

Name: Bobby Menbari

The Uses and Gratifications of Yelp Users: Exploring the Communication Behaviors of eWOM and the Rhyme Behind its Reason.

Introduction

Electronic word of mouth, referred to in this text as eWOM, is a form of communication that has revolutionized the consumer marketplace as we know it. Traditional word of mouth has, and continues to be, a very influential and powerful promotion tool but the integration of the internet as an ever-expanding communication medium has taken this form of marketing to a new level. My interest in this topic specifically stems from a personal business venture that I've been involved with regarding a new, streamlined, and information packed objective review site. Furthermore, I have conducted research on this very topic in previous courses and have gathered a comprehensive understanding of this particular communication medium.

Essentially, the objective of this research assignment is to determine what are the uses and gratifications of Yelp's users. With technology, either tangible or in the cloud, it is vital to constantly challenge the value being put forth. Determining the valuable attributes of a technology simultaneously sheds light on the ways in which it can better meet our needs.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature regarding the topic of eWOM and its value to consumers was plentiful, and in some cases, related specifically to what my thesis entailed. The article written by Chatterjee as well as Perkins and Parmelee's research delved into a particular communication medium's credibility and how the source of information provided plays an integral role in how reliable the information is perceived to be by the user. Chatterjee (2011) focused more on the disparity between the perceived value of a "firm-initiated" review as opposed to "consumer-generated" (p.81) content. Perkins and Parmelee (2012) also shed light on the value of consumer-generated content but further scrutinized the source of the consumer content, and determined the value of weak social ties as opposed to the viewpoints of close friends and acquaintances (p.91). Nonetheless, all listed authors drew a distinct line between the source of the information provided and its respective perceived credibility by the user. These resources were useful in my research because they provided a reference point from which to compare my own findings. Furthermore, the comparisons drawn were rather accurate and were successful in supporting my own thesis.

Much literature was found pertaining to the objectivity and diversity of eWOM and how those variables of a particular review site contribute to its perceived value as a go-to source of information. Kaye's (2010) study, although oriented towards blogs as a communication medium, provided great perspective on the diversity of viewpoints inherent to blogs and objective review sites alike (p.199). This diversity was noted to correlate positively with a user's perception of the value of the information. Kim and Chu's (2010) study focused on the perception of trust, specific to review content, amongst objective review sites and how a

variety of influences contribute to that assumption of trust (p.48). Although diversity of reviewers was noted as a contributable factor, their study also shed light on perceived homophily amongst users and its ensuing effects. Youn and Lee (2009) also delved into the variety of viewpoints inherent to eWOM but focused more on the role of anonymity and how it translates to a more honest environment from a reviewer's perspective, but more importantly, more trustworthy information provided to the user (p.474). Furthermore, the strength of social ties was scrutinized as well and, contrary to Kim and Chu's initial findings, weak-ties were shown to have a positive effect on the reviewer and end user's perception of the reviews value. These studies were particularly helpful in my own research because their findings correlated very closely with my own uses and motivations as a Yelp user.

Zhan and Li's study of the language and content orientation of eWOM reviews was rather intriguing and catered to those respondents who favored Yelp's ease of use/general legibility. Amongst other things, Zhan and Li's (2011) study focused on the "ease of comprehension" and how legibility played a role in the perceived value of a review to its user (p.239). This was relevant to my study specifically in that ease of use was a variable that came up often in my qualitative analysis...see findings and discussion for further elaboration.

Method

The research methods that were utilized for this study were online surveys, mediated by Survey Monkey, and a focus group whose participants were selectively pooled from the survey respondents. In light of the fact that the topic focused on the uses and gratifications of an internet mediated communication method, online surveys and thorough, interactive discussion seemed rather appropriate. Quantitative research strategies were utilized, and are rather apparent in all aspects of the research methods. However, the comprehensive discourse and analysis focused on more in depth qualitative analysis.

