

ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH VIA TWITTER

Customer eWOM Motivations and Intentions^a

Basim Musallam¹ and Rodrigo Magalhães^{2,3}

¹Researcher, Kuwait Maastricht Business School, Salmiya, Kuwait

²Professor of Information Systems and Organization, Kuwait Maastricht Business School, Salmiya, Kuwait

³Researcher, CIEO - Research Centre for Spatial and Organizational Dynamics, University of Algarve, Algarve, Portugal

Keywords: Twitter, Electronic Word-of-mouth, Online Consumer Behaviour, Online Consumer Motivation, eWOM Intentions, Consumer Engagement, Corporate Response Strategy, Interactivity.

Abstract: The study aims to explore customers' motivational factors to express their opinions in Twitter regarding company performance, products and services. Using Twitter as the main medium of the study, an electronic questionnaire has been implemented to gather data. A total of 1,192 complete valid responses have been collected from 5,011 hits on Twitter. Data were statistically analyzed to extract the strongest factors. The results show that consumers are driven by multiple motives. Concern for Other Consumers, Extraversion/Positive Self Enhancement, Venting Negative Feelings and Helping the Company are the primary factors. Furthermore, we have identified early symptoms of grouped eWOM in Twitter against and in favour of companies which carry an important message to companies regarding the need to formulate proactive strategies to deal with the upcoming trend of Twitter powers for companies. The study was carried out in Kuwait.

1 INTRODUCTION

In an effort to understand what factors companies should take into consideration when it comes to dealing with social media, many scholars have tried to identify the motivations behind user participation in online media. Nardi et al., (2004) have identified the motivations behind people participation in online medium by documenting user lives, opinion expressions, emotional and thinking outlets. Keitzmann, *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 linking users are the social connections and the information sharing which feed inner self-motivations to be involved in the social media sphere (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). In order to engage in an infinite loop between the user, other users, and the company, the company ultimately should support enriched conversations in social media (Parent et al., 2011).

This paper follows up the findings and recommendations of Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) and Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) regarding the need to refine the measurements used in these studies. Additionally, it addresses customer motives within a new cultural context with the new medium of Twitter. The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate customer intentions to engage with a company by commenting on it either positively or negatively, through writing tweets in Twitter.

The paper proceeds with the literature review in Section 2. Section 3 outlines the research methodology and in Section 4 the findings of the study are presented. Section 5 presents conclusions and implications for both managerial practice and suggestions for future research.

^a This paper is partially financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 eWOM via Twitter

The investigation of Twitter eWOM is timely and necessary. The most prominent output of the processes of interaction and communication is the flow of messages between users, which spread in the form of eWOM. eWOM has been defined as “a statement made by potential actual or former customers about a producer or a company which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004:39)

Shared opinions and reactions are passed electronically from person to person, thus creating a mechanism that impacts consumers’ decision making. This mechanism is effective, especially due to the memory features of Twitter (Jones et al., 2009) which allows eWOM to be accessed at any moment, as eWOM is visible not only online but also offline with high accessibility and forwarding capabilities through mobile devices (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2010).

eWOM has a multitude of features which are appropriate for business purposes. One distinctive feature is that companies have no control over eWOM once unleashed online coupled with hybrid interpersonal mass communication channels (Jansen, et al., 2009). It is driven by online interactivity of consumers seeking, giving, and passing opinions and information, which reinforces credibility and reliability (Chu and Kim, 2011). Twitter offers eWOM anonymity and limitless geographical reach.

Another feature is endogenous to Twitter, where eWOM plays a dual role as the informant precursor and the recommender outcome. It thrives on the push-push-pull communication with positive feedback mechanism creating a ripple effect (Huang, et al., 2009) that is not matched by any other communication channel in terms of speed. A high number of positive eWOM messages will influence more purchases, which in turn will restart the whole cycle on a larger scale (Duan et al., 2008).

