

Online Community Interaction - Revolution or Revulsion?

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ABSTRACT

Marketing writers' assertion that online communities are the future for organisations may be misguided, although peer-to-peer networks are certainly the future for consumers. Brands have experienced 'consumer revulsion' at their poorly-planned attempts to enter online communities to interact with customers.

The Internet has facilitated a revolution amongst consumers, providing a medium for online communities to thrive. Source credibility is paramount and Internet users are being selective with exactly whose message they are willing to accept, absorb and ultimately, allow to influence their buying decisions.

The primary objective of this research is to undertake an exploratory investigation into the dynamics of online communities and how membership influences the buying decision for consumers of genre novels.

Through the process of online focus groups and the completion of online questionnaires, data on the dynamics of online relationships between consumers and authors, the buying habits of consumers and the acceptance of online word-of-mouth (WOM) were extracted and analysed.

This research demonstrates that the dynamics of online communities are highly complex and in no way inferior or less fulfilling than real-life relationships and that the influence of online relationships on our buying decisions have no less impact than real-life encounters.

Keywords: Online Communities, Peer-to-Peer Networks, Word of Mouth, Source Credibility, Buying Decisions, Blogs, Discussion Forums.

INTRODUCTION

Rogers' oft-quoted 'diffusion of innovation' model discusses the power of word-of-mouth advertising and in particular, the importance of reference groups, opinion leaders and opinion formers; in influencing the buying decisions of consumers. Rogers suggests that consumers identify and feel part of a certain reference group and may aspire to be part of another. As such, many purchase decisions are based on our inherent need to belong. At the same time, certain individuals within these groups are seen as experts or influencers^[1].

Kotler maintains that "People trust much more the opinions of friends and acquaintances than the ads they read or the spokespeople who hype the product"^[2]. This is certainly not a new concept but it is newly important, with the emergence of the Internet and in particular, the growing popularity of online discussion forums and blogs^[3].

These online communities or peer-to-peer networks are seen by many as the leading opportunity for marketers and not just within the publishing industry^[4].

But it is not the organisation that controls the flow of information at these online communities, it is the participants and this poses a threat as much as it does an opportunity. Wasserman describes this new online breed of influencers as 'connectors' or 'e-fluentials' but warns marketers that if you attract 'positive influencers' then be equally prepared for 'determined detractors'^[5]. These groups are even more emphatic in their desire to spread bad news than their passionate counterparts are in spreading good news.

In the 90's, writers expected the Internet to cause a revolution and one bestselling article featured in Harvard Business Review went as far as to suggest that the Internet would render brands obsolete. Ritson asserts that "A decade later and marketers now have relatively mundane expectations of the Internet"^[6].

Previous Research

Much of the existing literature on the use of discussion forums and blogs and indeed the purported opportunities for organisations as a result of the phenomenon, is anecdotal and hypothetical or simply a list of software providers for blog and discussion forum administration^{[7][8][9]}. One article suggests that "Word-of-mouth drives book choices" amongst consumers^[10]. A poll of 1700 people found that half of all women and a third of all men chose books based upon the recommendation of a friend. 16% claimed that they purchased a book based upon suggestions from work colleagues. This poses an interesting context for the research and the author wanted to explore the nature of friendships between members of online communities, if indeed they see each other as friends and acquaintances. Most blog authors and members of discussion forums use anonymous usernames or 'handles' and will rarely have met other members face-to-face.

General literature on the rise of the Internet - blogs and discussion forums, is fairly plentiful, with the majority of writers advocating the power of this new medium. However, very few if any explain how this can be of use to an organisation. The researcher has yet to find quantifiable evidence that readers of blogs or members of discussion forums have actually purchased a product based upon an online recommendation. Certainly no research is relevant to the publishing industry generally, let alone genre novels specifically. The message in current literature relevant to authors is generally "Authors you should blog" but nothing substantiates this assertion other than references to the power of word-of-mouth (WOM) and the sheer numbers of blogs and discussion forums currently online.

OBJECTIVES

An exploratory investigation into the dynamics of online communities and how membership influences the buying decision for consumers of genre fiction.

