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Managing the uncontrollable: Empirical studies of user-generated content online

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CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis focuses on structured discussions on company-administered platforms and unstructured discussions on consumer-administered platforms. By analyzing the content of online buzz, the thesis aims to unravel noteworthy patterns and key factors (both uncontrollable and controllable) to also help companies develop strategies to manage user-generated content. Specifically, it investigates the factors that influence the content of online discussions, in particular, the valence and opinions expressed in user-generated content. Furthermore, it examines 1) how these factors can be influenced and managed in “uncontrollable” situations, namely, unstructured discussions on consumer-administered platforms, and 2) how these factors can influence the output of discussions in “controlled” situations, namely, structured discussions on company-administered platforms. Two different and specific empirical settings were examined: corporate social responsibility communications and co-creation, which reflect pressing challenges companies are dealing with in modern business practice, especially in the face of increasing internet user prominence.

The first two studies of the thesis examine blogger responses toward food industry press releases in addressing obesity and health concerns. The studies identify three factors that may influence the sentiments of online discussions: the content of the company communications, the level of fit between companies and their initiatives, and the degree of issue association. While the first two factors offer more control opportunities for companies, the degree of issue association should be closely monitored by companies and is less likely to be directly controlled by companies. Data from the blogosphere suggest that there is no specific community of bloggers on whom companies should directly focus their communication. The bloggers who voiced their opinions online are not connected with each other, as previous research has suggested (e.g., Fieseler, Fleck and Meckel, 2010). As a result, to overcome the unstructured random user-generated responses, companies are advised to carefully build their fan base in a community prior to commencing communications, which could result in more

structured discussions, to achieve more favorable outcomes. The third and fourth study of this thesis investigate user contributions in online communities. Data from a company-administered co-creation community suggests that users tend to mimic other users' emotions and opinions when they make contributions online. The content of the discussions in turn influences the popularity of discussion threads and the continuing development of the community. Specifically, positive emotions may increase subsequent creativity but could reduce future user comments. Companies may manage user-generated content on such a platform by having employees directly interact with users, although the impact is somewhat limited.

The findings revealed in the four chapters highlight the complexity of user-generated content online. It is true that increasing demands for transparency from consumers, expanding channels of social media, and promising relational bonds with internet users may press companies to engage with online users even more aggressively. This thesis suggests, however, that, in many cases, considering the characteristics of the companies and the platforms, it may be wise to communicate less loudly and proactively, as much of the content is not controllable. Even on company-administered platforms where companies seem to have more control, the users appear to have more influence on each other than companies do.

6.1 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY COMMUNICATIONS AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Chapters two and three are empirical studies that examine companies' corporate social communication and related user-generated content in the blogosphere. In particular, it focuses on press releases published by food companies on health-related issues and the subsequent blogger reactions, a topic and context unexplored in prior literature. In line with previous research (Wright and Hinson, 2008), the present studies suggest that corporate announcements can be picked up by internet users without a company's consent or intention. This implies that "uncontrolled" user-generated content focusing on social issues circulates online freely and not only when companies proactively engage with consumers (Korschun and Du, 2012). Companies should understand that, when

users come across such information, although not proactively seeking social information about a company (Dawkins, 2004), they may still express their opinions online. User-generated content does not only occur when companies demand it. These small-scale individual comments, which are not necessarily embedded in structured networks, still have the potential to accumulate into collective public concerns (Koku, 2012). It is important to note that online reactions came mostly from “non-specific” internet users, rather than known activists or particular communities of bloggers. While a diverse group of interested individuals may provide incentives for companies to reach a large variety of potential consumers online, it is more difficult to identify key stakeholder groups and engage in micro-dialogues with them. The findings differ from the prior suggestion that, in dealing with online users, particularly concerning corporate social responsibility, companies should engage with specific activists (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010) or communities (Korschun and Du, 2012). Consequently, in managing their reputation and public relations, especially when user-generated content occurs as unstructured discussions on consumer-administered platforms, companies cannot only monitor specific target audiences, such as journalists’ responses toward press releases, but also listen to other stakeholders’ voices online.