These features offer companies unprecedented chances to monitor eWOM’s spreading scale, and, for purposes of researching the behaviour of re-senders, it gives companies the opportunity to have a physical look at the written comments of consumers electronically documented (Huang et al., 2009).

2.2 Customer Motivations and Intentions

Customers are the key players in Twitter. They are part of the majority of the Twitter environment, the receivers who act as the real engines to stimulate eWOM. Those are the ones that the company strives to please while aiming toward getting closer to them. Thus, to build relationships with them is crucial and this requires understanding their behaviours and motivations in engaging with Twitter (Hanna et al., 2011).

Many scholars have investigated consumer behaviours in eWOM, from seeking eWOM, providing eWOM and passing on eWOM. The research model used in this study (see Figure 1) built upon the work of Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004), which in turn is the outcome of previous WOM models. Also, the work of Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) is adapted to the model.

Our model is built on four “utility types” or reasons for users to provide eWOM messages. The *Focus-Related Utility* encompasses the individual motivation to add value to online community with user input; *Consumption Utility* revolves around the consumption of other user inputs and gaining external opinions; *Approval Utility* deals with formal and informal praising for user contributions and thus feeds own satisfaction of peer approvals; *Homeostase Utility* is built on balance theory which states that individuals try to restore the balance once its original state has been changed, i.e. equilibrium changes with satisfaction or dissatisfaction which, in turn, drive people to express their emotions and revert to their equilibrium state.

Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) have identified eight factors that influence consumer motivation in composing eWOM messages. The economic incentives factor does not apply to the Twitter environment and thus was eliminated from the study. However, the remaining factors are all tightly related to the reasons of why customers use Twitter as a preferred eWOM format.

Concern for Other Consumers, Helping the Company, and Social Benefits fall under *Focus-Related Utility*. *Advice Seeking* belongs to *Consumption Utility*; *Extraversion/Positive Self-Enhancement* falls under *Approval Utility* and *Venting Negative Feelings* is related to *Homeostase Utility*.

One extra factor, the exertion of (*Collective Power over Companies*), which falls under *Focus-Related Utility* has been extracted from the *platform assistance* factor which focuses on operator

assistance and convenience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Lastly, *Influence of Others*, a factor that touches on the way that customers are influenced by other as well as being prone to imitate others (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006).

2.2.1 Venting Negative Feelings

This factor is the most obvious one when it comes to negative eWOM, capturing the way that negative experiences influence intentions (Jones et al., 2009). Venting negative feelings is the natural process for users to restore the balance and get back to their equilibrium state once they are exposed to an unsatisfactory experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). It serves the goal of lessening frustration and diminishing discontent with negative experience and resulting anxiety. Thus the following hypothesis is formed:

H1: *Venting negative feelings positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.2 Concern for Others

Customers are driven by their motivation to engage in eWOM communications in order to create and maintain social relationships, to share their satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and to keep the information circulating online (Chu and Kim, 2011). The factor has altruism in its heart, where the act of doing something good for others has no reciprocity element in it. People enjoy giving and aiding others with their inputs without expectations of anything in return. Such motive is derived from traditional WOM but Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) argued its relation to eWOM with the genuine desire to help others is emphasized in eWOM intentions. This feeds the following hypothesis:

H2: *Concern for others positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.3 Social Benefits

Twitter users follow each other and form affiliations to create virtual bonds which act as forms of social integration and identification, which are perceived as social benefits. The genuine desire to communicate with similar minded people and to have their values and inputs assist their virtual social interaction influence the psychological need to flock around those who share their values and interests. This factor is used to pose the following hypothesis:

H3: *Social benefits positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.4 Extraversion/Positive Self Enhancement

Customers are motivated by their desire to receive gratification from others. They share their experience and spread eWOM while enhancing the perception of source expertise (Jalilvand et al., 2010). User articulation in eWOM serves the purpose of feeding self-related needs that vary from self-image and prestigious intellectual perception, to social status. In the Twitter environment, customer eWOM can be used to reflect a level of knowledge about given products or services. It creates the impression of one being an insider regarding the company's internal affairs, while projecting oneself as mass influencer and opinion expert. The factor helps to form the following hypothesis:

