

UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS OF OFFLINE AND ONLINE CONSUMER RECOMMENDATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this is to address the following research questions: (1) What triggers consumers to recommend a product/firm to others? And (2) How do these triggers differ between online and offline recommendations, if they differ at all?

Two studies are conducted to address the research questions. Study 1 focuses on 100 face-to-face recommendations and uses the critical incident method. In the second study, a content analysis of approximately 1,000 recommendations posted online is performed. Our findings reveal the existence of several external and internal triggers to offline recommendations. Delight, however, seems to be the main driver of online recommendations. Examples are provided of practices that can foster contexts to encourage online recommendations and to improve the relevance and usefulness of online reviews.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers' likelihood to recommend a firm to others is a major indicator and an essential driver of the firm's growth (Reichheld 2003). In their attempts to grow, firms pay substantial amounts of money to establish creative reward programs aiming at encouraging referrals (Biyalgorsky, Gertsner and Libai 2001). As Dye (2000) notes, "people like to share their experiences with one another...and when those experiences are favorable, the recommendations can snowball, resulting in runaway success."

The importance of consumer recommendations is amplified in the Internet era. The Internet empowers consumers and allows for unprecedented networking with potential consumers. On one hand,

consumers can easily post their recommendations online for potentially millions to read. On the other hand, a growing number of potential consumers go online and freely access other consumers' opinions, i.e., product reviews, before deciding what to buy.

Substantial research has been done to understand the antecedents to positive consumer communications including consumer recommendations and similar concepts such as positive Word-of-Mouth and opinion leadership. Some of this research focuses on basic antecedents such as product involvement and message involvement but little has been done to understand the direct triggers or surrounding circumstances of consumer recommendations. Understanding the direct triggers is particularly interesting because the circumstances surrounding offline recommendations are different from those surrounding online ones. The contexts in which the two types of recommendations occur (face to face vs. virtual) are different. Moreover, offline recommenders communicate mostly with friends and acquaintances while online recommenders reach out to strangers.

The primary purpose of the research described in this is to better understand the circumstances surrounding consumer recommendations. In particular, we address the following research questions: (1) What triggers consumers to recommend a product/firm to others?; and (2) How do these triggers differ between online and offline recommendations?

In addition to the introduction, this article consists of three main parts. First, relevant literature is reviewed. In this review, focus is placed on the antecedents to consumer recommendations including the

antecedents to seemingly similar concepts such as positive Word-of-Mouth and opinion leadership. We also review the methodologies used by researchers to unveil these antecedents. Second, we present the two studies we conducted to address the research questions. Study One focuses on face-to-face recommendations and uses the critical incident method. Study Two focuses on online recommendations and uses the content analysis method. Third, our findings are presented and discussed with particular emphasis on the differences between the triggers of online and offline recommendations with the attendant implications for web managers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the mechanisms underlying consumers' recommendations, relevant literature on consumer communications is briefly reviewed. This literature includes research on Word-of-Mouth, opinion leadership, and consumer recommendations. These concepts have been intensively researched, so we limit our literature review to studies focusing on antecedents to consumer communications. In this section, we also present a brief review of the research methods used to uncover these antecedents.

Word of Mouth. Word of Mouth (WOM) has received substantial research attention with researchers studying WOM as both a dependent and an independent variable. Several scholars have investigated antecedents to WOM (see, e.g., Mazzarol, Sweeney and Soutar 2007). Their findings reveal a clear link between satisfaction and WOM (de Matos and Rossi 2008), and pleasant service recovery and WOM (Maxham 2001). Similarly, Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) identify involvement and opinion leadership as antecedents to WOM. In a seminal article, Dichter (1966) suggested the presence of four main motivational categories to positive WOM: product

involvement, self involvement, involvement with others, i.e., concern for others, and message involvement. Scholars later built on Dichter's work and offered new motives such as anxiety reduction and venting negative feelings (see, e.g., Sundaram, Mitra and Webster 1998).

