



The relationship between electronic word-of-mouth motivations and message characteristics: The sender's perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how particular motivations are associated with different eWOM message characteristics. This is examined from the sender's perspective in both positive and negative eWOM contexts. Responses from a sample of 201 consumers who had posted an online message about a financial service in the last 12 months were collected through an online survey. Results showed that cognitive and affective characteristics of messages were linked to different motivations to engage in eWOM, which further differed across positive and negative messages. Managers should encourage consumers to share more positive factual information and sort online reviews based on the subject matter, rather than just the positivity of a message.

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1. Introduction

It is well-documented that word-of-mouth (WOM) can influence consumers' decisions (e.g. Day, 1971; Harrison-Walker, 2001; East et al., 2008). The persuasiveness of a WOM message may depend on, among other things, the way a sender words a message through logical and emotional appeals or characteristics (Mazzarol et al., 2007; Sweeney et al., 2012). However, what remains unknown is what drives the sender to design their message with such characteristics. The present study attempted to address this research gap in an online environment.

The task of identifying and assessing WOM content has in the past been challenging as WOM has often been privately communicated, such that managers are neither privy to *what* is being said, nor *how* it is being said. As WOM communication is becoming increasingly transparent in online discussion forums, social networking sites, consumer review sites and blogs (Riegner, 2007), it is now possible to identify and examine individual electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messages and gain richer insight into how customers' feelings and experiences about a service are represented to others. The present study made use of this new source of WOM.

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Much of the research on WOM examines the receiver's perspective and little has addressed the generation of WOM (Harrison-Walker, 2001). To advance our knowledge in this area, a suitable point of departure is the investigation of WOM from the sender's perspective, in particular their motivation to initiate WOM communication and the characteristics of the WOM message. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between motivations and message characteristics across both positive and negative eWOM.

2. Literature review

2.1. The power of word-of-mouth (WOM)

Westbrook (1987, p. 261) defined WOM as "informal communication directed toward other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers". Researchers have found WOM is more effective than advertising and promotional activities in influencing consumer decision making, including changing attitudes (e.g. Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Day, 1971) or increased patronage (e.g. Arndt, 1967; Holmes and Lett, 1977). However, little is known about the characteristics that make a persuasive WOM message as researchers have, almost without exception, measured WOM in terms of its frequency and the number of people who receive it (e.g. Westbrook, 1987; Bowman and Naryandas, 2001). Such an aggregated approach to measuring WOM, in that individual messages are often not examined for its content and wording, has been

helpful in studying overall WOM activity, but limits our understanding of the richness and subtleties in individual WOM messages (Mazzarol et al., 2007). Consequently, a more ‘disaggregated’ measure of WOM in which the individual WOM message is the unit of analysis, was used in the present study.

2.2. The cognitive and affective characteristics of WOM messages

Anderson (1998) recognised the importance of examining WOM content and suggested positive WOM can vary in its vividness, pleasantness and novelty, as well as the extent to which it conveys a sender’s experiences. A number of authors have emphasised the importance of the message characteristics on the message persuasiveness, including both rational and emotional aspects (Allsop et al., 2007; Mason and Davis, 2007). Semin (2000, p.597) stated: “... talk does not simply involve producing words. It requires choosing words from a lexicon to create sentences that are also linguistically structured... with the purpose of communicating an intention to someone else. It is a production with a social end”. A number of authors support Mason and Davis’ (2007, p.505) assertion regarding communication “... it is more than words; it really is how you say it”. For example, the importance of words, content, body language, and expressiveness has been emphasised in WOM messages (Dichter, 1966; East et al., 2008). In this study we specifically explore the cognitive and affective characteristics of eWOM since these are core communication dimensions (e.g. Allsop et al., 2007; Mason and Davis, 2007; Sweeney et al., 2012). In this study, we define cognitive characteristics as the rational component of a message that typically refers to product attributes including performance, response to problems, and price-value perceptions (Sweeney et al., 2012). Affective characteristics refer to the message’s depth, intensity and vividness and reflect the language used and the degree of storytelling or depth of information involved in the message (Mazzarol et al., 2007; Sweeney et al., 2012). eWOM messages can be described in terms of cognitive and/or affective characteristics. Examples of this in the financial services context are shown in Table 1.

