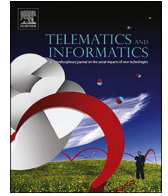


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## Posting-related attributes driving differential engagement behaviors in online travel communities

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### ABSTRACT

Users' engagement behaviors such as likings, sharing and social interactions in online communities are critically important to the viability and the ultimate success of these communities. However, empirical research investigating which posting-related attributes driving these participation behaviors still lags. The purpose of this study is to understand what and how posting-related attributes drive the engagement behaviors. Using travelogue data from a large traveling knowledge-sharing community, we used econometric models to investigate and compare the antecedents leading to three different kinds of engagement behavior that users exhibit in online communities (i.e., consuming, contributing, and creating). The results reveal that five attributes are associated with these engagement behaviors. These attributes demonstrate the differential effectiveness on the engagement behaviors with different intensities. Our empirical findings provide both theoretical and practical implications for online community operators to build a vibrant and successful online community.

### 1. Introduction

User generated content (UGC) has become a major source for tourists who have a demand for knowledge of their prospective destinations. Online travel communities (OTCs) thus become increasingly prevalent as a credible information network as it provides the tourists with trustworthy reviews and recommendations (Chung & Buhali, 2008). It is believed that the success of an OTC is dependent on the ability to attract OTC users to contribute and keep them engaged (Cheng et al., 2014). User engagement is defined as the intensity of an individual's participation and connection with the organization's offerings initiated by either the user or the organization (Vivek et al., 2012). The extant literature has associated user engagement behavior with enhanced satisfaction, loyalty, trust, positive word of mouth, emotional bonding, commitment, and sales growth (Agag and El-Masry, 2016; Brodie et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2016). For example, Casaló et al. (2010) demonstrate that users' intention to participate in an OTC can significantly influence their recommendation intentions. Agag and El-Masry (2016) report that active participation plays a positive role in users' intention to purchase and positive WOM toward an OTC. Harrigan et al. (2017) observe that user participation and engagement are positively associated with loyalty in tourism social media. Lee et al. (2014) also claim that the lack of participation in OTCs makes the majority of such communities fail at growing beyond mere existence into powerful forms of social media.

Given the importance of the active participation in online communities (OCs), researchers have shown great interest in investigating factors driving users' engagement behaviors in OCs (e.g., Gharib et al., 2017; Ul Islam & Rahman, 2017; Huang et al.,

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2014). One notable common feature of this stream of studies is that the majority have focused heavily on delineating the effects of psychological factors on engagement behaviors, and little existing research has investigated the antecedents of engagement behaviors in the OC context from the posting-related attributes' perspective. However, the existing studies in the fields of information systems and e-commerce overwhelmingly support that the attributes of an object (such as websites, mobile apps, etc.) with which users interact are prominent stimuli that drive users' engagement behaviors (Fang et al., 2017; Parboteeah et al., 2009; Peters et al., 2016). Drawing on these findings, posting-related attributes also might have a salient impact on users' engagement behaviors in the OTC context. Nevertheless, this issue has been largely ignored by the studies of online engagement. Clearly, there is a strong necessity to extend the extant literature by developing and empirically examining research models to better understand the effect of posting-related attributes on engagement behaviors.

In two recent studies, Luarn et al. (2015) and Schultz (2017) investigate brand post attributes in Facebook brand pages affecting user engagement behavior. However, these studies only consider the contributing engagement behavior (i.e., liking, commenting, and sharing) and focus on the attributes of post itself such as content vividness and interactivity, content categories, and publication timing. There are many different types of engagement behavior in the social media environment. In the case of OCs, liking, sharing, and social interaction are all the manifestations of behavioral engagement. No research to our knowledge has investigated and compared the differences of influencing mechanisms driving the different forms and intensity of engagement behavior within OCs, which impedes the academic and practical gaining a comprehensive understanding on the different types of engagement behaviors that users exhibit in OCs.

In addition, the existing studies examine engagement behavior in the context of social media based communities, transactional online communities and social Q&A communities, relatively few studies examine the engagement behavior in the context of OTCs. Different from social media based communities, transactional online communities and social Q&A communities, OTC, as a typical form of knowledge-sharing OCs, is generally based on loose social relationships among members and the members take their own initiative to facilitate free knowledge contribution and dissemination. Moreover, the sharing posts in OTCs are in general much longer and more vivid than other OCs. Considering that user engagement behavior differs in various online settings due to context-dependent nature of this phenomenon (Dovaliene et al., 2015), it is of necessity to examine engagement behaviors across various forms of OCs (Brodie et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; Dovaliene et al., 2015).

This paper also responds to Dolan et al.'s (2016) call for further empirical investigations exploring different types of engagement behaviors that users exhibit in OCs and understanding the mechanisms of how the content attributes that trigger users to engage at different levels of intensity. In essence, this study seeks to find the answer to the following questions:

- (1) *What and how do posting-related attributes stimulate the engagement behaviors?*
- (2) *Is there any effect difference of these posting-related attributes in affecting different forms and intensities of engagement behavior?*

To answer these questions, we develop econometric models to explain engagement behaviors by drawing upon recent literature on OC engagement behavior. Specifically, we identify five attributes from three distinct levels (i.e., information features, contributor features and receiver features) as critical external stimuli leading to engagement behaviors. Further, we also investigate and compare the differential effectiveness of these stimuli in affecting low intensity levels of engagement behavior (i.e., viewing), medium levels of engagement behavior (i.e., liking, sharing, and commenting), and intense levels of engagement behavior (i.e., social interaction). We validate the proposed model by using the real-world data collected from a major OTC.

The main contributions of this study are threefold. First, our study is the first to empirically identify posting-related attributes that affect users' engagement behaviors in the OTC context. Second, this study serves as a novel attempt to explore the relative effectiveness of these attributes on the different engagement behaviors. Third, in contrast to prior research of OTC participation behavior that gathers research data through self-reporting questionnaires, our study is one of the rare studies gathering data from the web pages of an OTC. Based on the findings, we propose practical implications that can be used by OTC managers for making better operation strategies and the informed design of OTCs.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. OTC engagement behaviors

Engagement behaviors refer to behavioral manifestations of engagement. Users exhibit behavioral manifestations of engagement at different intensities and with different valence within social media platforms (Brodie et al., 2016; Muntinga et al., 2011). The existing research has characterized engagement behaviors on a continuum of low to high activity (Dolan et al., 2016; Muntinga et al., 2011; Wong, 2007). In particular, Brodie et al. (2016) propose that there are three types of positively valenced social media engagement behaviors at different intensities: creating, contributing, and consuming. The majority of OTCs nowadays have integrated social media characteristics into their platforms. OTC users not only can like, comment, share and create posts but also can be able to follow and be followed by other users. As such, OTCs can be considered as a type of social media platforms. The current study focuses on investigating these positively valenced active engagement behavior in OTCs.

"Socializing" is epitomized as creating engagement behavior, reflecting a highly active level of social media engagement behavior. Social interaction in OCs can be described as the back-and-forth interactions among OC members. The back-and-forth interactions complement and extend the knowledge of focal sharing posts. As such, creating the new knowledge for OC members. As for contributing engagement behavior, users distribute the existing content and as such they are instrumental in conveying and

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