More recently, with the progress of the Internet, researchers have turned to *Word-of-Mouse* and research in this area has been increasing (see, e.g., Xia and Nasr Bechwati 2008). In 2004, Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler studied the drivers of contribution to online review forums. Their research suggests that consumers' desire for social interaction, desire for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth are the primary factors leading to eWOM behavior.

Opinion Leadership. Opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the purchasing behavior of other consumers in specific product fields (Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman 1996). Opinion leadership has long been of interest to marketing researchers because opinion leaders play an important role in consumer decision making (Zeithaml 1991) including encouraging others to adopt innovations (Rogers 1983). Researchers have examined antecedents of opinion leadership and personal characteristics of opinion leaders (and seekers) (see, e.g., Flynn et al. 1996 and Tsang and Zhou 2005). Antecedents to opinion leadership include perceived knowledge and involvement with the product (Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988). In addition, opinion leaders tend to be high on self-esteem and tendency to conform (Clark and Goldsmith 2005). It is worth noting that Lyons and Henderson (2005) studied opinion leadership in computer-mediated environment and found similar antecedents.

Although interrelated, WOM and product recommendations are not the same. WOM can be negative. In addition, positive WOM is broader than recommendations and does not necessarily involve the specific call

for action as recommendations do. Hence, recommendations are one specific form of positive WOM communications. Similarly, studying consumer recommendations is not the same as opinion leadership. While recommenders can be ordinary/average consumers, opinion leaders are seen as knowledgeable in certain fields (e.g., fashion, technology, etc.) and, accordingly, are asked for their opinions in their “areas of expertise.”

Consumer Recommendations. Given their importance, consumer recommendations have been addressed by marketing researchers mainly in two different ways. First, researchers have focused on referral management. Studies addressed the importance of referral management and the management of social interactions (Godes et al. 2005). Other researchers examined the effectiveness of reward programs aiming at enticing referrals (Biyalgorsky et al. 2001). Second, researchers have mainly treated recommending a product/firm as one “outcome” variable, among many others such as loyalty and repeat purchase. As a result, product recommendations have been a standard consequence in studies focusing on satisfaction (see, e.g., Cronin, Brady and Hult 2000), service quality (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman 1996), and service recovery (see, e.g., Eisingerich and Bell 2007).

Consumer researchers also have attempted to examine the antecedents of consumer recommendations. Curren and Folkes (1987) studied attributional antecedents of consumer communications about products including the desire to complain to a firm, compliment a firm, warn against, or recommend a product to other consumers. Curren and Folkes (1987) manipulated dimensions of attribution, i.e., locus, controllability and stability to understand experiences leading to recommendations. Johnson, Zinkhan and Ayala (1998) focused on service referral and proposed a model consisting of four predictors of willingness to recommend a

service provider: affect, outcome, competency and courtesy.

Methodologies. Scholars have used a variety of research techniques to examine the motivations and antecedents of consumer communications. Structured surveys have been used in many studies on WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988) and opinion leadership (Clark and Goldsmith 2005; Lyons and Henderson). Few researchers have used the critical incident technique to understand the underlying motives of WOM (Sundaram et al. 1998) and interactions among different consumers (Zhang, Beatty and Mothersbaugh 2010). Other researchers have used a combination of methods; see, for example, Mazzarol et al. (2007) who used both focus groups and the critical incident technique to investigate drivers of Word of Mouth. The two studies most similar to the research described in this article [by specifically focusing on antecedents to consumer recommendations], namely Curren and Folkes (1987) and Johnson et al. (1998), used laboratory experiments involving hypothetical scenarios to manipulate the independent variables of interest.

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW

The review of the literature on offline consumer recommendations reveals two main categories of antecedent variables. The first category consists of personality traits such as self-esteem and a tendency to be concerned for others. The second set relates to consumers’ experience with the product or firm such as satisfaction with the product performance and pleasant service recovery. Studies on online consumer recommendations reveal antecedents mostly similar to those of recommendations made offline.

