The power of eWOM: A re-examination of online student evaluations of their professors

Cong Li [a,*], Xiuli Wang [b,1]

[a] School of Communication, University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL 33146, USA
[b] School of Journalism and Communication, Peking University, Beijing 100871, PR China

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, a number of studies have examined the impact of the Rate My Professors (RMP) website (RateMyProfessors.com) on higher education. The focal area of examination is whether students' evaluations of their professors on RMP are valid. The current study attempts to push the RMP discussions to a deeper level through two studies. Study 1 illustrates that students rely on the valence of review information on RMP to make their course selection decisions without considering its validity. Study 2 shows that students' decision-making process tends to be biased as a result of review information available. The results of both studies suggest it is necessary for institutions to test new teaching evaluation models online.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research has been generated since the controversial Rate My Professors (RMP) website (RateMyProfessors.com) was launched in 1999. Scholars have examined the impact of RMP on higher education from different perspectives (e.g., Bowling, 2008; Davison & Price, 2009; Felton, Koper, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2008; Felton, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2004; Kowai-Bell, Guadagno, Little, Preiss, & Hensley, 2011; Otto, Sanford, & Ross, 2008; Sonntag, Bassett, & Snyder, 2009). The focal issue discussed in the existing literature is whether students' evaluations of their professors on RMP are valid. Some scholars have questioned the validity of RMP, as the website has no control over important issues, such as who posts an evaluation (e.g., a student who never takes a course nevertheless being permitted to evaluate the professor who teaches it) or when an evaluation should be posted (e.g., a student being permitted to evaluate a professor with no time limit, whether it be the first day of class or 10 years post-graduation) (Davison & Price, 2009). In addition, RMP allows students to rate the "hotness" (physical attractiveness) of a professor. Studies have revealed that professors who are perceived as physically attractive tend to receive higher evaluations on RMP than those who are not perceived as such (Felton et al., 2004, 2008; Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman, & Misso, 2006; Silva et al., 2008). It also was discovered that white professors tend to be evaluated more favorably than those with a racial minority background, particularly African Americans and Asians (Reid, 2010).

While the majority of evidence points at a lack of validity in students' evaluations on RMP, some scholars have argued that these evaluations may indeed be valid, as evidenced when they were found to be significantly correlated with items on some of the official evaluations administered by institutions (Brown, Baillie, & Fraser, 2009; Sonntag et al., 2009; Timmerman, 2008). Unlike prior research, the current study is not focused on the debate of RMP validity. Instead, this study attempts to push the discussion to a deeper level by illustrating that students' evaluations on RMP or similar websites may lead to biased decision-making, independent of validity. As understood by Kowai-Bell et al. (2011), RMP and other similar websites have engendered a great deal of controversy among educators and researchers with regard to their validity; however, research that measures potential consequences of RMP website usage is very limited. To fill this void and enrich the current body of literature, this study examines how online evaluations influence students' attitudes toward their professors and their subsequent course enrollment behavior (or course enrollment intentions) in two experiments, focusing on two critical variables: message valence and message volume. The details of both experiments are presented following a literature review. General discussions of the experimental findings are provided at the end of the article.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptualization of WOM and eWOM

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has long been an important source of information that influences decision-making. It is commonly

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 305 284 2355; fax: +1 305 284 5216.
 E-mail addresses: congli@miami.edu (C. Li), xiuli.wang@pku.edu.cn (X. Wang).
[1] Tel.: +86 010 62754683; fax: +86 010 62754485.

defined as informal communication about products or services between two or more individuals, none of whom represents a marketing source (Bone, 1995; Day, 1971; Westbrook, 1987). The fundamental concept of WOM indicates that information, and, in particular, recommendations, passes by verbal means in an informal, person-to-person manner, rather than by mass media or traditional marketing (Arora, 2007). As a consequence, one WOM message can reach and potentially influence many people through multiple exchanges (Denny, 1995).

With the emergence of the Web 2.0 era and the growth of online social media participation, WOM is perceived to be more powerful today than ever before. Web dialogues posted on blogs, discussion forums, social media, and opinion websites are often viewed as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). In fact, people are able to obtain product and service information not only from friends and family members, but also from a variety of unknown people through many virtual opinion platforms. From entertainment venues and restaurants to vacation sites and appliances, online reviews are available for almost anything-including colleges and college professors. The student evaluations on RMP and other similar websites can essentially be considered a form of eWOM (Edwards, Edwards, Shaver, & Oaks, 2009).

