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How Online Diaries Persuade Customers — The Role of Narratives

Short Paper

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Abstract

Online diary is a series of reviews in chronological order generated by customers to record their experience over time, which is a new type of online review emerging in the medical beauty industry. This study extends narrative transportation theory to explore the effect of the dynamic structure of online diaries on persuasion. We posit that emotional shift and utilitarian value can positively enhance online diary persuasion through improving transportation, and the relationship between the temporal flow and persuasion is converse U shape. The moderating role of social influence and visual content richness to the main effect is also investigated in this study. We collected real data to test our hypotheses utilizing Natural Language Processing (NLP) method and econometric model. This study is expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions.

Keywords: online diary, narrative transportation theory, dynamic structure

Introduction

Online review is an important and reliable source of information for potential customers (Cheung et al., 2012; Siering & Janze, 2019), over 90% of customers will refer to online reviews before making purchase decisions (Ke et al., 2020). With the development of information technology and social media, there are more forms of online reviews, such as images and videos, instead of single-text reviews, which provide more detailed information to potential customers. Apart from the changes in presentation forms of online reviews, online platforms provide opportunities for customers to post a series of reviews in chronological order to record and share their using experience, in the form of online diaries, which is emerging in the medical beauty industry. For example, on the Realself platform, which is the biggest cosmetic procedure community in America, customers can search for patients to conduct cosmetic procedures for them, and after that, they can post a series of reviews to share their experiences and feelings on the platform. In China, there are many medical beauty apps, which introduce sharing communities, customers can post online diaries to record their changes and share their experiences.

Compared with traditional one-time online reviews, online diaries have their new features. We compare online diaries with regular reviews, as detailed in Table 1. One prominent feature of online diary is the dynamic structure. Online diaries allow customers to provide follow-up reviews after the first post, and to update their using and post-using experience and feelings in chronological order, in other words, online diaries provide opportunities for potential customers to track the whole using experience of customers who have purchased and make the whole product using cycle visible and transparent, however, regular reviews just provide information at a certain cross-section, without follow-up reviews. Although a large number of studies have examined the effect of online reviews (Cheung et al., 2012; Eslami et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2017), limited research focuses on online diaries, a kind of review with more complex structures. This study aims to explore how the dynamic structure of online diaries persuades customers.

Existing research about online review persuasion mainly draws on dual-process theory (Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM)) to examine how online review characteristics influence customer information processing and persuade customers (Cheung et al., 2012;

Hong et al., 2017). Both models indicate that individuals' information processing relies on analytical processing, they make judgement by evaluating the argument strength of online reviews. However, ELM and HSM cannot explain how the dynamic structure of online diaries persuades customers well, although the argument quality of online diaries may be higher than regular online reviews because they provide more detailed information.

Narrative refers to stories with plots and chronological sequences of events (Green & Brock, 2000). In this study, we conceptualize online diaries as narratives. It is because the dynamic structure of online diaries, posting a series of follow-up reviews in chronological order to update using experience, bears the characteristics of narratives. Narrative transportation theory posits that narratives can involve narrative receivers by inviting them into the world that the narrative describes, as a result, the attitude and beliefs of narrative receivers will change (Green & Brock, 2000). The changes in the mental state of narratives-receivers can explain the persuasive effect of narratives (Green et al., 2004). The Extended Transportation-Imagery Model indicates transportation relies on imagery of narrative movement and empathy for narrative characters (van Laer et al., 2014), so narrative receivers will feel they are experiencing the same events. In the communication and advertising field, previous studies have examined the persuasive effect of narratives (Murphy et al., 2013; Shen et al., 2015; Villarroel Ordenes et al., 2017). In the online diary context, narrative transportation theory provides a view to explain the effect of online diaries' dynamic structure. Therefore, the first research question in our study is:

RQ1: From the narrative processing perspective, how does the dynamic structure of online diaries persuade potential customers?