In our research, we investigate the existence of antecedent variables pertaining to the circumstances surrounding the recommendation incident. Given that these circumstances might vary significantly

between offline and online contexts, we present two studies focusing on face-to-face and online recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

Two studies are conducted. In the first study, we use the critical incident method and perform content analysis on answers provided by 100 respondents describing their experiences and explaining why they had recommended a product to a friend. In the second study, we examine product recommendations in an online context by performing content analyses of about 1,000 recommendations posted on a product review web site. In these analyses, we focus on comparing face-to-face and online recommendations.

This approach differs from that of most previous researchers in the area of consumer recommendations. Instead of using experiments with hypothetical scenarios (Johnson et al. 1998) to test the influence of pre-determined factor(s) on consumer recommendations (Curren and Folkes 1987), we perform content analysis on unstructured consumer reports of their actual experiences.

The critical incident technique used in Study 1 enables us to have a richer picture of consumers' thinking processes. The critical incident method mainly relies on a set of procedures to collect, content analyze, and classify observations of human behavior (Flanagan 1954). Researchers have used the critical incident technique extensively in marketing research (Gremler 2004) to study, among other areas, sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in service encounters (see, e.g., Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990), customer switching behavior (see, e.g., Keaveney 1995) and gift giving (see, e.g., Ruth, Otnes and Brunel 1999). This "story telling" method has proven to be a powerful tool that allows respondents to determine which details are the most relevant to them for the phenomenon being investigated (Gremler, 2004, p.66). Such a technique is particularly suitable for a study similar to others aiming at unveiling

important circumstances surrounding a recommendation situation.

The content analysis technique has been frequently used to gain insights to different aspects of consumer behavior. For instance, consumer researchers have used content analysis to better understand consumers' perceptions of pricing unfairness (Nasr Bechwati, Sisodia and Sheth 2008) and response to advertising messages (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Content analysis has been also used by researchers examining online data, both consumer postings (see, e.g., Jayanti 2010) and firm websites (see, e.g., Dou, Nielsen and Tan 2002; Okazaki 2006). The advantage of analyzing online postings is that it is an unobtrusive method of data collection where the provider of the comments is not affected by the researcher in any way. By using the critical incident method in face-to-face encounters and analyzing the content of recommendations posted online we aim to better understand triggers to both personal and impersonal recommendations and comparing them.

Study 1

Sample and Design

One hundred undergraduate students completed a cross sectional survey for course credit. The sample consisted of 48% females where the mean age was 21 years. In the survey, respondents were asked to describe a situation where they "recommended a product/service to someone (a friend, colleague, family member, etc.) during the past twelve months." Respondents were told that it would be helpful to describe, in detail, what happened exactly and what made them make this recommendation. Similar instructions have been used by researchers applying the critical incident method of data collection (see, e.g., Bitner 1990; Keaveney 1995).

In an attempt to capture the full purchase cycle, respondents then were asked to describe what made them buy or know

about the recommended product in the first place. Similar to the first question, the second question was open-ended and respondents were asked to provide as many details as possible. Then, 7-point Likert type scales were used to measure respondents' own satisfaction with the recommended product, their attachment to the product and their level of activism. Appendix A reveals the scales used and related references.

A thorough content analysis was performed on the responses to questions one and two. Two judges worked sequentially on the content analysis. The first judge repeatedly examined the answers provided and identified emerging common themes and surfacing categorizations. The emerging themes and interpretations made by a first judge were then used for categorization by the second judge. The second judge confirmed the work done by the first judge by finding the structure set by the first judge to be accurate. Categorizations proposed by the first judge accommodated virtually all cases encountered and interpretations fairly represented the data at hand. Notably, Cohen's Kappa, a statistical measure of inter-rater reliability, was 0.94.

Findings

Direct Triggers of Recommendations.

Analyses of Study 1 data revealed the existence of two circumstantial triggers and two internal triggers to consumer recommendations. The first external or circumstantial trigger was being approached and asked for advice. The data suggest that asking for assistance seems to generate a number of recommendations (32%). In effect, respondents wrote things such as: "I was approached by my friend who had recently broken his iPod" and "One of my cousins was looking for a cell phone to buy, so she asked me which one I could recommend."

