The Influence of Opinion Leaders towards Consumer Information Adoption in the Virtual Communities of Consumption

YU WANG

ABSTRACT

With the appearance and popularity of virtual communities of consumption, potential consumers begin to search for and share information with others in such kind of platforms and to be affected by the electronic word of mouth of certain products or services. Meanwhile, opinion leaders begin to exert influence on these individuals by helping them to filter, categorize and figure out the most valuable pieces of information. Consequently, how to utilize opinion leaders to affect consumer behavior by term of electronic word of mouth becomes one of the hottest topics in the relevant fields. This article utilizes the Information Adoption Model to study how opinion leaders exert influence on consumer information adoption process so as to provide implications about how to utilize opinion leaders in the virtual communities of consumption.

INTRODUCTION

With the appearance of electronic commerce and online platforms, individuals begin to accept new kinds of network transaction, share various information online, and meanwhile search for necessary and valuable information online, leading to the popularity of virtual communities of consumption. However, facing with huge amounts of information (Woodward & Hall, 2012), it becomes an urgent problem, which need to solved, for consumers to find out the really valuable information to adopt. Under this situation, the word of mouth communication serves as a more important, more influential and more reliable way for consumers to exchange information of products or services. Notably, in the process of the word of mouth communication, opinion leaders play a crucial role by not only guiding the consumers to consume, but also helping sellers to promote their products or services.

Many researches focus on the influence of opinion leaders towards the decision making process of consumers (Lyons & Henderson, 2005; Chakravarthy et al., 2011; Chaudhry, 2013), however, little researches study the different influences of opinion leaders towards different kinds of consumer behavior, including the process of choosing brands, of adoption information and of others. Consequently, this article is going to study the influence of opinion leaders on the information adoption process of consumers in the virtual communities of consumption by utilizing relevant models and
thus to provide some implications about how can opinion leaders encourage the consumers to adopt online information.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF CONSUMPTION

Definition

The study of virtual community has received a lot of attention since the past decade. One of the first proponents of virtual community was Rheingold, who built the first online community called The Well in the late 1980s. In his book, The virtual community is defined as “social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993[5]).

Also, the virtual community is defined as “a broad subculture has emerged around thousands of fragmented bulletin board services, resulting in the creation of virtual communities that leverage the capabilities of network to connect people with each other and to fulfill their specific needs for communication, information, and entertainment” (Armstrong & Hagel, 1997[6]).

Furthermore, Armstrong and Hagel (1997)[6] distinguish four types of virtual communities, including virtual communities of interest, of relationship, of fantasy and of consumption. This typology is based on the four basic needs of human beings, which include needs of interest, relationship, fantasy, and consumption and which can be meet with in the virtual communities. Notably, virtual communities of consumption serve to commercial purposes, like facilitating consumption, by encouraging participants to communicate and interact with others so as to make a deal.

The Economic Value

According to Armstrong and Hagel (1997)[6], the economic value of virtual community of consumption includes:

1) For consumers
   In essence, virtual communities of consumption act as agents for members by helping them get information and meet their social needs to communicate. Hence, potential consumers are empowered to have distinctive focuses on what kind of resources they are likely to find, to integrate member-generated content and communication, and thus to avoid the information asymmetry to some degree.

2) For vendors
   The virtual communities of consumption enable vendors to have a broader geographic reach and to face with their consumers directly. Hence, vendors are able to reduce the search costs for potential consumers, to increase propensity for them to buy by aggregating information and options and to interact with them to improve the understandings of their needs.

OPINION LEADER

Definition

The concept of opinion leader was first introduced by Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, when they theoretically introduced the Two-step flow of Communication in their
book, *Personal influence*, and highlighted the communicative role of the opinion leaders. It is indicated that interpersonal communication is more influential than the mass media along on the choice of individuals and that the central and influential individuals act as intermediaries between the mass media and the public: they obtain information from the mass media and further pass it to the public with strengthening or weakening it to some degree (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955[7]). Namely, opinion leaders actively acquire and accept the information disseminated by the mass media, process and transmit them, while most of the general audience rely mainly on the interpersonal interaction with these opinion leaders to get information to guide their actions. As a medium of information and as the individuals to filter information, opinion leaders have crucial influences on the general audience.