While in this particular context, companies may have no control in targeting particular audiences online, they may control the content of their communications. Chapter two and three analyzed the content of companies’ press releases. The results are generally in line with prior research that taste-related announcements generate proportionally more reactions and positive buzz than knowledge-related ones do, and product-related press releases are more widely discussed and better perceived, compared to promotion-related ones. However, not all initiatives that fall into the same category result in a similar pattern of discussions. Not all taste-related press releases resulted in positive responses. For example, to claim that a tea drink helps burn calories is perceived as false and generates significant amounts of negative buzz. Similarly, while press releases of new “health” product introductions are welcomed by bloggers, the modification of existing products tends to suffer from negative responses. The findings also highlight that the way in which an initiative is phrased and communicated may also influence the valences of online discussions. There seems to be a fine line between being innovative and over-exaggerating in corporate communications.

Other than the content of press releases, there are two manageable factors identified in the thesis that may also influence user-generated content. How prominent companies are associated with obesity and how consistent the initiatives are with companies' core business of selling food products are found to influence online buzz. These two factors are mainly based on consumer perceptions and may thus intensify the "uncontrollability" of user-generated content; companies can manage the impact by carefully evaluating their own situations and choosing specific initiatives that give the "right" (intended) message. The degree of associations that a company has with a particular social issue was seen to influence user-generated content in chapter two. Prior studies suggest that very specific approaches for tackling a social issue, such as obesity, are more suitable than generic well-being schemes (e.g., Wansink and Huckabee, 2005). However, in reality, the former approach did not necessarily receive much positive recognition in the blogosphere. Frequent company communication regarding its activities addressing social issues does not lead to more reactions. Instead companies with high levels of issue associations generally trigger more responses, both positive and negative, whereas companies having low associations generate fewer reactions. Issue association influences the volume of the buzz but not necessarily its valence. It is only when companies have a dedicated fan base online that they can trigger many positive reactions among bloggers. These findings extend previous evidence of the theory of "negative double jeopardy" which suggests that the more well-known brands are more likely to be the target of online anti-brand activities (Kucuk, 2008). It seems to be true still in the case of corporate social responsibility communications that the better-known and higher-profile companies are more likely to be talked about, both positively and negatively.

In general, our results are in line with prior studies, which suggest that high-fit activities, that is, initiatives that are highly compatible with companies' core business are better perceived (e.g., Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). However, in our study, modification of the current product, a high-fit activity, results in negative buzz, despite the fact that this activity indicates a higher level of commitment from companies. These unexpected results might be caused by what we call a "controversial fit". The initiatives are highly compatible with core business but underscore consumers' ideas that the company's offerings may seem suspicious. The reminder of this negative connotation, despite high

fit with the core business of selling food, may strengthen undesirable associations with obesity. These negative associations would eventually lead to negative buzz, as discussed in chapter two.

The outcomes of chapters two and three imply that low awareness of socially responsible initiatives, as previously considered (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010), may no longer be the central obstacle for all companies. Activities may be noticed and discussed by online users, especially when companies are highly associated with the social issue concerned. The challenges lie in the “uncontrollable” reactions that companies might receive. In an unstructured channel like the blogosphere, the findings highlight the difficulties of identifying particular opinion leaders to focus companies’ communication efforts. The word associations (Aggarwal, Vaidyanathan and Venkatesh, 2009) as implied in chapter two may be a useful tool to adapt as a starting point for listening to and observing the user opinions circulated online. The challenges remain, however, for companies that are under higher scrutiny from consumers; their strong associations with particular social issues make it almost impossible to conduct their business without being noticed. Their corporate social responsibility policies, even well-intended ones, may be negatively criticized even without being proactively communicated. Conversely, for companies that are not highly associated with particular issues, the challenge would rather be whether their efforts are noticed at all.

6.2 CO-CREATION AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

The second part of the thesis moves from the unstructured buzz on consumer-administered platforms, the blogosphere, toward structured discussions on company-administered platforms. Having their own, structured online communities may make it easier for companies to target particular users and manage content. However, the final two studies on co-creation suggest that there are some uncontrollable and unexpected elements that companies should be aware of. The essence of establishing a successful co-creation community is to attract more innovative users and have them commenting on others’ ideas to foster the best collective outcomes. However, internet users do not necessarily make their comments independently and having “controversial”

or negative discussions may not be a bad thing, as discovered in our studies. Prior research focuses on investigating user motivations to participate in online communities (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013) and tailoring platform designs to these motivations (e.g. Novak, Hoffman and Yung, 2000). The longitudinal studies of chapters four and five provide explanations on how positive/negative and popular discussions are formed on company-administered platforms and illustrate how these discussions influence the community output.

