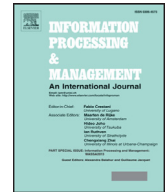




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Exploring emotional expressions in e-word-of-mouth from online communities

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ABSTRACT

Electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) is an important force in building a digital marketplace. The study of eWOM has implications for how to build an online community through social media design, web communication and knowledge exchange. Innovative use of eWOM has significant benefits, especially for start-up firms. We focus on how users on the web communicate value related to online products. It is the premise of this paper that generating emotional value (E-value) in social media and networking sites (SMNS) is critical for the survival of new e-service ventures. Hence, by introducing a formal value theory as a coding scheme, we report a study on E-value in SMNS by analyzing how a Swedish start-up industrial design company attempted to build a global presence by creating followers on the web. The aim of the study was to investigate how the company's website design and communication can affect eWOM over time. This was done by capturing a series of "emoticon and value expressions" generated by community members from three different e-communication campaigns (2011–2012) with changing website content, hence giving different stimuli to viewers. Those members who expressed emotional value, often incorporating emoticons, displayed both shorter verbal expressions and reaction time. These value expressions, we suggest, are important aspects of eWOM and need to be actively taken into account. The study has implications for information management strategies through using eWOM.

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1. Introduction

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) by definition comprises the customer's informal communications directed at other customers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers (De Matos and Rossi, 2008). It is often operationalized as referrals, which, however, is only one among many aspects of WOM. Referrals include what customers say to other customers and can take the form of implicit or explicit recommendation (Reichheld, 2003). However, WOM has been found to include more than just recommendation. Much of what people say to each other is really about "what happened" (Söderlund & Mattsson, 2011). WOM can therefore be an important source of information for people talking to others (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Patterson, 1998; Reichelt, 2013). For example, consumers rely on WOM when selecting purchases that require a high involvement level (Arndt, 1967; Brown & Reingen, 1987; Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, & Pervan, 2011).

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The relative impact of emotion in eWOM is still vague (Yin, Bond, & Zhang, 2014), hence this paper investigates the eWOM process by comparing the e-WOM outcomes of three different website design and communication attempts (waves) made by a start-up design company during three time periods 2011–2012. We hypothesize that more prevalent emotional triggers on the website and communication may lead to more emotional eWOM generated by the online community.

A web site and its online environment representation in video, photographs, diagrams or text descriptions can engender an emotional response, which in turn can lead to eWOM. We often find this in discussion amongst consumers pertaining to a product and is equivalent to a 'group think' syndrome that forms a legitimating and persuasive force for individuals. Emotions are related from a psychological perspective to feelings which can be thought of as perceived physical/mental sensations (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994).

Action tendencies are impulses or inclinations to respond with an action (Roseman et al., 1994). In the case of a product, a person typically makes a comparison and judgment on whether they like or dislike the product. Given the range of likely comparative products this is typically not done in a rational, cost/benefits manner as this would take too long but rather 'gut' feel or intuition is used to quickly assess whether the product has value or more value than other products (Damasio, 1992). The person can then decide to make a decision to voice an opinion (negative or positive) about the product on an emotional basis of how the product, if owned, would make the person feel (Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008). This can be communicated to others, through eWOM, in a form of emotional disclosure (Reynolds, Brewin, & Saxton, 2000). The intricacies of eWOM have become a topic of research in the information systems community in recent years (Mohammad, Zhu, Kiritchenko, & Martin, 2014; Sun, Wang, Cheng, & Fu, 2014; Verhagen, Nauta, & Feldberg, 2013).

2. Literature review

Word of mouth is the process of conveying information from person to person, both online or offline. Word-of-mouth communication can have large effects on commercial businesses. Research has showed that exposure to WOM and electronic WOM messages can generate more purchasing interest and help to increase brand awareness (Arndt, 1967; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Keller, 2007).

Word of mouth, or referral research, includes a wide-ranging literature on word-of-mouth communication. Consumers' judgments of products and the flow of information are in focus in WOM research. Lazarsfeld and Katz described the flow of information and influence from person to person in social systems (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Since then, consumer researchers have studied how word-of-mouth influences consumption. Dichter (1966) analyzed the way that word-of-mouth influences consumers' attitudes and perceptions. The author focused on the analysis of psychological aspects of word of mouth – speaker motivations, listener motivations and influential groups. Arndt (1967) performed a study of consumers' use of face-to-face recommendation and the short-term sales effects. The author found that exposure to favorable comments increases acceptance of a new product. Arndt reported that consumers seek social support. The word-of-mouth pattern suggests that sharing information and knowledge is more important than social control. Arndt explained that the word-of-mouth process is more about seeking social support for adoption or non-adoption of a "social" accepted opinion when making a purchase decision. WOM through a friend or work colleague is considered to transmit more credibility than an advertisement message from a company (Day, 1971; Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrell, 1997). Granovetter (1973) has contributed to the understanding of tie-strength in WOM behavior. The relational content and form are fundamental in WOM research. Relational content refers to the type of relation represented in the connections among users or consumers. Relational form refers to the linkage between actors, paths and referral flow. Brown and Reingen (1987) examined the role that tie-strength play in word-of-mouth processes. The authors found that referral communication helps that information travels from one subgroup to another. The authors found that at the micro level, strong and homophilous ties were more influential than weak ties.

2.1. Electronic WOM

Technological innovations have given marketers plenty of tools to make use of electronic WOM. A wired lifestyle is essential to Internet shopping and the new sharing-economy. Bellman, Lohse, and Johnson (1999) identified online product information search as the most important predictor of online buying behavior. The information seeking and giving behavior is fundamental to digital markets (Kozinets, 1999). Discussion boards and online referrals have broad exposure and influence on consumer's decision-making process. Davis and Khazanchi (2008) analyzed the positive impact of eWOM attributes and factors on e-commerce sales. However, due to strong competition at the digital market place consumers are flooded with information, brand signals and advertising messages, both offline and online. This information overflow, but also extreme commercial market noise has contributed to a decline in advertising and promotional effectiveness (Patterson, 1998; Reichelt, 2013). Bailey (2005) studied consumer use of product review websites. His study showed that consumers consult review sites when buying online. The study showed that user placed their focus on the information and opinions found on review websites. Being responsive to the consumer's desire for brand marketing cuts through the noise in the digital market place.

eWOM has been shown to add value to advertising in that it influences early sales of a new product (Sussan, 2005). We suggest that eWOM can have a number of potential benefits for firms and customers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004) especially for community building on the web. Getting early sales is critically important especially for start-up ventures on the web.

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