Social influence is defined as the modification of an individual's attitude and beliefs to respond to others (Kuan et al., 2014). Previous studies have investigated the social influence of review opinions and reviewers on potential customers' judgement (Cheung et al., 2009; Zhou & Guo, 2017). In online diary context, potential customers can post their opinions and reviews under the diaries. Whether the judgement of a particular potential customer can be impacted by the opinions of other potential customers is overlooked. Therefore, we propose the second research question of this paper:

RQ2: How does social influence moderate the effect of the dynamic structure of online diaries on persuasion?

Visual content refers to the visual presentation of information (i.e., image and video) (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007; Xu et al., 2015). Most existing studies have investigated the effect of visual content on customer engagement in social media context, and found visual content can enhance customer engagement (Hou & Pan, 2023; Shin et al., 2020b). However, there are limited studies to explore the role of visual content in the online review context. Whether visual content in online reviews can improve persuasion is still unclear. Therefore, the third research question we propose in this study is:

RQ3: How does visual content moderate the effect of the dynamic structure of online diaries on persuasion?

To investigate these three research questions, real data will be collected from an online medical beauty community in China. We will adopt Natural Language Processing (NLP) method to operationalize variables investigated in our conceptual model, and we will employ a fixed-effect negative binomial regression model to test our hypotheses proposed in section 3. This research can make both theoretical and practical contributions, we will present this part later.

Literature Review

Online review

Existing studies have investigated the effects of several critical characteristics of online reviews. For example, studies have determined that review valence can positively impact purchase intentions (Floh et al., 2013), and review volume has a significant effect on product sales (Cui et al., 2012). Review quality is an important indicator for potential customers, according to Elaboration Model (ELM), customers assess review quality through a central route based on their motivation and ability, and then review quality positively impacts their attitude towards product (Cheung et al., 2012). Review rating and review length/depth also play a significant role in customer decision-making (Hong et al., 2017, Eslami et al., 2018), Wang et al. (2018) also explore the role of the dynamic trend of the review rating score and find that rating trend depends on the

degree of heterogeneity in the rating environment and customer diagnostic ability. Visual content is another investigated review-related characteristic (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007; Xu et al., 2015). Previous studies have examined the effect of image features, for example, Hou & Pan (2023) determine that the aesthetics of photos can enhance customer engagement. Shin et al. (2020b) examine that consistency and similarity between text content and visual content significantly impact the persuasion of social media content. Although visual content has gained extensive attention in recent days, there are limited studies to explore the role of visual content in online review context, and the relationship between visual content and textual content.

Compared with regular online reviews, online diary has new features, as shown in Table 1. Firstly, follow-up reviews that online diary provides can update customers' using experience and feeling, potential customers can track affective feeling and emotion changes through follow-up reviews, however, for regular reviews, existing studies just regard the emotion of reviewers presented in reviews as stable state, ignoring the emotional changes in the review (Ghasemaghaei et al., 2018; Hong et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2014). In our study, we will explore the effect of emotional shift on persuasion, rather than a single emotional state.

Secondly, online diary allows customers to record their experiences in chronological order, compared with regular reviews, existing studies regard temporal cues as one kind of contextual information (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Huang et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2018), mainly employ Construal Level Theory to explore the effect of temporal cues. For example, Huang et al. (2018) determine that temporal cues can moderate the relationship between review concreteness and perceived helpfulness, abstract review, distant temporal and concrete review, and near temporal cues will strengthen the effect of review on perceived helpfulness. However, in online diary context, the temporal dynamic feature is overlooked, in this study, we will explore the effect of dynamic time embedding on persuasion.

Thirdly, customers can trace what happened in the using process through online diary, online diary makes the whole product using cycle visible and transparent, however, regular reviews just provide information at a certain cross-section. Therefore, the dynamic structure is one of the most prominent features of online diary.

	Online diaries	Regular reviews
Reviewer	Same	Different
Follow-up reviews	Provide	Not provide
Using experience and feelings	Update	Not update
Time	In chronological order	One-time
Event development	Traceable	Not traceable
Table 1. Comparison between Online Diary and Regular Reviews		

In summary, although a large number of studies have examined the effect of online reviews, limited research focuses on online diaries, a new type of online review with more complex structures. This study will explore the role of the dynamic structure of online diaries on persuasion.

