The Scope of Motivation Studies for (e)Word-of-mouth

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Abstract: There are fundamental differences between research into WOM (word-of-mouth), in which communication occurs face-to-face, and one into eWOM (electric word-of-mouth), which occurs over the Internet between strangers. In specifically looking at motivational factors, this study reveals significant differences in that while traditional WOM studies mainly discuss recipient motives, eWOM studies (a) mainly discuss sender motives and (b) permit the inclusion of economic motives.

Keywords: WOM, eWOM, motivation

Introduction

Consumers are not isolated entities whose perceptions and attitudes are transformed solely by advertisements; they make decisions on what is a good product and what to buy based on being

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surrounded by other people in addition to receiving information from mass media (Ikeda, Kobayashi, & Shigematsu, 2004). The *word-of-mouth* (WOM) effect, in which information is primarily transmitted orally between concerned parties directly, has been tested since the 1950s as one of the effects of influence made by other people. Arndt (1967) defined *word-of-mouth communication* as “oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as noncommercial concerning a brand, a product, or a service.” In this manner, past studies only considered face-to-face communication, but today, the Internet has given rise to numerous online communities comprising people who have never met each other in person, and there are increasing opportunities for users to influence each other (Hamaoka & Satomura, 2009; Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). As illustrated in Table 1, Hamaoka and Satomura (2009) introduced a classification based on the media used and parties involved in addition to the conditions established by Arndt (1967), and defined communication that occurs with strangers over the Internet, whether via email or bulletin board, as *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM) and all other communication as *word-of-mouth* (WOM).

**Table 1.** Classification of WOM and eWOM

| Media   | To whom            |
|---------|--------------------|
| Face to face | WOM   |
| Internet  | WOM   |
|          | eWOM   |

*Source: Hamaoka and Satomura (2009) p. 5, Table 0-3.*
Why Do People Exchange Information?

(1) Why do people exchange information face-to-face?

Dichter (1966) categorized the motivations for a speaker and a listener to engage in WOM communication. For the speaker, involvement is essential and includes product involvement, self-involvement, involvement with others, and message involvement; conversely, from the perspective of the listener, circumstance, source credibility, trustworthiness, expertise, interest, and intimacy are key motivational factors.

Involvement refers to the consumer’s level of personal attachment, persistency and interest regarding a product, advertisement, or purchase situations (Matsui & Nishikawa, 2016). Miyata, Kobayashi, and Ikeda (2007) demonstrated that higher levels of involvement are correlated with higher levels of exposure to face-to-face information. There are various levels of involvement, with “indifference” being the lowest and “obsession” being the highest. Involvement is deeply related to factors such as the individual’s desires, personal importance of the product, and interest. For example, although people who went through adolescence during the bubble economy when driving a luxury car was a sign of status show high involvement in cars, most present-day youth appear to show a low involvement with cars and do not think of them as an important marker of status.

Some other items influencing involvement are differences from substitute products, information about the product, and the potential for risk. Products that are high in perceived risk (uncertainty about the consequences of purchasing the product) increase levels of involvement (Bauer, 1960).

Richins (1983), in research focused exclusively on negative WOM, shows that important motivational factors for engaging in WOM are
consistent with those indicated by Dichter (1966), that is, product involvement, self-involvement, and involvement with others. Here, positive word-of-mouth (PWOM) is information that promotes purchase of a product (“I recommend this product”) and negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) is information that inhibits purchase of a product (“I do not recommend this product”). Much existing research has shown that PWOM has a positive influence on consumer decisions, and NWOM has a negative influence (Arndt, 1967; Burzynski & Bayer, 1977; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Kuwashima, 2018a; Richins, 1983; Wilson & Peterson, 1989). However, Kuwashima (2016) pointed out that PWOM may also have a negative influence for highly conspicuous goods.

Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster (1998) surveyed motivations behind NWOM as well as PWOM. They grouped purchase experiences into four categories: product performance, response to product/purchase problems, price and price perceptions, and employee behavior. They also grouped motivations for dispatching PWOM communication into four categories: altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company; moreover, they grouped motivations for dispatching NWOM communication into four categories: altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance, and advice seeking. Finally, they analyzed the relationship between purchase experiences and eight categories of WOM dispatch motivations.

(2) Why do people exchange information on the Internet?

Since information on the Internet is public and shareable with anyone, it has the characteristics of public goods. Therefore, people are fundamentally discouraged from sharing their own (valuable) information with others over the Internet. Kollock (1999) raises the following four possible motivations for providing information on the internet despite the aforementioned:
(A) Anticipated reciprocity: A person is motivated to contribute information to others in the expectation that one will receive support or information from others in return. It is common in offline communication to reciprocate when helped by someone. In online communication, people sometimes return a favor to others (who are not the specific people by whom they were helped) as a form of reciprocation.

(B) Enhancing one’s own reputation: This motivation is easy to act upon because communication over the Internet is viewed by many others as well as the specific target of the message.

(C) A sense of efficacy toward others: This motivation becomes increasingly important with the size of the community.

(D) Attachment to a community: Instead of being motivated by personal gain, a person contributes information to a group so that others, or the entire community, may reap a benefit.

Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) reveal that (1) concern for other consumers, (2) positive self-enhancement, (3) social benefits, (4) economic incentives (receipt of rewards for writing a review), and (5) advice seeking are motives that positively contribute to gathering information and dispatching communication in online communities. They further analyzed how motives of dispatching eWOM differ among consumers and classified them into four clusters: (1) cluster that contribute information driven by economic incentives, (2) cluster of multiple-motive consumers, (3) cluster that help others, and (4) cluster of true altruism.

Miyata (2005) compared motives for accessing online consumer communities against motives for viewing company websites among Internet users. When gathering information from an online community, seeking information that fit one’s own needs, expert information, product reputation information of users who tried them, and seeking answers to questions were strong motives. However,
there was also a high response rate for “gaining benefits by sharing information” and “returning the favor for previously having received a comment or response from others in an online community.” Miyata then evaluated respondents who raised these reasons for involvement according to how frequently they answered others or provided information in the online community and compared mean values across six levels. She found that while many respondents answered “because of having previously received comments or answers from other people in the online community” and “helping others is fair,” their actual frequency was low. By contrast, although low numbers of respondents answered “to raise my reputation” and “out of personal attachment to the community,” their frequency was high.

Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski (2006) focused on the utilitarian aspect of the exchange of “how to” at software user forums and suggested motivation, ability, and opportunity as the factors that define it. Their results show that motivation and ability had a significant effect on “how to” exchange, whereas opportunity did not. Furthermore, “how to” exchange can raise consumer evaluations of a company’s product, which leads to repurchase and the intent of WOM.

As often seen in these studies, although there are users who provide information on the Internet, there are many who only browse information but do not contribute any information by themselves, that is, read-only members (ROM) (Miyata, 2005). Ikeda (1997) suggests reasons why certain users only read and do not output information: “message stress,” an inability to contribute because they do not understand the message; “interpersonal stress,” an inability to contribute due to an aversion to potential trouble in the community; “information overloading,” an inability to contribute due to too much information; and “anonymity stress,” an inability to contribute due to the lack of transparency about the other’s
identity. A questionnaire targeting users enrolled in electronic meeting room provided by online service provider NiftyServe revealed that while users who both receive and send information do not experience “information overload” or “anonymity stress,” users who experience “interpersonal stress” tend to be ROM, and “message stress” was unrelated to both.

**Economical Motives Emerge in eWOM**

As is shown by the inclusion of term “noncommercial” in the definition of WOM, communication conducted by contributors who seek financial rewards for their dispatch is by definition not WOM but is rather classified as sales activity. In the case of eWOM, however, as mentioned by Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), there is a cluster of users whose contributions are motivated by economic incentive. The reason that these contributions are not thought to constitute sales activity is, unlike in the case of face-to-face communication, that they result in indirect benefits rather than direct sales of products or services.

