

EFFECT OF HUMOUR ON EWOM INTENTION: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PRODUCT INVOLVEMENT AND EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

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Abstract

Modern marketers often find it difficult to decide what strategies and tactics should be used in eWOM marketing in order to manage the speed and extent of message spreading and product sales. Many successful eWOM campaigns have used the possibilities of humour to escalate the acceptability and reach of messages. The present study examines the influence of humour on eWOM in terms of purchase intention and referral intention of the consumers. The study also investigates the moderating role of product involvement and emotional attachment on eWOM.

Keywords: *eWOM, humour, product involvement, emotional attachment, purchase intention, referral intention*

Introduction

According to Henning-Thurau et al (2004) eWOM is “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet”, (p.39). The advantage of engaging in marketing activities through eWOM is manifold. Firstly, it is inexpensive as compared to other above-the-line promotional techniques, as people pass on messages by themselves. Second advantage is that it can create a mass advertising impact and would be treated more favourably by the message recipients as the messages are disseminated by neutral sources. Third advantage is its effective targeting capacity as the message is passed along the current and potential consumers within the social circles of the message recipient (Dobele et al, 2005).

Considerably, eWOM techniques can act as a “cue stick” in those marketing contexts where traditional marketing tools fail to make desired results. Despite the importance of eWOM in determining the success of new products, it is still one of the least exploited areas of market research. Although eWOM is considered as a “random ground-up phenomenon over which marketers have little control” (Dobele et al, 2005), having a clear insight about eWOM management and strategies to improve the rate of adoption would be beneficial for marketers.

WOM & eWOM

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) is *a self-motivated, transient and spontaneous vocalisation* (Stern, 1994), that influences “awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioural

intentions and behaviours" (Buttle, 1998) of consumers. In his bestselling book, *Anatomy of Buzz*, Rosen (2001) points out that WOM is the aggregate of all personal communication about a product, service or company, which involves a series of mutual exchanges and influences between the current consumer and the surrounding potential consumers. With the advent of internet and the advancement of various electronic communication tools, traditional WOM gave way to sophisticated eWOM. The development of social networking sites made the process of exchanging information simple and cost effective. As a result, conventional communities evolved into virtual communities, resulted the emergence of deep-structured eWOM networks having no space and time constraints for information transmission (Mc William, 2000).

Today, Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can be regarded as one of the most effective tools of persuasion in modern marketing. In the eWOM process, the sender and the receiver process the message with fixed or determined meaning (Stern, 1994); its chief purpose is to seek support and conformity and to give justifications for decisions there by express the social position and power (Gatignon and Robertson, 1986). Opinion leaders belong to the early adopter category use eWOM to influence early majority and late adopters in terms of search, buying and usage of new products (Goldsmith and Witt, 2005; Gupta and Rogers, 1991). The content and style of communication here, generally, is not deliberately constructed using literary tools or formal patterns (Stern, 1994), but is the "strongest agent of imitation" of "sentiments, ideas and modes of action " (Graham and Havlena, 2007, p.427). It utilises all possibilities of electronic communication devices to spread marketing messages across a widespread network of direct and indirect consumers.

eWOM Intention

As eWOM is a way of self-presentation, the probability of consumers engaging in information transmission is greater if the product or service is of personal significance (Chung and Darke, 2006) or, the purchase or brand preference is important (Lutz and Reilly, 1973). Consumers having similar interests and passions gather in a virtual environment (Granitz and Ward, 1996) to express their eWOM intentions and abilities. Their eWOM intentions may be of managerial aspects (Amstrong and Hagel, 1996), socio-psychological aspects (Granitz and Ward, 1996) or consumption-related aspects (Henning-Thurau et al, 2004; Balasubramanian and Mahajan, 2001). Several reasons have been found in the literature that lead to consumers' eWOM interaction. The study by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) proposed three reasons for consumers' eWOM interaction: such as a consumer gets value by adding his/her personal contributions to an eWOM network (Focus-related Utility); by directly consuming the information provided by others in the eWOM network (Consumption Utility) and when others in the eWOM network consumes his/her personal contributions. The study by Henning-Thurau (2004) extends this framework by adding two additional reasons such as: convenience and assistance for problem solving

through the platform operator (Moderator-Related Utility) and the fundamental aspiration of the consumer for a balanced way of life there by communicating positive emotions and expelling negative feelings (Homeostase Utility). Fundamentally eWOM intention is either related to a purchase or related to a recommendation. The current study summarises all the reviewed qualities of eWOM intention into two dimensions such as purchase intention and referral intention

Humour and eWOM

According to Lynch (2002), "Jokes and humour play an important part in determining who we are and how we think of ourselves and as a result how we interact with others" (Lynch, 2002, p.425). Duncan (1979) points out that humour in advertising can cause a positive impact on the viewer by improving the level of attention, memorability and persuasiveness.

