



Viral marketing: Motivations to forward online content[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing popularity of viral marketing, factors critical to such a new communication medium remain largely unknown. This paper examines one of the critical factors, namely Internet users' motivations to pass along online content. Conceptualizing the act of forwarding online content as a special case of a more general communication behavior, we identify four potential motivations: (1) the need to be part of a group, (2) the need to be individualistic, (3) the need to be altruistic, and (4) the need for personal growth. Using a survey of young adults, we examine the relationship between these motivations and the frequency of passing along online content. We also investigate if high trait curiosity can indirectly lead to more forwarding by increasing the amount of online content consumed. Results show that Internet users, who are more individualistic and/or more altruistic, tend to forward more online content than others.

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1. Introduction

The Internet is now the “new normal” way of life for many Americans to get their news, book travel reservations, do research for school or their job, check out the weather, and seek out romantic partners among other activities (Rainie, 2005). For those who consume entertainment, news and information online, recommendations from friends are important sources for that information. This new online environment is conducive to a new form of marketing communication commonly referred to as viral marketing. Viral marketing typically starts with the marketer creating some form of electronic content such as a video or a mini-site, the aim of which is usually brand-building. The URL (web address) for the electronic content is made available to Internet users, who after viewing the content will decide whether they want to pass the URL along to their friends. If the URL gets forwarded and the Internet users receiving it also keep passing the URL along, the electronic content has the potential to reach a large group of Internet users at an exponential rate (Watts and Peretti, 2007).

Despite the increasing shift of advertising spending to viral marketing (Knight, 2007), the factors critical to viral marketing effectiveness remain largely unknown to both marketing academics and practitioners (Godes et al., 2005). Among the many potential

critical factors, this study focuses on Internet users' motivation to forward electronic content (i.e., the URLs storing the content). Understanding Internet users' motivation to forward online content is crucial since the decision to pass the content along is completely voluntary – in other words, marketers do not pay Internet users to pass along electronic content. Electronic content that is “seeded” initially to Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user's forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users, who are more ready to engage in e-WOM, e-mavens. Although Internet users may also spread electronic content by posting URLs in chat rooms or personal blogs in social networking sites, these actions are more similar to broadcasting to many audiences comprised of individuals who the senders may not know or intend to target. We restrict e-WOM to those forwarding actions through e-mail, instant messaging, or other communication media that are of high “addressability” in nature. We believe the scope of our e-WOM is most relevant to the current practice of viral marketing campaigns in which marketers intend to spread their messages as personal communications, rather than mass communications.

One may immediately see the parallel between e-mavens and market mavens, a notion introduced by Feick and Price (1987). Market mavens are people who constantly acquire and spread general marketplace information. E-mavens on the other hand are people who acquire and spread information via electronic platforms such as email (Phelps et al., 2004). In other words, market mavens are defined by the type of information that is acquired and spread (i.e., marketplace information) while e-mavens are defined by the channel (i.e., email and the Internet) through which information is acquired

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and spread. E-mavens are on the other hand, conceptually similar to the notion of Internet mavens (Belch et al., 2005), except that we include both email and the Internet. Although the market maven construct has been shown to act as a personal trait (e.g., Laroche et al., 2003), we define e-mavens here primarily by high frequency of forwarding online content and leave the potential to explore e-mavens as a personal trait for future research.

Not restricted to any specific type of information, we conceptualize e-WOM as a special case of a more general communication behavior, in which individuals communicate through e-mails or instant messaging to accomplish certain communication goals. Although not widely studied this way, the forwarding of electronic content can be viewed as part of a conversation and as a possible forum for interpersonal communication. We therefore develop our theoretical model of e-mavens' motivations based on the interpersonal communication literature and discuss their hypothesized effects on the action of forwarding electronic content as well as an action preceding forwarding, namely the consumption of electronic content. We then empirically test which of these motives are indeed operating.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Motivation to forward electronic content

Viewing e-WOM as a conversation between two sources implies a need to understand the process involved in the transmission of information from person to person. While a number of theories are proposed to explain why we engage in interpersonal communication, we adopt the conceptual framework proposed by Schutz (1966) as it provides a useful framework for integrating the various motivations that potentially underlie the forwarding of online content. Specifically, Schutz proposed a three dimensional theory of interpersonal behaviour which he called FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation). He postulated that people engage in interpersonal communication because they are motivated to express one or more of three interpersonal needs: inclusion (need to be part of a group/need for attention), affection (show appreciation and concern for others), and control (need to exert power in one's social environment).