The coding method I utilized was based loosely on the examples provided in the coding workshop, but altered and optimized to work in excel format. Due to my proficiency in excel, I was able to make the sheets rather complex and streamline some of the time consuming processes.

The surveys were created and administered through Survey Monkey to roughly 100 of my Facebook contacts. Of the 100 encouraged to participate, 22 responded. The 10 survey questions were comprised of 8 questions oriented towards numerical, quantitative data and 2 questions oriented towards more detailed, qualitative analysis. The ensuing data was then exported to an excel spreadsheet to determine averages per category as well as look for unique trends. An occupation variable was created specific to the technology profession field as compared to the collective averages. The qualitative answers were quoted within their respective coding categories and averages or trends were determined based on those correlations.

Coding category definitions specific to the surveys are listed and defined as follows:

HOURS	Hours/day using internet (including smart phones)
USE	What do you use Yelp for?
WRITE	Yelp reviews you write/month?
USER	Yelp reviews you use/month?
VALUABLE	The reviews and reviewers are more worthwhile
OBJECTIVE	The reviews and reviewers provide an objective point of view. Absent of personal bias.
FOOTPRINT	The reviews and reviewers cover a larger area, both geographically and density.
CONVENIENCE	The reviews are easier to access through technological optimization.
FF PREF	Friends and family reviews are the first source of information.
VOLUME	The listings, reviews, and reviewers are more plentiful.

FAMILIARITY	Yelp is better known and thus has more credibility.
EASE	Yelp is easier to navigate and use.
UNKNOWN	The respondent is unaware or unwilling to acknowledge Yelp's competition.

The focus group research method was conducted in a quiet community room of a multi-unit dwelling. Out of the 10 requested participants, only 4 were able to accommodate. The participants were required to complete the disseminated survey to determine their demographic information as well as their initial feedback and response regarding the topic. Six primary questions along with 6 probing, supplemental questions were prompted and discussed as a collective group. The questions were open-ended, qualitative questions designed and oriented to entice dialogue and were based upon the results posed from the surveys. Although I was not certain what the group would deduce from the discussion, I had a general framework based on my preemptive survey analysis and framed the discussion accordingly. Although the discussion was not recorded, copious notes were taken within the master coding sheet.

Coding category definitions specific to the focus group are listed and defined as follows:

GPS	Location specific searching.
NEGATIVE	The respondent does not agree with the question.
SUBJECTIVE	The reviews and reviewers provide a subjective point of view.
TESTED	Yelp and its reviews are tried and tested.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the research methods utilized for this study in addition to the scholarly references drawn upon in my literature review and analysis, definite determinations of the proposed research question were illuminated. Prior to conducting the focus group discussion, an occupation variable was established for the technology profession field. This variable reacted according to expectations and revealed a respective increase in virtually all proposed indicators of increased Yelp usage. Annual income, hours of internet use, number of written reviews, and the number of used reviews all increased within the technology occupation variable in comparison with the collective averages; this same pattern was observed with the focus group participants as well.

Essentially, three main uses and gratifications of a particular Yelp user were unraveled and supported by the literary comparisons. Both in the survey and focus group data sets, the *objectivity/ diversity* of information were noted as the most prominent motivation for Yelp users. As observed by Kaye (2010), “blog users are attracted to blogs because they are rife with information and opinions from many different perspectives and sources” (p.205). This same interest in diversity of reviews was also noted by Devon during the focus group discussion, “there is a balanced amount of information, so it’s valuable”. Similarly, this same usage motivation was conveyed in the qualitative portion of the survey by survey respondent #12, “Yelp is non-bias and offers a greater variety of opinions”. Trust was seen by respondents and the supporting literature alike as synonymous to the objectivity/diversity of reviews. As discussed by Kim and Chu (2011), “...trust has been found to be essential to virtual community members’ intention to exchange information with other members” (p.55). Furthermore, objectivity/diversity and trust were seen by Youn and Lee (2011) as having a direct correlation with the perceived strength of social ties...specifically weak-tie communicators were noted as having more precedence over strong, potentially biased influences.