Narrative transportation theory

Narratives are defined as stories with plots and chronological sequences of events (Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014). Narrative transportation theory posits that narratives can involve story-receivers by inviting them into the world that the narrative describes, as a result, the attitude and beliefs of story-receivers will change (Green & Brock, 2000). The changes in the mental state of narrative-receivers can explain the persuasive effect of narratives (Green et al., 2004). Van Laer et al. (2014) propose the Extended Transportation-Imagery Model using a meta-analysis approach, they posit transportation relies on imagery of narrative movement and empathy for narrative characters, it means when narrative transportation occurs, narrative-receivers are experiencing a feeling that narratives deliver, they will produce empathy for story characters and imagine the story plot in their mind as such they are experiencing the same events themselves. Green (2004) also proposes that narratives can reduce narrative-receivers' resistance to

persuasion, transportation is based on the reduction of counterarguing response as narrative-receivers focus their attention on narrative plots.

Apart from transportation, there is another mechanism that can explain the persuasiveness effect of narratives. It is about the role of narrative engagement. This stream of studies argues that identification with characters and perceived similarity will improve persuasion as the perceived relevance of narrative-receivers will motivate them to perform similar behaviors (Bandura, 2003; Nabi & Green, 2015).

Online diary is a series of posts/sub-diaries generated by customers in chronological order to record their consumption experience over time. Each online diary is a narrative that customers can share their own consumption experience. The dynamic structure of online diaries is presented in the movement of narrative plots, that is, the chronological sequence of events. Therefore, we explore the effect of the dynamic structure of online diaries on persuasion from narrative processing perspective. In the context of online reviews, there are some studies investigate the effect of online reviews from narrative processing view, for example, Hamby et al. (2015) distinguish two types of reviews' content representation format, information-based reviews and story-based reviews, and determine that story-based reviews can persuade customers through transportation and reflection. van Laer et al. (2019) identify a new construct, narrativity, which captures the degree that a text tells a story, and examines the persuasion effect of narrative elements of online reviews including narrative discourse, time embedding, and landscape of affective and cognitive consciousness. However, these studies do not scan the dynamic structure of online diaries.

Social influence

Social influence is defined as the modification of an individual's attitude and beliefs to respond to others (Kuan et al., 2014). Previous studies have examined the effects of online reviews from social influence perspectives including informational social influence and normative social influence. Information social influence perspective can explain why the attitude, beliefs and behaviors of potential customers are influenced by prior opinions and reviews (Lee et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2018). Normative social influence perspective proposes that the individual's judgement will be modified to comply with prior reviewers' expectations (Cheung et al., 2009; Zhou & Guo, 2017). These studies have investigated the social influence of review opinions and reviewers. However, existing studies overlook the effect of the interpretation to online reviews from other potential customers on the judgement and understanding of a particular potential customer. In online diary context, potential customers can post their opinions to the online diary, in this study, we will explore how social influence from other potential customers impact the persuasion of online diaries.

Hypothesis Development

This study aims to explore the effect of the dynamic structure of online diaries on persuasion., also the moderating role of visual content richness and social influence on this effect. The research model is shown in Figure 1. The dependent variable is persuasion, which is the outcome of narrative transportation, and shows the attitude of potential customers to online diaries (Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2019). As for independent variables, we use three variables to characterize the dynamic structure of online diaries based on the Transportation-Imagery Model, they are emotional shift, temporal flow and utilitarian value. Transportation-Imagery Model posits that transportation relies on imagery of narrative movement and empathy for narrative characters (van Laer et al., 2014). Because affective feeling (i.e., emotion) is an important prerequisite for empathy (Nabi & Green, 2015; van Laer et al., 2019), so we use emotional shift in online diary to capture empathy for narrative characters, which is defined as changes in a series of emotions of reviewers in the online diaries (Nabi & Green, 2015). Narrative movement is another indispensable element that can trigger transportation, we extend narrative movement to temporal flow and utilitarian value. Temporal flow refers to the temporal dimension of events, which shows the chronological flow of narrative movement (van Laer et al., 2019), we use the updating time of follow-up posts to measure temporal flow in this study. Utilitarian value is defined as a transition from the initial state to the late state or outcome arising from the event (experience described in online diaries) (Shen et al., 2015). Social influence and visual content richness are hypothesized to moderate the relationship between the dynamic structure of online diaries and persuasion.