There are many other definitions of opinion leaders. In essence, the opinion leaders is defined as an individual who is the active receiver of word-of-mouth, who is exposed the most to mass media, and who tends to interpret the information with or without subjective ideas to others (Arndt, 1968[8], Rogers & Cartano, 1962[9], Kotler, 2001[10]).

Furthermore, with the development of Internet, online opinion leaders appear. They are quite similar to the traditional ones, except that these online opinion leaders exert their influences on others online.

**Types**

Based on forming causes, online opinion leaders can be divided into two type (Fu, 2010[11]). The first type refers to those who have been offline opinion leaders already. For example, some public figures, who have high social status or who have already been successful, have a certain degree of influence offline and thus can become online opinion leaders easily. The second type refers to those who generate online directly, thanks to the openness of network. With the desire to spread information online and corresponding knowledge, individuals are able to share information, affect others and become likely to be opinion leaders.

On the other hand, opinion leaders can be categorized based on the types of common websites which they use, including BBS, Blog/ Micro-blog, SNS, Instant messaging platform and others (He, 2010[12]).

**Characteristics**

Previous researches have unearthed some common characteristics of opinion leaders, which enable them to be distinguished from other followers. It is concluded that many studies focus on the characteristics of opinion leaders in light of demographic factors, media exposure and social positions, that many studies focus on the education degree, gender, or social class and that many studies focus on related personality traits such as conformity, responsibility, motivation and so on (Weimann, 1991[13]).

Overall, the characteristics of opinion leaders can be summarized as following:

1) Professional

The existing researches reveal that being professional is a crucial characteristic of opinion leaders (Myers & Robertson, 1972[14]; Mitchell & Dacin, 1996[15]; Gilly et al., 1998[16]; Trepte & Helmut, 2004[17]). Opinion leaders have comparatively high product involvement, have more interests in searching related information than common consumers and thus they are more likely to accumulate more professional knowledge.
2) Innovative

Previous researches indicate that the being innovative is a significant attribute of opinion leaders and actually, opinion leaders are more likely to try new products than their followers (Corey, 1971[18]; Myers & Robertson, 1972[14]; Rogers, 1995[19]; Goldsmith et al., 2003[20]).

3) Involved

Many researches emphasize the enduring and high level of involvement as a feature of opinion leaders (Corey, 1971[18]; Bloch & Richins, 1983[21]; Chan & Miscra, 1990[22]; Goldsmith et al., 2003[20]) and this feature can be used as a crucial reason to explain why opinion leader talk about products.

4) Socialized

The social attribute is a very consistent attribute of opinion leaders from the early studies and opinion leaders are well integrated in social networks and are more likely to interact with relatives, friends or others, when compared with opinion receivers and inactive members (Trolldahl & Van Dam, 1965[23]; Weimann, 1991[13]; Rogers, 1995[19]; Flynn et al., 1996[24]).

5) Additional characteristics of online opinion leaders

Besides these characteristics of traditional opinion leaders, some researches also analyze the additional characteristics of online opinion leaders (He, 2010[12]; Row, 2006[25]; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997[26]). These characteristics include blurred social attributes, greater heterogeneity with followers, faster speed of establishing their position, less possibility to be misunderstood, new media habits, higher release frequency of information and so on.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Definition

The study of consumer behavior has been strongly rooted in the marketing field which evolved after the late 1950s, and researchers endeavor to understand the decision-making processes and characteristics of consumers.

According to many definitions of consumer behavior (Walters & Paul, 1970[27]; Enis, B.M, 1974[28]; Solomon et al., 1995[29]; Schiffman, 2007[30]; Kotler & Keller, 2011[31]), consumer behavior refers to how individuals make their decisions on consumption, including decisions about what to buy, why to buy, when to buy, where to buy, how to evaluate and post-evaluate, and so forth.