YouTubers are one representative example of how money is earned through information dispatch on the Internet. YouTubers receive revenue when viewers see ads played on their YouTube videos. Since their revenue varies according to the number of times their video is viewed, they are motivated to create videos that attract the attention of as many people as possible and increase the number of views. Blogs are another method of earning income through advertising revenue. Sources of revenue from blogs can be split into four categories: (1) affiliate ads, (2) Google AdSense ads, (3) authoring articles that promote a product, and (4) selling one’s own products or services. Instagrammers differ from YouTubers and bloggers in that their main source of advertising revenue comes from sponsor contracts. Famous Instagrammers enter into sponsor agreements
with companies that want to sell their products and receive advertising fees by promoting these products. Rewards may be determined in several different ways, such as compensation based on the number of Instagram followers, the number of promotional posts viewed, or the number of likes and comments received. Instagrammers are also able to create a consumer network and influence product sales by increasing fans (Kuwashima, 2018b).

It is extremely difficult to separate commercially motivated from non-commercially motivated communication when conducted in this way over social media. For example, videos of a Mac fan discussing all the great aspects of new Mac product purchased with his own money may have originally been motivated by the simple desire to share his love for his favorite product with others. Yet once an Apple’s advertising representative comes across his videos and provides him with new product, he may stop discussing product flaws with the hope of receiving more new products. A video that offers nothing but praise for a product can be called an advertisement. However, it is not easy for viewers to distinguish whether these videos constitute WOM or commercial advertisements. Apart from YouTube, the same issue can be found across all social media outlets. Companies are strongly aware of this fact, and this has led to the coinage of terms such as “social media marketing” and “influencer marketing.” In summary, although the original definition of WOM excludes commercial activities, commercial activities cannot realistically be excluded from the realm of eWOM.

**Conclusion**

On the issue of motivation behind WOM behavior, studies on face-to-face WOM mainly discuss why people seek out WOM information, that is, “Why do consumers want to receive WOM?” However, in eWOM research, the main point of discussion is why
people post WOM (a form of useful information) in a public space such as the Internet and allow this information to become a public good— in other words, “Why do people want to contribute WOM?” Although both approaches seem to discuss the same issue, research is in actuality addressing the different positions of WOM receivers and senders.

In face-to-face WOM, the reception side bears the cost of searching for the individual who, among one’s acquaintances, possesses the sought-after information, so it is considered that the focus is on the reception side of WOM. Since the reception side wants to receive WOM, it is easy to conclude that speakers would naturally provide this information (about products, etc.) when requested, without having to go so far as to discuss the speaker’s motivations.

In the case of eWOM, information about nearly any product can be searched for on the Internet today. People (with the same motives as recipients seeking traditional WOM) who want information about a product can easily search for it online. Conversely, in comparison to the number of people searching for information on the Internet, there are very few people who contribute this information unprompted. It can be concluded that since the motivations of online information recipients are the same as the motivations of seekers of traditional WOM, the focus of eWOM discussions has been on the sender side.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, there is another difference

|                        | Receiver’s motivation | Sender’s motivation |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Commercial             | eWOM                  | eWOM                |
| Noncommercial          | WOM                   |                     |

Table 2. Scope of studies of motivation for (e)WOM
in terms of commercial motivation. Since it is easy to determine whether commercial motives are present in face-to-face WOM behavior, examples involving commercial motives have been excluded from WOM. However, since commercial motives are extremely difficult to distinguish in eWOM, all such behavior is discussed as a part of WOM.

Summarizing the above differences in a chart would result in Table 2. Although WOM and eWOM use the same “word-of-mouth,” studies differ in terms of the subject and phenomenon being researched.

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