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Collins, N. S., & Murphy, J. (2013). Towards a folk taxonomy of popular new media marketing terms. In Proceedings of the Asia Pacific CHRIE Conference. Macau SAR, China. University of Macau.
This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.
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TOWARDS A FOLK TAXONOMY OF POPULAR NEW MEDIA MARKETING TERMS

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ABSTRACT

Word of Mouth and Brand Community Marketing terms have emerged to describe particular people and their effectiveness in promoting messages, particularly with the emergence of social media. The development of the terms and their use are concurrent in academic literature, industry literature and popular culture. Furthermore, it is common for these terms to converge, borrowing meanings, connotations and subtexts. This paper explores five key community marketing terms−Geek, Maven, Alpha User, Evangelist and Fanboy−and develops term classifications and relationships into a folk taxonomy. Tourism and hospitality practitioners and academics can use the taxonomy for word of mouth activities and research.

Key Words: Folk taxonomy, folksonomy, taxonomy, word of mouth, brand community

INTRODUCTION

Classification systems are a bedrock of Western science. When discussing phenomena, part of the discussion is ensuring that the participants use the same language to research, theorise and discover. In esoteric fields with knowledge barriers for entry, the language is technical and academic, ensuring everyone participating in discussions is

talking about the same thing. In less esoteric fields, technical terms often develop separately amongst academic, industry and popular culture. Sometimes the vocabularies converge and borrow from each other; sometimes not. These multiple vocabularies make discussions complex and sometimes confusing.

Emerging hospitality and tourism marketing terms related to social media and electronic word of mouth illustrate this confusion with multiple vocabularies (Kwok & Yu, 2013; Williams, Stewart, & Larsen, 2012). Academia, industry and popular culture discuss the marketplace in a language that makes sense in the context of the discussion. Therefore marketing areas applied strongly in industry and celebrated in popular culture are described richly in various languages. Community marketing is one such area.

Community Marketing, a subset of Word of Mouth Marketing, focuses on groups of product users and communities of consumption, sometimes called subcultures of consumption (Arnoud & Thompson, 2005; Featherstone, 1991; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; "WOM 101," 2007). These non-geographically based social groups have a consumption activity, such as tourism, at the centre of their network. Word of Mouth and Brand Community research has led to academic and popular terms for people effective in promoting messages.

The terms often converge, borrowing meanings, connotations and subtexts. This paper classifies relationships of five such terms−Geek, Maven, Alpha User, Evangelist and Fanboy−into a folk taxonomy. The classification helps address tourism industry and academic calls for research of social media (Williams et al., 2012) and adds to an emerging research body on spreading social media messages (Kwok & Yu, 2013).

TAXONOMY, FOLK TAXONOMY, FOLKSONOMY

A taxonomy classifies words, often in the natural sciences, to describe the world and object relationships (Brent, Breedlove, & Raven, 1968). Usually natural scientists create taxonomies into hierarchies. In psychology, anthropology, information sciences and related fields, taxonomies also have matrix structures (Franklin & Graesser, 1996; Norman, 1963).

A folk taxonomy develops organically within a culture. Not strictly scientific, a folk taxonomy is the world, its elements and their relationships described by those who

are native or familiar with an environment by living within it (Brent et al., 1968). Folk taxonomies can include, but are not restricted to, scientific terms. As the terms and relationships in this paper evolve quickly, anything other than a folk taxonomy is overambitious, as it would mean naming scientific phenomena that may change in the future. Moreover, hospitality and tourism academics borrow from industry and slang and vice-versa.

Taxonomies are always evolving as new terms develop and new relationships defined. Developing a taxonomy resembles taking a snapshot of the current factors at play in the Community Marketing landscape, and creating anchoring points between which new terms can develop and define themselves.

This paper draws upon a recently developed classification form, the "folksonomy" (Li & Bernoff, 2008). A folksonomy is a social media phenomenon in which readers, rather than taxonomists, "tag" or label the content. This tagging by readers defines the item. Folksonomies, such as the Urban Dictionary, are sources in this paper to help measure the validity of slang terms and their definitions; however the information in this paper was drawn from a variety of sources including academia.