The aim was to further explore online relationships and in particular, those relationships taking place at online

communities such as blogs and discussion forums. The influence of negative word-of-mouth was also explored and it is important for the context of the research, to understand the evolution of genre consumers and what this means for marketers and their models, considering many of these models are nearly half a century old and were developed long before the rise of the new media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary Consumers

Douglas Coupland famously titled a chapter of his book, "I am not a target market" ^[11]. The term 'Generation X' has since been adopted by marketing writers to describe post-boomers, baby busters, slackers and twenty-somethings born between 1960 and 1980 ^[12].

Nunes and Johnson discuss how baby boomers were the first generation to be exposed to 'professional marketing' all their lives ^[13]. As a consequence, today's consumers are more marketing savvy than ever. It has been suggested that marketers should now be preparing for 'Generation Y' as the youngest of Generation X are pushing 26 ^[14]. Bartlett suggests that "They are confident and upbeat, education-minded, tolerant and accepting of diversity. They are more conservative than Generation X, but not as sceptical".

Brown suggests that consumers are changing, that the cycle of mass production leading to mass marketing, leading to mass consumption, leading to mass production; is being defeated by the "Individualities, instabilities and fluidities of the post modern epoch" ^[15].

Contemporary Marketing

Marketers have merrily taken marketing theory as a proven science, thanks to the seminal works of gurus such as Philip Kotler, flaunting models, theories and SWOT analyses at 'target markets' for decades ^[16]. This modernist approach to influencing the buying decision of consumers has been challenged of late, as markets continue to fragment and consumers become more sophisticated. Kotler admits that "Conventional marketing thinking" needs a kick up the backside ^[17]. Brown is leading the postmodern charge, writing witty, creative and highly critical essays, journals and books on the advent of postmodern marketing. He believes that "Increased professionalism, more sophisticated models, better research procedures and, not least, infinite amounts of patience, will ensure that marketing eventually delivers on its admittedly extravagant promises". Mr. Brown is shaking up the hornets' nest and seems to love every minute of it.

Source Credibility

As consumers' sophistication levels increase, their cynicism rises too, when it comes to trusting messages in marketing communications ^[18]. Commentators in the US maintain that opinion polls reflect decreasing faith in not only politics, but also media and education systems, with equal disdain. Trust is a key issue, and it is argued that two dimensions are perceived by the consumer; competence – perceived ability to meet customer needs; and benevolence – perceived willingness to put the customer first. If cynicism is rising it becomes even harder for the organisation to influence the buying decision. Old remedies such as endorsements by celebrities, advertorials and in the publishing industry especially - bogus testimonials by other authors, are no longer as affective or effective.

Marketing writers are urging organisations to make use of blogs and discussion forums however, Balter and Butman warn that authenticity is what marketing is all about and state that in this consumption-obsessed society, "There are plenty of people who enjoy chatting about products almost as much as using them" ^[19]. They further add that "Paying shills to act like ordinary Joes", is asking for trouble.

Another contrasting view on the opportunities presented by blogs and discussion forums is that of Wasserman, who asserts that "Paying advocates, even passionate ones, tends to undercut their credibility" ^[20]. However, he does point out that some organisations are effectively tapping into this 'amplified reach' by "Wooing e-fluentials with free stuff, given out before the masses get it". This is an effective way to create new opinion leaders however, there is no guarantee that they will like the product and write glowing reviews. Such negative publicity will very quickly undo millions of dollars of advertising amongst a reference group.

If we look at the modernist concept of communications and the simplistic view that advertising is simply the transmission of a message, then credibility is the perception of how truthful that message really is ^[21].

Anyone who has access to the World Wide Web can tell anyone in the world, who is prepared to listen (or read, as the case may be), exactly what they think of the genre literature out there - and people are listening. Publishers should remember that their target market is both marketing and technology savvy. A writer with a sharp wit and an insatiable appetite for novels has a platform and can build a loyal fan base.

