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Relationships between Quintessence and Strong Word of Mouth Behaviour

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Abstract

Theory suggests that Quintessence (Q), an emotional/spiritual connection to a product, relates positively to Word of Mouth marketing (WOM). This paper investigates if consumers who experience Quintessence (Q+) share the same behavioural indicators as consumers who participate in strong Word of Mouth behavior (WOM+). Survey data from subscribers to an online entertainment service demonstrated that Q+ and WOM+ consumers shared similar characteristics, those who experienced Quintessence (Q+) spread significantly more WOM than those without Quintessence.

Introduction

As narrowcasting replaces broadcasting, channels of communication multiply and the importance of Word of Mouth Marketing (WOM) increases. Academic and industry literature demonstrate the efficacy and efficiency of WOM (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). As technology enhances WOM opportunities, leveraging communication channels is a growing focus of marketing researchers.

Quintessence (Q) is a phenomenological, constructed perception of sacredness that arises from the product experience. This paper explores the relationship between this sacred feeling and Word of Mouth behavior in an applied context.

As the concept of Quintessence comes to marketing through qualitative research, measureable outcomes of the phenomenon are largely unexplored. This paper takes a step to quantitative analysis by exploring the correlation between Quintessence and several behaviors in an applied context, including an outcome that can reap producer benefits: WOM.

What is Quintessence?

The Oxford English Dictionary (Burchfield, 1987) notes the first use of quintessence in the 16th century related to the fifth essence of a universal substance. For most of its existence, the word was a scientific, or as one says today, a pseudo-scientific term associated with alchemy and other theories of the universe.

Russell Belk's work on religiosity in Consumer Culture is significant for both its seminal value and its foundation for subsequent work in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), particularly relating to the sacred and the profane. Belk introduces in to marketing literature the concept of Quintessence, or the perceived sacredness of everyday objects. Quintessence is constructed in several ways. One way is through the manner in which the object was obtained (a wedding ring, for example); it can be sacred through its place in a larger collection (a baseball card, for example); or through its origins (a family heirloom). This paper will examine yet another origin of Quintessence, sacredness through perceived perfection in form and function (Belk, 1995; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Belk & Wallendorf, 1990; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989).

Quintessence is socially constructed (Sayer, 1997). The perceived perfection in form and function is communicated through the product experience, co-created between the consumer and the producer, or actors within a value network (Lusch, Vargo, & Tanniru, 2010). The Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) paradigm (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) is an essential framework within which to discuss Quintessence. No other paradigm accounts for the co-creation of value and therefore accurately reflects Quintessence's subjective quality. SDL posits that producers cannot build in value; value only arises through the product-in-use experience. Likewise, producers cannot build Quintessence into their product; they can only create the opportunity for Quintessence to occur while the consumer uses the product.

Quintessence is often cited in a qualitative context. Quintessence is often cited in studies related to CCT, especially cult-like behaviour around consumer products or cultural analyses of consumer behaviour (Belk, 1988; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Belk & Wallendorf, 1990). Links, particularly quantitative links, between Quintessence and other types of consumer behaviour do not appear in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to explore quantitative relationships between Quintessence and other behaviours, specifically WOM.

Methodology

The authors of this paper worked with data from an Entertainment Online Subscription Service (EOS). EOS is an Australian online entertainment rental subscription service. Members pay a monthly fee to rent videos and electronic games which are sent to them through surface mail. Memberships can be suspended or terminated at any time by the member. Therefore it is essential that members are consistently satisfied with the service. Moreover, many Australians live near brick and mortar video rental stores from which they can rent higher volume at a lower price; therefore it is essential that the range of titles and convenience of postal delivery outweigh the competition.

EOS surveyed their customers with a series of questions using an online survey. Over 60,000 EOS members were encouraged to participate in the survey. One respondent selected at random would win a free year's subscription to EOS.

The survey had over 60 questions. None were required to complete the survey. The questions, in various formats (multiple choice, Likert scale and short answer), sought demographic, behavioural and psychographic information. The survey yielded 6,097 responses. After eliminating cases based on missing data, time to complete the survey and conflicting responses, the sample was trimmed to 3,997 valid cases.

