



# Scan and click: The uses and gratifications of social recommendation systems



Ji won Kim\*

School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 14 February 2014

### Key words:

Online survey  
Uses and gratification  
Opinion expression  
Social media use  
Internet use  
Social recommendation system

## ABSTRACT

An online survey was used to examine college students' uses and gratifications of social recommendation systems such as "like" on Facebook. By presenting numerical values, these systems display the volume (i.e., how many users) and valence (i.e., like/dislike) of collective opinions within a *specific* e-community that users are involved with. Consequently, these systems offer the chance for users to scan the climate of opinions within a *specific* online community. More importantly, these systems have introduced a new mode of speaking out online. Due to social recommendation systems' significance in the public opinion domain, the study attempted to understand why and how people use them to express opinions. Results showed that social recommendations were used for expression, information, socialization, and entertainment purposes. Above all, users primarily viewed them as potential expressive tools and actually use them to express their opinions. While internet use had no significant relationships with either motives or system uses, social media uses were closely related with both motives and actual uses. The findings suggest that social recommendation systems seem to play an important role in the public opinion domain by offering an additional way to scan collective opinions and express opinions.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Given the potential efficiency of the internet as a tool in encouraging public discussions, it has become important to understand how this new communication environment affects the public opinion process. Particularly, the online interactive features such as "like" and "thumbs-up/down" have been recently recognized as a useful tool for scanning public sentiments (Messing & Westwood, 2012). Such opportunities for interaction increase the potential for two-way communication between sources and receivers, offering more control to end-users of the systems (Bucy & Tao, 2007; Kioussis, 2002; Newshagen, 2004). In this sense, highly interactive online media provide more opportunities for people to participate in the communication process, potentially influencing democracy, which is based, at least in part, on communication.

Though there are many interactive features of online media, social recommendation systems in particular deserve scholarly attention. These systems are online feedback tools that display the volume and valence of users' collective opinions on a set of objects, ideas, or even persons (e.g., thumbs-up/thumbs-down

and like/dislike). By presenting numerical values, these systems display the volume (i.e., how many users) and valence (i.e., like/dislike) of collective opinions within a *specific* e-community that users are involved with. Consequently, these systems offer the chance for users to scan the climate of opinions within a *specific* online community. More importantly, these systems have introduced a new mode of speaking out online, albeit via a simple preference indicator. Although expressions made through social recommendations may be confined to dichotomous statements such as agree/disagree, support/oppose, and like/dislike, it is important to note that they can be used as another means of expression among online users, particularly for those who are reluctant to write comments to express themselves.

Despite social recommendation systems' potential to facilitate online discussions, little scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding why and how people use them to express their ideas and opinions. Instead, a review of the literature in this area reveals that recent studies of these systems have focused on examining their influence on users' attitude change and behavior patterns (Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Liu, 2006; Messing & Westwood, 2012; Resnick, Zeckhauser, Swanson, & Lockwood, 2006). As these tools require active participation from users, it is important to understand the uses and motivations for using these systems before examining further questions such as their effects on users. Therefore, using an online survey of college students, this

\* Address: School of Journalism, The University of Texas at Austin, 300 West Dean Keeton A1000, Austin, TX 78712, United States. Tel.: +1 812 345 2431; fax: +1 512 471 7979.

E-mail address: [jk26277@utexas.edu](mailto:jk26277@utexas.edu)

study sought to examine why and how online users employ social recommendation tools. Additionally, this study explored how users' uses and motivations vary depending on individual differences such as the amount of general internet use and social media use (e.g., Facebook).

## 2. Background and literature review

### 2.1. Social recommendation system

Social recommendations, also referred to as social endorsements or user ratings, are online feedback mechanisms that have become immediate and collective indicators of what “others” think (e.g., thumbs-up/thumbs-down, like). Occasionally, because there is no agreed-upon terminology, the social recommendation systems have been called generically “recommendation systems,” potentially confusing readers (e.g., [Zhu, Huberman, & Luon, 2011](#)). Thus, it seems important to declare that social recommendations (e.g., “like” buttons) are different from computer-generated recommendations (e.g., Amazon's recommended items). Whereas social recommendations are suggestions made by other online users through interactive features such as “like” icons/buttons, computer-generated recommendations are automatic suggestions made by algorithm. Accordingly, those studying computer-generated recommendations have been occupied with the accuracy of these prediction algorithms ([Cosley, Lam, Albert, Konstan, & Riedl, 2003](#); [McNee, Riedl, & Konstan, 2006](#); [Ziegler, McNee, Konstan, & Lausen, 2005](#)) and user experiences with the system ([Knijnenburg, Willemsen, & Kobsa, 2011](#)). Social recommendation researchers, on the other hand have been mainly concerned with the consequences of the social recommendation systems such as attitudinal and behavioral changes (presented below). The current study deals with social recommendations by exploring users' behavior and motivations before any effects may occur.