Emotions can significantly impact review helpfulness and customer decision-making (Hong et al., 2016; Villarroel Ordenes et al., 2017). Nabi & Green (2015) propose more nuanced emotion exposure in narratives can increase persuasion compared with a single emotion valence, this is because emotional shift can reduce counterargument responses of narrative-receivers and improve transportation. Narrative transportation theory proposes that emotional shift can improve narrative-receivers' empathy for narrative characters and further enhance persuasion (van Laer et al., 2014). Emotional contagion theory also can explain the effect of emotional shift on persuasion, which proposes that a person or group can influence the emotions of another person or group by conscious or unconscious emotion delivering (Li et al., 2022), so narrative-receivers will generate a series of emotions similar to characters. In online diary context, reviewer can update their affective feelings and emotions through providing follow-up reviews, these texts full of emotion changes can improve customers' empathy for reviewers. Therefore, we expect that there is a positive effect between emotional shift and online diaries persuasion.

H1: Emotional shift is positively related to persuasion

The narrative structure is constituted by narrative movement, in other words, the chronological flow of events (van Laer et al., 2014). The narrative movement shows the transition from the initial state to the late state or outcome arising from the event (Shen et al., 2015), which indicates the direction of the narrative and allows narrative receivers to track the plot development of the narrative.

According to the definition of narratives and the understanding of narrative movement (Shen et al., 2015; van Laer et al., 2014, 2019), narrative movement has two necessary elements. The first element is time embedding, which records the chronological order of event development with beginning, middle and ending (van Laer et al., 2019). Existing studies have determined that high-level time embedding in the narratives can enhance persuasion through transportation because high-level time embedding contributes to narrative-receivers imagining plots (van Laer et al., 2014, 2019). Another element is the transition of the state or the outcome of a narrative (Banerjee & Greene, 2012; Hamby & Brinberg, 2016). The ending state of a narrative can impact narrative-receivers' beliefs through reflection, that means when narrative-receivers are transported in a narrative, they will compare the experience described in a narrative with their own experience, they will infer they can benefit if there is a positive narrative ending (Hamby & Brinberg, 2016).

In the online diary context, we extend and contextualize two elements of narrative movement to utilitarian value and temporal flow. Utilitarian value refers to the transition from the initial state to the outcome of the event described in an online diary, which is similar to perceived usefulness of reviewers and represents the product quality, but the difference is that utilitarian value is not the argument of reviewers about whether the product is good or not, it is reflected in the comparison of the initial state and the outcome described in the diaries, and potential customers can infer the utilitarian value of products from the comparison and transition of states, by imagining they are experiencing the same event (transportation). Therefore, we argue that the difference between the outcome and initial state (utilitarian value) can enhance persuasion through potential customers' narrative transportation. Temporal flow refers to the temporal dimension of events, which shows the chronological flow of narrative movement (van Laer et al., 2019), we use the updating time of follow-up posts to measure temporal flow in this study. Compared with time embedding, temporal flow is explicit, rather embedded in the narrative implicitly, because potential customers can clearly track the updating time on the platform. The expectation of potential customers is that they can track the main plot development, rather than all the minor details. Therefore, we argue that when reviewers update their experience too frequently, the margin utilitarian value is minimal. Conversely, when reviewers post follow-up reviews over a long time interval, the potential customers will feel they miss the main narrative plot, which is not beneficial to their plot imagery and narrative transportation (van Laer et al., 2014). Therefore, we expect that there is a converse-U shape relationship between temporal flow and persuasion.

