Understanding Consumers' Use of Online Advisory Websites: A Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Online advisory websites have become primary sources of information for consumers, especially when it comes to the purchase of hedonic/experiential products such as hospitality and tourism services. Examples include TripAdvisor.com and Yelp.com. There are still many gaps in our understanding of consumer behavior, more so in the tourism and hospitality literature. In this proposal, we draw attention to some of the key research areas that will help practitioners develop useful practices to help consumers take better decisions, and in the process enhance stickiness and consumer loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

Online advisory websites have become primary sources of information for consumers in various purchasing contexts. These websites become even more important when it comes to the purchase of hedonic/experiential products such as hospitality and tourism services given the inherent uncertainty and varied tastes. For instance, TripAdvisor.com is one such a premier and popular travel advisory site that is widely used across the world. While lot has been discussed and written about these websites, and how consumers use them, there are still many gaps. This paucity is even more evident in the tourism and hospitality literature.

In the process of searching for and using the information on these websites, consumers exhibit several interesting behaviors. It is imperative for marketers to understand these behaviors so that they can develop better advisory systems that engender customer satisfaction, stickiness and long-term loyalty. We see several areas of inquiry in this domain and see opportunities to conduct exciting and impactful research. We believe that the outcomes of these studies will better inform the decision makers to develop sources of information that enable travelers to better decisions and plan for memorable trips.

In this research proposal, we outline four important areas that we believe are ripe for future research. In this, we briefly discuss the theoretical bases for each research area, and also outline data and methodological considerations.

KEY RESEARCH AREAS

Research Area 1: Online Reviews and Consumer Behavior

Several studies have explored the key factors that influence consumers' motivations and propensity to provide online reviews [1]. Yet, we still don't know much about how and why consumers write online reviews, and what can be done to influence them to provide better reviews that are deemed useful by other consumers visiting advisory sites such as TripAdvisor. Good reviews benefit both the consumers and the service providers in several ways.

It is possible to empirically model an individual consumer's decision to post a review and measure how the rating environment influences the decision to post as well as the qualities of the review. Based on previous consumer psychology research, we can hypothesize that several factors of the rating environment including a) the number of reviews for a given service provider, b) the key ingredients of the reviews such as ratings, textual content, expressed emotions etc, and c) heterogeneous consumer (the review writers) characteristics can potentially determine the incidence and evolution of reviews. Understanding these patterns can help managers take necessary steps to attract useful reviews as well as design better review sites.

Data requirements: A potential dataset for analyzing the dynamics of review posting behavior should track reviews of a few hundred businesses across a cross section of geographical regions in the US. For instance, we can focus on one specific industry such as restaurants. We can follow newly opened restaurants or restaurants newly listed on the website and capture their reviews as well as the characteristics of the consumers who have posted the reviews. This can be done for a specific time period. Semantic analysis can be applied to correlate the writing and language patterns in the textual portion of the review with the review writing behavior as well. It is quite a well-known fact that the textual portions of reviews have an equal if not greater effect on consumers writing and reading online reviews. In addition, we can track postings of individual consumers. For instance, we can track registered consumers and track their posting behavior across several businesses. In this process, we can study their motivations to post, as well as how the existing rating environment affects the posting behavior.

Research Area 2: Post- Review Behavior of Senders and its implications

An important question that has not received much attention in the context of online advice is: '*what happens to the consumers after they post reviews?*' Till now, most behavioral research has focused on how reviews affect consumers who read them. But, what about consumers who write them?

The few studies that delve into this important phenomenon do so using extended netnographic methods as well as surveys that track behaviors of active contributors in online forums. From these studies, the three key outcomes for eWOM communicators are learning and enhanced use of focal brands [2], impression management [3], and social capital and reputation [4]. The online environments that support eWOM drive post-eWOM behaviors in pretty unique ways not seen offline.

For instance, the fact that consumers can now engage with an extended community of users means that eWOM can draw significant benefits from the 'crowd' as opposed to a limited set of individuals [5]. Evidence from several studies in this genre (e.g., [2]) show that contributors/communicators actively seek to benefit from collective creativity which occurs when social interactions help them develop new interpretations and discoveries that thinking alone would

not have generated. The consumer collectives help the contributors' ideation process through active variation and selection process that is supported by diverse ideas and experiences brought to the forefront by various consumers.

Further, the relatively anonymous and goal-directed nature of online environments means that for active contributors, reputation is the only resource that can be developed and used to achieve an end. As Kollock ([6], p.228) suggests, "…*high quality information, impressive technical details in one's answers, a willingness to help others, and elegant writing can all work to increase one's prestige in the community*". (In the offline world, other resources such as income and possessions buttress status and reputation). A positive outcome of this desire to maintain reputation is better online citizenship and greater effort to provide valuable information to eWOM seekers. Several studies have found evidence to this positive reinforcing mechanism.

There are several issues of interest in this area. It is critical for firms to encourage a selected few to generate high value content and engage in interactions (both are the central currencies of these online platforms). However, given that participants are heterogeneous and participation changes over time, deciding what types of community governance models best work in a context is a non-trivial matter that determines the long-term health of these communities [7, 9]. Are reputation-based mechanisms more powerful in driving engagement behaviors (e.g., TripAdvisor.com or Yelp.com) or are hierarchical structures (e.g., Wikipedia, open source communities) more effective? As recent accounts in popular press suggest, both mechanisms have their pitfalls. What are the specific contexts that determine the success of such mechanisms?