Reference Groups

'Reference Groups', is the term used to describe a group of individuals that influences a consumer's attitude or behaviour ^[22]. The specific behaviour in the context of this research is the buying decision or actions taken by the consumer as a consequence of being a member of an online reference group. These reference groups can be made up of family members, friends and work colleagues or may be a formal club or society. This research is focussed on the informal groups made up of people consumers meet online with similar interests. Indeed many consumers search out sites and forums that provide a community of like-minded individuals. Different reference groups will influence the attitude towards and propensity to buy, different products. For example, friends and colleagues may influence the clothes a consumer wears (along with celebrities and fashion trends) but an online discussion forum may be the key influencer for the books they read and/or purchase.

Within these groups, there are opinion leaders and opinion formers ^[23]. Opinion leaders are usually peers within the group who are able to exert influence because of their knowledge on a certain product category. Rogers claims that these leaders tend to be "Of the same social class as non-leaders, but may enjoy a higher social status within the group" ^[24]. Blog owners and long-standing members of discussion forums who are widely-read and who have been recommending books and making 'solid' recommendations can be considered opinion leaders for the purposes of this research. Opinion formers are considered experts relating to the product ^[25]. For this research the label will be given to published authors, individuals who work within the publishing industry, critics/reviewers of books and to some extent, the moderators of discussion forums and/or blogs. And herein lies the power of the Internet, it is very easy to become

an opinion former if you manage to engage and maintain an audience.

Online Relationships

Wellman states that communities are simply "Networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity" [26]. The Internet challenges the notion that geography is an important aspect of community. It is still possible to be neighbourhood-centric, the Internet simply allows the neighbourhood to exist across geographic boundaries.

Wellman further suggests that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has simply broadened the ease and scope of multiple, partial social circles and has even encouraged consumers to seek out like-minded individuals for interests and hobbies they would be unlikely to find in their real life communities; at least not in such numbers and with such ease. Wellman has coined the phrase 'Glocalization', where communities are formed encouraging extensive global and local interaction around a common interest. The contrasting views of academics on online communities tends to revolve around the premise that the Internet is killing the 'sense of community' in users; and some writers suggest that anything other than face-to-face contact is inferior. Wellman strongly believes that CMC simply "Extends the social range of networks, allowing people to maintain more ties and fostering more specialized relationships". Slouka asserts that online relationships are "Shallow and impersonal" and are far less fulfilling than real life relationships [27]. This is supported by Kraut et al who suggest that the Internet is the domain of lonely and depressed individuals who perhaps do not have the social skills to develop relationships offline [28].

Much of the academic argument over building relationships online is around the concept of social cues, as many cues are physical or non-verbal and are obviously not present online. Slouka suggests that online relationships remain shallow because whilst they provide a sense of intimacy, there is no emotional investment from the individual. Whitty and Gavin discuss the phenomenon of 'Boom or bust' where online relationships become intense very quickly or are discarded [29]. They further add that relationships built on text-based cues "Render online relationships as intimate and personally fulfilling as any other". The absence of cues such as "Physical proximity, information about physical appearance, cues about group membership and information about broader social membership" actually enhances online relationships rather than impede them.

Clearly much of the existing literature focuses on online relationships in the context of dating or finding a partner. Cummings et al claim that "Using the Internet to build social relationships results in social interaction that is wanting, at least when it is explicitly compared to the standards of face-to-face and telephone communication" [30]. However, how consumers value relationships at online communities and their receptiveness to word of mouth recommendations at these communities, was a theme further explored during the primary research of this study.

The Revolution

There is a revolution amongst genre readers - the rise of an adult reader base that wants intelligent, literary novels filled with gritty, believable characters. These readers are intelligent, articulate and elitist and they enjoy being elitist but if asked, they probably started out reading *Dragonlance* and *Tolkien*.

They have since evolved and the publishing industry needs to evolve with them.

There are whole communities online at discussion forums, reading, reviewing and recommending books in all genres.