Social recommendation systems were first adopted in e-commerce to encourage consumer participation in the marketing communication process ([Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003](#)). Many commercial websites such as Amazon, Yahoo!, and Movie Critic suspected these systems would act as social information tools cuing users about collective opinions, promoting bandwagon effects. As an early adopter of this technology, the movie industry used these systems to promote positive audience attitudes toward certain movies and thereby increase their ticket sales at the box office ([Duan et al., 2008](#); [Liu, 2006](#)). Studies have revealed that more tickets were likely to be sold when more positive ratings had been posted about a particular movie ([Duan et al., 2008](#); [Liu, 2006](#)). Similarly, [Resnick and colleagues \(2006\)](#) found positive effects of high positive ratings on the price of products on the auction website Ebay. A number of studies have demonstrated social recommendations have an influence on users' attitudes and product consumptions ([Bickart & Schindler, 2001](#); [Resnick et al., 2006](#); [Senecal & Nantel, 2004](#); [Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005](#); [Srinivasan, Anderson, & Ponnayolu, 2002](#)).

More recently, these social recommendations are more widely adopted across a broad range of online sites, influencing online users in subtle but important ways. Particularly many online news sites employ social recommendation systems to indicate an article's popularity, affecting readers' opinions and behaviors in various ways. A recent study illustrated that social recommendations can play a significant role in readers' online news consumption; if the article has a large number of positive recommendations from readers, other online news consumers are more likely to read that news story ([Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005](#)). Furthermore, a study has shown that social recommendations are a primary factor in influencing perceived news credibility and news

consumption; if the news received a high volume of positive recommendations (e.g., diggs), readers would consider it more credible and consume it more than an article with a low volume of recommendations ([Xu, 2013](#)). Social recommendations were even found to be influential in editors' news placement decisions ([Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2012](#)). Clearly being social cues for the collective opinions of others, these social recommendations are influencing individual attitudes and behaviors by increasing social influence online.

Not only do social recommendations provide social cues about collective opinions, these tools also are more subtle indicators of opinion expressions of one's own. Users are able to express their opinions by clicking thumbs-up and thumbs-down ratings without having to write down their own opinion. They can also do so anonymously in many cases with much less time than writing words out. Despite the limited expressive nature of social recommendation systems—systems that prevent opinion holders from elaborating on their reasoning—they are meaningful in that they have introduced a new mode of speaking out online, influencing oneself and others.

Despite its growing role as social information and expression tools in the online public opinion process, only a few studies to date have examined social recommendation systems within a public opinion context ([Hong & Park, 2011](#); [Lee & Jang, 2010](#); [Messing & Westwood, 2012](#)). [Messing and Westwood \(2012\)](#) found that social recommendations actually succeeded in moderating partisan information selectivity by encouraging exposure to attitude-challenging information ([Messing & Westwood, 2012](#)). Furthermore, a study conducted by [Hong and Park \(2011\)](#) revealed that these social recommendation systems are even able to encourage people's willingness to express their opinions online. In this study, as individuals perceived greater effects of social recommendations on others, their willingness to express opinions increased. By incorporating the role of social recommendation systems into the study of public opinion research, scholars will be able to add more to a growing discussion of social influences online.

Although it may be an ultimate goal for scholars to understand the effects of technology on people and society, [Newhagen and Rafaeli \(1996\)](#) suggested that it is necessary to first understand the relationship between the individual user and the technology in order to clearly estimate the effects of the new technology. However, not enough attention has been paid as to why and how people use social recommendation systems. This study sought to understand *why and how* users employ social recommendation systems, particularly considering the inherent interactivity and user-centered nature of the technology. Therefore, a uses and gratifications approach would be a well-suited framework to build this study as the springboard for future research of social recommendations.

### 2.2. Uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications was first introduced in the era of limited media effects, shifting away from a perception of a passive audience to one of a more active audience ([Severin & Tankard, 1997](#)). Uses and gratifications scholars have long asserted that the audience is active and goal-directed in their uses of media; they are aware of their own needs and thereby select the appropriate media to fulfill these needs ([Severin & Tankard, 1997](#)). With this in mind, scholars have attempted to understand the psychological needs that shape peoples' motives for media use ([Rubin, 1994](#)). In short, this approach holds a psychological communication perspective that focuses on individual use and choice by asserting that different people can use the same mass medium for very different purposes ([Severin & Tankard, 1997](#)).

Uses and gratifications is well-known as a paradigm for its widely applied principles as well as its applicability for

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6839207>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6839207>

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