The second circumstantial trigger was hearing a complaint about a currently used

product or a problem needing a solution. The data reveal that many recommenders (28%) volunteer recommendations upon hearing complaints. Respondents, for example, stated such things as "I recommended my aunt to purchase an iPod because she complained how her old MP3 player was useless," and "While I was doing my make-up, she was doing her hair and she was complaining about how horrible her hair straightener was. That's when I jumped in and recommended the one that I used."

Several recommendations appear to be motivated by internal factors without the presence of a contextual trigger. The first internal trigger for recommendations was extreme passion for the product/firm. Examples of recommendations motivated by passionate consumers include "I strive to convert as many people to the Mac for the simple reason that, in my eyes, it is a superior machine; I find that enough of a reason to recommend this product to, virtually, anyone." A second internal driver for recommendations was self-interest and the desire to make money out of the recommendations. Selfish reasons are illustrated in the following statements "The sale of another vehicle would increase my father's credibility and possibly increase future business," and "I mainly recommend it because the more people who invest in this product the more money I can make out of it."

Finally, it is notable that our analyses show that delight is not always felt by recommenders. To illustrate: about 34% of our respondents did not report the highest level of satisfaction of 7 on a 7-point scale. Hence, although satisfaction is high among our respondents with a mean 6.3 (sd=.08), delight is not reported by all recommenders. A small portion (7%) of our respondents did not even experience the recommended products themselves.

Other Findings. Data of Study 1 reveal the existence of intimacy between recommenders and recommendees. This intimacy is reflected in the responses of 34% of the

respondents whom, in their descriptions, predicted how recommendees would feel about a product based on personal information about their preferences and resources. Examples of such thoughts include “I thought it was important for it to be durable because my mom drops things a lot,” and “I also know James well. I know that he likes to watch television a lot and he gets bored really easily.”

These findings show that passionate recommenders are driven mainly by their perception of the importance of the product in one’s life or their attachment to the product (see Appendix A for scale items). Respondents’ level of activism was found to not affect the frequency of reported passion-driven recommendations. Previous researchers expected product evangelists to be activists by nature (Bloch 1986).

Finally, analysis of the data confirms the importance of recommendations in driving product acquisitions. In describing what led to them acquiring the product in the first place, respondents mentioned price, product features, and having seen an advertisement. Interestingly, however, several respondents (32%) stated that their purchase was driven by recommendations by friends or family. The analysis of the data also revealed an essential role for trial in acquiring a product. 23% of the respondents bought after they had tried the product with a friend or accepted a firm’s free trial proposal. The findings of Study 1 imply a loop linking trial to satisfaction to product recommendations.

Discussion

The main contribution of Study 1 is revealing the role of contextual factors in triggering recommendations. In effect, a large proportion of recommenders presented their recommendations in response to advice-seeking or upon hearing a complaint. Many respondents described situations where advice was sought or complaints were presented. Although researchers on WOM and opinion leadership have identified related constructs

such as self involvement and concern for others (Dichter 1966; Sundaram et al. 1998), they did not discuss situations that stimulate such motivations. Our collection of incidental data pertaining to the detailed situation including when, where, and how a recommendation occurred helps in drawing a more comprehensive picture of the circumstances surrounding product recommendations. For instance, the finding that recommendations are made in response to hearing a complaint is new and has not been identified as a trigger to consumer recommendations by previous researchers. Such a finding may have interesting practical implications as discussed later in this article.

Data analyses confirm findings of previous research in satisfaction but also raise interesting questions concerning the exclusive role of delight in consumer recommendations. Our results support the role of high levels of satisfaction as a prerequisite for product recommendations. These findings are in line with marketing literature which has identified satisfaction as a main antecedent of positive communications about the product (see, e.g., Mazzarol et al. 2007). Although our research in general supports the special attention given by previous researchers to the construct of delight and its implications concerning referrals and product recommendations (Barnes, Beauchamp and Webster 2010), one third of our respondents did not report total delight with the recommended product and a few of them did not even experience the product themselves. This interesting finding lends additional support for the key role of other factors, particularly circumstantial ones, in triggering offline recommendations.

