

Information flow and WOM in social media and online communities

Recent developments have changed forever the way that consumers interact with brands that they are interested in and have influenced the available avenues they can use to collectively express their strong feelings and to exchange information about brands. The development of complex online settings which allow individual to interact allowed them to have access to people who are not geographically close but have similar mind-sets in relation to various issues and often form online communities where they exchange feelings and ideas about their object of passion. The online communities often have as a focal point a consumption activity or a brand and this development has changed the manner that consumers act before, during and after their consumption experiences. Companies have to cope with the new reality and appreciate that they cannot be successful unless they find new ways to approach their consumers. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the last 15 years, there is increasing academic interest on online consumption and brand communities with multiple streams of research that springs from the area. Some of the existing research communities on the topic focus on brand-related and consumption-related outcomes because of the participation in online communities, topics that are of particular interest for companies. Other research focusses on the behaviour of individuals in online communities, their interactions and the use of the online environment they are operating in, themes that imply that new ways of consumer expression and interaction are emerging and strengthening.

This special issue of the *Online Information Review* focusses on consumer behaviour in online communities and in particular in consumer interactions within brand and consumption communities. Given the importance of the topic, it is not surprising that the call for papers of this special issue attracted 42 very international submissions. The selection of papers is very international, since the total 14 papers were accepted from this call were authored by 43 academics working in 13 countries and four continents. Ten of these papers are presented in this special issue and the other four will feature in a special section which is a forthcoming regular issue. The ten carefully selected contributions of this issue were made by 34 academics working in ten countries and four continents and push the boundaries in all facets of information flow and behaviour in online brand communities. The papers cover a number of interesting areas related to the interaction between the individuals and the technology during the involvement of individuals with the communities. As a result, this issue informs the landscape of recent research progress and novel applications, techniques, case studies and strategies in analysing online information posted on various social media platforms.

The first paper, titled “Don’t be so emotional! How tone of voice and service type affect the relationship between message valence and consumer responses to word of mouth in social media (sWOM)” by Freya De Keyser; Nathalie Dens and Patrick De Pelsmacker, tests two previously unstudied moderating variables: the tone of voice of the sWOM and service type that the sWOM is about, that affect the relationship between message valence and consumer responses to sWOM messages. The findings of this study reveal that message valence exerts a greater impact on consumer responses with factual sWOM messages compared to emotional ones. Furthermore, the impact of message valence is stronger for hedonic services compared to utilitarian services.

Wu He, Xin Tian, Ran Tao, Weldong Zhang, Gongjun Yan and Vasudeva Akula present the case study “Application of social media analytics: a case of analyzing online hotel reviews”.



The team uses natural language pre-processing, text mining and sentiment analysis techniques to analyse online customer reviews related to various hotels. The authors found that the overall review star rating correlates pretty well with the sentiment scores for both the title and the full content of the online customer review. The case study also revealed that both extremely satisfied and extremely dissatisfied hotel customers share a common interest in the five categories: food, location, rooms, service, and staff.

Daniela Buzova, Silvia Sanz and Enrique Bigné in the paper “M-WOM in a brand’s Facebook fan page”, use the individual media dependency framework and offer a new perspective in explaining eWOM participation in mobile settings based on social networks. The authors demonstrate fan page dependency and parasocial interaction are key drivers explaining m-WOM communication process. In addition to the advice to brands to post information which is relevant, the authors found that the information should also be entertaining and visually attractive. When the information has these contents and presentation characteristics, it fosters the user-brand interaction to achieve users’ engagement with the brand and generate m-WOM.

Antonia Estrella-Ramón and Fiona Ellis-Chadwick contribute to the understanding of the potential influence of different types of user-generated content on brand success with the article, “Do different kinds of user-generated content in online brand communities really work”? The authors analyse different types of user-generated content for 205 video games in a popular online brand community. Results show that users look for simple and quick reviews and content about products in online brand communities (i.e. screenshots). However, users do not guide their purchases based on user-generated content when the process of gaining understanding is more time-consuming (i.e. reading discussions, watching videos) or requires more active involvement (i.e. workshop presence).

Rocio Alarcón, Salvador Ruiz de Maya and Inés López focus on the effects of sharing co-creation experiences on consumers’ behavioural intentions and make a contribution to the theoretical literature on social sharing of emotions in the article, “Sharing co-creation experiences contributes to consumer satisfaction”. This study conducted a 2×2 between-subjects experiment using 120 participants where co-creation and sharing of emotions were orthogonally manipulated. The authors confirm a joint effect of co-creation and sharing on satisfaction and repurchase intention. Thus, the effect of co-creation can be bolstered by encouraging participants to share the experience with other people.

Two papers focus on the drivers of online engagement. In particular the article, “Antecedents and outcomes of online brand engagement: the role of brand love on enhancing electronic-word-of-mouth” by Sandra Loureiro, Tatjana Gorgus, and Hans Kaufmann use a panel sampling with 201 participants from the millennial generation provided by the software tool Qualtrics to demonstrate how involvement and online brand experience are important drivers of online brand engagement. New insights are provided in the mediating role of brand love between online brand engagement and electronic-word-of-mouth.

Rania Hussein and Hassan Salah also investigate the antecedents of customer engagement in the article “Customer engagement on social media: how to enhance continuation of use”. This study uses a sample of 388 US general users and provides a different way of theorizing customer engagement by incorporating new variables to technology acceptance model, approach particularly relevant in the social media context. It also draws a link between attitude toward social media and levels of use, which has been understudied in literature.

Nowadays, brands and users are continuously joining different social media such as Instagram or WeChat and, as a result of its growing importance, there is a need to better understand consumer behaviour in this context and two contributions focus on this. More specifically, the articles, “Transforming followers into fans: a study of Chinese users of the WeChat Official Account” by Lyngyun Guo, Mingli Zhang, Kai Kang and Mu Hu and

“Antecedents of consumer intention to follow and recommend an Instagram account” by Carlos Flavián, Luis Casaló and Sergio Ibáñez give insights on how individuals interact with brands on social media. Guo Lyngyun advances the company social networks (CSN) research by taking into consideration both personal and environmental factors (follower participation motivation and perception of information quality), and their interaction effects on fan engagement behaviour and the stickiness on CSN. Carlos Flavián *et al.* use data from 440 members of a fashion brand community’s official Instagram account which suggests that both perceived enjoyment and usefulness have a positive influence on intended participation and recommendation of an account on Instagram. The findings of this paper help managers to understand consumers’ behavioural intentions on Instagram and note the relevant role of perceived enjoyment and usefulness in creating a satisfactory experience in this context.

The special issue closes with the paper “The brand personalities of brand communities: an analysis of online communication” by Leyland Pitt, Jeannette Paschen, Jan Kietzmann, Amir Dabirian and Mana Farshid. This work explores whether the brand personality of an online brand community, rather than of the brand itself, can be deduced from the online communication within that brand community. The authors make an empirical contribution performing a computerised content analysis approach on community generated content from eight online brand communities. They identify two types of communities: those focussing on solving functional problems that consumers might encounter with a firm’s offering and those focussing on broader engagement with the brand. The findings of this study serve as a blueprint that marketers can adopt to analyse online brand communities themselves and also how they stack against competitor brands.

The papers presented in this special issue illustrate the extensiveness and potential of online brand and consumption communities. A lot of challenges still exist in the field of eWOM and online brand communities. We, the guest editors, would like to thank the about 90 expert reviewers who helped us in assessing the submissions and secured that the quality of the selected work is really high and the papers are innovative and contributing to knowledge. We look forward to an exciting future of research and contributions in the area of online brand communities!

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