ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study carried out in Kuwait aimed at exploring the motivational factors which drive consumers to mention company names in Twitter. Building on existing models for eWOM motives and using Twitter as the tool for data collection, an electronic questionnaire was launched with the help of a number of opinion leaders. A total of 1,192 valid responses were collected from 5,011 hits. Data were statistically analyzed to extract the strongest factors. Concern for Other Consumers, Extraversion/Positive Self Enhancement, Venting Negative Feelings and Helping the Company are the primary factors. However, the findings are inconclusive when considering the proposition that studies aimed at identifying motivational factors behind eWOM engagement, differences can be expected in results from populations with predominantly collectivist values as opposed to populations with predominantly individualist values. Assuming that in the Kuwaiti cultural context individualist values predominate, it would have been expected to have results which are different from those obtained in studies carried out among populations whose cultural values are predominantly collectivist. However, this was not the case. In some factors the results are very similar, while in others, results are markedly different. This suggests that more research is needed in the cross cultural implications of motivational factors behind eWOM engagement.

Keywords: Consumer Engagement, Electronic Word-of-Mouth, eWOM Intentions, Interactivity, Online Consumer Motivation, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

In the last 20 years the phenomenon of word-of-mouth (WOM) has evolved from the simple message passed on when one satisfied customer tells friends and family about the service they received, to the use of affiliate models of selling, which became popular with the rise of online shopping and review sites. More recently, affiliate selling has shifted from agencies pushing out links to drive sales to consumers becoming active promoters of products and services,
whether that is through websites, virtual stores, apps or online store fronts. Chahal (2012) reports that the ice cream company Iceland found that consumers filling out online surveys were quite happy to pass on their thoughts to friends. The company claimed that via the online survey more than two million people saw a branded message, which in turn led to a significant increase in traffic on Iceland’s website. Through Twitter and other social media consumers are willingly participating in conversations and forming a new level of social interaction with their engagement in commenting, seeking opinions, giving opinions, and passing them to others.

The new era of social interactions forces companies to mark their ground strategically in social media and Twitter in particular. The need to manage eWOM in order to help manage the company’s identity and image is becoming a necessity rather than a luxury (Huang et al., 2009; Mangold and Faulds, 2009). In an effort to understand what factors companies should take into consideration when it comes to dealing with social media, a number of scholars have tried to identify the motivations behind user participation in online media. Nardi et al. (2004) have studied this topic by documenting user lives, opinion expressions, emotional and thinking outlets, while Kwon and Sung (2011) have addressed social and psychological motives behind user social interactions in brand communities. Kietzmann et al. (2011) focused on what drives online conversations and suggested that people seek self-esteem through being among the opinion leaders in the medium with trendy and hot ideas. Other motivations revolve around user desires to meet similar people to exchange ideas and opinions, with user messages being heard for humanitarian causes and positive effects.

The common factors driving users to participate in social media are the social connections and the information sharing which feed inner self-motivations (Foster et al, 2010). These motivational elements have been categorized as both functional goals for information exchange and hedonic goals for rich and positive experiences (Hur et al 2009). Founded upon uses and gratification theory (Katz and Foulkes, 1964), this paper follows up the findings of a number of social media researchers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Matos and Rossi, 2008) regarding user motivational dimensions behind eWOM and applies them in the cultural context of Kuwait. Taking as a given the fact that the cultural environment in Middle Eastern countries is different from that of western countries, from which most of the research on social media originates, the study aims at validating user motivational dimensions in such a cultural context. Hofstede’s (1980; 1983) Individualism versus Collectivism cultural dimension is singled out as being the most relevant for the purposes of the present study, and an argument is put forward regarding the need to look more closely at eWOM motivational factors in the light of the Collectivism versus Individualism debate (Earley and Gibson, 1998).

The study was conducted in Kuwait, with Twitter’s functions and capabilities being utilized as an integral part in the research process. In addition to its utilization by researchers to disseminate findings, Twitter is also a useful tool for research collaboration and for collecting data, particularly in what concerns its potential to reach diverse audiences in a very short period of time (Gossage, 2011; Nicholas and Rowland, 2011; Wiseman and Watt, 2010). In the present study we explore such potentiality of Twitter. Firstly, by tapping into the collaborative potential among Twitter users we were able to gather a research sample in record time. Secondly, by exploring the motivations of users to participate in eWOM in the Twitter-sphere, we had immediate access to a very willing group of survey respondents. The methodology hinges upon an investigation of customer intentions when engaging with a company by commenting on it, either positively or negatively, through “tweets”, i.e. messages with a maximum length of 140 characters.
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