Related Models

The existing researches show several typical models in the field of consumers behavior and these model include Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975[32]), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989[33]), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991[34]), Information Adoption Model (IAM) (Sussman et al., 2003[35]) and so on.

1) Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) is widely used in the field of consumer behavior, and is mainly to explain the relationship between attitudes and behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975[32]). The basic idea of this model is that behavior depends on intentions,
and these intentions, in turn, are affected by the attitude toward performing the behavior and the subjective norm. Meanwhile, this model shows that the attitude and norm can affect behavior indirectly though affecting intentions (See Figure 1). Consequently, this model can be used to predict individuals’ behavior based on their attitudes and behavioral intentions.

![Figure 1. TRA.](image)

2) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is based on TRA and used to explain user acceptance of information systems and technology (Davis, 1986[33]). The goals of this model are to explain the determinants of computer acceptance by measuring individuals’ intentions, and to explain their intentions by their attitudes, subjective norms, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and external variables. Obviously, the concepts of perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and external variables are the additional factors of this model, when compared to TRA (See Figure 2).

![Figure 2. TAM.](image)

3) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is an extended model of TRA by being added the concept of perceived behavioral control, in order to analyze the behavior of individuals with incomplete volitional control (Ajzen, 1991[34]).

According to TPB, intentions can be predicted or explained by the attitude toward the behavior, the subjective norm and the perceived behavioral control, and these intentions can be used to predict or explain behavior (See Figure 3).
4) Information Adoption Model

Information Adoption Model (IAM) is widely used for examining how individuals adopt information into their intentions and behaviors within the computer-mediated communication platforms (Sussman et al., 2003). This model is derived from TAM and dual process models of informational influence (e.g., Elaboration Likelihood Model). ELM is used to describe the change of attitudes form and to explain the processes underlying the effectiveness of persuasive communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). According to ELM, informational influence can occur at any degree of receiver elaboration, but the results depend on two different influence routes, which include a central route and a peripheral route. The central route results from individuals’ careful consideration of the true merits of the information and results in a high level of elaboration, while the peripheral route results from simple cues related to the information, without carefully thinking of the merits of it, and results in a low level of elaboration.

![Figure 3. TPB.](image)

Although TAM is a widely accepted theory, its explanatory power is limited. It mainly focuses on information systems and on the individual usage of a computer, but neglects the social processes (Riffai et al., 2012). Hence, Sussman et al. (2003) integrates TAM and ELM, which are useful to explain how the receivers are affected by the information within the message, and uses the argument quality as the central route, the source quality as the peripheral route, the perceived information usefulness as a mediator.

![Figure 4. IAM.](image)
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to IAM, the influence of opinion leaders in the virtual communities of consumption mainly focus on affecting the perceived usefulness of information of the consumers, by utilizing the credibility of opinion leaders themselves and the quality of the message which they send out.

Hence, in order to encourage consumers to adopt the messages sent by the opinion leaders, the opinion leaders need to focus on improving the quality of their messages and their credibility.

1) Improve message quality

In the online cases, the basic indexes for evaluating the quality of message include the content, format, accuracy, ease of use, timeliness and so on (Doll & Torkzadeh, 1988[38]). Meanwhile, the format of message includes oral message, word message, pictures, videos and others. Consequently, online opinion leaders need to release more attracting contents and to take various forms.

2) Increase credibility

Source credibility refers to the receivers’ perceptions of expertise and trustworthiness of sources (Hovland et al., 1953[39]; Sussman et al., 2003[35]). Hence, in order to increase their credibility, opinion leaders need to take actions to increase their expertise and trustworthiness. On one hand, they need to show their deep understandings of relevant fields to their followers and to share more professional information. On the other hand, they need to interact more with their followers, help their followers and thus to increase their credibility.

REFERENCES