The survey data had limitations. The survey was very long, which meant that many cases had to be deleted as there was evidence that the answers were not considered. The questions were randomized in the survey; however the length of the survey also may have compromised the data within it. The varying types of response formats as well as the nature the way some of the questions were written means that some of the data is not conclusive.

For the purpose of this survey all cases that may have compromised data were eliminated. Most questions, other than demographic ones, measured answers on a five point likert scale. There were two exceptions One exception was the question relating to the likelihood of the respondent telling others about EOS in future, which was rated on an eleven point scale. The other exception was the question measuring Quintessence itself, which was binomial (yes/no).

The question measuring Quintessence was formulated based on the literature about Quintessence. However no previous quantitative measure for Quintessence could be found in the literature; hence the authors of this paper formulated the question based on their perspective of what a survey question about Quintessence would look like. The binomial nature of the question refers to the literature about Quintessence that speaks of it as an absolute, rather than something which is measured in stages.

Questions for this analysis focused on data from the survey regarding Quintessence, demographics, consumer satisfaction, perception of value and Word of Mouth behaviour. Demographic data was taken into account in order to describe people who are represented in the survey.

Participants self-reported how many times within the last 12 months they told others about EOS. It is worth noting that EOS offers its members continual incentives (one month free membership) and seasonal incentives (three month free membership offers) as both inducements to their subscribers to spread WOM and promotional offers for new members.

The survey question measuring Quintessence was “My life wouldn’t be the same without EOS.” Analyzing the relationship of this variable with demographic, behavioural, psychographic and WOM related data would highlight differences between the Quintessence-positive (Q+) negative (Q-) groups, and across the general population.

Given the binomial Quintessence question and the ordinal nature of other questions, Kruskal-Wallis tests explored possible differences between the Q+ and Q- populations, as well as between WOM activity and key psychographic items. As a large population, $n=3,997$, may yield a false positive, results were verified with two randomly chosen subsamples ($n=400$) for consistent and robust results.

Findings and Discussion

As mentioned earlier, 3997 subjects participated in the survey, whereby females are slightly overrepresented (62%). Age groups showed a similar distribution and those over 55 represented the largest group (20%). Around two thirds lived in a metropolitan area (65%) and owned a house (61%).

Respondents who answered “yes” to the question “My life wouldn’t be the same without EOS.” Were considered Quintessence positive (Q+). Chi-square tests ($p = .05$) indicated significantly more females than males in the Q+ population. Furthermore, those living in regional areas, alone or with other adults, as well as those with a low income and without house ownership were significantly more likely to be in the Q+ population.

Further psychographic items as well behavioural as items regarding WOM behaviour indicate a connection between WOM and experienced Quintessence, specifically at the extremes of WOM behaviour (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How many people have you told about EOS in the last 12 months?

Expressed in percentage (n=1297)

