



The effects of a lack of social recognition on online communication behavior

Roland Helm^a, Michael Möller^b, Oliver Mauroner^c, Daniel Conrad^{a,*}

^aStrategic Industrial Marketing, University of Regensburg, Universitätsstraße 31, 93053 Regensburg, Germany

^bTourism and Regional Marketing, Adam-Ries-University of Applied Sciences, Juri-Gagarin-Ring 152, 99084 Erfurt, Germany

^cFraunhofer Institute for Applied Optics and Precision Engineering IOF, Albert-Einstein-Str. 7, 07745 Jena, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 6 November 2012

Keywords:

User generated content
Opinion leader
Personality strength
Social recognition
Online communication

ABSTRACT

Online services and applications extend the influencing opportunities of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM). Unlike traditional word-of-mouth, the online environment allows for special features such as anonymity in user-generated content. Furthermore, the personality of online users affects their motivation when creating this content. The aim of this paper is to link specific online activities, i.e., the posting of product ratings and participation in discussions in online forums, with certain personality traits within an empirical study. The findings, based on an online survey with more than 16,900 completed questionnaires, indicate that opinion leaders in the online environment cannot be compared with traditional opinion leaders in terms of their articulation and personality structure. In regard to online activities with a high influencing potential, the results of moderated regression analyses show that persons with an introverted personality are more active as online opinion leaders due to the lack of social recognition they experience. The results have implications for how marketers should present incentive structures to address and integrate potential online opinion leaders, and how scholars should understand the role of opinion leaders in the online environment.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Communication between customers can strongly influence the level of (brand) awareness and, in particular, product introductions to the market and, therefore, the economic outcome and market success. Many online services, such as UseNet, and online applications, such as opinion platforms (e.g., epinions.com, consumerreview.com, rateitall.com), contribute to the expansion of information exchange and mutual influence (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Senecal & Nantel, 2004). A mere 10% increase in electronic word-of-mouth has, for example, led to hotel bookings increasing by 4.4% and cinema turnover by 6.3% (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). Riegner (2007) assumes that electronic word-of-mouth has an influence quota of 24% in regard to highly priced goods. Since product information, which can be accessed regardless of time, is generated in public and stored, online communicators can take on the role of multipliers. In the offline environment, this role is filled by the traditional opinion leader. Due to the uncertainty of whether opinion leaders can act as multipliers in an online environment, we will extend the term “opinion leader” by the term “online opinion leader” in this context.

Electronic word-of-mouth marketing has recently been the subject of much attention among scientists and practitioners

(Kozinets, Vlack, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Nevertheless, marketers still need a better understanding of online communication and consumer attitudes. A closer examination of those who can influence buying decisions greatly through their activities is desperately required as the empirical research on online opinion leaders is very limited (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Specifically, the special characteristics of online communications, such as the mostly self-defined degree of anonymity, call for a systematic examination of this group of people. In contrast to offline communication, online communication is generally not determined by the appearance of the communicators or – if people are online – their sociodemographic characteristics. Furthermore, online communication offers the possibility of asynchronous communication, which makes the construction of contents predictable and controllable.

Engaging in online WOM may, therefore, be particularly attractive to people with fewer contacts, less interpersonal skills and higher levels of introversion, who therefore exhibit inhibited interpersonal behavior (Amiel & Sargent, 2004). Online activity may also be associated with the potential to gain recognition. People who are unable to demonstrate their range of expertise offline due to specific personal constrictions have the possibility to do so using the Internet and its associated services and applications.

The crucial research question is therefore: How can the personality of online opinion leaders be specifically described and addressed? In order to differentiate online and offline opinion

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 941 943 5625; fax: +49 941 943 5622.

E-mail address: daniel.conrad@wiwi.uni-regensburg.de (D. Conrad).

leader, this paper focusses on specific forms of user generated content, e.g. the writing of progress reports or the asking of questions in online forums, as well as on the striving for social recognition as a specific personality trait. This paper will provide a model for obtaining a specific personal and differentiated view of such opinion leaders, making it possible to identify specific personal differences between generated online contents.

The research question also aims at obtaining information to help characterize the online opinion leader and distinguish him or her from traditional opinion leaders. This is necessary because, as [Zhu and Zhang \(2010\)](#) confirm, client articulation does have an influencing effect, especially on lesser-known products. These authors identify a positive relation between the number of client opinions and their influencing effect as well as the highlighted relevance of the reliability of the contributions for this influencing effect. However, studies such as these still focus on articulations rather than on the sources from which they stem. Our article seeks to close this research gap by identifying those whose articulations influence people and by offering a description of their personality structure.

The findings have specific implications for the creation of incentive structures for participation in the information diffusion process as well as for the active participation in both online communities and corporate social networks. Communities of practice could, for example, be established in an open source approach setting, or social media components could be integrated into intra-company online communication.

