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What Information Do Opinion Leaders and Opinion Seekers Search for Online?

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This article attempts to understand the nature of information (i.e., product- or promotion-related) that opinion leaders and opinion seekers consume from a company's website. We also examine whether there are significant differences in search behavior. For the analysis, we use a combination of clickstream and trait data provided by a popular sports nutrition firm in Japan. We find that while opinion leaders do not view product-related content, those with high brand commitment view more promotion-related content. Conversely, while opinion seekers do not view promotion-related content, those with high brand commitment view more product-related content. The study develops a comprehensive framework to understand the information search behavior of these two segments and provides managers with a better understanding of how different segments consume different content.

Many prior studies have used the two-step flow of communication – where information is first transferred to opinion leaders through different channels of media, and opinion leaders then transfer that information to their followers – to explain the impact of marketing communication on product performance (e.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). However, in recent years, we have witnessed an explosion in the number of media channels thanks to digital technology. Moreover, in today's world, individuals decide where to search and what content to share online, thus significantly affecting consumers' purchasing behavior. Consequently, we know little about the nature of information

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searches by different consumer segments especially in a digital context. In light of these developments, it is necessary for firms to understand the nature of information sought by opinion leaders so that they can develop their communication strategy more effectively. At the same time, it is important to understand the information-seeking behavior of another segment: opinion seekers. Opinion seekers are an important segment as they seek factual information and opinions from other individuals before making their purchase decisions. Previous studies have found that the segment of opinion seekers is quite different from opinion leaders. However, we know little about the nature of information that they seek online.

This research works to understand the nature of information that opinion leaders and opinion seekers consume from a company's brand website. Specifically, we attempt to understand whether these segments search for more Web pages that carry brand information and/or campaign information and thus evaluating whether there are significant differences in their search behavior. Moreover, we try to identify the moderating role of brand commitment as a driver to fulfill different goals in search activities by these two distinctive segments: opinion leaders and opinion seekers. In our theoretical framework, we build on prior work that has examined the motivations for individuals to share or seek information in order to explain the nature of information that they seek. We use data from a natural field experiment carried out by a popular sports nutrition product in Japan for the analysis. The study makes at least two important contributions:

- First, it bridges prior work on opinion leaders and opinion seekers and develops a comprehensive framework to understand the information search behavior of these two segments.
- Second, it provides marketing managers with a better understanding of how the two segments consume different content on the firm's website.

Theoretical Framework

Opinion Leader: In order to understand the nature of content that opinion leaders seek, it is first important to understand their motivations for seeking information and sharing it with others. While previous studies have attempted to understand the motivations for why opinion leaders share information and engage in word-of-mouth

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behavior (Cheung and Lee 2012), Burt's (1999) theory of social capital is perhaps the most relevant to understand the link between motivations for sharing information and the nature of information content sought out by information leaders. Burt's explanation of how opinion leaders acquire and diffuse infor-

mation is also consistent with the two-step flow of communication. According to Burt, opinion leaders acquire information because of their strong relationships or cohesion with other groups. Such information acquisition often occurs through socializing communications. Opinion leaders diffuse information within a group because they need to appear attractive to individuals with whom they have a strong relationship. In other words, opinion leaders diffuse information within a group because of competition or equivalence. And they utilize innovations or new information in order to stand out. Chan and Misra (1990) also suggest that opinion leaders have an inherent need to stand out from the rest of the crowd. They term this need as public individuation. According to this theory, an individual can become individuated though greater knowledge or interest in a particular product than seekers and thus be judged as more influential (Goodwin and Frame 1989).

