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ScienceDirect

Journal of Interactive Marketing 28 (2014) 1 – 15

JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE MARKETING

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Let Users Generate Your Video Ads? The Impact of Video Source and Quality on Consumers' Perceptions and Intended Behaviors

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Available online 8 August 2013

Abstract

The advent of social media has challenged companies as sole creators of marketing messages. Whether intentionally branded or subconsciously promoted, users become ambassadors for products and brands by producing and disseminating user-generated content (UGC). Whereas previous studies on UGC have mainly considered verbal peer recommendations or written reviews, our research focuses on user-generated videos (UGVs). In our 2 (source: user vs. agency) × 2 (technical quality: low vs. high) experimental study, we explore the impact of user-generated videos (UGVs) vs. agency-generated videos (AGVs) on spectators' perceived source credibility and their intention to visit the tourist destination Tyrol in Austria, as promoted in the video. In addition, we explore the moderating role of video quality. In contrast to conventional wisdom, our results indicate that there is no general superiority of UGVs over AGVs. Rather, the influence of different video generators (user vs. agency) on spectators' perception and intended behavior depends on the technical quality of the video. In the case of low technical quality, users as generators have a significantly stronger positive effect on source trustworthiness and expertise – and thereby on consumers' intended behaviors – than AGVs. However, no impact from the generating source on trustworthiness has been found under the condition of highly technical quality. Concerning source expertise, videos generated by users are rated more highly than agency-generated videos under both low and high technical qualities, but the advantage is significantly lower under high technical quality. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of user-generated content overall and relativize the widely assumed general superiority of user-generated content over commercial, firm-generated content, at least in the case of videos.

Keywords: User-generated content; Social media; Crowdsourcing; Source credibility; Viral Marketing

Introduction

Companies have traditionally been considered as the sole creators of marketing messages and brand-related content designed to influence consumer behavior. With the advent of social media in the form of online social technologies, social networking, video, and community platforms, traditional one-way communication has been transformed into multi-dimensional, two-way, peer-to-peer communication (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008). Instead of passively consuming professionally created, brand-relevant messages, individual consumers now can easily generate and distribute their own content (Ertimur and Gilly 2012). User-generated content (UGC) describes a variety of media content created and disseminated by users outside commercial routines (Haven, Li, and McHarg 2007; OECD 2007). Whether intentionally branded or subconsciously promoted, by actively producing, engaging with, and forwarding brand-related content, consumers become ambassadors of specific brands, products, and services (Cheong and Morrison 2008; Muñiz and Schau 2007). Existing research on UGC has to date mainly focused on verbal peer recommendations as well as written product and service reviews found in blogs or forums. Most research has therefore been anchored in the WoM and eWoM literature (Smith, Menon, and Sivakumar 2005).

However, UGC is not limited to written text. Recently, creating and sharing videos has become very popular among users of video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo. Although user-generated videos (UGVs) have become quite popular and enjoy growing interest, to date, little empirical attention has been

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1094-9968/$ -see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2013.06.003

directed to examining their impact on consumers' behaviors. Recent studies provide some evidence of UGVs facilitating greater consumer engagement than company videos (Ertimur and Gilly 2012). However, our understanding of their specific impact on the decision-making behavior of consumers has remained limited and incomplete until now. Most existing research has investigated the influence of the messenger's (the person who is actually communicating a message either face-to-face, by video, audio, or text) credibility on the audience's intended behavior or attitude changes (Aljukhadar, Senecal, and Ouellette 2010; Wilson and Sherrell 1993).

In contrast, our study considers different sources of video generators – not to be confused with messengers within the video – and explores the impact of their credibility on the audience's intended behavior. We compare UGVs produced by enthused amateurs and disseminated outside of commercial routines with agency-generated videos (AGVs) produced and edited by professional ad agencies. We explore 1) how UGVs of Tyrol, a well-known tourism region in Austria, influence consumers' intention to visit Tyrol and willingness to spread such videos among their social network compared to AGVs and 2) how the technical and argument quality of the videos affect the relationship between the video source and source credibility as well as that between the video source and intended behavior.

