Title

Social Influence on online wine evaluations at a wine social networking site: Effects of consensus and expertise

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

Social influence, wine evaluations, social networking

Research Question

Do wine drinkers belonging to a wine social network form their opinion 1) guided by the sheer number of agreeing others in their group, or information obtained from the other

Methods

Using this naturalistic data based on 13,712 notes about 209 wines posted by wine drinkers at a wine social networking site, we conduct an archival analysis

Results

Social influence on wine evaluations occurred through the communication of a descriptive norm via written information. We provide empirical evidence that suggests that there is both normative and informational influence

Abstract

“I can certainly see that you know your wine. Most of the guests who stay here wouldn’t know the difference between Bordeaux and Claret.” Basil Fawlty, ‘Fawlty Towers’

Evaluations of wine, like many other forms of evaluation, might sensibly be based on the views of others, especially if one is as ignorant as Basil Fawlty. Wine drinkers typically pay attention not only to prices but also to others’, especially experts’, ratings to determine the quality of a wine (Schamel, 2000). Yet, several studies (e.g., Ashenfelter, 1990; Hodgson, 2008) have shown that an expert’s opinion regarding quality can be seriously flawed. Moreover, as Reuter (2009) explains, due to conflict of interest, a wine expert’s reviews might be biased
(e.g., where a magazine, such as Wine Spectator, is an influential rating agency, and its reliance on advertising revenues may be associated with an inflation of ratings for advertisers’ wines).

While economists have studied how signals from unfamiliar others – wine experts and price setters – play an important role in shaping wine drinkers’ opinions regarding the quality of a bottle of wine, social psychologists have extensively documented how and why people are influenced by actions and the beliefs of similar others (Asch, 1956; Cialdini et al., 1990; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Sherif, 1936). This research typically distinguishes influence that is ‘normative’ (“to conform with the positive expectations of another”; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955, p. 629) versus ‘informational’ (“to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality”; ibid.). Social-psychological research has also shown that social influence has a significant effect even when the actions of the other people are not directly observed (Nolan et al., 2008). An obvious, if relatively ignored, source of wider influence is provided by the wide reach and easy access provided by the internet, with consumers having even started “… abandoning traditional expert sources in favor of the perspectives of their peers” (Griskevicius et al., 2008, p. 84) over a wide range of issues (see Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Iyengar et al., 2009). In the case of this more distal influence via the internet, where people are not members of a face-to-face group whose members have expectations they feel compelled to conform with, the views of others are still influential.

Consensus is one of the most important factors in determining the extent to which people will conform to others (e.g., Asch, 1951; Gerard, Wilhelmy, & Conolley, 1968) and it gives a source credibility and ensures that it is seen as a valid source of information, with unanimity across source members being especially influential (Allen, 1975; Allen & Levine, 1971). Yet early studies on the relationship between group consensus and social influence, albeit using a wide range of tasks and source manipulations, provided conflicting results on the relationship between group consensus and social influence. Some studies revealed a curvilinear relationship between consensus and influence (e.g., Asch, 1951; Kishida, 1956; Rosenberg, 1961), whereas other studies found a linear relationship between consensus level and influence (e.g., Gerard et al., 1968; Lascu, Bearden, & Rose, 1995; Nordholm, 1975). Yet another set of studies failed to find a linear relationship (e.g., Goldberg, 1954; Kidd, 1958; Reis, Earing, Kent, & Nezlek, 1976).

In this paper we analyze the ratings posted by regular wine drinkers belonging to a web-based wine network, where wine evaluations and ratings become available to members once they are posted. Using this naturalistic data we conduct an archival analysis to ascertain the extent of the influence that prior ratings have in shaping other group members’ opinions. The analysis focuses, in particular, on individuals’ and the group’s average ratings of a bottle of wine. By doing so, it effectively tests the validity of the argument that wine drinkers belonging to such a group or community form their opinion, and thereafter assign a particular rating either because they are guided by the sheer number of agreeing others in their group (a ‘consensus heuristic’ which leads them to conform to the majority view), or because they accept information obtained from the other members of the group as evidence about reality (see Festinger, 1950), in which case they should be more influenced by other members who are more expert.

Our findings suggest that social influence on wine evaluations occurred through the communication of a descriptive norm via written information. We provide empirical evidence that suggests that there is both normative and informational influence on online wine evaluations, but that normative influence is greater than the effect of experts’ ratings. This influence comes mainly from the first few group members, and increases as a function of source uniformity. Together with a lack of evidence that more expert members have more influence, these findings suggest that influence in this setting is more normative than informational. Results have implications for widespread effects of social influence on consumer and other websites where we are subject to the power of others’ opinions.