At the same time, the concept of humour itself is relative so that its impact depends on " how humorous messages are processed by the message recipient" (Zhang and Zinkhan, 2006, p.114). In one of the earliest studies in this area, Duncan and Nelson (1985) note that humorous messages in radio advertisements can easily grab the listener's attention, while it lacks the persuasive power to lead the listener to buy the advertised product. Meanwhile, Lammers et al (1983) argues that humorous content in a message has a positive correlation with persuasiveness as it reduces the message resistance. A study by Brussier (2009) alleviates the complexities of how humorous messages are diffused and perceived in eWOM communication, by drawing some key conclusions such as; there is a great difference in the effectiveness, credibility and persuasiveness between neutrally toned and humorous eWOM messages; positive or negative eWOM messages having neutral tone induce message persuasion than humorous eWOM messages. This study also suggests that negative eWOM messages can improve the rate of referral intention and positive-neutral eWOM messages can increase purchase intention. Another study by Perry et al (1997) also argues that humorous messages prompt consumers to consume the advertised products or services. In addition to this, the recipients of humorous messages are more likely to pass on messages to others. Chung and Zhao (2003) suggest that humorous messages can function as a 'peripheral cue' so that they are more effective in the case of low involvement products. It means that someone who is about to make a purchase of a low involvement product, generally possesses low level of MAO (motivation, ability and opportunity) factors, but a peripheral cue (for example a humorous message) can positively influence his attitude formation towards that product. It is expected that the effect of humour in traditional promotional tools would reflect on consumer behaviour in eWOM context as well.

H1 Humour is positively associated with purchase intention in eWOM

H2 Humour is positively associated with referral intention in eWOM

Product Involvement

Product involvement is a key factor that determines consumers' purchase choice. Several studies have been done on this topic to dig out the relationship between product involvement and purchase intention by introducing concepts such as ego involvement (Traylor and Joseph, 1984) and attitudinal loyalty (Park, 1996). Involvement is all about how the messages and the associated products are relevant to an individual (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984). It is about emotional uplifting, sense of concern and other psychological stimuli (Park and Mittal, 1985) and the degree of activation of a consumer (Cohen, 1983). As noted by Vaughan (1980), high level of persuasive elements are required in the case of products or services having high price range, ego support, novelty, social value and chance of risk, in order to drive the customer into action. In the opinion of Havitz and Dimanche (1997), product involvement is an imperceptible concept in consumer behaviour for motivating, persuading and influencing people to act towards a particular activity or product. It measures how individuals in the market place perceive the importance of a brand, product or service on the basis of their "inherent needs, values and interests" (Bian, 2008, p.6). It is considered as one of the cardinal motivating factors of customer decision making behaviour (Chakravarti and Janiszewski, 2003). Traylor and Joseph (1981) suggest that consumers who are more involved with a particular product range or brand are more committed and are more likely to make a purchase or intent to make a purchase. With the objective of measuring the extent to which the consumer is involved with a brand or product category, Kapferer and Laurent (1985) framed a Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP) scale containing five antecedents of involvement such as pleasure, interest, sign, risk probability and risk importance.

Generally, involvement relates to three aspects of the purchase process; personal characteristics of the buyer, physical aspects of the stimuli and the purchase context (Chung and Zhao, 2003). The last two aspects mentioned here are on the basis of the presumption that involvement mainly is a result of external stimuli (Taylor and Joseph, 1984).

Some researches categorise product involvement into 'situational involvement' and 'enduring involvement'. Situational involvement is the type of product involvement that occurs depending on the purchase context and the latter represents "the ongoing concern with the products" (Chung and Zhao, 2003).

According to the 'Elaboration Likelihood Model' proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981), the way an individual treats a piece of information varies in accordance with his/her degree of involvement with it. If the individual possesses high level of motivation, ability and opportunity (MAO) while dealing with the communicated message, there will be high-elaborated likelihood, ie an effort to process the information cognitively (Chung and Zhao, 2003). If these three factors are of low level, then the consumers are less likely to

take an effort to process the information and to make the purchase. Product involvement has a positive correlation with elaborated likelihood, which means that low involvement products cause low level of elaborated likelihood; meanwhile high-involvement products can raise the degree of likelihood. These findings suggest the following hypotheses

H3 Product Involvement moderates the interaction between humour and purchase intention in eWOM

H4 Product Involvement moderates the interaction between humour and referral intention in eWOM