Exactly how these motivations are specifically related to the forwarding of online content is not clear. Therefore, we examine various literatures to identify specific motivations related to the three dimensions of interpersonal communication in the online context. First, although the literature on word-of-mouth communication focuses on product-related information, the motivations that influence e-WOM should share some of the same characteristics. The second major area we review to identify pertinent motivations for the e-maven is the literature on Internet usage. Lastly, for reasons to be described in detail later, we focus on research that is applicable to college-aged students. In the next section, we use the FIRO framework to identify the key motives associated with the e-maven's propensity to engage in forwarding online content.

2.1.1. Inclusion

According to FIRO theory, the interpersonal need for inclusion refers to the need to be recognized as participants in human interaction and some terms that connote the relation include "belong", "join", and "togetherness" (Schutz, 1966). However, an essential aspect of the concept of inclusion is the desire to be identifiable or different from other people (Schutz, 1966). This leads us to postulate two primary motives underlying the interpersonal need of inclusion – the need to belong and the need to be unique.

2.1.2. The need to be part of a group

According to the belongingness hypothesis, human beings possess "a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister and Leary, 1995:499).

Phelps et al. (2004) examined consumers' motivations to pass along email and found that the most common motivation mentioned by respondents was the desire to connect and share with others. Flanagin and Metzger (2001) studied individuals' motivations for using a number of different media and report that similar to interpersonal (face-to-face) communication, electronic mail was used heavily to fulfill social bonding and relationship maintenance needs. As more people rely on the Internet as a means of communication we surmise that young adults will need to share their media experiences particularly if they anticipate future discussions. Therefore we predict:

H1. The need to belong will positively affect the forwarding of online content.

2.1.3. The need to be different

Self-image motivates WOM communication. For example, a recent study by Chung and Darke (2006) found that individuals were more likely to engage in WOM for products closely aligned to one's self-image – that is, products that tell others about who you are. This is not the only study to suggest that impression management goals are important drivers of WOM communication. Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998) explored consumers' motivations to engage in WOM and reported that self-enhancement was an important motivator for engaging in positive WOM – approximately 20 percent of their respondents had initiated WOM as a means of enhancing status. Similarly, Dichter's (1966) research revealed that individuals can construct or assert their sense of self by using WOM to gain attention and connote status.

Vignoles, Chryssochoou and Breakwell (2000) suggest that the motivation to see oneself as distinctive is a pervasive human motivation. Individuation is defined as the willingness to stand out or be different from others and studies show that people who are high in public individuation are more willing to voice their opinions and stand out in a community (Maslach et al., 1985). Chan and Misra (1990:54) introduced the concept of individuation to the opinion leadership literature and proposed that the "act of disseminating information through word-of-mouth communication makes opinion leaders stand out among their group, makes them "different" than the other members." The key point here is that the act of forwarding online content to others in the same network allows the e-maven to differentiate him or herself. This leads us to our second hypothesis.

H2. Public individuation positively affects online forwarding.

2.1.4. Affection – the need to be altruistic

Affection is defined as the need to maintain a satisfactory relationship, leading individuals to engage in behaviors related to intimacy, warmth and emotional involvement (Schutz, 1966). Since people driven by the need for affection desire relationships that are close and personal, we posit that this need is closely related to the concept of altruism or concern for others (Price et al., 1995). We often consider altruistic acts as selfless, or in other words, actions that are based on love and affection. We propose that in the context of forwarding online content, altruistic motivations may be the most relevant indicator of the need for affection. For example, Dichter (1966) proposed that some people share information with others as a means of expressing love or friendship. More recently, Price and her colleagues found that concern for the welfare of others (altruism) was one of the key antecedents of marketplace helping behaviour. Evidence from the WOM literature provides support for the premise that consumers are often driven by altruistic motives both in online (Phelps et al., 2004) and offline environments (Sundaram et al., 1998). These findings were substantiated recently by both practitioner (Keller Fay, 2007) and academic research (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) examining consumer motivations to publish their experiences on online forums. Based on our review of the literature we propose that:

H3. Altruism positively affects the online forwarding of information.

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