Blogs and Virtual Word-of-Mouth

Spero and Stone assert the commercial importance of the digital media for procuring new customers and for developing and maintaining loyalty [31]. The problem for publishers however, is that the 'voice' of the revolution is not coming from the publishing bourgeoisie... but from the consumer proletariat and they do not need to print and distribute their manifestos, they have blogs. Blogs, or Web logs number anywhere between several hundred thousand and several million on the World Wide Web [32], functioning as diaries, a place to rant, make recommendations or in some cases, get dates, gifts and even cash!

Over fences, word-of-mouth can take some time, the problem (or advantage) with blogs, is that it is estimated that between fourteen and twenty million Internet users read blogs every single week [33]. Some publishers may argue that they *are* employing the digital media to reach consumers, that they *are* encouraging their authors to participate in online discussion forums, some may even boast that they are placing banner adverts (how hip) at these online communities.

Oser provides a contrasting view on the opportunities presented specifically by blogs [33]. The journal highlights the controversy and backlash experienced by Nike when the company placed a blog at Gawker.com. Nike maintains that they have learned a valuable lesson on "What blog readers will permit, and even welcome, in terms of marketer involvement". In the same article however, Oser details a number of blog success stories and in particular, behemoth, Microsoft Corp. whose blog, "Has humanized the company" in the minds of software developers; a key market. Oser offers the following caveats for organisations who may feel that blogs hold the future for online media campaigns: Don't throw money at bloggers. Traditional ad placements will not work; Do present humorous, engaging ads that may turn into viral campaigns; Don't pretend to be a consumer to plug your product; Do engage in a dialogue and be prepared to respond to positive and negative feedback; Don't think of blog users as consumers; Do think of blog users as future influencers for your products; Don't talk to blog users using the typical messaging strategies.

Discussion Forums

Although some bloggers allow readers to post comments on their blogs, the majority only offer one-way communication much like the traditional mediums for journalists. Discussion forums however, are where online communities are formed. Discussion forums allow anyone to register a username and password and then the user is able to reply to existing threads and create new topics.

The majority of supporters for discussion forums tend to be organizations in the technology and engineering sectors, who feel that online communities facilitate "Meaningful, thought provoking, peer-to-peer interaction needed to drive innovation and new product development" [34]. However, of all the themes during secondary research, it is discussion forums, which seem to elicit the majority of contrasting views.

Croft questions the value of discussion forums for advertisers and quotes an analyst as saying "There are a lot of companies trying to find out whether there is a business here, and most of

them are finding it difficult" ^[35]. He warns that marketers are used to engaging with consumers but in this case, the consumers will be talking right back. Rubach argues that organisations are being forced to accept "That content democracy is key and to give their consumers a voice" ^[36]. She accepts the power of word-of-mouth at online communities and concedes that the most effective way to learn about your consumer is to strike up a dialogue. However, in relation to discussion forums, Rubach urges the organisation to "Keep a watchful distance".

Negative Word-of-Mouth

Many writers suggest that "WOM can accelerate or retard the acceptance of a new product"^[37]. Lau and Ng further suggest that the power of word-of-mouth is such, because the communicator is face-to-face with the receiver and that the source credibility of the communicator is perceived as higher because they are independent of the marketer. Clearly at online communities participating members are not face-to-face and indeed they may be totally anonymous to each other.

There is numerous evidence suggesting that disgruntled consumers share negative experiences with their communities with more passion and more often, than they do with positive experiences. Lau and Ng found that respondents to their study told an average of five people about dissatisfactory experiences. Chatterjee suggests that "A satisfied customer may tell some people about his experience with a company, but a dissatisfied customer will tell everybody he meets" ^[38]. At an online community a member can relay a positive or negative experience once and share it with the entire membership of the community.

There is an abundance of text on the importance of word-of-mouth but there are contrasting views on whether negative word-of-mouth is equally as influential on purchasing decisions as positive word-of-mouth. Lau and Ng claim that negative word-of-mouth is "A silent and potent force that is capable of wreaking havoc on a firm's bottom-line". In contrast, Charlett and Garland's study states that the assertion that negative word-of-mouth is more influential than positive word-of-mouth is nonsense ^[39]. The author of this study feels that a consumer's desire to tell more people about a negative experience is only relevant if the recipient of the negative word-of-mouth is influenced against making a purchase decision. This is an important theme that was explored during the primary research.