The results from chapters four and five suggest that even users on company-administered platforms are more likely to be influenced by other users than by employees of the companies. Users, instead of exhibiting individual thinking, contribute content under the influence of other users. The tendency of “imitating” other users’ content is found during the commenting process. When the perceived information is more positive (respectively negative), subsequent content is more likely to be positive (respectively negative). Likewise, when the preceding content expresses agreement (disagreement), the subsequent user content is more likely to agree (disagree) and less likely to disagree (agree). The sequential dynamics that have been observed in online product review sites (e.g., Godes and Silva, 2012) are thus found to be also present in online communities.

However, this effect is not prominent when employees’ content is considered; employees’ emotions are found to influence only users’ positive emotions, but do not seem to influence users’ negative emotions. If companies want to manage user emotions, it seems more efficient to do so through controlling their exposed management/communication styles – namely, through task-oriented and proactive communication. Task-oriented communication leads to an increase in user emotions, whereas a proactive approach results in a decrease in user emotions. What is significant in the findings is that even in company-administered communities, where direct feedback is presumed (Di Gangi, Wasko and Hooker, 2010), proactive participations from employees may neither always be appreciated (Fournier and Avery, 2011) nor necessarily lead to favorable reactions. On the other hand, task-oriented communication, which usually leads to responses that are less emotional (Derks, Bos and Grumbkow, 2007), is found to lead to more emotional reactions among subsequent user-generated content in our study. Notwithstanding the above, if companies seek a specific emotion, whether

positive or negative, the most powerful influence stems from users themselves, not from moderators of the community sent from companies.

Drawing on social impact theory, the results demonstrate that the influence of other users originates from two sources, immediacy and number of preceding posts or comments. Of these two factors, the number of preceding user-generated posts appears to have a stronger impact. Once the direction of the discussion is set by the first group of users, it is difficult to move the content in an opposite direction. This highlights the importance of the first few people who contribute to the discussions. The results entail that in the structured environment, as opposed to the unstructured platforms in chapters two and three, it is indeed possible to find the leader and target particular users. However, in contrast to previous suggestions that opinion leaders (Iyengar, Van Den Bulte and Valente, 2012), light users (as opposed to loyal customers) (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009) or the critical mass (Watts and Dodds, 2007) are the most influential users and should be cautiously monitored, the first few users who submit contributions, it seems, would be the ones that companies should focus on. Results suggest that the “collective creation” that companies are trying to achieve by allowing users to comment on each other may not be as collective as it seems.

Furthermore, escalating emotions and opinions starting from the first comment would eventually determine the affective opinion environment of the community, which, in turn, determines the popularity of each discussion thread and the overall development of the community. Contrary to previous findings that a positive environment would attract a higher volume of discussions (Moe and Scheweidel, 2012), chapter four suggests that variance in emotions and opinions is key in determining popularity. The discussions that are in consensus regarding user emotions, whether positive or negative, are less likely to be popular. This confirms the prior research finding that controversial topics are more likely to trigger discussion (Chen and Berger, 2013). It seems that people are motivated to contribute when the prior comments have high variance, but are inclined to imitate others when they actually do make comments. This highlights the critical role of affective and opinion climate in shaping user-generated content in online communities.

The influence of the community climate and the unexpected negative effect on popularity from positive emotions has led to the final study in the thesis. Chapter five

explores the effect of collective emotion on subsequent community output, making comments and submitting creative ideas. Collective emotions, i.e., emotions that are shared by a large number of individuals (Brief and Weiss, 2002), were previously found to affect group actions (e.g., Sy, Cote and Saavedra, 2005) and directly influence group performance (e.g., Piderit, 2000). Our study confirms findings from prior literature that community creativity and participation are indeed influenced by user collective emotions. However, these two interrelated outputs are driven by opposite emotions. While positive emotions encourage users to contribute creative ideas, negative emotions encourage more commenting in the community. This paradoxical effect of collective emotions highlights the complexity that companies are facing when utilizing online co-creation. User-generated content in online communities should not be treated the same, because distinct behaviors, such as contributing creative ideas and commenting on others' ideas, may be driven and influenced by opposite emotions as revealed in our study.

