**NONCUSTOMER’S INFLUENCER VALUE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides new insights about customer influencer value in social networks. Thereby, identifying customers with high degrees of influence, not only by their network size but also the type of online social ties they have within their networks. Moreover, this paper provides empirical evidence of the theoretical possibility of noncustomers to have influencer values by revealing their impact on other actors’ expected purchase accounting for the moderating roles of valence and the category of offering.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the influence customers have on each other is of critical importance in service research (Alexander et al., 2018). Customers engage in repeated journeys with the firm and their social networks via online engagement behaviors that go beyond transactions (e.g. e-WOM) (Azer and Alexander, 2018; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Recent research formalizes the value of this influence that a customer exerts on other actors as customer influencer value (CIV); one of the components to assess customer engagement value (CEV) (Kumar et al., 2010). However, little is known about how service firms can identify customers with potential high influencer value which is their main challenge to leverage CIV during acquisition efforts (Venkatesan et al., 2018). Additionally, thus far, no research has investigated non-customers’ influencer value (NCIV) especially, that it is theoretically possible for noncustomers to have influencer values (Kumar et al., 2010).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Customers engage with and create value for firms in many ways beyond transactions; hence, assessing CEV should not be limited to monetary transactions (Kumar et al., 2010), accordingly, the extant literature proposes four components; CIV is one that represents the value of the influence that a customer exerts on other actors via their disseminated e-WOM (Venkatesan et al., 2018). Each time customers voluntarily share content about firms via social media, they influence others and consequently, increase or decrease the value of this firm based on the valence of the shared post (Kumar, 2013). Therefore, identifying customers with high degrees of influence merits further investigation to enable firms to leverage CIV (Venkatesan et al., 2018). Prior research has shown that customers with potentially high degrees of influence are individuals with large social network (Freberg et al., 2011; Kumar et al., 2010). However, according to e-WOM research social ties between actors affect the acceptance, persuasiveness and consequently, the influence of their brand-related e-WOM (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Menon and Ranaweera, 2018). Thus, the size of network might not be the sole identifier of potential degrees of influence. As such, our focus is not limited to the network size; customer’s influence in terms of the combination of the network size and ties type has not been previously studied. Extant research on social ties builds on Granovetter's (1973) classification of ties as being either strong or weak although social ties are known to be a multi-dimensional construct (Menon and Ranaweera, 2018). In agreement with prior research that shows a strong relationship between utilitarian motivations and attitudes towards brand-related social media messages, hence, their expected shopping behaviors (Kim et al., 2016), in this paper, we study the three types of online social ties, thereby, the utilitarian type relates to the utilitarian motive of the recipient.

METHODS

The first experiment adopts a 3 (types of social ties) x2 (network size) factorial in-between subject design to identify customers with high degrees of influence; sample recruited:180 MBA students (females 49.4%, average age = 24.4 years, SD = 0.50).The second study (online survey) investigates non-customers' likelihood of sharing firm-related posts sampling 200 social media influncers. Finally, the third experiment, adopts a 2(NCIVs levels)x2(Valence) x2(Offering type) factorial in-between subject design to measures the impact of NCIV on other actors moderated by valence and type of offering; MTURK sample: 440 participants (females 57.5%, average age = 41.5 years, SD = 1.139)

RESULTS

Network size is not a unique identifier of CIV, however,dependant on online social ties,customers with large and even small network sizes will affect other actors’ attitudes and behaviors.This study also provides empirical results of previous theorization of NCIV by revealing the likelihood of non-customers continuing to share firm-related posts and the third study shows the impact of NCIV on actors moderated by the valence of their online posts and type of offerings.

DISCUSSION

This study offers new insights into the CIV and NCIV. Thereby, contributing to marketing research with empirical results that identify customers with high degrees of influence so that firms can maximize CIV. Unlike prior studies that focused on network size, this study shows that customers with high degrees of influence are those with small network size and strong ties; while those with large network size and weak ties have the weakest impact even to those with large network size and utilitarian social ties, which show a much stronger impact on other actors’ attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, this study, contributes with the first empirical results about NCIV, thus, firms can track their social networks in order to win them back. Finally, our results provide new insights that could be further used to study the relationship between NCIV and the other three components of CEV.

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