H4: *Extraversion/positive self enhancement positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.5 Helping the Company

The customer desire to give the company something in return for gained satisfaction and appreciation drives this factor. This motive is the result of the same psychological background as altruism, as the customer feels that companies with good performance deserve to be rewarded with positive eWOM. This is also a form of commitment to the company and to the novelty of its product (Jalilvand, et al. 2010). The factor is hypothesized to impact user intentions in Twitter as follows:

H5: *Helping the company positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.6 Collective Power Over Companies

Unsatisfied customers engage in collective complaints against companies using the power of their virtual social influence. The accumulated number of customer messages resulting from the consumption of a company's products and services acts as a powerful tool against the company's image and reputation (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Twitter users are in their millions; this is combined with the long-term availability of memory arising from stored messages, to form a very real collective power of customers which threatens the company with public

criticism. The factor is reflected in the following hypothesis:

H6: *Collective power over companies positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.7 Influence of Others

In the Twitter sphere, customers are prone to be influenced by the behaviours and practices of other users. They imitate what has worked for others and copy them, especially if the approaches used by others have been proven fruitful (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). It can be argued that peer influence plays a significant role since users follow those who are like-minded. Hence, the adoption level of similar practices is justified by a higher number of positive eWOM (Doh and Huang, 2010). The factor is used to propose the following hypothesis:

H7: *Influence of others positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

2.2.8 Advice Seeking to Get Information

This factor serves both sides of seeking opinion; prior- and post-purchase or consumption of products or services. Customers provide their feedback based on their consumption and elaborate on their experience to provide insights to others (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). It is a way to: (a) offer or solicit objective opinions regarding how to solve a problem, (b) enlighten others with required skills for consumption and (c) obtain more specific and useful feedback. The next hypothesis addresses this factor:

H8: *Advice seeking positively impacts user intentions to engage in Twitter messages about companies.*

3 METHODOLOGY

Adhering to the aims of this study, we have adopted Twitter as a research tool for both sampling and collecting data. Using it as both the environment containing the eWOM phenomena under investigation and as the tool deployed to apply the theory has proved to be quite beneficial.

The questionnaire is the primary data collection instrument in this study. It has been designed to assess the motivations behind customer intentions into composing eWOM messages in Twitter about company products, services or performance. The

aim of the questionnaire is to determine the main factors influencing consumers in mentioning companies on Twitter. All factors have been adapted from the reviewed literature as shown in Figure 1.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts consisting of 39 statements. It made use of a Likert five-point scale, ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. The first part includes five statements covering general information i.e. age, gender, education and nationality (GNR1-4) and one elimination statement for validity purpose (GNR5). The second part was divided into nine sections and designed to investigate consumer behaviours in engaging in eWOM. A first draft of the questionnaire written in English and Arabic and presented in electronic format was piloted before implementation.

The first section of second part was dedicated for the dependent variable of the study. It aimed at assessing users intentions when they express themselves in Twitter, either positively or negatively, reporting on their experiences with a particular company. Statements were built on the eWOM definition by Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) (see Table 1).

The sampling was deliberately restricted to Twitter users. The implications of using Twitter as a research tool were also put into practice in adopting it as the vehicle for creating the viral effect of eWOM in the form of an electronic survey link. The electronic format questionnaire link was distributed strictly online via Twitter users who are the *market mavens* as characterized by Kaplan and Haenlein (2011a). These are the opinion leaders in the Kuwait Twitter-sphere who have acted as our distribution nodes for our survey in the Twitter network.

The sample of opinion leaders was selected from the pool of 1,000 top ranked Twitter users in Kuwait, in terms of number of followers with a minimum of 1,000 followers covering both genders and different age groups. Among the top ranked, users who are actively involved in the Twitter-sphere with emphasis on bloggers with Twitter accounts, were identified and selected as market mavens. Political figures, corporate accounts and official personnel accounts have been omitted from the sample.