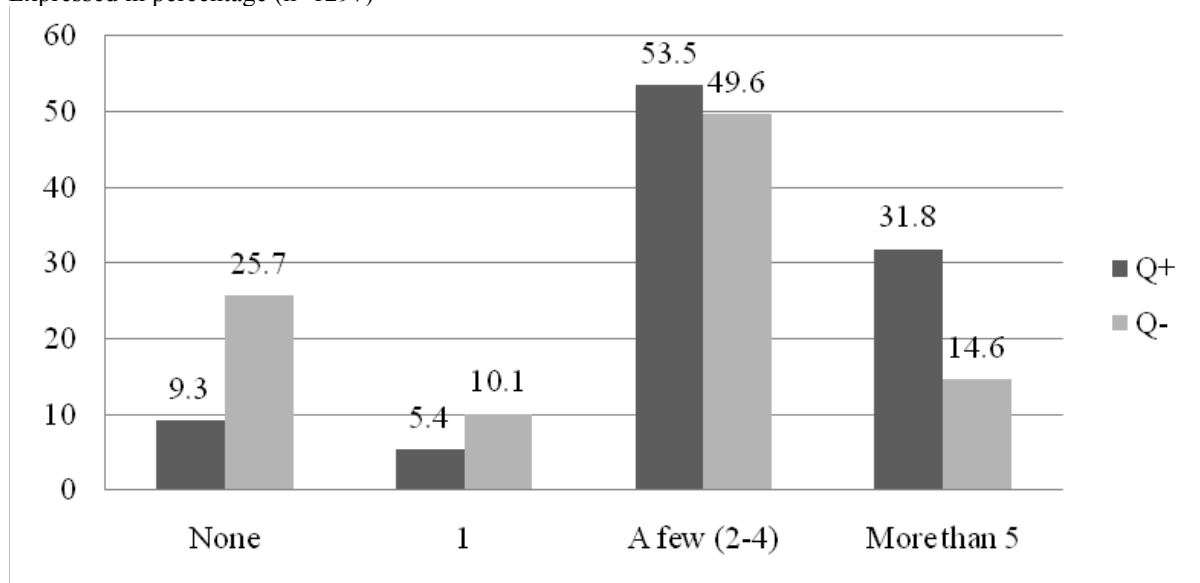


Figure 1 indicates the feeling of Quintessence (Q+) linked positively to the amount of WOM someone spreads. The Q- population correlates more strongly with those who have spread no word of mouth at all. The Q+ population correlates more strongly with those who have spread WOM about the EOS to over five or more people in the last 12 months.

Interestingly, the majority of the data demonstrates little difference between the Q+ or Q- populations in low to mid range WOM behaviour. Amongst those who spread WOM to one to four people in the last 12 months, the differences between the Q+ and Q- populations are comparatively minor.

A further Kruskal-Wallis Test shows that those who experience Quintessence (Q+) recommend to significantly more people than those without Quintessence (Q-). The mean rank for the Q+ population is 2240.62 (n=1,297) that is higher than the mean rank for the Q- population 1685.81 (n=2,457). Therefore, as in figure 1 above, the Q+ population is indicated as spreading more WOM+ than the Q- population. Chi-square test result of 261.586 with 1 df results in $p < 0.001$. This indicates significant statistical difference.

These results are similar when exploring demographic differences between people with different WOM behavior. Further Chi-square tests ($p = .05$) indicated that those recommending to two or more people in comparison to those who do not recommend or only recommended to one person, are rather female, moderate earners and living in regional areas.

Kruskal-Wallis tests show the Q+ population generally more satisfied than the Q- population with the online subscription service. They significantly ($p = .01$) agree more that their household is satisfied with the membership and that the value of the membership has improved in the last 6 months. Furthermore, Q+s indicate they plan to remain a member of EOS in future.

A similar picture exists for the differences between those high and those low in spreading WOM. Further Chi-square tests ($p = .01$) indicate that high WOM is positively linked to rising perceived value, with Q+ respondents more likely to experience an increase in value as the membership relationship continues.

Implications and areas for further research

The implications of this research are severalfold. First, this data analysis begins to explore the concept of Quintessence from a quantitative perspective, and its relationship to other key consumer behavioural aspects. By identifying customers for whom the product has developed a sacred quality (Q+), producers can also be identifying individuals in their population who spread extreme WOM and are motivated to spread even more WOM in partnership with the producer.

Moreover, by sourcing information about Q+ populations, producers may be able to source information about their most loyal and their most vocal customers. Further research in to this data set and correlating the data with length of membership may provide evidence to support this perspective.

A key component of the effectiveness of WOM is the sincerity with which a message is being transmitted. It is probable that someone who indicates that a product has changed their life not only tells more people about it, but is more sincere in the way the product is spoken of.

The demographics of the Q+ population cross over significantly with the WOM population: largely female, polarized between younger and senior consumers and people without children living in households with multiple adults. These demographics are likely to correlate with the specific EOS population and may not be indicators of Q+ populations more widely.

Further research in to Quintessence and the significance of Quintessence in consumer population is required. Questions arise around whether Quintessence is a Western phenomenon or whether individuals from a variety of cultures will act the same way. The affect on Quintessence on customer satisfaction, loyalty, consumer advocacy and customer evangelism should also be explored. Russell Belk introduced the concept of Quintessence in consumer culture to the marketing world; this paper takes a step toward quantitatively exploring what the applied implications are when Quintessence is present in the consumer experience.

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