There is increasing evidence that consumers researching a purchase decision are reading online reviews of products. In a study by Chatterjee, 54% of respondents to the study claim that they accessed reviews before making their final decision ^[40]. However, it is not clear if these reviews actually changed the consumer's mind. This is one of the main problems with existing research on word-of-mouth, there is evidence that unhappy consumers tell more people about negative experiences than positive experiences and there is evidence that consumers are reading reviews during the decision making process however, there is little evidence that negative word-of-mouth prevents a purchase decision and certainly not that negative word-of-mouth is more powerful than positive.

METHODOLOGY

Through the process of an online focus group and the completion of an online questionnaire, data on the dynamics of online relationships between consumers and authors, the buying habits of consumers and the acceptance of online word-of-mouth were extracted and analysed.

An important dynamic of these relationships is the motivation of authors who are active at online communities. Using existential phenomenology in the form of an open online focus group with broad topic headings, data on the authors' motivations and experiences were extracted and analysed.

For the purposes of this study, 'truth' is the consensus of the differing viewpoints of the sample and 'facts' are dependent upon the views of the observer. This is a relativist's view however, as stated above; it is possible to employ both qualitative and quantitative methods and interpret them with the researcher's relativist philosophy

FINDINGS

Blogs & Discussion Forums

In order of importance, respondents claim that they visit discussion forums:

- To interact with like-minded individuals (34%)
- To discuss the books they have read (27%)
- To get recommendations (27%)
- Because they are writers and want to interact with other writers (12%)

A large majority of respondents (89%) feel that the collective discussions at a discussion forum will influence their propensity to purchase a book by a new author. Interestingly, despite a general consensus at a forum that a book is poor, 69% of the sample claims that they will still purchase the book to make-up their own minds. This goes against the current literature, which suggests that negative word-of-mouth is more powerful than positive word-of-mouth.

66% of respondents are reading the blogs of published authors on a regular basis. Only 48% of the sample read blogs maintained by other fans of genre literature (their peers) and 20% maintain their own blogs where they make book recommendations. Another way to interpret this particular insight is that 20% of the sample can be considered as opinion leaders however; only 48% of the sample is actually reading their blogs.

From this research, it would seem that discussion forums have much more of an influence on the purchase decision than blogs.

Online Recommendations

90% of respondents have made book purchases following recommendations. 84% due to recommendations at discussion forums and 36% due to recommendations at blogs.

The majority (51%) claim that online recommendations account for 50% or more, of their total book purchases, which were made as a result of a recommendation.

It seems that repeat recommendations are more valid than a single recommendation and often, the participants will ensure that the person making the recommendation has similar tastes to their own. It seems the opinion leader only has one chance to make a solid recommendation to a prospect reader, if that recommendation is not appropriate for the consumer, then they will disregard future recommendations by that person.

Even participants, who claim they do not seek recommendations at discussion forums or blogs, admit that the 'validation' of their own opinions, may sway their decision to buy.

CONCLUSIONS

80% of respondents are making book recommendations themselves online.

Ignoring validation of one's own opinions and book choices, recommendations are key for consumers when considering books by:

- new authors
- authors they were previously unaware of
- authors they had heard of but not yet sampled

Source Credibility

Kotler asserts that people trust the word of friends and acquaintances over the word of spokespeople, who may hype a product. With this in mind it is interesting that 23% of the sample considers the other members of discussion forums as friends and 52% see them as acquaintances. 11% see other members as faceless individuals and 14% have never given the matter any thought and certainly did not want to give them a label for the purposes of this study. This is an interesting insight considering previous research on the depth of online relationships versus real-life interactions.

Discussion forums are viewed as much more than simply a resource for information or entertainment; they are often viewed as a key element of the member's 'online social life'.