The link between cognitive and affective WOM message characteristics and subsequent attitudes and behaviour of the receiver has been demonstrated in several studies (e.g. Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010; Sweeney et al., 2012). For example, receivers have higher service and value expectations following the receipt of a message high in cognitive content in particular, as well as affective content (Sweeney et al., 2012). Recipients of eWOM are also more likely to be persuaded in the case of higher informational quality and message clarity (Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). Such research provides the impetus to investigate what generates cognitive and

affective characteristics, which is a research gap the present study aims to address.

2.3. Motivation to engage in electronic WOM (eWOM)

Past studies have suggested a range of motives for engaging in WOM (e.g., Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) adapted Dichter (1966) and Sundaram et al.’s (1998) motivations to an online context, proposed (and empirically-tested) several reasons why a consumer might engage in eWOM communication, six of which are of interest in the present study, namely:

1. *Positive self-enhancement* reflects a consumer’s need to share their consumption experience to augment their own image as intelligent shoppers.
2. *Social benefits* occur when a consumer transmits a WOM message for identification and social integration purposes.
3. *Advice seeking* concerns the need to acquire tips and support from others to better understand and use a product or service.
4. *Concern for other consumers* relates to genuine offers to help other consumers make better purchase decisions.
5. *Helping the company* relates to a consumer’s desire to help a company as a result of a particularly pleasing consumption experience.
6. *Venting negative feelings* relates to a dissatisfying consumption experience that results in the consumer wanting to release frustration and anxiety through negative WOM.

2.4. Link between motivations and message characteristics

Research on WOM communication (Wetzer et al., 2007), written communication (Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010; Schellekens et al., 2010) and messages posted online (Schau and Gilly, 2003; Kozinets et al., 2010) suggests that communication motives may be linked to the wording of a message. Wetzer et al. (2007) argued that the specific goal that a consumer strives for in communication may be reflected in the content of the message. For example a consumer will talk differently if they want to take revenge from when they seek social connections, and indeed this difference is largely due to varied underlying emotions (e.g. anger and disappointment). This is neither to say that consumers are aware that their communication goals are facilitated by the way they use the language, nor that they are manipulative in the way they talk. However, we do argue that consumers use language as a means to structure and represent reality in a particular way, in order to influence the belief processes of the recipient (Semin, 2000). Often

Table 1
Examples of cognitive and affective characteristics of eWOM messages.

| Valence | Cognitive | Affective | Cognitive and affective |
|----------|---|--|--|
| Positive | “Not only was the promotional interest rate attractive, having assessed other financial products, the comparative rate for this product was extremely competitive”. | “Believe me, I cannot recommend this bank enough. I had soooo many pathetic experiences with other banks; it makes this bank really stand out. This is what ALL banks should be like.” | “You are not wrong about this investment company. I think the fund managers there are geniuses and make others look pretty bad. There is a wide selection of investment options for different risk profiles or investment objectives. I recommend this company without any hesitation” |
| Negative | “Do not deal with this bank... it has too many fees. It has fees for application, maintenance, and discharging the loan. Every direct debit transaction incurred a fee” | “I feel ripped off! The bastards raised their interest rates faster than you can say BAM!! I hate most banks, but this one is the worst of the lot! If it were not for helping my friend’s business, I would not give them a single cent!” | “Let me tell you: this company is always one of the first ones to raise their interest rates and has had at least four interest rate rises above the one by the Reserve Bank. It is so disappointing dealing with them because the advertising portrays them as community-friendly. I definitely would encourage you to do your research...this bank may not be as friendly as you think.” |

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