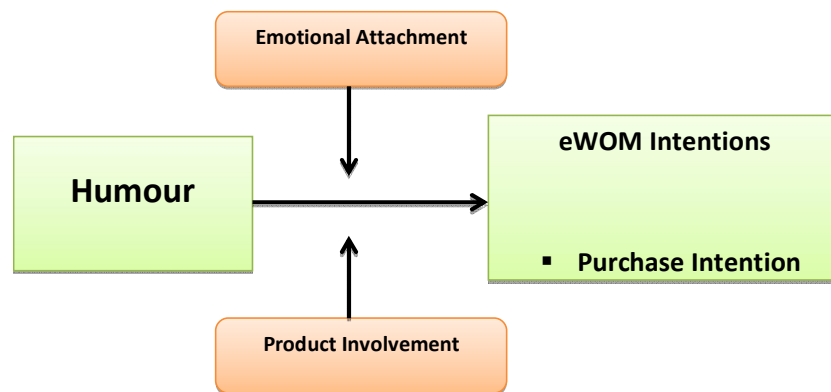


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Emotional Attachment

Emotional attachment of the consumer with the brand would also play an important role to make a purchase decision or to forward a message to other people within his/her eWOM network. As you may not like to open or forward a spam message to others, consumers normally are very cautious in dealing with messages from unknown sources. Usually there should be an incentive or the message itself should have any form of considerable value to influence the consumer to open or to forward a message in the eWOM communication process. As found by Dicher (1966), no customer is willing to be an endorser of a brand, product or service, unless the message or the communication process as a whole promises some kind of satisfaction or the consumer is emotionally attached to the brand. As noted by Burgess (2005), the most important motive for referral behaviour is social or emotional.

Emotional attachment is considered as equivalent to brand loyalty (Dholakia, 1997); commitment with the company to maintain a relationship (Fullerton, 2005); psychological or emotional identification with the brand (Jonker, 2008; Fullerton, 2005). The emotional attachment can be originated either from attitudinal commitment or from behavioural commitment (Dholakia, 1997; Fullerton, 2005; Jonker, 2008). According to Fullerton (2005),

behavioural commitment is mainly arisen from lack of options, switching expenses or dependency. Meanwhile, attitudinal commitment is formed as a result of the favourable attitude formation towards a particular brand, company, product or service. It may be because of the regular consumption (Fournier, 1998) or psychological state of affective commitment (Fullerton, 2003). In the study conducted by Berry (2000), it says that strong emotional attachment would generate positive eWOM message formation and transmission. Two studies done by Fullerton in 2003 and in 2005 proved that emotional attachment is positively associated with referral intention. It means that if a consumer has an emotional attachment with a brand, company, product or service, he may act as a brand endorser through his/her eWOM network. Based on these previous researches the following hypotheses can be formed

H5 Emotional Attachment moderates the interaction between humour and purchase intention in eWOM

H6 Emotional Attachment moderates the interaction between humour and referral intention in eWOM

Method

Since it was presumed that it would have been difficult for the respondents to recall the eWOM messages they have come across recently while completing the questionnaire, the possibility of face-to-face survey method had been dropped. As it has been proved in the similar studies (Lam et al 2009) that respondents would be able to attend the questions more effectively and cognitively if they come in contact with a related scenario right before answering a questionnaire, electronic survey method was found to be the most suitable method for the current study. An online survey administration tool called Survey Gizmo (www.surveygizmo.com) was chosen to design and execute the survey. The questionnaire consisted of a humorous video about a banking corporation. The video used in the questionnaires was chosen carefully after considering many brand-product categories. There were 10 relevant eWOM videos in the initial selection process, out of which one of them was chosen for developing the final questionnaire. 10 random respondents were shown those 10 videos to test the appropriateness of the selection. A questionnaire was given to them on which they could mark the level of all major emotional elements within each video. Based on their responses the best humorous video from that list was selected for constructing the final questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions, including 11 Likert scale, 2 Multiple-choice and 1 open ended questions. The only open ended question was about the nationality of the respondent, which was discarded later as it is nearly impossible to find the predicted characteristics of the national culture within an individual living in a multicultural environment (Bearden et al, 2006). The survey for the current study was administrated on a sample of 200 random respondents from different parts of the world, adapting the sample size of a similar study