2. Research background

Social competence is an important personality characteristic of traditional opinion leaders ([Piiro, 1992](#)). [Weimann \(1994\)](#) even described their position in the social network as being that of a "...sociometric star...". An increased social inclusion ([Reynolds & Darden, 1971](#)), self-esteem and extraversion ([Summers, 1970](#)) can be understood. In contrast, the findings of specific Internet personality research are very heterogeneous. Certain publications state that extroverted people use the Internet more ([Wolfradt & Doll, 2001](#)), while others argue that there is no connection between extroversion and the use of the Internet (e.g., [Swickert, Hittner, Harris, & Herring, 2002](#); [Tuten & Bosnjak, 2001](#)). In particular, the research conducted by [Shepherd and Edelman \(2005\)](#) presents a different picture. They found that people with social fears prefer the use of the Internet to face-to-face communication (see also [Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007](#); [Landers & Lounsbury, 2006](#)). This supports the view that inhibited people use the Internet more ([Ward & Tracey, 2004](#); [Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003](#)). This is a result of the increased sense of security found in an anonymous environment ([Leung, 2001](#); [Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2006](#)) in which inhibited people can act more confidently ([Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006](#)). [Shaw and Gant \(2002\)](#) support the view that the Internet increases self-esteem (see also [Kraut et al., 2002](#)).

In order to arrive at a personality-specific description of online opinion leaders, an examination of individual motivations as the central driving factors of an active online environment presence is necessary. Unfortunately, few current studies address these underlying motivations. [Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler \(2004\)](#) analyzed participation in online communities such as opinion platforms. The authors identified motives such as altruism and social benefit, which include, for example, social integration, and suggest that the reciprocal recognition of members is a possible reason for participation. However, this finding has not been discussed further. This is regrettable in the case of altruism since its positive social appraisal links it to an increase in both self-esteem and striving for recognition ([Krebs, 1995](#)). The link be-

tween a lack of self-esteem and altruistic motives has already been proven ([Schütz & Tice, 1997](#)).

[Wasko and Faraj \(2005\)](#) also do not consider the impact of such links when studying online activity. These authors explore the structures of the motives of people involved in communities of practice, to which they have free access and which, therefore, resemble discussion forums. At this point, the possibility of gaining reputation is found to be important as it is identified as the relevant motivation influencing the quality and number of articles written. This finding may be very relevant, but the authors do not identify for which individuals and groups the possibility of reputation is relevant. Owing to the lack of such personality characteristics, no implications are identified for online opinion leaders as a group. Striving for recognition has been identified as a motive for increasing self-esteem, just as altruism has been found to be an important motive for participation (see, e.g., [Hars & Ou, 2002](#); [Hertel, Niedner, & Herrmann, 2003](#); [Lakhani & Wolf, 2005](#)). Nevertheless, there is no separate description of active users as such.

As the resume of current research streams shows, there is a high practical relevance for addressing and integrating online opinion leaders. In particular, the neglect of personality variables and motive structures has to be viewed critically in regard to opinion leaders in the online environment. This implies the necessity of integrating specific intrinsic personality constructs that enable a connection to the striving for social recognition regarding different conditions of online communication. In addition, the samples used in studies focusing on the personality of the Internet user are usually very small (e.g., [Amichai-Hamburger, Lamdan, Madiel, & Hayat, 2008](#) with 139 participants and [Shaw & Gant, 2002](#) with 40). This presents a problem alongside the consideration of personality aspects, as research on communities and their members is often also qualitative. Additionally, the high level of aggregation that often occurs in the two streams of research seems to be a problem. This applies to the use of the Internet as well as to the personality variables often used.

Furthermore, there is an ambiguity concerning the characterization of online opinion leaders and their differentiation from traditional opinion leaders. According to the two-step flow model of influence by [Katz and Lazarsfeld \(1955\)](#), it is a small minority of opinion leaders that take on the role of intermediaries between the mass media, including the Internet, and the majority of society ([Watts & Dodds, 2007](#)). Nevertheless, in this context, it has to be examined whether the identification of online opinion leaders has to be operationalized with traditional methods for identifying traditional opinion leader and whether an equalization of both groups would result in satisfying results given the specific conditions of the online environment.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the role of the traditional opinion leader ([Watts & Dodds, 2007](#)) by focusing on online activities with a potential influence on buying decisions. Our approach explicitly excludes information distribution within viral campaigns.

3. Modeling approach

The goal of this interdisciplinary research approach is to set up an integrative research model for the characterization and differentiation of online opinion leaders, including the identification of specific antecedents of generating online content. The model combines a media-specific view covering several forms of user-generated content and a user-specific view focusing primarily on the effects of a lack of social recognition on communication behavior. On one hand, we assume that a lack of recognition directly influences the activity of acquiring a reputation through the possibilities presented in the online environments due to its relevance for mental and physical well-being. On the other hand, the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/351242>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/351242>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)