

Look Who's Talking: Exploring Older Adults' Organic Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Introduction

As a result of an ageing society and improvements in technology, an increasing number of older adults are spending time on the Internet. In the UK for instance, recent Internet use for people aged 65-74 has increased from 52% in 2011 to 83.2% in 2019. For the 75 and over age group, usage has increased from 19.9% in 2011 to 46.8% in 2019 (ONS, 2019). Older consumers use the Internet for different purposes such as shopping (Lian and Yen, 2014), banking (Choudrie et al., 2018), accessing health services/information (Vroman et al., 2015) and engaging with online communities (Ivan, 2019). However, from a marketing perspective, research into older adults' digital consumption remains limited (Nunan & Domenico, 2019). Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) is one example of this. Consequently, this study aims to explore the eWOM behaviour of older adults in online communities in order to advance marketing's current understanding of older adults' motivation to create, absorb and evaluate of eWOM.

Background

As Internet usage is increasing, there is a growing body of literature exploring the benefits of older adults' interaction with online communities. Such benefits include improved resilience, wellbeing, companionship, happiness and stimulation (Nimrod, 2012; Kamalpour et al., 2020). These studies span across numerous disciplines such as human-computer interaction, leisure, tourism and entertainment (Berdychevsky and Nimrod, 2017; Liu, 2016; Nimrod, 2012, Kamalpour et al., 2020). For example, Nimrod's (2012) study on online communities used by older adults as a resource for tourism, indicates themes such as practical information exchange, searching for contacts and travel stories, yet there is no direct mention of marketing or eWOM. Consequently, within the context of older adults engaging with online communities, there is limited consumer-based understanding and even less knowledge of eWOM.

As the Internet is evolving, the marketing literature has made advancements on the original Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) conceptualisation of eWOM. For instance, Babić Rosario et al., (2019) undertake a multi-disciplinary systematic review to provide a clear framework and distinct definition. Furthermore, there is a deeper understanding of eWOM as a product of complex networks, social structures and interpersonal communication (Berger, 2014; Kozinets et al., 2010; Mathwick et al., 2008). Most of these advancements are based on literature and data gathered from participants under the age of 65, leaving a large scope to investigate older consumers' eWOM behaviour. The present study will consequently adopt the Babić Rosario et al. (2019) framework of the motivations, opportunities, and abilities (MOA) of older consumers to experience eWOM creation, exposure and evaluation. This will allow motivations and drivers of eWOM, to be re-evaluated for the ageing consumer (Berger, 2014; Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Furthermore, the online community explored is designed to support social engagement rather than being focused on brands, products and services. Not only is this an under researched platform but it is also difficult for marketers to control this accidental exposure to eWOM, indicating that further research is necessary for a holistic understanding (Babić Rosario et al., 2019).

Methodology

The present study conducts a Netnography of a UK-based online community created for people over the age of 50 to share stories, debate topics and support each other. Netnography is the method of choice due to its success in collecting information on the creators and receivers of eWOM (Kozinets 2002; Babić Rosario et al., 2019). Data have been collated over a 6-month period, from 15th September 2020 to 15th March 2021. In total there are 50 forum topics, 4,648 threads and 316,097

replies. Of these posts, there are 622 threads and 42,318 replies involving eWOM activity. Behaviour relating to eWOM has been discovered for product and service categories such as books, household technology, digital technology, household furniture, banks, clothing and entertainment.

Results and Discussion

The data are still being analysed but preliminary results suggest that older adults primarily generate organic eWOM for *information acquisition* and *social bonding*. Older adults acquire information for products such as household technology, digital technology, household furniture and clothing. When obtaining information, there appears to be two different behaviours of seeking advice and resolving problems (Berger, 2014). The posts reveal that seeking advice usually occurs at the beginning of the customer journey or in the transition phase from an old to a new product (See Table 1, example 1). Whereas, resolving problems occurs in the post-purchase phase of a customer journey, such as in example 2 in Table 1. Interestingly, the motivations for creating eWOM seem more complex than originally coined (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). For instance, a creator may be expressing positive self-enhancement or venting, but the main motivation of eWOM is to gain information from community members. For instance, example 3 (Table 1) vents about the difficulties they are having with their radios, yet they intend to ask for advice in order to solve the problem. Furthermore, another participant (See Table 1, example 4) expresses their positive feelings towards games that they use on their tablet but really, they are looking for further recommendations.

In contrast, *social bonding* resonates in posts relating to entertainment including books, TV, film and radio. Participants often share their experiences of these products and services to reinforce the shared views that they have with community members and to reduce loneliness and social exclusion (see Table 1, examples 5 and 6). As with the previous theme, *social bonding* is also more complex than originally established (Berger, 2014). For instance participants may be influenced by self-enhancement, where they share what makes them look good and identity signalling, where they present a clear identity of themselves, but the main motivation remains to engage and bond with other community members (see Table 1, examples 7 and 8).

Main driver	Sub-themes	Example
Information Acquisition	Seeking Advice	1) <i>"I need to get a new phone, any ideas please?"</i>
	Resolving Problems	2) <i>"Help! Spam keeps cropping up on my tablet's calendar. How do I get rid of it?"</i>
	Venting => Resolving Problems	3) <i>"I have two DAB radios that have suddenly stopped working...what am I doing wrong?"</i>
	Positive self-enhancement => Seeking Advice	4) <i>"I really enjoy CodeWords, Words with Friends and Word Jewels. I'd like to try more. Any recommendations?"</i>
Social bonding	Reinforcing Shared Views	5) <i>"Have you ever read a book and you don't know why it's not more popular? My favourite at the moment is Jess Kidd"</i>

	Reducing Loneliness and Social Exclusion	6) <i>“The new Dancing on Ice series...will anybody be watching it with me this evening?”</i>
	Self-enhancement => Reinforcing Shared Views	7) <i>“Have we really learnt from History? I am reading The History of The Peloponessian Wars by Thucydides. I wonder if he knew that humanity would just continue to gruelling kill each other, rather than co-habit peacefully.”</i>
	Identity-Signalling => Reinforcing Shared Views	8) <i>“I am an absolute Trekkie and 2nd Generation is my favourite. Then Voyager and then DS9. Do not like the Original Series.”</i>

Table 1: Preliminary data analysis results

Contribution

This is the first paper to explore organic eWOM created by older adults on online communities. As a result, the findings intend to update previous conceptualisations of eWOM, which ignore this consumer group. The current preliminary results outline the motivations and drivers for older adult eWOM activity, yet there is still more to be analysed. The final results will provide marketers with holistic knowledge of eWOM, for an under-researched consumer group on an under-researched platform.

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