H2: Utilitarian value is positively related to persuasion

H3: The relationship between temporal flow and persuasion is converse U-shape

Social influence refers to the modification of an individual's attitude and beliefs to respond to others (Kuan et al., 2014). The opinions (Lee et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2018) and expectations (Cheung et al., 2009; Zhou & Guo, 2017) of other people are two channels that can produce social influence. In online diary context, not only reviewers and review content can influence the potential customers' judgement, but other potential

customers' opinions also impose influence on the attitude and beliefs of a particular potential customer. The Extend Transportation-Imagery Model also propose that when narrative transportation occurs in social groups, the transportation will be influenced by the interpretation of social groups to stories (van Laer et al., 2014). Therefore, we argue the transportation of online diaries of a particular potential customer will be influenced by other potential customers' reviews of the original online diaries, that is, the relationships of emotional shift, utilitarian value and temporal flow and persuasion will be moderated by social influence.

H4(a): Positive(negative) social influence can strengthen (weaken) the effect from emotional shift to persuasion

H4(b): Positive(negative) social influence can strengthen (weaken) the effect from utilitarian value to persuasion

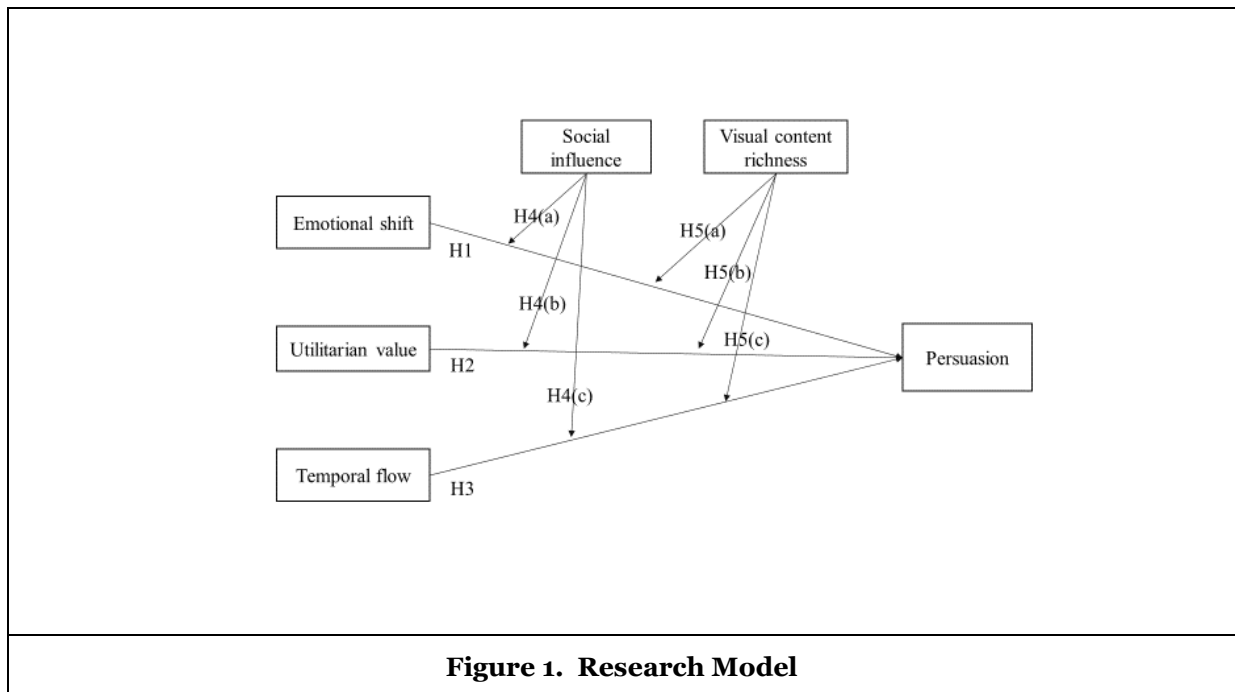
H4(c): Positive(negative) social influence can strengthen (weaken) the effect from temporal flow to persuasion

Visual content richness refers to the number of images in an online diary. Previous studies have investigated that visual content can enhance persuasiveness and purchase probability (Shin et al., 2020a). In the advertising context, studies also find that images can lead narrative transportation through contribute to narrative-receivers generating vivid images about the plot (Grigsby et al., 2022; Phillips, 2000). Dual coding theory indicates the channels of image information and text information processing are different, and image has advantages to improve individuals' engagement in terms of text (Li et al., 2022; Schlochtermeyer et al., 2013). Therefore, we argue that visual content richness in online diaries can positively moderate the relationship between emotional shift, utilitarian value, temporal flow and persuasion.

