Information Acquisition, Persuasion, and Group Conformity of Online Tribalism:
Does User Activeness Matter?

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ABSTRACT

Though empirically some research suggests the linkage of better communication effect with active users' presence, no existing clues are found on the user activeness at the micro level to contribute to the virtual community's aggregate-level health and vitality. This paper models the interpersonal communication process via a multi-agent, self-reasoning model. It considers each agent's information value and conformity value, two key constructs adopted in this paper. This paper adopts simulated experiments to identify active users based on individuals' behavioural characteristics, screen out typical users of different activeness levels, and reveal causalities among the outcomes. The findings show that users' activeness determines the information vitality and influence of information dissemination and substantially impacts the dynamics of user-groups. The author concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological contributions and pinpoints these findings for marketers to improve online customer relationship management.

KEYWORDS

Activeness, Conformity, Influencer, Information Value, Online Tribalism

INTRODUCTION

The fast-growing virtual platform has witnessed lots of myths in business. Virtual community incubates extensive customer communications where consumers demonstrate some tribal behaviors in an informal network based on a common interest and affiliation to a topic, a belief, a figure, a ritual, or a culture (Helmuth, Gouhier, Scyphers, & Mocarski, 2016; Kacprzak–Choiska, 2011). Typical examples include major question-and-answer platforms such as Quora with 300 million monthly unique visitors (Smith, 2019a) and Zhihu featured by 600 million monthly unique visitors (Smith, 2019b). However, research suggests that 1% of active users have contributed up to 70% of the total posts and deeply engaged with various online actions (G. Wang, Gill, Mohanlal, Zheng, & Zhao, 2013). A very similar statistic is also inferable from Zhihu Statistics (Smith, 2019b). Tribal behaviors enable forum users to influence each other by initiating, spreading, appraising, receiving, and internalizing beliefs via a social network. Undoubtedly, behind the nodes of the group network, some drives and consequences are interwoven, such as information exchange, self-esteem development, group attitude shaping, and social status development (Feliciani, Flache, & Tolsma, 2017; Sierra, Badrinarayanan, & Taute, 2016; D. Wang, Li, & Xiao, 2019).

Literature more or less casts partial lights on the presence of active users in various online activities (Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2017; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017), yet little systematic investigation has even been into the vision as "what features do those critical

influencers own" and "how to identify them." Some research has spotted that consumers attached different credence to information sources in terms of expertise, identity, or reputation (Harrigan et al., 2021), motivation (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017), testimony (Packard & Berger, 2017; Vithayathil, Dadgar, & Osiri, 2020). Influencers who attain a geometric growth in the number of followers and evolve as opinion-leaders due to their expertise or devotion to a conversation have a more significant influence on other users' product adoption (Asamoah & Sharda, 2021; Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). Notably, from vast literature, the incredible power of influencers is evident but attributed only to external intervention such as advertising, sponsored opinion leaders. At the same time, opposite to these emerging opinion leaders (e.g., "cewebrity"), the other type of influencer is cosponsored influencers (e.g., celebrity) who receive a reward to promote their brands by their extraordinary persuasiveness on millennials. Rare theories and empirical studies explain how peer-to-peer impacts grow as an endogenous outcome from virtual information exchange.

Despite various explanations of the influence of an online advisor, literature is scant about the emergence of "organic" influencers and understand their "activeness" with impacts on others and how influencers impact other members' attitudinal shaping and decisions. These questions necessitate a comprehensive study to address research gaps as to how influencers and influence interact and evolve in action at an aggregate level. In view of so, this research has three research objectives.

First, this research tries to identify who acted as influencers to influence implicitly or explicitly the mass users by opinions and to screen them out by their online action's activeness. Second, this paper aims to provide an explanatory vision for how the motives drive one user to become active (or inactive) via information acquisition or conformity-seeking motives and consequently achieve one's information-based and conformity-based fulfillment. Furthermore, this paper shows the accumulated consequence, mainly as how the activeness affects users' propensity to voice and the prosperity of the knowledge in the system. The author adopts a systematic approach to model how online influencers impact other individuals by weaving up the opinion's evolution with information exchanges. The paper takes the perspective of information circulation. It models the inter-personal interaction process by agents' inputs (information demands), actions (match of prior knowledge and attitude, interpersonal connection, and information exchange), and outputs (value acquisition and social influence) of online interpersonal communication.

The contributions of this study are as follows. *Theoretically*, this paper develops an integrated framework, provides a direct answer to the research questions, and highlights two personal drives - information circulation and social influences to model the micro motives of social interactions. The individual's infotainment- and conformity-seeking motivation can explain how individuals impose influence on each other. This paper adopts a self-inferring approach in the method that all the attitudinal or behavioral changes become the endogenous outcomes of the information dissemination process to represent the complicated social learning procedure (Mawer, 2016). *Methodologically*, with the simulation method, experimentation can show an online community's overall effect by adopting a simplified simulation approach to assemble the individual drives and speculate the changes of information value and attitudinal changes. *Practically* identifying critical influencers on virtual platforms and individualistic and group mechanisms of influencer-recipient interactions will facilitate screening out critical opinion leaders and optimize peer-to-peer communication in terms of reach and persuasiveness.

In the next part, the author reviews related literature, including how user motives establish individual user's learning outcomes, group value development, and user activeness. The author simulates an open-ended online tribe with a rich diversity of message carriers in research design and execution and maps how users' self-identity and social identity interact and form the dynamics of online influence via information exchange to shape the group attitude, primarily, how these indicators change by user's activeness level. Finally, the analytical results before the conclusions and discussion are presented.

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