Creative effort: UGC is "characterized by a degree of personal contribution" (Naab & Sehl, 2017, p.1258). Internet users must contribute to a content themselves (these creative works can be original photographs, audios, videos, or even thoughts expressed or comments) or at least collaborate with the existing contents to construct new ones, however, the minimum amount of personal contribution needed to qualify for UGC remains vague (Arnhold, 2010). Based on this requirement the mere reproductions of existing content are not considered as UGC (e.g., copying an existing newspaper article and posting it on a personal blog (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), copying a part of a television show and posting it on

an online video platform (OECD, 2007)).

c) Creation outside of professional routines and practices: This characteristic distinguishes UGC from content produced by the traditional media producers. It may be argued that "the creation purpose of UGC is shifting from non-profit to profit" (Arnhold, 2010, p.30) because of its tremendous potential in influencing consumer behavior. OECD (2007) itself admits that commercialization of UCC has been a growing trend. Such term as "user-generated content marketing" has become typical for the effort of marketers to try to engage consumers by making use of UGC. However, despite the fact that commercialization of UGC is an undeniable trend, it is necessary to maintain this requirement to differentiate UGC from marketing-generated content or organization-generated content (OECD, 2007).

The third criterion proposed by OECD (2007) that requires UGC to be independent from commercial purpose calls for a reconsideration on the source of UGC. In the case of professionals who create content outside their primary employment, for instance, a journalist writes about his hobby in his free time, then this content can still be deemed as UGC. Thus, any Internet users should be reckoned with UGC creators as long as they build content without commercial purpose regardless they are professional media producers or not.

On the basis of the above approaches and discussion, the three characteristics of UGC offered by OECD (2007) will be applied for the purpose of this study because they reflect the fundamental attributes shared by the numerous and various content types published by the Internet users (Ochoa & Duval, 2008), however, the title of the third characteristic will be replace by "free from commercial purpose" to better serve its requirement.

5. Comparison between eWOM and UGC

A comparison between the characteristics of eWOM and UGC is presented in table 5-1.

Based on the identified characteristics of eWOM and UGC, it can be said that these two concepts share similar features: First, both eWOM and UGC are information dissemination processes as once the information is made publicly available, it is an information dissemination per se. Second, there is a high possibility that the creators and receivers of eWOM and UGC are strangers to each other because within web 2.0 platforms, content is shared for an undetermined number of recipients, the message senders present content in cyberspace without knowing who is reviewing the information and vice versa (Tham et al., 2013). Third, eWOM and UGC must meet the publication requirement that requires the content to be publicized to a selected group or an uncertain number of people through publicly accessible transmission media on the Internet.

Table 5-1: Similarities and Differences between eWOM and UGC

		eWOM	UGC
Similarities	Information dissemination	√	√
	Potentially unknown source and receiver relationships	√	√
	Online availability	√	√
Differences	Creative effort	Unrequired	√
	Content limit	√ (Commercial entity-related)	Unrequired
	Commercial-influenced independence	Unrequired	√

√: applicable

Source: authors, based on characteristics identified

To the other extreme, there are dimensions that are not attribute to both eWOM and UGC: The first distinction that may be identified between eWOM and UGC is that of creative effort. Smith et al., (2012) state that the difference between eWOM and UGC depends on whether the content is generated by users or only conveyed by users. A content in order to be regarded as UGC must be a pure creative product or at least a hybrid form combining self-made work with existing content. Conversely, besides generating new information such as writing reviews or comments, merely sharing or forwarding amateur or professional-produced contents pertaining to commercial entities can also be considered as an action of generating eWOM. The second distinctive feature that discriminates between eWOM and UGC refers to content scope. Whilst regarding to commercial entities such as a product, service, brand or company is one the most striking characteristics of eWOM, such criterion is neither directly nor indirectly mentioned in the definitions of UGC, in other words, UGC has no boundary in terms of content scope. The third and final attribute that distinguishes eWOM and UGC concerns being "free from commercial purpose". A content is deemed as UGC if it is generated outside an institutional or commercial market context, in the meantime, eWOM is not impacted by such criterion.

To sum up, it can be said that UGC and eWOM are two closely related concepts with overlapping attributes. However, they possess significant different features that make it impossible to use these two concepts interchangeably. The relation between UGC and eWOM can be depicted as in figure 5-1.
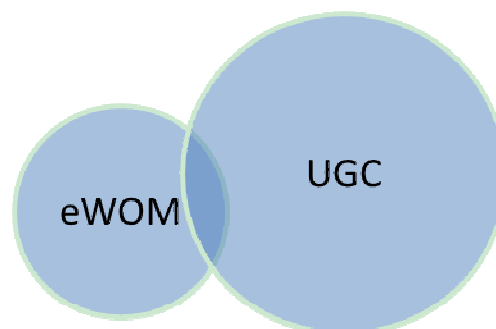
Figure 5-1: The relation between eWOM and UGC

Source: authors

6. Contribution and Implications

This article contributes to the understanding of eWOM and UGC in several ways. First, it raises the importance to clearly differentiate between closely-related academic concepts in order to avoid academic problems at the very first stage of studies (e.g., researchers who study the motivations to generate eWOM or UGC may gain inaccurate results if they confuse between eWOM and UGC). Second, it enriches the existing literature by identifying four characteristics that represent eWOM. Particularly, eWOM is an information dissemination process, the relationships between eWOM providers and receivers are little known, the content of eWOM pertains to commercial entities and eWOM must be online available. Most importantly, this study has proven that eWOM and UGC are two distinctive concepts with conspicuous different attributes in spite of sharing similarities. This is valuable information for those whose studied objects are related to eWOM or UGC as it lays the ground for identifying a spectrum of eWOM or UGC, determining their production motivations, exploring their influences on consumer behavior, etc. By and large, this article advances our knowledge and understanding of eWOM and UGC, and underpins future researches appertaining to these two concepts.

7. Limitations, Future research and Conclusion

This study is subject to certain limitations that need to be addressed in future research. While the concepts of eWOM and UGC were well elaborated, the motivation to generate eWOM and UGC have not been taken under consideration. This highlights the need for further investigation of impetus of eWOM and UGC, thereby more information about the discrepancy or similarity between the two concepts may be uncovered. Additionally, eWOM and UGC are likely to evolve over time due to the continuous development of intelligent web services and new Internet-based software applications, in consequence, future studies could reexamine the concepts of eWOM and UGC and their relation based on the change of technology. What is more, it will be interesting for future researches to deeply analyze how eWOM and UGC are commercialized and its effects on consumer behavior.

In conclusion, this study seeks to answer the question "Is it possible for eWOM and UGC to be used interchangeably?" by elaborating their definitions to identify their characteristics, based on which a comparison between the two concepts were implemented. It has been found that eWOM and UGC possess parallel features: information dissemination, potentially unknown provider and receiver relationships, and online availability. On the other side, UGC owns features that eWOM does not: UGC requires user's personal contribution in its contents whilst eWOM merely requires content conveyance by user, UGC has no limit in respect of content scope whereas eWOM is posited to be related to commercial entity, and UGC is required to be independent from commercial purpose while eWOM is not. Overall, findings of this study support the viewpoint of Hautz et al. (2014) and Smith et al. (2012) that eWOM and UGC are two separate concepts and as a result they cannot be used interchangeably.

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