6.3 GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

To summarize the results between the unstructured consumer-administered blogosphere in chapters two and three, and the structured company-administered online communities in chapters four and five, the thesis illustrates that companies may control parts of the "uncontrollability" of user-generated content in both circumstances. While in the blogosphere, content may be somewhat influenced by the content of corporate communications, in online communities it seems to be more efficiently influenced by other users' content. In other words, when users are not necessarily connected with each other, companies may actually have a better chance of foreseeing the direction of online buzz. When communicating corporate social responsibility policies, it is inevitable for companies to deal with some uncontrollable elements, such as non-specific target audiences. Companies can adjust their communication strategies by carefully evaluating consumer perceptions of their issue associations and the fit level of their initiatives. Conversely, in the context of co-creation communities, the success of having an efficient platform largely depends on the participating users and the content they generate. Social influence, particularly emotional influence, largely comes from other users rather

than employees representing the companies. It is thus important to consider these characteristics when understanding user-generated content online. Moreover, the role of traditionally defined opinion leaders in all our studies seems minor, compared to other scenarios that have been illustrated in prior studies. When capturing user-generated content online, distinctions between the types of platforms, emotions and opinions, individual and collective behaviors, as well as static or dynamic influences, should all be considered to evaluate which elements are controllable and which are not.

6.3.1 Implications for Management and Marketing

In order for a company to maximize the efficiency of its communications and better control user-generated content online, it seems worthwhile to embrace internet users and establish structured communities. Having a portal with clear target audiences appears to be easier than facing a non-specific audience. Since internet users are going to voice their opinions anyhow, engaging in direct communications could help concentrate efforts. For example, Starbucks' press releases are found to receive the most positive buzz in the blogosphere in the studies in chapters two and three. Their approach of engaging with consumers both online and offline might be a good model to follow. Although outside the research scope of this thesis, their co-creation platform, My Starbucks Ideas, could also be one of the outlets for them to monitor centralized opinions.

Notwithstanding the above, companies should be aware that setting up company-administered platforms does not lead to "controlled" content. While the dynamic influence among users is apparent, the extent to which companies can be influential is deemed to be minimal. It is advisable for companies not to over-intervene. They need to give up some control, even in their own communities; that is, allowing users to influence each other, while carefully monitoring those frequent and heavy users who have the tendency to voice their opinions first. A closer monitoring of user activities, especially the emotional environment, would be recommended. The LIWC tool that was applied in this thesis seems to be reliable as also illustrated in prior research (Berger and Milkman, 2012). It is particularly critical to consider what kind of behavior is triggered by each emotion. In our study, submitting creative ideas is more frequently encountered in

a positive emotional environment, while making comments occurs more in a negative one. If companies want to combine the two, some specific designs could be considered when building the site. For example, a like-only voting scheme would be suitable for the communities that prefer positive emotions, and a dislike-only voting system and commenting function for the communities that encourage wider participation.

In a related vein, while a moderated company-administered community is preferred by most internet users, having employees proactively engage in communities is usually not favored by community members as confirmed in this thesis. This depends on the preferences of users having a more or less emotional environment. Similarly, although the pressure of increasing transparency is forcing companies to communicate their social initiatives, some are actually better off if they stay low-profile, especially for the companies that have negative and strong associations with a particular social issue. Working quietly without promoting it in their communication may reap the greatest benefits and help them avoid negative criticism. The diverse expectations that internet users hold of companies have been reflected in their reactions toward company communications, whether broadcasted through press releases or narrowcasted to users in communities. While it may be inevitable that companies must disclose information, the results suggest a more passive route, unless companies have pre-engaged with internet users.

Finally, in the past decade, companies have been striving to identify opinion leaders in order to seed positive influences within online networks. The practices of viral marketing and referral marketing have been implemented, based on the assumptions that some people are more influential than others. This thesis suggests that this is partially true, as long as the leader is also the first to voice the favorable sentiments and there is a structured network in place. In the disconnected platforms, when bloggers are not interconnected with each other, both the possible benefits and the drawbacks resulted from identifying the leaders would be diminished. What is important, however, is that even when the target audiences were not specific, a particular piece of information could be picked up and spread within bloggers' own networks. A better option for companies seeking to gain more control is to be selective of the first persons who receive the information. In the blogosphere, the once-controversial or unethical practices of blog marketing, such as giving people monetary incentives to talk favorably

about companies, would consequently seem to be the option. However, companies should be aware of the damage to their corporate reputation that may potentially come with such a strategy (Cox, Martinez and Quinlan, 2008).