As a consumer-dominated channel of communication that mainly derives from personal influence, WOM is often perceived as more reliable, credible, and trustworthy than company-initiated marketing information (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2006), and its effects are often determined by how much people trust the information source (Bristor, 1990; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrell, 1997). The power of eWOM is evident in Riegner (2007) study. More than 4000 Web users were surveyed regarding the impact of user-generated content from blogs, rating/review websites, forums, discussion boards, and social networking websites on their purchase decisions. It was found that approximately 9% of the respondents linked at least one eWOM source directly to a recent purchase decision.

2.2. Effects of eWOM

Given the increasing popularity of eWOM, a growing body of research has focused on how it influences individuals' decision-making in different product categories (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006; Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007). Message valence and message volume are two critical variables examined in many prior studies, although these study findings are somewhat mixed (e.g., Clemons et al., 2006; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Gauri, Bhatnagar, & Rao, 2008; Liu, 2006; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). In the conceptualization of most prior research, valence represents the nature of information as either positive or negative, whereas volume refers to the total amount of information disseminated.

Liu (2006) examined the impact of online movie reviews on motion picture box office revenue, and found that the volume of eWOM information provided significant explanatory power for both aggregate and weekly box office revenues. However, its valence, as measured by the percentages of positive and negative messages, showed no significant effect. In a similar vein, Duan et al. (2008) looked at the relationship between movie reviews and box office sales and discovered that the volume of movie ratings exerted more significant influence on box office sales than valence.

Other studies, however, found eWOM valence to be a significant predictor of consumer behavior. For example, Gauri et al. (2008) discovered that positive customer reviews had the greatest impact on consumers' repurchase intentions, while the total number of reviews showed no significant effect. In another study, Clemons et al. (2006) examined the relationship between online reviews and the success of new craft beer launches. It was found that positive online reviews were more likely to generate higher sales growth. Ye et al. (2009) investigated online hotel sales and showed that positive online reviews significantly increased the number of hotel bookings, whereas negative reviews affected the bookings adversely.

Other studies suggested that both message volume and message valence have significant effects in influencing consumers' decision-making. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) found that both volume and valence of online reviews influenced book sales. The authors concluded that "the addition of new, favorable reviews at one site results in an increase in the sales of a book at that site relative to the other site." (p. 346). Dellarocas et al. (2007) proposed a diffusion model using metrics from online user reviews during the opening weekend of a movie with other traditional metrics such as movie theater availability. It was shown that both the volume and valence of online movie reviews had a positive and statistically significant impact on future box office sales.

A potential reason why findings of eWOM effects in the literature are somewhat mixed is that researchers examined very different product and service categories in their studies, some of which by nature may be more susceptible to the effects of eWOM, than others (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). People may be influenced by eWOM messages more when they are looking at service-oriented products such as hotels, restaurants, and movies, as opposed to tangible goods, which can be returned if they are unsatisfactory (De Vany & Walls, 1999; Murray, 1991; Ye et al., 2009). In addition, eWOM may play a greater role when purchasing new products that consumers do not know well and for which more information is needed before purchase (Mahajan, Muller, & Kerin, 1984).

2.3. eWOM and higher education

Several prior studies have examined factors that lead to eWOM behavior, including people's desire for social interaction, economic incentives, concern for other people, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). A key question regarding the current study is why college students post evaluations of their professors online and what end result they are trying to achieve? Field, Bergiel, and Viosca (2008) suggested that contrary to popular belief, students do not rate their professors on the Internet for the sake of "revenge." In fact, they tend to provide online ratings for all their professors instead of picking those whom they really like or dislike. However, a significant portion of students may be "lurkers" that actively collect review information from others but rarely contribute their own content (Kowai-Bell et al., 2011).

Although the eWOM system for higher education (RMP or other similar websites) may be perceived as inappropriate and criticized for establishing an anti-intellectual tone (Davison & Price, 2009), students find it very useful for course selection purposes (Field et al., 2008; Kowai-Bell et al., 2011). As shown by Kowai-Bell et al. (2011), the valence of RMP reviews has a significant impact on students' perceptions. Students who read positive reviews of a professor were more likely to report an increase in perceived control, look forward to the class, anticipate earning an "A," and recommend the class to a friend. In another study, Silva et al. (2008) found that perceived professor quality (e.g., enthusiasm, organization) tends to generate more online student reviews, either positive or negative. Built on these prior studies, the current study anticipates that higher perceived professor quality leads to more positive online evaluations, which, in turn, positively influences course enrollment. In other words, we expect a mediation effect of eWOM valence between perceived professor quality and actual course enrollment. The following hypothesis is thus generated: