



Does who we are affect what we say and when? Investigating the impact of activity and connectivity on microbloggers' response to new products



Omer Topaloglu^{a,*}, Mayukh Dass^{b,1}, Piyush Kumar^{c,1}

^a Silberman College of Business, Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1000 River Rd. Teaneck, NJ 07666, USA

^b Rawls College of Business, Texas Tech University, MS 2101, Lubbock, TX 79409, USA

^c Terry College of Business, University of Georgia, 130 Brooks Hall, Athens, GA 30602, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether microbloggers' past activity and connectivity influences the timing and valence of posted responses to new products. It shows that the timing of a post depends on the past microblogging activity of the poster and the number of posters he or she follows. Textual analysis also shows that the valence of a post is sensitive to the activity of posters, the number of posters followed, the timing of the posts, and the nature of the evaluations of the new product (cognitive vs. affective). These findings provide insights into the relationships among the nature of microbloggers' responses to new products, their previous posting activity, and their online network characteristics. Collectively, the findings of this research suggest that microbloggers' responses to new products should be interpreted after adjusting for posters' non-product-related characteristics.

1. Introduction

Consumers have embraced social media, generating massive amounts of online content about products that interest them (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Marketers use this information, called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), to track their brands and gain insights into consumer behavior (You, Vadakkepatt, & Joshi, 2015). They are particularly interested in the evolution of sentiments contained in eWOM because its pattern tends to be correlated with brand awareness (Liu, 2006), sales (Srinivasan, Rutz, & Pauwels, 2015), and future online activity (Moe & Schweidel, 2012).

Because of its low cost and high volume, eWOM is useful for gauging early consumer response to new products (Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, & Feldhaus, 2015). Furthermore, because its content is visible to and searchable by others, eWOM influences future online purchases. Therefore, despite having little control over eWOM (Godes et al., 2005), marketers prefer online conversations about their new products to be positive or neutral. However, eWOM related to new products contains a variety of sentiments (Srinivasan et al., 2015) because of variations in product evaluations and heterogeneity in posters' characteristics.

This paper focuses on the heterogeneity among posters and addresses the following research question: Does past online activity and the structure of online social networks influence the timing and valence of eWOM following the launch of a new product? Although eWOM

takes many forms, this research focuses on microblogs, which are short, instantaneous, non-interactive, non-invasive, searchable posts. Almost one in five such posts mentions a brand (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009), because of which microblogs are an influential form of eWOM that marketers are increasingly using to gain insights into consumers and stimulate new product adoption (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015).

Building on the social psychology literature, which suggests that underlying attitudes precede overt behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), the assumption in the present research is that an individual generates a microblog when the intensity of his or her response to a new product exceeds a personal threshold (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). Because of underlying psychological factors, these thresholds, and therefore the propensity to post, vary across individuals. In addition, because individuals are connected with others on social media platforms, the roles they play within their communities are also likely to influence the microblogging responses (Zhao et al., 2015).

Four related studies were used to address the research question posed earlier. First, a pilot test (Study 1) examined whether the stated content and timing of eWOM depend on a poster's past activity and connectivity. Study 2 tested several key hypotheses using results from content analysis of tweets following the launch of Starbucks Via instant coffee. Study 3 was designed to replicate the key findings from Study 2 using data from a controlled study. Finally, Study 4 examined whether

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: drotopaloglu@gmail.com (O. Topaloglu), mayukh.dass@ttu.edu (M. Dass), pkumar@uga.edu (P. Kumar).

¹ All authors have contributed equally.

the readers of microblogs on new products are sensitive to changes made to adjust for posters' characteristics.²

The results of these four studies complement existing eWOM research that focuses on the relationships between individual orientation and the propensity to post (Cheung & Lee, 2012), mood and valence (De Choudhury & Counts, 2012), online connectivity and review objectivity (Goes, Lin, & Yeung, 2014), extroversion and online opinion leadership (Helm, Möller, Mauroner, & Conrad, 2013), frequency of posting and differentiation (Moe & Schweidel, 2012), and review timing and review value (Chen & Lurie, 2013). Both the timing and valence of microblogged responses to new products were found to depend on the heterogeneity across posters in terms of observable characteristics such as past posting behavior and the number of inbound and outbound connections within posters' online networks. Given these findings, we suggest that marketers should adjust for posters' characteristics while interpreting the aggregate microblogging sentiments regarding new products. Furthermore, potential receivers of aggregate sentiments may also be sensitive to changes made to adjust for poster characteristics. Therefore, sharing information about adjustments is also likely to influence receivers' future behavior.

2. Consumer roles and online word-of-mouth

2.1. Online word-of-mouth

eWOM is online product information generated by individuals not associated with a sponsoring firm (Godes et al., 2005). It encompasses virtual communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004), ratings (Moe & Schweidel, 2012), reviews (Cheng & Ho, 2015), blogs (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), and microblogs (Dass, Kumar, Kapur, & Topaloglu, 2011). Consumers find such information more reliable than messages from sellers (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993), and frequently use eWOM before making a purchase (Chen & Xie, 2008). Therefore, eWOM tends to improve customer acquisition (Trusov, Bodapati, & Bucklin, 2010), product awareness (Liu, 2006), subsequent eWOM (Moe & Schweidel, 2012), and online and offline sales (Liu, 2006; You et al., 2015).

Scholars have explored the underlying motivations for generating eWOM as well as the elements that make its content valuable for others. They have found that individuals generate product reviews to enhance their reputation, increase their sense of belonging to a community (Cheung & Lee, 2012), and help others (Verhagen, Nauta, & Feldberg, 2013). Those who are otherwise introverted are more likely to post online (Helm et al., 2013), especially about highly differentiated and exciting brands (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013), while those with high levels of brand commitment are more likely to retransmit content created by others (Kim, Sung, & Kang, 2014). Interestingly, as posters accumulate followers, they produce evaluations that are more objective (Goes et al., 2014), and derive greater value from image-related utility than from the intrinsic utility of posting (Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Individuals who post frequently tend to exhibit differentiation rather than a bandwagon effect (Moe & Schweidel, 2012) and express more polarized opinions (Schlosser, 2005).

eWOM can have normative and informative effects on its recipients (Filiari, 2015), reduce uncertainty about firms' offerings (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010), and affect purchase intent (Lee & Shin, 2014). For example, a polarized post can have "a persuasion effect," whereas a neutral post can have "an informative effect" (Liu, 2006). eWOM also moderates the effects of actual consumption experiences and can mitigate the effects of product failures (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). The nature of the recipients' network, however, affects their responses,

such that those in dense networks do not respond differently to posts with varying valence, while those in sparse networks value positive information (Sohn, 2009). Interestingly, strongly opinionated, negative information tends to be more viral (Godes et al., 2005), and negative evaluators have more credibility (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) and are perceived to be more intelligent and competent (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015).

2.2. Role expectations and eWOM

Social life for many consumers increasingly rests within the digital realm (Ho & McLeod, 2008), where they play various social roles (Gleave, Welser, Lento, & Smith, 2009). These roles, defined as "clusters of social cues that guide and direct behavior in a given setting" (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985), lead to social expectations that predict appropriate behaviors. These role expectations are dynamic (Lynch, 2007) and depend on contextual factors and individuals' positions within social structures. People maintain consistency in their role expectations and reduce incongruence to avoid feeling incompetent or immoral (Aronson, 1992).

Online social networks have created new roles, such as technical editors on Wikipedia (Gleave et al., 2009) or originators and propagators on Twitter (Zhao et al., 2015). These influential roles carry several labels such as lead users (Schreier, 2007), opinion leaders (King & Summers, 1970), or social hubs (Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann, & Hong, 2009). Influence from such members of a social network, especially those with a large number of followers and a high level of expertise, is particularly important for accelerating the adoption of new products (Cheng & Ho, 2015; Dass, Reddy, & Iacobucci, 2014; Goldenberg et al., 2009).

2.2.1. Effect of activity and connectivity on timing

Within the eWOM context, individuals create positive content because of altruism and self-enhancement and generate negative content for anxiety reduction or vengeance (Richins, 1983). Role expectations further affect these choices because members of a poster's online social network tend to make attributions about the content and timing of a post (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Therefore, influencers try not to be too late because temporal congruity affects the perceived reliability of a post about a new product (Chen & Lurie, 2013; Godes et al., 2005; Liu, 2006). Individuals with many social ties, however, adopt new products sooner because they are exposed to them earlier (Goldenberg et al., 2009). Similarly, those who follow many users in online social networks are also likely to gain exposure to the product sooner and post their responses earlier.

H1. Microbloggers who follow many other users are likely to post sooner in response to a new product than those who follow few other users.

The level of online activity increases the value of connections in a social network (Trusov et al., 2010) and provides intrinsic utility (Toubia & Stephen, 2013). Therefore, activity levels are likely to consolidate network position and increase an individual's influence. Social activity, however, also influences role expectations (Laverie, Kleine, & Kleine, 2002). Those who are perceived to be influential because of high levels of activity will therefore be careful about protecting their role-specific interests and will be slow and deliberate, rather than impulsive, in their online posting behavior (Zhao et al., 2015).

H2. Following the introduction of a new product, microbloggers who post frequently are likely to post later than those who post infrequently.

2.2.2. Effect of activity and connectivity on valence

Dual processing theories in social psychology suggest that two distinct processes in human cognition affect consumer information processing. One is fast, associative, and based on low-effort heuristics,

² All experimental studies followed the IRB protocol for exempt status. The participants were recruited on M-Turk and invited to participate in an online survey about social networking. Individuals were not identified in the data, which were kept confidential.

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