The familiarity or intimacy between recommenders and recommendees revealed in Study 1 is an intriguing finding that might shed new light on our understanding of product recommendations. Previous researchers have examined the role of personal ties between the two parties and have pointed to the fact that stronger ties lead to more effective messages (Brown and Reingen 1987). These researchers were, however,

mainly concerned with credibility and linked stronger ties to higher levels of trust in the recommenders.

Our findings reveal something different where familiarity means an intimate knowledge of the recommendees' preferences and characteristics implying the ability to make better or more suitable recommendations. This finding is in line with Xia and Nasr Bechwati's (2008) finding that a reader's ability to cognitively personalize with a product review makes the review resonate better with the reader and, hence, more influential.

Findings of Study 1 have useful managerial implications. For instance, findings point to the extreme importance of product trial as an essential step that ultimately leads to product recommendations. Marketing academicians and practitioners have emphasized the role of trial and have come up with creative ways to enable potential consumers to try less traditionally divisible products such as offering free trial periods for intangible services and limited-time free downloads. Our findings reinforce the need for such creative strategies.

Results of Study 1 involving exclusively offline cases raise intriguing questions about online product recommendations. First, the two types of external recommendations triggers identified in Study 1, namely responding to advice seeking and to complaints, do not seem to have a "natural" context online. Hence, in the absence of such triggering contexts online, it is interesting to investigate whether it is appropriate to conclude that all online recommenders are either strongly passionate about the products they recommend or driven by selfish reasons. Second, the clear existence of intimacy between provider and receiver of a recommendation and the impact of personal information in offline contexts as revealed in our first study raise interesting questions about the motives of online recommenders and the effectiveness of online recommendations where both intimacy and personal information is lacking. Third, the importance of contextual factors unveiled in

Study 1 is intriguing as it, on one hand, might imply that different dynamics rule online recommendations. On the other hand, this phenomenon might encourage onliners to try to simulate an environment similar to that offline where potential recommenders have the opportunity to be sought for advice or to know of a complaint online.

Study 2

Sample and Design

In Study 2, content analysis was performed on 1,000 product recommendations posted online on buzzillions.com. Buzzillions.com is a product review site with approximately twelve million reviews. It covers a wide variety of products including, among others, electronics, sports, clothing, books, and home and gardening. Buzzillions.com is not a retailer; the website managers state that all reviews are posted by real consumers, not retailers. [We, however, could not verify this statement.] The posted reviews can be positive or negative. Each review posting is followed by a question about whether or not the reviewer recommends the product/service to others.

One hundred students were asked to go to the buzzillions.com website and randomly choose one review for each of ten products/services of interest to them. The only restriction set on their choice of a review was to only include reviews where the reviewer recommended the product (i.e., answered "yes" to the recommendation question). Hence, a total number of 1,000 reviews posted online were reviewed. The recommendations chosen covered approximately 900 brands in several industries.

A content analysis was performed on the reviews posted online. First, two judges worked separately on looking for indications whether the online triggers match those of the offline context as found in Study 1. Second, the judges worked sequentially on additional content analysis. In this phase of the analysis,

the first judge repeatedly examined the reviews posted and identified emerging common themes. The emerging themes and interpretations made by that first judge were then used for confirmation (or lack) by the second judge. The second judge confirmed the work of the first judge by finding the structure set by the first judge to be accurate (Cohen's $Kappa = 0.91$). The interpretations/categorizations made by the first judge were viewed to be a fair and accurate representation of the data at hand.

Findings

Online vs. Offline Triggers of Consumer Recommendations.

Our examinations of the online postings in comparison to the triggers found in Study 1 reveal that online recommendations are ruled by dynamics different than those of offline recommendations. Of the two external and two internal triggers identified in Study 1, delight with the product seems to be the main driver of online recommendations. In effect, none of the 1,000 posted reviews referred to the reviewer being asked for advice and, hence, writing the review in response. Similarly, none of the reviews included a mention of hearing complaints from others. In addition, self-interest was not reported in any of the online reviews examined.