done by Lam et al (2009) which investigated the effect of cultural values in word-of-mouth communication. The resulting sample consisted of respondents between 21 and 40 years of age and 59% of them were males. There were 6 respondents below the age of 21 and one who was above the age of 51. Most of the respondents were students of different universities in Asia and Europe. The data collection was carried out using web-based survey method across the sample population. The video material embedded in the questionnaire could be seen by the respondents before attending the questions. Their responses were recorded simultaneously with the help of Survey Gizmo. All the questions except for the last couple of questions in the questionnaire, ie to know the demographic details of the respondents, used a seven point Likert scale, where 1 was used for denoting the extreme negative association of the respondent with a particular question and 7 was used for denoting the extreme positive association of the respondent with a question. The midpoint value 4 was used for indicating the neutral or no opinion stance of the respondents about a question. The scales used in the questionnaire were adapted and modified from several previous studies done by Zhang et al (1996), Fullerton (2005), Jonker (2008), Allen & John (1990), Hofstede (1983) and Lam et al (2009).

Experimental Stimulus

The video embedded in the questionnaire explains the global presence and experience of HSBC in dealing with the global consumer needs, but in a humourous tone. In this video, a representative of a western washing machine manufacturing company is asked to go to India to find out the reason why their washing machine sales are up in India. It contains a range of visuals about the urban and semi-urban India that makes the company representative confused. Finally he finds out the reason for the increased sales of washing machines.

The reason is washing machines are used for blending Lassi, a traditional Indian drink that contains yoghurt, fruit extracts and sugar, commercially. All the visual elements including facial expressions and gestures in the video were depicted in a funny manner

Results

In the questionnaire, three questions were used for measuring each of the independent variables. The dependent variables, i.e. purchase intention and referral intention of the respondents, were measured using single direct questions. Reliability tests to analyse the significance of multi-scale items in the questionnaire were conducted prior to the analysis of individual hypotheses. All scales yielded high reliability scores (**Cronbach's Alpha values over 9**). Bivariate and Moderated regression analysis were used for testing the validity of individual hypotheses. Test results whose significant scores greater than 0.1 were dropped as the correlation between the variables was not significant enough to confirm the hypothesis.

Hypothesis	Result
H1 Humour is positively associated with purchase intention in eWOM	Dropped
H2 Humour is positively associated with referral intention in eWOM	Accepted
H3 Product Involvement moderates the interaction between humour and purchase intention in eWOM	Dropped
H4 Product Involvement moderates the interaction between humour and referral intention in eWOM	Dropped
H5 Emotional Attachment moderates the interaction between humour and purchase intention in eWOM	Accepted
H6 Emotional Attachment moderates the interaction between humour and referral intention in eWOM	Accepted

Suggestions

The results obtained are presumed to be useful for eWOM marketers operating in multicultural environments.

- Consumers tend to pass along humorous messages via eWOM networks as compared to neutrally-toned messages but that doesn't necessarily mean that those messages can influence consumers to develop purchase intention. Humorous messages can be used as a powerful promotional tool to spread marketing messages, to improve brand appeal and to extend brand reach. However humorous eWOM messages do not necessarily increase the sales of products or services associated with that brand.
- Humorous messages are applicable for both high involvements and low involvement products to induce referral intention, as product involvement does not moderate the interaction between humour and purchase/referral intention
- The level of emotional attachment a consumer has with a brand does have a positive impact on his/her purchase intention and referral intention followed by an eWOM message. eWOM messages can be used effectively to increase the sales of products or services of a brand or to increase the brand reach among current or loyal customer bases.

Limitations

The current research utilised only electronic survey method in order to gather primary data. Therefore the mood of the respondents might have affected the quality of responses. Absence of the researcher beside the respondents while they were completing the questionnaire might have also affected their responses, as the possibility of alleviating any queries during the course of the survey completion was limited. The measuring scales used for designing the survey questionnaire were adopted and modified from many different studies designed for different purposes thus it might have failed to achieve the desired congruency throughout the questionnaire. Though the study was aimed to gather general consumer insights, the lion's share of the respondents were students.

Conclusion

The results obtained are presumed to be useful for eWOM marketers operating in multicultural environments. Consumers tend to pass along humorous messages via eWOM networks as compared to neutrally-toned messages but that doesn't necessarily mean that those messages can influence consumers to develop purchase intention. Humorous messages can be used as a powerful promotional tool to spread marketing messages, to improve brand appeal and to extend brand reach. However humorous eWOM messages do not necessarily increase the sales of products or services associated with that brand. Humorous messages are applicable for both high involvement and low involvement products to induce referral intention, as product involvement does not moderate the interaction between humour and purchase/referral intention. The level of emotional attachment a consumer has with a brand does have a positive impact on his/her purchase intention and referral intention followed by an eWOM message. eWOM messages can be used effectively to increase the sales of products or services of a brand or to increase the brand reach among current or loyal customer bases.

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