Data Requirements: The most ideal method to study post-review writing episodes is to conduct a follow-up survey. In this, one can elicit several behaviors: a) the service recovery process, b) the spread of negative/positive WOM offline, and c) future intentions of engagement with the same service provider. Methods such as A/B testing can also be applied to measure the varying affect of service providers' engagement in these online forums.

Research Area 2: Mobile and App Usage Behavior

We are seeing a momentous platform shift in terms of how consumers connect to the Internet, and eventually with businesses and each other. Mobile smart phones (and similar mobile devices such as tablets) now dominate the digital landscape. For the past three years, mobile and smartphone sales have completely eclipsed those of desktops. It is a universally agreed upon fact that mobile devices have changed consumer behavior in many ways, and as a consequence, have changed how firms approach marketing. There are several differences between desktops and mobile devices in terms of consumer usage:

1. When consumers are on the go they probably have a task to accomplish. Mobile users "snack" on the Internet in small browsing sessions, and generally access the web when they need a quick answer. Mobile usage, therefore, consists of significant number of smaller sessions when compared to desktops.
2. PC users have more time on their hands, and can spend more time in researching and assessing the results. Mobile users have less time and screen space to study the information presented on a mobile phone. Therefore, users are more goal-directed and desire greater precision of results.

3. Considering the portability of mobile phones, there is a significant spatio-temporal component to the information sought (e.g., finding a restaurant in a unfamiliar town while on a business trip)

The rise of smart phones has been symbiotic with the meteoric growth of the mobile applications ('App' and 'Apps') marketplaces. Travel advisory websites have been at the forefront of this revolution by supporting highly usable apps that enables consumers to accomplish pretty much all the activities that they previously attended to via desktops.

However, not much is known about how consumers use mobile phones and apps to search for and consume travel and hospitality related information. Considering that information search is the most important step in the consumer decision journey and this is the stage where marketers have most leverage in influencing consumers, it is imperative for marketers to understand the key differences in consumers' use of mobiles and desktops for information search, processing and consumption of the results and subsequent intentions or behavioral outcomes. For instance, if we take a typical episode of consumer search using an app, we see several interesting variables:

➢ Ordering of the information in the listings
➢ Geographical distance of the listings (the spatial component of the mobile phone vs static nature of a desktop) (gravitational effects and choice)
➢ Quality information of the listed business (the Star ratings and reviews of each business)
➢ Complexity of the task or probably involvement?? (Selecting a restaurant for a quick dinner Vs. comparing several alternatives to pick one for a romantic date)?? (or informational Vs. navigational?)

An important question to ask at this point, with important implications for marketers, is: 'how do consumers reconcile these pieces of information when the information is presented via different interfaces?'

Data requirements: A desirable data set for identifying and exploring consumers' mobile search patterns including mobile search is clickstream data on how consumers navigate for example Trip Advisor mobile app, look for information and evaluate several alternatives (by digging deeper into each link/listing) and eventually select a business. If a comparable data set can be obtained from desktop users, then one can compare and contrast desktop website and mobile app behaviors.

Research Area 3: App usage and Stickiness

Another potential study topic in the same realm is app usage, usability and stickiness. At the dawn of ecommerce, one of the key topics of interest for marketers was to understand the key characteristics of websites that engage consumers, attract them and keep them using the sites (stickiness) –all this eventually leading to several positive outcomes. Yet, recent industry studies have shown that engendering app stickiness is probably one of the biggest challenges facing marketers. We could develop interesting methods to study the same in the context of mobile apps. The key question is: *What are the key factors that affect consumers' stickiness to mobile apps (specifically with respect to travel and hospitality related apps)?*

In this, we see the influence of two key aspects that need to be explored in depth.

Nature of the Task (experiential and hedonic vs. goal-directed and utilitarian)

A consumer's purpose for navigation significantly affects her responses to the stimuli in the environment. Outcomes can be two types: hedonic and (or) utilitarian. Utilitarian outcomes are defined as "resulting from some type of conscious pursuit of an intended consequence; thus, it is task-related, rational, and may be thought of as work" [9]. Hedonic outcomes are defined as being "more subjective and personal than its utilitarian counterpart and resulting more from fun and playfulness than from task completion" [9]. The nature of the task serves as a decision frame for processing information and determines the relative significance of various aspects of an experience will change [10]. The nature of the task determines consumers' information processing styles i.e., a) whether one will rely on a peripheral assessment of displayed information rather than a more careful and systematic approach, and b) the types of heuristics employed in decision-making, the availability of an organizing principle to guide the decision process, and the certainty associated with resulting decisions or judgments. Considering these issues, it is important to understand how consumers take decisions while traversing mobile interfaces of advisory websites.

Consumer Characteristics

Consumers differ in their ability and motivations to use apps, and as a consequence, have varying outcomes. One of the key characteristics that significantly affect perceived interactivity and outcomes is self-efficacy (SE) [11]. SE influences a variety of usage outcomes. As mobile usage becomes more pervasive, it is important to recognize that the skill sets needed to successfully use modern mobile devices differ from those necessary for navigating desktop environments. In this context, mobile self-efficacy (MSE) is defined, as a consumer's perceived ability to effectively use a mobile application to execute a series of actions and achieve desired results. In summary, user characteristics are expected to be extremely important in understanding interactivity and stickiness in a mobile environment, and there is a need for a stronger understanding of these user characteristics. While mobile self-efficacy promises to serve as an effective lens into user characteristics, researchers should focus on identifying several more relevant user characteristics.

Data requirements: This can be studied using standard methods such as pop-up surveys of consumers using the TripAdvisor app and also neuro-marketing methods such as using eye-tracking devices to see measure consumer use of the app and measuring several variables including their eye movements, cognitive functions while they browse for information.

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