These results reveal an overwhelming satisfaction, even total delight, with the product recommended. Reviewers praised the product features and described their positive experience with the product. A significant percentage of reviews used expressions like "I love this product" (38%) and "the best product I have ever had" (29%). To further examine the extent to which recommenders were driven by passion for the product, we analyzed the posted recommendations for other statements of hyperbole such as "awesome", "superb" and "perfect". Interestingly, such extreme terms were used in the vast majority of the reviews. Hence,

recommenders appeared to be passionate in describing product performance and superiority.

Other Findings. Study 1 revealed the existence of intimacy between recommenders and recommendees with recommenders predicting how recommendees would feel about a product based on personal information about their preferences and resources. As expected, this did not occur in online recommendations where reviewers do not know the readers. However, interestingly, reviewers provided information about themselves that could be quite relevant and useful to the readers. For instance, almost one-fourth of the reviews included expressions like "I have a dark skin", "my feet are wide with high arches" and "I am a full-time working mom". While reviewers were not expected to know the readers of their recommendations, they seemed to include in their recommendations descriptions to help these readers determine how suitable a product might be for them. Similarly, approximately, 19% of the online recommenders included expressions like "if you have a long commute early in the morning" and "if you are a dog lover and have a small house." In other words, recommenders seemed to be concerned with providing readers with information to help them determine whether the product recommended would work for them.

Although none were reportedly sought for advice, a significant number of online reviewers seemed to be concerned about providing the proper advice to the readers. In effect, although all the reviews examined were positive and even passionate, more than one-fourth of the reviewers (26%) drew the reader's attention to negative aspects in the product and warned against certain uses. Accordingly, expressions similar to "the only drawback is", "what I did not like about it" and "make sure you clean the glass before applying the product" were frequent.

Discussion

In comparison to those of Study 1, findings of Study 2 reflected a greater role for delight in triggering consumer recommendations online (vs. offline). While delight was explicitly reported by a limited proportion of respondents in the first study, data of Study 2 reflected the passion that online recommenders overwhelmingly had for the products they recommended. Consumers' excitement about the products they were recommending online was obvious through the extreme terms they used in describing these products. The key role of delight as preached by previous researchers (see, e.g., Barnes et al. 2010) seems to gain even greater importance in the age of electronic networking.

Taken together, the results of studies 1 and 2 provide insights about what online website managers can do to provide online contexts similar, as much as possible, to offline ones leading to consumer recommendations. Given the growth of social media, a major challenge to marketers is to nurture online contexts that help expand beyond recommendations driven by passionately delighted consumers. Practices encouraging postings of complaints and questions are attempts to foster these contexts. Examples of websites encouraging comments and inquiries include, among many, Advice Network and Blurtit.com. Furthermore, to encourage recommendations from less passionate consumers, a growing number of sites invite consumers to review products they bought from them. For instance, Dell.com sends emails to buyers who used their website asking them to review the product(s) they had bought from the site. Similarly, firms can create a forum where consumers share their favorable experiences. Examples of such tactics include Chevrolet dealers' sponsoring Corvette clubs to provide reinforcement for existing enthusiasts and a support group for sports car newcomers (Bloch 1986).

The analyses of the online reviews in Study 2 present interesting implications about

the usefulness of online recommendations. Research in persuasion has implicitly questioned the usefulness and effectiveness of messages presented by total strangers (see, e.g., Ratneshwar and Chaiken 1991; Tormala and Petty 2004). Data from Study 2 imply that online reviewers seem to take their task seriously and try hard to provide relevant and proper advice through (1) trying to describe the best fit for the product, and (2) cautioning against negative features or applications. This finding is refreshing and is in line with previous research identifying involvement (Ditcher 1966) and concern for other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) as main motives for consumer communications.