The data collection process started by contacting thirty influential users in the Kuwait Twitter sphere, from which twenty three agreed to spread the questionnaire link by re-tweeting it to their follower networks. The retweets were intended to cause a ripple effect aimed at reaching the maximum possible number of users.

The data analysis was conducted with tools for statistical analysis such as factor analysis, regression analysis, and variance extract. The strength between independent variables and the dependent variable was examined in order to identify the most effective and significant factors contributing to eWOM intentions.

Table 1: Statement of eWOM intentions.

Indicator: It is likely that I
... write a tweet regarding my positive experience with my bank/telecom company
... write a tweet regarding my negative experience with my bank/telecom company
... forward a tweet (Re-tweet) about other people experiences with my bank/telecom company
... participate in Twitter conversation regarding my bank/telecom performance

4 RESULTS

We have used free Twitter applications to monitor the questionnaire link distribution and responses network. The electronic link was re-tweeted 351 times within 72 hours, at which point it reached the cut-off date. The sample caused the desired ripple effect for the questionnaire link by being the source of retweets.

The link was visited 5,011 times from which 2,755 were abandoned visits with respondents leaving the first page without filling in the questionnaire. Out of the remaining 2,256 responses, 917 were only partially filled which can be explained by the fact that most participants accessed the link through smart phones and any mobile network malfunction would have reset the survey. We ended up with 1,339 usable responses.

In order to exclude random and non-pertinent responses, these were filtered by asking respondents whether their responses reflect their opinions about telecommunication companies or banks inside Kuwait or outside it. The filter eliminated 147 responses of users who based their opinions on firms outside Kuwait which left us with 1,192 full responses to conduct the remaining analysis.

In order to investigate the significance of the research model, we have applied standard linear regression to the model's variables as shown in Figure 1. The model's significance level (p-value) of .000^a shows that there is high level of significance between all factors in the model. The Pearson's Correlation Coefficient gives the indication that

variance among all eight factors leading to the dependent variable is 27.8%.

The regression analysis results were used to investigate the validity of the hypotheses and to test the level of significance with which each factor influences and predicts the dependent variable. As shown in Figure 1, two variables have fallen short in terms of statistic significance with the coefficient p-value > 0.05; namely *Influence of Others* (0.569) and *Advice Seeking* (0.468).

Based on the regression analysis, we conclude that hypotheses H7 and H8 cannot be accepted, while all remaining hypotheses (H1, H2, H4, H5 and H6) are accepted. We recall the fact that hypothesis H3 related to *Social Benefits* has been omitted from proposed design, with the corresponding statements being grouped with other factors.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Our results concur with the findings by Hennig-Thurau et al., (2004) and show that the factors adapted from the model by Goldsmith & Horowitz (2006), which fall under *Consumption Utility* do not impact customer intentions and are not applicable in the Twitter sphere, at least not in Kuwait. Twitter is a nurturing medium for eWOM when it comes to composing and passing messages with absence of advice seeking motive. Our findings also support Kwon and Sung's (2011) when these authors state that users are prone to tweet less frequently when it comes to company products and services, as opposed to mentioning company names in tweets. We attribute this to customers being driven to tweet with their opinions and sentiments about events and incidents that happen in their environment. Thus has more of broadcasting nature than requesting assistance and information.

The study aims to explore and identify what triggers consumers into contributing to Twitter's eWOM by specifically mentioning companies in their tweets. Thus the managerial implications of our study are quite pertinent.