We use these theories and work backward, starting from the goal of an opinion leader to understand the nature of content that he or she would seek on a company's brand website. An opinion leader has a need to stand out in the crowd and is ready to utilize any new information to do so. We therefore hypothesize that opinion leaders frequently visit pages that update their content often and offer new information. Conversely, opinion leaders infrequently view pages that are not updated as often. We make a reasonable assumption that on a brand website, content related to campaigns and promotions are updated more often than content relating to

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the firm, product, or the brand. We term the former as promotional content and the latter as product content. Therefore,

- Hypothesis 1a: Greater tendency to engage in opinion leadership results in more views of promotional content.
- Hypothesis 1b: Greater tendency to engage in opinion leadership results in fewer views of product content.

As we continue our backward journey of information-seeking behavior of opinion leaders, the first step is the transfer of information from the firm to opinion leaders. According to Burt, opinion leaders acquire information through socializing communications with those with whom they have a strong relationship (i.e., cohesion). One approach to understanding whether an individual shares a strong relationship with a brand is through brand commitment. Commitment is a key dimension of attitude strength and an enhanced desire to hold a unique type of attitude (Pomerantz, Chaiken, and Tordesillas 1995). Prior studies have examined the consequences of high brand commitment and found that a higher level of brand commitment results in a higher level of customer involvement (Gruen, Summers and Acito 2000) and positive word of mouth (Westbrook 1987) among other consequences. To summarize, brand commitment serves as a driver that motivates people to act toward their goals in a brand-related context.

From the point of view of this study, it therefore seems that opinion leaders who have a strong relationship with the firm, and hence high brand commitment, visit the firm's website frequently to acquire new information and achieve their goals. We thus hypothesize that those opinion leaders who have high brand commitment view content that is updated and relevant to meeting their goals to a greater extent than those with a low brand commitment. Conversely, they spend less time viewing content that does not help them achieve their goals.

... brand commitment serves as a driver that motivates people to act toward their goals in a brand-related context.

- Hypothesis 1c: Higher brand commitment results in more views of promotional content by opinion leaders.
- Hypothesis 1d: Higher brand commitment results in fewer views of product content by opinion leaders.

Opinion Seeker: Prior studies have defined opinion seekers as "individuals who sought information or opinions from interpersonal sources in order to find out about and evaluate products, services, current affairs, or other areas of interest" (Feick, Price & Higie 1986, p. 302). From the perspective of the two-step flow communication theory, opinion seekers are viewed as the message receivers who get information from opinion leaders. Some studies opine that an opinion seeker is often one who has little knowledge and is anxious about the consequences of a purchase decision and therefore seeks advice from someone he or she knows (Beatty and Smith 1987). Many studies view opinion-seeking as a co-phenomenon of opinion leadership (Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman 1996). Based on these findings, it seems that opinion-seeking suggests a tendency to search for factual information and/or opinions from other people. Their main goal



seems to be to lower the risk associated with a purchase. Therefore, from the point of view of this study it then seems that opinion seekers view pages related to factual information about the firm, the brand, and the product to a greater extent than pages that convey information about ongoing campaigns and promotions. We therefore hypothesize that:

- Hypothesis 2a: Greater tendency to engage in opinion-seeking results in fewer views of promotional content.
- Hypothesis 2b: Greater tendency to engage in opinion-seeking results in more views of product content.

Since opinion seekers strive to acquire factual information about the brand and minimize the risk of a purchase decision, it would be interesting to examine how brand commitment moderates the extent to which they view different content on a firm's website. As noted in the previous section, brand commitment motivates individuals to act toward their desired brand-related objects and achieve their goals. We therefore posit that opinion seekers who have high brand commitment view pages that convey factual information to a greater extent than opinion seekers with low brand commitment. Similarly, opinion seekers who have high brand commitment view pages that do not carry product-related information to a lesser extent than individuals with low brand commitment. We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 2c: Higher brand commitment results in fewer views of promotional content by opinion seekers.
- Hypothesis 2d: Higher brand commitment results in more views of product content by opinion seekers.