Given the findings gained in Study 2, it is worth noting that firms can provide platforms to encourage practices that improve the relevance and usefulness of online consumer recommendations despite the lack of personal familiarity. Firms are taking steps that aid consumers provide more effective recommendations through, e.g., enabling consumers to identify the most relevant reviews via techniques similar to segmentation and targeting practices traditionally applied by marketers. Similar to L. L. Bean's, websites can ask reviewers to provide information about themselves before posting their comments. Other websites allow for questions and, hence, for reviewers to provide answers to specific questions (see, e.g., product-reviews.net). A few sites also group consumers to form more homogenous clusters. Examples of such sites include amazon.com and reddit.com, both of which use moderators to form niche communities. On the other hand, several sites ask reviewers to state both the pros and the cons of a product (see, e.g., zappos.com) or provide an editor's summary of all reviews posted (such as theperformanceleader.com).

Usefulness of online reviews is highly contingent on whether these reviews are driven by self-interest with credibility being a particularly important issue online. While findings of Study 1 reveal the existence of recommendations motivated by self-interest,

the 1,000 online reviews analyzed in Study 2 are void of any explicit reference to self-interest. This finding is expected but does not preclude the existence of such hidden motives even among the 1,000 reviews analyzed. The possibility of providing a review for selfish reasons presents a challenge to website managers. Several sites ask corporate reviewers to clearly state their identity (see, e.g., buzzillions.net). However, controlling for self-interest-driven recommendations might be unachievable. Hence, there is a need to educate readers to discard such reviews through, e.g., focusing on average ratings and avoiding reliance on reviews when only a few of them are posted.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The main contribution of this research is its comparison of triggers of online consumer recommendations to those offline. The use of the critical incident technique offline helped us to reveal interesting findings about the circumstances leading to offline recommendations. The content analysis of a large number of recommendations posted online for a wide array of products provides us with a natural and telling picture. Our findings lead to interesting insights and implications such as the growing importance of delight in the Internet age and the need to provide opportunities for consumers to complain and seek advice online. We also provide examples of practices that can improve the relevance and usefulness of online reviews.

The methods used in this research can be supplemented by other techniques to further examine the data and enrich the studying of consumer recommendations. First, despite its usefulness, the critical incident technique has limitations such as lack of accurate recall and selective choice of incidents (Gremler 2004). Supplementing this technique with other methods such as keeping diaries by panels can help deal with these limitations. In addition, expanding the

pool of respondents beyond college students to include more heterogeneous groups of consumers may reveal additional triggering contexts. Second, although unobtrusive and inclusive of a wide variety of products, the content analysis of online postings is a first step toward understanding online recommendations. Supplementing content analysis with communicating with reviewers through, for example surveys, may help better detect additional contexts that trigger online recommendations.

This research raises several questions which we believe are worth investigating in the future. For example, an interesting research project would be to examine whether and how the dynamics described above change across industries.

This study purposefully investigates a wide variety of products to focus on the act of recommending per se. However, previous research has identified product involvement as one of the few main antecedents of product recommendations (Dichter 1966). Hence, the impact of product type on product recommendations dynamics might vary and is interesting to study. Another natural extension to our work is to further investigate what triggers readers of online reviews to accept or reject a recommendation.

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Appendix A**Scales – Study 1**

Scale & Items	Source(s)
Satisfaction ($r=.67$; $p<.001$)	Schindler et al. (2005)
I was delighted with this product/service at the time I made the recommendation.	
This product was a good value for me.	
Attachment to the Product ($\alpha=.71$)	Bloch & Richins (1983); Mittal (1995)
It would take a lot for me to walk away from this product.	
Buying this product would be like giving myself a treat.	
I would be disappointed if this product suddenly became unavailable.	
I want others to feel as positively about this product as I do.	
Activism ($\alpha=.80$)	Seguin, Pelletier and Hunsley (1998); Curtin, Stewart and Duncan (2010)
I often participate in community development projects/activities.	
I promote norms designed to benefit society.	
I tend to educate others about critical political or social issues.	
I write to officials to make my concerns known.	