6.3.2 Limitations and Future Research

In addition to the limitations and future research directions that have been mentioned in chapters two to five, this section highlights some generic points and overriding ideas for future research. Sentiment analysis appears to be useful for analyzing user-generated content. However, the distinction between emotions and opinions has not yet been widely applied. As mentioned earlier, users may hold affective commitment to a brand/company but not necessarily agree with all its acts. Similarly, emotions can compound positive and negative opinions. Users may address their disagreement with positive emotions. It would be interesting to further investigate the interactions between these two elements in other contexts, especially in situations regarding hedonic and controversial brands and products. Furthermore, as observed in chapters four and five, negative emotions and positive emotions can indeed coexist. Experiences of emotional ambivalence and cognitive dissonance may explain some of the “unpredictable” reactions among user-generated content and are worthy of further investigation.

On the other hand, the formation of opinions in user-generated content is found to be influenced by companies’ perceived associations with the topic in question in chapter two. While the opinions of comments within a community are found to exhibit sequential bias, the associations that companies have with a particular issue could also be influenced by this sequential effect at the societal level. A longitudinal study to trace how these associations have been formed and influenced over time would be interesting and critical for future research. Before the internet took its role, traditional media and journalists were believed to have set the social agenda (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). To understand how in the era of social media these types of associations can be established, whether and how the sequential bias is at work and how companies can influence or direct trends is critical for future crisis and reputation management research.

In a related vein, the consequences of social influence that are observed in chapter four imply that some opinions could be suppressed due to the tendency of following

others instead of exhibiting independent ideas. Parallel to this crowd-following effect, there is the bystander effect. Also based on crowd psychology, the bystander effect suggests that people are less likely to contribute or help when they perceive that there are already enough people doing so (Voelpel et al., 2008). These effects may compromise the consumer empowerment that is expected from the internet. The basic assumption of consumer empowerment online is that individuals can freely express their opinions regardless of who they are. It would be interesting to examine how the perception of empowerment could be affected by having opinions that are in the minority of the online group, especially in the case of collective crowd wisdom. As it seems that, instead of the combination of individual wisdom, the collective wisdom is influenced by the preceding others who voice their opinions first and by collective emotions. When participating in a community where the community of practice is strong, and thus the pressure for convergence is especially high, individuals may actually experience suppression of their opinions and emotions.

Furthermore, as employee communications in our study did not yield prominent results, it would be appealing to investigate what kind of employee responses would be appreciated and efficient. Prior research on corporate correspondences has mainly focused on negative electronic word-of-mouth and complaint handling (e.g., Strauss and Hill, 2001). However, our study suggests that negative emotions are less likely to be changed. While positive user-generated content is preferred and can be relatively easily influenced, companies may actually have a higher chance of influencing positive buzz via mechanisms of social influence. Moreover, the increasing interactions with internet users and the demand for more interactions from consumers would imply that a better understanding of the communication style is required. In many cases, such as in the context of co-creation communities, the aim of corporate correspondence may not necessarily be to change user opinions from negative to positive, but rather to engage in a discussion. Understanding the mechanism of how to control content in order to encourage more conversations rather than to suppress particular opinions is critical.

User-generated content research mostly involves empirical studies, but there also seems to be a need to develop further theoretical understanding. In this thesis, theories of social influence have been applied to explain parts of users' behavior, but there are theories that can be employed to extend the explained observed results. For example,

prior research has used self-presentation and media richness to explain the motivations of people's choice to participate in a particular type of social media platform (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). It is suggested that online buzz about the same brand could reveal different patterns across various channels (Smith, Fischer and Yongjian, 2012). Further research is needed to examine how these motivations interact with user-generated content and how these would influence users' preferences toward company correspondence. For example, Domino's Pizza is applauded by public relations specialists for having responded directly via the same medium to the public relationship crisis in 2008 mentioned in chapter one (Gaines-Ross, 2010). Having a matching level of self-presentation seems critical in engaging in interactions with consumers, which warrants future investigation.

Finally, it is worth noting that the research settings in this thesis have been limited to two particular contexts residing on two specific platforms, using particular data sources. The limitations of the conclusions in the previous chapters are undeniable; to obtain more reliable and objective data, future research could replicate the studies to include other types of platforms and contexts to further explore the uncontrollability of user-generated content, as well as additional types and sources of data. In spite of these limitations, the findings of the thesis are hopefully intriguing enough to invite further research on the topic of user-generated content.