Research Design

Data Collection: Two types of data, browsing data from a company's brand website and attitudinal data from an online survey, were collected for the analysis. Browsing data was recorded from a real brand website in Japan. Health nutrition products were selected because consumers tend to visit the website with a relatively higher level of involvement resulting in a more cognitive information search, thus making it suitable to track clickstream behavior. The website belongs to Japan's leading brand in the health nutrition category, and contains various kinds of information. There are more than 20,000 registered members, ranging from serious health and body building-conscious individuals to individuals who are more casually concerned about health and nutrition. The website consists of eight different content categories: top page, brand information, product information, sports and nutrition laboratory, sport types and required nutrition, fan club, event information, and campaign information. Registered customers can access different content from the top page, but they also can access content directly from search engines.

To gather the browsing data, all of the browsing activities on the brand website of all pre-registered customers were recorded during a three-month promotional campaign period. All the URLs were recorded in the browsed order for each visit made by each unique customer along with the browsed time. Page views were then aggregated per those eight categories per customer, forming accumulated page views during the period per customer. To compute measures pertaining to



opinion leader, opinion seeker, and brand commitment, an online survey request was sent out to all of the registered customers. Those who completed a survey were presented a token gift of appreciation. Surveys with extremely short or long answering times or with erroneous answers were eliminated to form a smaller sample of 2,711 subjects. The compiled browsing data was then merged with the online survey data using unique customer IDs. About 65 percent of this sample actually visited the website during the three-month period resulting in 1,777 observations. Seven observations with more than 32 visits were eliminated because they were thought to be too many. Therefore the final sample for the analysis was based on the browsing behavior and attitudes of 1,770 subjects. The average number of visits during the three-month period was 3.15 per customer.

Independent Variables: **Opinion leadership** was measured using three of the six scales from Flynn et al. (1996). The items were:

- “My opinion on nutrition supplements seems not to count with other people.”
- “Other people come to me for advice about choosing nutrition supplements.”
- “I often persuade others to buy the nutrition supplements that I like.”

They were measured on seven-point scales from “I do not agree” to “I agree.” We reverse coded the first item and took the average of the three items to develop a score of opinion leadership for each individual. The reliability of the three items, i.e., Cronbach’s alpha, is 0.61

Opinion seeking was measured using three of the six same scales from Flynn et al. (1996). The three items were:

- “When I consider buying a nutrition supplement, I ask other people for advice.”
- “I don’t like to talk to others before I buy nutrition supplements.”
- “I feel more comfortable buying a nutrition supplement when I have gotten other people’s opinions on it.”

They were also measured on seven-point scales from “I do not agree” to “I agree.” And as before, we reverse coded the second item and used the average of the three items as a measure of opinion seeking for each individual. The reliability of the three items, i.e., Cronbach’s alpha, is 0.60.

Brand commitment was measured using scales from Oliver (1998) on five-point scales (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). The items were:

- “I am really attached to the brands of nutrition supplements that I use.”
- “I stick with my usual brands of nutrition supplements because I know they are best for me.”
- “I am committed to my brands of nutrition supplements.”

The average of the three items was used as a measure of brand commitment. The reliability of the three items, i.e., Cronbach’s alpha, is 0.90.



Dependent Variable: Since analyzing the page views for eight different types of content would be tedious, we conducted a factor analysis using Varimax rotation to reduce the number of dimensions. The analysis revealed two factors with an eigenvalue of greater than one and explained 50 percent of the total variance.

- The first factor comprised of the top page, brand information, product information, sports and nutrition laboratory, and sport types and required nutrition. The reliability for this factor that we termed **product-related content** is 0.54.
- The second factor comprised of the fan club, event information, and campaign information. We termed this factor as **promotion-related content** and it has a similar reliability of 0.50.

We added the page views across all of the content in each factor and thus obtained two measures. The first is the total number of page views pertaining to product content and the second is the total number of page views pertaining to promotional content.