H5(a): Visual content richness can positively moderate the effect from emotional shift to persuasion

H5(b): Visual content richness can positively moderate the effect from utilitarian value to persuasion

H5(c): Visual content richness can positively moderate the effect from temporal flow to persuasion



Proposed Research Methodology

Since the unit of analysis of this study is at the post (online diary) level, we collect the real data by crawling online diaries from a medical beauty app, which is the biggest online cosmetic procedure platform in China. The data set includes three subsets. The first subset contains online diaries information, including textual and visual content of each follow-up review, and the feedback of potential customers to online diaries such as the number of likes and shares for each diary. The second subset contains information about potential customer reviews, including the number of reviews and the textual content of each review. The third subset contains information about the poster of online diary, including their basic information such as age and sex, the number of posts and the number of people who follow them. Our full sample includes 10086 online diaries, 78056 follow-up reviews and 156980 potential customer reviews of online diaries.

In order to examine the effects of online diaries' dynamic structure, we will use Natural Language Processing (NLP) method to operationalize variables investigated in our conceptual model and employ a fixed-effect negative binomial regression model to test our hypotheses. Table 2 shows measurements of variables.

Variable	Measurement	Method
Emotional shift	The number of emotion valence transitions	Lexicon-based sentiment analysis
Utilitarian value	Count of words that describe product utility	Utilitarian value-related dictionary building; word2vec
Temporal flow	Updating frequency	Total time interval/the number of online sub-diaries
Social influence	The valence of reviews, including negative, neutral and positive valence	Sentiment analysis (SnowNLP package)
Visual content richness	The number of images in one diary	Counting
Persuasion	Positive feedback from customers to online diary	The number of likes and shares

Table 2. Variable Measurement

Since we use the number of likes and share to measure the dependent variable, which are count variables with over-dispersion, we plan to employ a negative binomial regression model for the main analysis, we also include time-invariant effects to control for potential time pattern. In addition, some other control variables at reviewer, post, and product levels are added. At reviewer level, we control for reviewer popularity (the number of followers) and reviewer expertise (the number of posts). At post level, we control for review length and review readability. At product level, we control for product price, product risk and the reputation of institution that provide the product.

Intended Contributions

The study is expected to make several theoretical contributions. Firstly, this study captures a new type of online review and explores how the dynamic structure of online diaries impacts persuasion from narrative processing, to the best of our knowledge, limited studies focus on and explore the effect of online diaries, therefore, this study is novel to a certain extent. Secondly, this study extends and contextualizes narrative transportation theory into online diary context, we extend two elements of narrative movement to utilitarian value and temporal flow, which can better capture the characteristics of online diaries as narratives. We also examine the effect of emotional shift, utilitarian value and temporal flow on persuasion, which validate the narrative transportation theory in the online diary context. Thirdly, we investigate the moderating role of social influence and visual content. Firstly, we examine that not only prior reviews and

reviewers can influence potential customer judgement, but the interpretation of other potential customers to original online diaries also imposes influence on individual judgement. Secondly, the role of visual content is complex, we examine the moderating role of visual content, visual content will enhance the transportation of potential customers to the textual content of online diaries, and then improve persuasion.

This study also provides practical implications for both e-commerce platforms and customers. For e-commerce platforms, this study puts practitioner attention to online diaries, as a new type of online review, online diaries can enhance persuasion. Platforms can consider introducing this form of review and encourage customers to share their using experience on the platform, which can enlarge the persuasion of online reviews. For customers, online diaries will change their information searching, they can get more reliable and comprehensive information about the whole product using lifecycle, through tracking follow-up reviews of online diaries.

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