The *credibility* of Yelp’s reviews as opposed to its competitors and traditional recommendations from

friends and family were also noted as a particularly compelling gratification of the surveyed participants as well as the literature. Chatterjee (2011) discusses:

“Consumer-generated content as a form of WOM communication is perceived to be more reliable, credible and trustworthy by consumers compared to firm-initiated communications. Consumer-generated recommendations provide access to consumption-related information that holds some ‘informational value’ and context-specific ‘interpretive value’ over and above the advertising messages provided by the marketer that can influence the recipient’s compliance with the request” (p.82).

For those seeking a reliable source of information, absent of bias or ulterior motive, Yelp as a medium of eWOM was seen as a formidable option. Demonstrated in this study as well as by Perkins and Parmelee (2012), “reliance and credibility tend to be linked, which results in people relying on online media more if they consider it highly credible and less if they think it lacks credibility” (p.92). This perceived credibility experienced by the user was also noted as it pertains to amount of negative reviews associated with a particular listing. Amanda from the focus group discusses, “the negative reviews are helpful and give it more credibility”.

Lastly, *ease of use* was a reoccurring trend observed in both research methods as well as the supporting literature. Tyler, Amanda, and Devon from the focus group all agreed collectively that Yelp, most especially the mobile application, allows for a convenient, easy to access, and interactive platform that streamlines the process of consumer research as we know it. Zhan and Li (2011) also make a similar observation in that “research suggests that ease of comprehension is positively related to acceptance of a recommendation” (p.240). Although the survey data did not decisively support this particular usage motivation, the comprehensive focus group discussion that shed light on this topic was too pertinent not to address and incorporate in the three main uses and gratifications of Yelp users.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations and recommendations for future research regarding this topic were plentiful. For the most part, the areas that were lacking were the amount of participants relative to both research methods. The utter lack of response or even acknowledgment by the requested respondents was alarming and resulted in rather abrasive tactics on my part to encourage participation. As it pertains to a topic as widely discussed as eWOM, it would have been more effective to have had at least twice as many respondents in both research methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations specific to Yelp users. In some situations, especially in the surveys, the data was so well balanced that it was difficult to determine any blatant tendencies or trends.

Besides the issues specific to the number of respondents, the research actually went quite well and was successful in adequately answering my proposed research question. The coding scheme and categories were defined explicitly and held up during data collection. Furthermore, the optimization of data collection through excel was particularly helpful in organizing the data and visually drawing comparisons.

References

- *Chatterjee, P. (2011). Drivers of new product recommending and referral behaviour on social network sites. *International Journal of Advertising* 30, 1, 77-101.
- *Kaye, B. K. (2010). Going to the blogs: Toward the development of a uses and gratifications measurement scale for blogs. *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 18, 4, 194-210.

- *Kim, Y., Chu, S. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. *International Journal of Advertising* 30, 1, 47-75.
- *Perkins, S., Parmelee, J. H. (2012). Exploring social and psychological factors that influence the gathering of political information online. *Telematics and Informatics* 29, 1, 90-98.
- *Youn, S., Lee, M. (2009). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM). *International Journal of Advertising* 28, 3, 473-499.
- *Zhan, L., Li, J. (2011). Online persuasion: How the written word drives WOM. *Journal of Advertising Research* 51, 1, 239-257.

Materials

- Menbari_YELP_U&G.xls (submitted via email): This workbook is comprised of multiple worksheets in tab from on the bottom of the page. These include a blank copy of the survey, a breakdown of the quantitative and qualitative survey results, the technology occupation variable information, the respective survey trends, the entire focus group master coding sheet with completed data fields and questions, and a page devoted to definitions specific to both research methods.
- Menbari_consentForm.pdf (submitted via email): This pdf document has a scanned version of the filled out focus group consent form.