Hypothesis Testing: We used a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) with opinion leader (2), opinion seeker (2), and brand commitment (2) as independent variables. In the first model (M1), we had the total number of page views pertaining to product content as the dependent variable. In the second model (M2), we had the total number of page views pertaining to promotional content as the dependent variable. We used the Hochberg's GT2 correction to correct for unequal cell sizes. Both of the models were significant (M1: F Statistic = 4.7, $p < 0.01$; M2: F Statistic = 4.33, $p < 0.01$).

We now follow up with the marginal means and report significant results using the 95 percent confidence interval. We first report the results for opinion leaders. We did not find a significant difference in the number of page views for promotional content between opinion leaders (Mean=5.33, SE=0.17) and non-opinion leaders (Mean=5.13, SE=0.20). Therefore Hypothesis 1a is not supported. However, we did find that opinion leaders (Mean=3.37, SE=0.50) had significantly fewer page views of product content than non-opinion leaders (Mean=5.26, SE=0.62). Therefore Hypothesis 1b is supported. Regarding the moderating effect of brand commitment on opinion leaders, we find that opinion leaders with high brand commitment (Mean=5.92, SE=0.23) had significantly more page views of promotional content than opinion leaders with low brand commitment (Mean=4.74, SE=0.24). Therefore Hypothesis 1c is supported. However, we did not find a significant difference in the number of page views related to product content between opinion leaders with high brand commitment (Mean=4.30, SE=0.69) and those with low brand commitment (Mean=2.45, SE=0.73). Therefore Hypothesis 1d is not supported.

We find that opinion seekers (Mean=4.93, SE=0.19) have significantly fewer page views of promotional content than non-opinion seekers (Mean=5.53, SE=0.18), thus lending support to Hypothesis 2a. However, we did not find a significant difference in the number of page views related to product content between opinion seekers (Mean=4.11, SE=0.57) and non-opinion seekers (Mean=4.52, SE=0.55). Therefore Hypothesis 2b is not supported. Examining the moderating effect of brand commitment on opinion seekers, we did not find a significant difference in the number of page views related to promotional content





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between opinion seekers with high brand commitment (Mean=5.20, SE=0.27) and those with low brand commitment (Mean=4.65, SE=0.26). Therefore Hypothesis 2c is not supported. We find that opinion seekers with high brand commitment (Mean=5.57, SE=0.81) had significantly more page views of product content than opinion seekers with low brand commitment (Mean=2.65, SE=0.78). Therefore Hypothesis 2d is supported.

Discussion

The study not only supports findings from previous studies but also makes several important contributions to ongoing research on online search behavior. While most work until now has examined online search behavior broadly, we take a closer look at the heterogeneous nature of online search activity, especially with regard to opinion leaders and opinion seekers. Consistent with prior work, we too find that opinion leaders and opinion seekers are distinct segments; the correlation between the two behaviors in our data was 0.012. More importantly, we show that different goals for opinion leaders and opinion seekers result in widely different information search behaviors. In addition, we show the important role of brand commitment in enabling opinion leaders and opinion seekers to acquire relevant information and thus achieve their goals. The combination of browsing data from a brand website and trait information of a relatively large sample using an online survey is novel and lends credibility to the study. The study also provides several insightful results for marketing managers. Websites are an important touch point and it is therefore vital that firms adopt a customer centric approach to make it more relevant and user friendly. Firms can use the results of this study with a better idea of how to customize their web content for different consumer segments. This would help them better target opinion seekers who are potential customers and opinion leaders who are perhaps key influencers and thus improve the effectiveness of their online marketing efforts.

An important result for firms here is that brand commitment and website design go hand in hand.

The study has its limitations. The results are based on one product category with relatively high involvement. Future studies can examine other factors such as customer satisfaction and loyalty. The reliability for opinion leaders and opinion seekers could be higher. However, it is important to note that there is no change in the results when only two items with the highest loadings or just a single item are used as measures for these constructs. Future studies can examine brand commitment as a multidimensional construct e.g., calculative and emotional, and evaluate the moderating effect of each of these dimensions.



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