Personality factors and flow affecting opinion leadership in social media ☆

So Young Song [a], Erin Cho [b,*], Youn-Kyung Kim [a]

[a] Department of Retail, Hospitality, and Tourism Management, College of Education, Health & Human Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996-1911, USA
[b] Strategic Design Management, School of Design Strategies, Parsons School of Design, The New School, New York, NY 10011, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study examines the personality traits of people who tend to engage in social media as opinion leaders in the context of the travel industry. Specifically, we investigate the extent to which openness, exhibitionism, and competence in interpersonal relationships and flow experience affect the propensity of opinion leadership (OLP) and opinion leadership behavior (OLB). The proposed model was tested with two significant populations in social media, Generation X and Generation Y. The results indicate that openness, exhibitionism, and competence in interpersonal relationships significantly increase OLP. We also find that flow experience (i.e., playfulness and time distortion) strengthens the relationship between OLP and OLB. While the model holds true for both populations, the results show that the role of exhibitionism in OLP is more pronounced for Generation X than Generation Y.

© 2017 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

The significance of social media and its number of users has increased dramatically over the last two decades. As of 2015, about 65% of American adults have used social networking sites as a tool to exchange information, a nearly tenfold jump over the past decade (Perrin, 2015). For example, as a leading social media platform, Facebook reached 1.55 billion active users in September 2015. This number represents a 14% growth from the previous year (Facebook Inc., 2015). By 2015, Instagram and Whatsapp, sister companies of Facebook, have also become significant portals of social networking with about 400 and 900 million active users respectively (Rao, 2015). Numerous other sites and applications by small and large online players—Google Plus, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, MySpace, Blogger, and Flickr—are also being used as platforms where people connect with others to share their experiences and opinions.

In fact, much evidence exists that consumers' major communication channel for tourism has switched to the Internet, particularly to social media communities (Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). Several studies show that when making travel decisions, online interpersonal influence and digital word-of-mouth are the primary sources of pre-purchase information (Couture, Arcand, Sénécal, & Ouellet, 2015;

Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). The opinions and recommendations that are shared on social media can also influence tourists' attitudes and interpretations of destinations even after their trip. This influence can recreate the post-trip experience by reinforcing what the trip means to the travelers (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015). Therefore, the tourism industry could benefit from incorporating social media and engaging with its opinion leaders to introduce, develop, revise, market, and even distribute their travel products and services.

Thus, understanding who is more likely to play the role of transmitting information and influencing the attitudes or behaviors of others is critical (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996). However, tourism companies have been rather passive in identifying these "opinion leaders" because of their poor understanding of who these individuals are in social media (Gardiner, Grace, & King, 2014; Taylor, 2014). This study addresses this issue. Therefore, we investigate whether and how distinct personality traits that are associated with opinion leadership in interpersonal communications affect the propensity to be an opinion leader (OLP) in social media. We then test the degree to which OLP leads to the actual behavior of information sharing and recommendation (i.e., opinion leadership behavior, OLB) in social media. Given that our context is online experience, we also examine the role of flow experience with social media in mediating the relationship between OLP and OLB. We test our model on the populations whose ages range between 19 and 50 years old. This age group represents >75% of social media communication and can be divided into two important groups: Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1997) (Pew Research Center, 2015; Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Given that shared generational characteristics significantly affect

people's evaluations and behavior, we examine whether and how the relationships depicted in our model differ between these two generations.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Opinion leadership

The research has long emphasized the importance of identifying opinion leaders because they contribute to distributing information and making recommendations about consumption choices (Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). The advancement of communication technologies has shifted the modes and the preferences of the way people obtain and communicate information more toward the Internet (Perrin, 2015). Thus, this shift has raised the significance of opinion leaders in social media as a channel of information distribution and influencers of choices. Researchers find that consumers are likely to view the information from interpersonal communication to be more credible or reliable than other sources of information, such as advertising and mass media (Flynn et al., 1996). These interpersonal influences are particularly important in the hospitality and tourism industries because consumers often have difficulty evaluating the specifics and overall value of their services before buying (Kvasova, 2015). However, not everyone with prior experiences shares them with others. Therefore, identifying the personality traits of people who are likely to share their opinions in social media is critical.

Past studies have indicated that some characteristics of opinion leaders in traditional interpersonal communication might still apply to opinion leaders in the digital environment, such as education, income, and occupational status (Lyons & Henderson, 2005). In terms of personality traits, studies show that opinion leaders are extraverted and outer-directed (Marshall & Gitosudarmo, 1995); exhibitionistic and narcissistic (Baumgarten, 1975); self-confident and competent (Baumgarten, 1975); explorative (Coulter, Feick, & Price, 2002); open to new ideas (McElroy, Hendrickson, Townsend, & DeMarie, 2007); and curious, creative, innovative, and experimental. We condense these diverse characteristics into the personality traits of openness, exhibitionism, and competence in interpersonal relationships.