Developing a folk taxonomy takes into account academic, industry and popular culture terms. Developing classifications, relationships and hierarchies places these terms on a continuum for exploring their defining characteristics and relationships. A literature review, popular and academic, suggests the terms for those who spread WOM vary broadly across three scales: *passion* towards a product/brand, *knowledge* about the product/brand and product/brand *social interaction*.

WORD OF MOUTH MARKETING

Word of Mouth (WOM) is the act of consumers spreading marketing information, generally peer-to-peer amongst their social networks and generally for no compensation. WOM is extremely effective due to its air of authenticity (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008; "WOM 101," 2007). Although how to generate WOM is a source of constant conjecture, it is generally accepted that producers cannot generate WOM, also called buzz. Producers can however, encourage this buzz

through various strategies such as attempting to control the content of the peer-to-peer messages (Herr et al., 1991; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Sweeney et al., 2008).

The rise of Brand Communities and other social networks based around consumption grew in significance in the twentieth century, the age of the internet. Web 2.0 and social media catapulted brand communities to major marketing channels (Arnoud & Thompson, 2005; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Shanker, Cova, & Kozinets, 2007). Theories abound throughout industry and academia about how to harness the growing power of the ordinary consumer. Even popular culture weighs in on the debate by naming and renaming the types of people who thrive in the consumer marketplace where so many spend a majority of their time.

The result is a plethora of terms from academia, industry and popular culture. The terms converge into a hot mess where consensus on theories and practice is difficult. Developing a folk taxonomy takes into account the terms in academic, industry and popular culture, developing classifications, relationships and hierarchies. Once investigated, these terms can be placed on a continuum for exploring the terms' defining characteristics and their relationship with each other.

Common usage in popular culture and academic writing, and words with benchmark connotations, led to five folk taxonomy terms−Geek, Maven, Alpha User, Evangelist and Fanboy. This paper draws on three key sources: dictionaries, published literature and folksonomies. Triangulating the definitions with several sources helps ensure an accurate representation across academic, industry and common English. Moreover, by putting academic weight behind slang terms, the lexicon retains the rich nature of metaphor and connotation inherent in the language.

LOOK WHO'S TALKING: GEEKS, MAVENS, ALPHA USERS, EVANGELISTS AND FANBOYS

The terms used to describe the kinds of people who spread WOM vary. Broadly, people who discuss products range across three scales: passion (how passionate are they about the product/brand), knowledge (how knowledgeable they are about the product/brand) and social (how much interacting with others about the product/band is important to them).

Geeks

Knowledge, rather than social prowess or emotion for a product/brand, defines Geeks. They may not be passionate about a product/brand nor motivated to share their knowledge outside their geek world, if at all. The word implies difference; a Geek is someone different from the mainstream. The word originates from a description of a carnival sideshow act, harkening to the difference from the mainstream, or something gawk-worthy (Burchfield, 1987). The first use of the word Geek meaning someone enthusiastic and knowledgeable was in 1964 (Burchfield, 1987); however the word rose to prominence during the turn of the 21st century and the rise of the computer Geek (Milner, 2004). Geeks are characterised by their encyclopaedic knowledge, not necessarily their social prowess or emotion for the product or brand.

In Community Marketing, Geeks are the backbone of the post-purchase peer to peer tech support network, particularly in technology markets (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2007). Geeks are not about winning people over to the brand; they tend not to care whether others are as involved in the brand or product as they are. However they do like to demonstrate their knowledge as, similar to the academic community, this is a way of attaining status in the Geek community (Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn, & Zinkan, 2006).

Mavens

The word Maven comes to English from Yiddish, a hybrid Hebrew and German language of Eastern European Jews. A maven enjoys sharing their knowledge with others. The first English usage was in a newspaper from the 1960s referring to a "herring maven" as someone who let housewives know where to get the best herring for their dollar (Burchfield, 1987). This century, the phrase has been adopted by academics (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004) and popular literature (Gladwell, 2000). The two defining characteristics of a Maven are their breadth of knowledge and their joy in sharing their knowledge, especially with the uninitiated (Gladwell, 2000). Although Mavens are usually passionate about their subject, their passion is more about the sharing information or educating others than for the product/brand itself.