Individual and personalized approaches with the help of friendly, informal language and tone will absorb frustration and anger from customers and let them feel they are special, and that the company is there to listen and to give them attention. It will satisfy the positive self-enhancement motivation of customers who will receive replies that solve their problems, while feeding their ego and image. This illustrates precisely Keitzmann et al., (2011) contention that conversations are driven by opinion

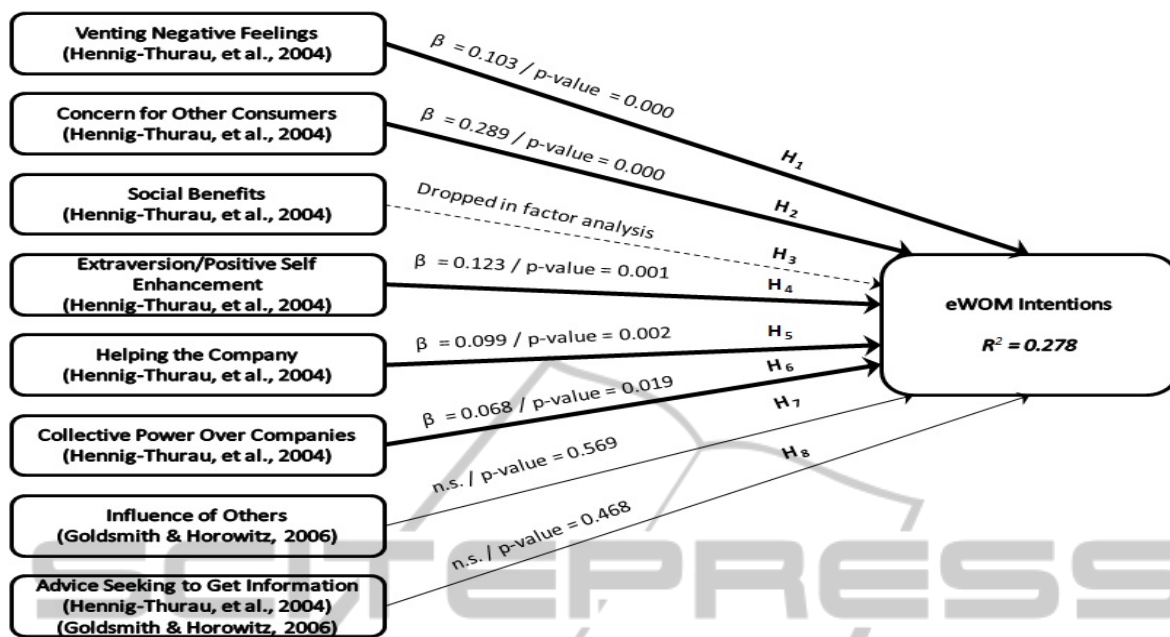


Figure 1: The research model showing standard linear regression results.

leaders' self esteem. Such an approach will humanize company brand and boost customer perception about the human characteristics of Twitter's electronic format (Kwon and Sung, 2011).

Companies need to pay attention to online grouping against them and try to absorb it with proper responsive strategies. Online consumer activists and groups can cause catastrophic uproars which should be handled with care at the early stages. At the end of the day, what has shaken governments can also shake the ground beneath companies, especially where those grounds have proven to be slippery.

Embracing negative eWOM in Twitter and offering consumers sincere ears are the online shock absorbers. In the age of Twitter, social media tools should be integrated into the company's strategy in order to monitor the effects of the company's decisions and to encourage users to express themselves freely and not in a controlling way.

Once the company understands customer motivations and acts accordingly this will pave the way for engaging in conversations where customer sentiments thrive. The conversation feedback is what makes the difference, be it recommendations, suggestions or even questions, as suggested by Jalilvand, et al. (2010). This interactive communication pays dividends when it comes to market research (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2011b). Customers acting as co-producers with their unique inputs create substantial amounts of data, which can

be pulled up at any given and used as market intelligence.

Future research should revolve around fine tuning factors of extraversion and positive self-enhancement motivations in order to explore how to deal with them and their noise should bring valuable insights to academic level and business level likewise. The replication of the study in other regions with high rates of Internet penetrations should provide insights into key cultural differences. Finally, an attempt to investigate the motives to retweet tweets with company names should capture the majority of lurking Twitter users who would rather keep to low presence and contribute with retweets rather than forming their own tweets with their names.

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