2.1.1. Openness

Openness refers to the personality traits of being adaptable to new ideas and being innovative and creative (Childers, 1986). Openness is arguably an important trait that affects people's preferences for the modes and the contents of communications. For example, studies have found that high openness favors online communications and favorable attitudes toward novel, imaginative, and whimsical content (Jadin, Gnambs, & Batinic, 2013; Kvasova, 2015). While individuals low in openness are practical, rational, prefer routine, and are more likely to conform, those high in openness tend to be independent, imaginative, and desire diversity (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008). People with high openness are also intellectually curious and cognitively flexible with widespread interests (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002). In addition, openness increases an individual's inclination to accept, try, and adopt new products and brands (Coulter et al., 2002; Ruvio & Shoham, 2007). The literature indeed suggests that opinion leaders in social media continuously look for variety, tend to try different products in their area of interest, and readily accept more radical innovation than their followers (Segev, Fiske, & Villar, 2015). Guadagno et al. (2008) also find that in the world of online blogging, openness is a significant cue when predicting a potential blogger. We thus posit that the personality trait of openness increases the propensity to be an opinion leader in social media.

Hypothesis 1. Openness significantly increases the propensity to become an opinion leader in social media.

2.1.2. Exhibitionism

The literature defines exhibitionism as the tendency to seek sensation, to be extraverted, and to show off to gain attention and admiration (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011). For people with high exhibitionism, self-disclosure in social media is an opportunity to be recognized, gain admiration, and publicize their expertise (Choi, Panek, Nardis, & Toma, 2015; Leung, 2013). Kaplan (2012), in fact, argues that social media is a tool to satisfy someone's need for exhibitionism. This concept of "digital exhibitionism" (Wang & Stefanone, 2013, p. 7), in particular, is fostered by those who want to garner fame, demand social attention, and secure positive views of themselves from others. Individuals with high exhibitionistic tendencies are eager to reveal private information and show off their knowledge and understanding of subject matters to entertain others and gain popularity (Choi et al., 2015; Wang & Stefanone, 2013). For example, Hollenbaugh (2011) finds that these motivations of achieving recognition and respect from others significantly increases the likelihood that a person will become a blogger. Carpenter (2012) and Ryan and Xenos (2011) also indicate that Facebook users with high exhibitionism are likely to self-promote their lifestyles on a frequent basis as a way to receive attention from others. In addition, Leung (2013) finds a significant correlation among exhibitionism, affective needs to use social media, and the frequency of social media use. People with high exhibitionism enjoy generating online content by dispersing information about their experiences. We thus posit the following hypothesis on the positive relationship between exhibitionism and OLP in social media.

Hypothesis 2. Exhibitionism significantly increases the propensity to become an opinion leader in social media.

2.1.3. Competence in interpersonal relationships

Competence in interpersonal relationships is defined as "the ability of a person to interact effectively and appropriately with other people" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989, p. 9). This ability reflects the quality or skillfulness of social interactions and social self-esteem and is inversely related to loneliness (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). Opinion leadership is linked to a greater degree of social communication, affiliations with organizations, and participation in social activities (Summers, 1970). Studies have indicated that those with high competence in interpersonal relationships are likely to play a key role in disseminating referral information to others (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Wang, Jackson, Wang, & Gaskin, 2015).

However, the role of interpersonal competence in determining opinion leadership in social media is not so obvious. Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky (2010) note that competence in interpersonal relationships is related to increased online communication. This increase indicates that individuals with high interpersonal competence are more likely to use Facebook to seek or retain social connections with a greater number of friends. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) also show that greater social capital (i.e., the resources accumulated through the interpersonal relationships with others) is associated with greater usage of social media. However, in contrast those who lack the skill for interpersonal communication in real life might be more likely to turn to social media for social engagement. For instance, Ryan and Xenos (2011) show that social media users are likely to be less conscientious and have a higher level of family loneliness than nonusers. They also indicate that socially lonely people tend to spend more time on social networking sites per day. This tendency indicates that individuals with less competence in interpersonal relationships might have more favorable attitudes toward social networking sites, and they might feel more comfortable maintaining personal relationships in social media than face-to-face. Similarly, Orr et al. (2009) find that social anxiety and a high level of shyness are positively related to the amount of time individuals spend on social media to battle loneliness. Kuss