Due to their encyclopaedic knowledge of a product category, Mavens are hard to get behind a particular product unless the product is superior to others. Mavens may shift their allegiances to emerging new and improved product lines. Mavens have influence as they derive joy from educating others, and the community sees them as impartial and knowledgeable—which is their source of influence. To get to the heart of a Maven one has to be able to defend the product on a feature-by-feature level.

Alpha Users

An Alpha User is someone of influence in a particular context who, through respect in their community, influences others. Rogers (1983) calls these people Opinion Leaders; industry calls them Influencers ("WOM 101," 2007). Like much Community Marketing terminology, the Alpha User label rose during the internet era, signifying someone with influence and access. The primary quality of Alpha Users is their social influence. They may be knowledgeable about the product/brand; they may not. They may be passionate about the product/brand; they may not. Their social influence defines their interest in the marketing community. This influence makes them valuable to marketers, aware that the Alpha User endorsement translates into sales. Product use by celebrities, leaders and others with social influence is an endorsement—some of the best WOM results that marketers seek (Tierney, 2001).

Customer Evangelists

Devoted to a product/brand, customer evangelists volunteer their time to influence others positively about a product/brand (Kawasaki, 1991). As the name suggests, the brand devotion is metaphorically a religious devotion. The word, first used in English in a 14th century translation of the New Testament (Burchfield, 1987), came into its own in marketing in the 1980s at Apple Computer (Kawasaki, 1991). Evangelists are moved on an emotional and perhaps even spiritual level; however they are not necessarily knowledgeable about the product/brand. Evangelists have heightened social awareness, if not social skills (Collins & Murphy, 2009). They are convinced of the value

in the product/brand they endorse, and through their authenticity and enthusiasm tend to convince others.

Evangelists are a sweet spot in community marketing. Enthusiastic and social, the product or brand transformed their lives and and they seek to convert others (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Collins & Murphy, 2009; Kawasaki, 1991; Shelly, 2008). Although evangelists are few, their ability and devotion to spreading word of mouth is unparalleled in this taxonomy. Evangelists by definition are determined to sway others to their perspective.

Fanboys

The term Fanboy comes from the term fanatic and comic book culture. They are passionate about a product/brand beyond sense and reason (Newman, 2008; Pustz, 1999; Redden & Steiner, 2000). The term has been used in an academic context to explore popular culture. This term is strictly about the passion; knowledge and social influence play a minimal part. Where the Geek is knowledge, the Fanboy is passion.

From a managerial perspective, Fanboys defend the brand, albeit their behaviour is sometimes unfavourable to the brand. They are not entirely convincing and not exactly welcoming to civilians. Members of Guy Kawasaki's mailing list of Apple MacHeads, who rabidly responded to any media slight against Apple during the 1990s, illustrate negative Fanboy behaviour. Their sometimes vicious attacks harmed Apple's brand (Shelly, 2008).

THE KNOWLEDGE-SOCIAL-PASSION CONTINUUM

There are other Community Marketing terms and new terms emerge as academia and popular culture create metaphors. Table 1—from the academic, industry and cultural literature—anchors the folk taxonomy on a continuum and creates a framework on which other terms can sit. The folk taxonomy is about defining terms, classifying relationships and the differences among terms.

Table 1: The Knowledge-Social-Passion Continuum

	GEEK	MAVEN	ALPHA USER	EVANGELIST	FANBOY
KNOWLEDGE	Essential	Essential	Inessential	Inessential	Inessential
SOCIAL INTERACTION	Inessential	Essential	Essential	Essential	Inessential
PASSION	Inessential	Inessential	Inessential	Essential	Essential

CONCLUSION

The intent behind this paper was to categorise common academics, industry and popular culture terms related to word of mouth marketing. Through researching the etymology of key phrases in the literature and industry, the folk taxonomy approach gives tourism and hospitality researchers room to use the scientific approach of classification without losing the richness of popular culture and the utility of industry language.

Arguing the difference between a fanboy and a geek may seem splitting hairs and in common parlance, the terms in this taxonomy are interchangeable. Yet the differences are germane for theoretical discussions and tourism marketing. Motivations and relationship among these terms help investigate and leverage Brand Communities and Word of Mouth Marketing.

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