Based on insight from source credibility theory (Ohanian 1991) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) research (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Cheong and Morrison 2008), we propose that users as generators of videos will not be perceived as more credible per se. Rather, we suggest that the impact of the source (agency vs. user) is contingent both on argument quality and technical video quality. We use a 2 (source: user vs. agency) × 2 (technical quality: low vs. high), between-subject experimental design to test our developed hypotheses.

Our findings indicate that UGVs exhibit a significantly higher degree of source trustworthiness and therefore a stronger influence on intended behavior than AGVs, only under low technical-quality conditions. Concerning source expertise, UGVs are rated higher than AGVs under both low and high technical qualities. However, if videos produced by agencies reflect high quality, they are at least perceived to be at the same level of expertise as user-generated videos of low technical quality. Our findings challenge the perceived superiority of user-generated content over firm-generated content in the case of online videos. Finally, no moderating effect of argument quality could be found.

Our study thereby contributes two new perspectives to existing knowledge: First, it explores the influence of different content generators (agency vs. user) and not those of different messengers (e.g., firm vs. actors or peers) of video on audience's intended behaviors. Second, it explores the moderating role of video quality on these relationships by distinguishing between the technical and argument qualities of video.

User-generated Content

UGC refers to a variety of different media content, including ratings, reviews, articles, blogs, photos, podcasts, or videos, originating from users rather than commercial entities. Users and consumers themselves become active and produce content outside of commercial routines and share it online via social media without commercial intentions (Haven, Li, and McHarg 2007; OECD 2007).

Most existing research on UGC assumes that content creation can be compared to content dissemination. Therefore, UGC has previously been considered a concept similar to eWoM and has thus been applied interchangeably (Kozinets et al. 2010; Muñiz and Schau 2007). Although both concepts indeed share some similarities, they also significantly differ from each other and cannot be considered the same. Both UGC and eWoM reflect a consumer-dominated channel of marketing communication and brand-related content, where the sender does not have commercially oriented intentions and is independent of firms (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008; Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007). However, the two concepts of UGC and eWoM differ depending on whether the content is *generated* by users or only *conveyed* by users (Smith, Fischer, and Yongjian 2012). Whereas UGC requires some form of content to be generated, eWoM merely requires content conveyance by users and can also include users' conveyance of professionally created content (Cheong and Morrison 2008). A video generated by a user is considered UGC. By contrast, a user – who watches and subsequently shares and forwards a video – engages in eWoM, independent of the type of generating source (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008).

Most of the present research on UGC is based on the idea that it can be examined as a form of word-of-mouth communication (Kozinets et al. 2010; Muñiz and Schau 2007) and explores the influence of its non-commercial nature on credibility and consequently consumers' decision-making behaviors (Bickart and Schindler 2001; Chakravarty, Liu, and Mazumdar 2010; Cheong and Morrison 2008; Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski 2006; Smith, Menon, and Sivakumar 2005). The majority of research on UGC has been conducted using media modalities of low richness (text and/or still pictures), including written online product/service reviews, ratings and recommendations in blogs or message boards (Cheong and Morrison 2008).

The tremendous growth of online social sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, however, has generated new media expressions such as UGVs. UGVs combine text, moving images, and sound to create audio–visual content and represent a richer modality of UGC (Ertimur and Gilly 2012). Studies investigating modality effects find that, compared to textual modality, messages conveyed through audio and visual combinations exert greater influence on persuasion, facilitate message recall, and enhance the salience of communicator-related information (Chaiken and Eagly 1983), which ultimately influence consumers' behavioral intention. UGVs allow consumers to share and discuss opinions and experiences by combining images, text, sounds, and storylines in the form of audio–visual material (Paek et al. 2011). They have also proven to be appealing, memorable, and persuasive in virtual settings (Jin 2009).

Conceptual Framework and Formulation of Hypotheses

Literature on how people are influenced by received information has identified perceptions of the source and its credibility