Author Relationships

Brands should not to make the mistake of thinking that customers actually want a dialogue with them^[41]. This seems to contradict Kotler who suggests the aim of an organisation should be to create fans, rather than customers. Books are slightly different to the majority of other products in that authors can attain celebrity status and it is interesting to gain an insight from the perspective of consumers as to whether it is the author who is the brand, or the book/series. 64% of respondents felt that the author or at least the author in addition to the book/series is the brand. 19% feel that it is the book that is the brand and 17% were unsure.

60% of respondents are interested in what authors have to say about their work and their general beliefs and opinions. 12% are interested in what they have to say about their work, only 1% does not like authors involving themselves in discussions and 27% are indifferent.

The topic of author involvement at discussion forums was by far the most controversial during the online focus groups. Some respondents had strong opinions against author interaction.

37% stated that dislike of an author and/or their beliefs and opinions will prevent them (the consumer) from reading the author's work. 45% will not purchase the author's work if they dislike them or their beliefs/opinions. The majority in both cases will still read/purchase a book despite this negative sentiment. Again, this evidence is in contrast to much of the current literature on the power of negative sentiment.

The focus group also provided the author with the opportunity to explore consumer perception relating to the motivation of authors who involve themselves at discussion forums. Most participants accept that promotion is a factor but that a balance should be evident between taking part in discussions and pushing their own books.

This research demonstrates that the dynamics of online communities are highly complex and in no way inferior or less fulfilling than real-life relationships and that the influence of online relationships on our buying decisions have no less impact than real-life encounters. Part of the complexity surrounding online relationships is the social cues associated with building, maintaining and deepening trust and, which in turn generate influence. An element of the primary research explored to what extent, members of online communities value their online peers and this is an important theme in the context of reference groups, opinion leaders and opinion. The new media has aided the evolution of the next generation of influencers, known as 'connectors' or 'e-fluentials'.

The primary research provides evidence that membership of online communities profoundly influences the buying decision for consumers of genre novels through the collective discussions and recommendations that take place. Indeed, many members seek these online communities specifically to aid their buying decisions.

Current literature asserts that consumers have evolved and that publishers have not evolved their marketing strategies at the same pace. The primary research provides evidence that traditional marketing spend by the publishing industry is not influencing contemporary consumers' buying decisions effectively. Many consumers feel that they are being stereotyped and that the Internet has facilitated a revolution for consumers providing the ability to seek out like-minded individuals and develop complex social networks with very similar dynamics to real life social networks but with differing social cues. Online communities have their own 'rules of engagement' and expected netiquette.

Word of mouth taking place within online communities is highly effective in influencing the purchase decision but interestingly, for book purchases, negative sentiment does not always dissuade a purchase. Despite many relationships online being shallow and often anonymous, source credibility is still critical and many members of online communities look for opinion leaders and opinion formers amongst the membership for book recommendations. Despite many assertions within the current literature that online relationships are not as meaningful as real-life relationships, the majority of members of online communities see their online peers as friends and acquaintances.

The majority of consumers welcome the opportunity to interact with authors online and yet a dislike of the author as an individual and/or a dislike of their personal beliefs or opinions would not deter the majority from reading or purchasing the author's books. The majority of consumers see the author as the brand rather than the book or series and are likely to read all books by an author they enjoyed previously.

The majority of authors within the sample are motivated to interact with online communities partly by a desire to promote themselves and their products and partly by a genuine desire to develop a dialogue with their audience. Consumers accept that there is a balance, but reject quickly any transparent attempts to influence their buying decision. A minority of authors see online communities as 'fair game' for shameless self-promotion and even pose as fans, writing fake reviews and attempting to generate buzz at discussion forums.

Members of online communities for one product (in this case books) tend to be members of other communities for discussing

their other interests. For members of online communities, the Internet influences the majority of their purchasing decisions over traditional mediums. Discussion forums have far more impact upon consumers than blogs.

This research should be considered evidence that the dynamics of online communities are complex and that membership does indeed influence the buying decision for consumers of genre novels through the collective discussions and recommendations that take place. Marketing writers' assertion that online communities are the future for organisations may be misguided, although they are certainly the future for consumers.

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