

Online Word of Mouth: Characteristics of Yelp.com Reviews

Tiana Tucker*

Communication Science
Elon University

Abstract

This study used speech code theory to explain and evaluate how computer users communicate by posting reviews on the consumer-oriented website Yelp.com. A content analysis was completed of 763 reviews, and among them, 106 were more closely examined to discover how the characteristics of reviews related to ratings of those reviews. Drawing on literature, the researcher sought to study electronic word-of-mouth communications according to genre, consumer influences, and opinion-leader behavior, comparing all to traditional word-of-mouth interaction. The research revealed specific characteristics that were unique to each of the three categories. Overall, opinion leaders on Yelp, a group of regular users who have gained elite status in the community, did carry more authority with review readers than non-elite members of the Yelp community.

I. Introduction

Consumers will trust friends, friends of friends and even a stranger's recommendation before they trust anything that the glitzy marketing and advertising agencies shove at them. Word of mouth communication has always been relied upon by many generations of consumers and business owners. Marketing and advertising agencies have continuously lost trust with consumers since the days when the founding principles of the fields were created. On the other hand, fellow consumers' voices have continued to steadily increase in credibility. Given those dynamics, this study sought to explore what characteristics make these user-generated reviews credible to other consumers.

The author examined online consumers' word of mouth on the user generated web site Yelp to find the contextual commonalities the reviews have under each category of *useful*, *cool* or *funny* as classified by review readers. The purpose is to identify the trends that define the type of language and symbols used in each of the three categories that review readers used in their evaluations. Because such user interaction is sure to expand, this study helps researchers to better explore the ways that peer-driven communications work in a digital arena such as a consumer-driven website. The speech code theory will be used as a lens through which to analyze the type of language used in the reviews when describing an experience at particular business establishment. This research closely examined the specific approach the users employed in the Yelp speech community to communicate their message to other people seeking information from fellow consumers like themselves.

II. Literature Review

The majority of literature regarding the topic of electronic word of mouth platforms deals with the fol-

* **Keywords:** online reviews, Yelp, online community, online word of mouth, and elite status users

Email: ttucker2@elon.edu

lowing four areas: definitions of electronic word of mouth, influences on purchase decisions, characteristics of leaders among users, and comparisons to traditional word of mouth activities. Additional literature about the speech code theory's basic elements and characteristics is also included within this section.

Electronic Word of Mouth

Electronic word of mouth is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). According to Keller and Berry (2003), many of *the Influentials*, consumers 18 years or older, identified people as the best sources over advertising for recommendations when looking for some items. For example, their percentage reached 83% for new restaurants, 73% for new meals or dishes, and 71% for places to go visit at (2003, p. 5).

Consumers produce user-generated web sites' reviews, which serve as "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987; Steffes et al., 2008). Researchers Steffes and Burgee (2008) found that electronic word of mouth from one virtual stranger to another was equally as valuable as receiving purchasing advice from a trustworthy friend, if not preferred.

Opinion Leaders

Opinion leaders who surface on electronic word of mouth web sites such as Yelp are typically more engaged in the environment and provide more explanatory information, in addition to using the Internet more frequently than others (Lyons et al., 2005; Steffes et al., 2008). Authority in Web 2.0 environments is bestowed on users in accordance with the quantity of ratings individuals gain and on their helpfulness as judged by their peers (Funk, 2009, p. 12). Researcher Funk notes that status and reputation are important attributes on sites powered by user-generated content, and "we wear our authority on our sleeves," (2009, p. 13).

Yelp's Foundation and Purposes

Yelp attempted to solve the problem with the traditional model of word of mouth. Word of mouth had not evolved to be more relevant and readily available in people's 21st century search for local establishments recommended by ordinary consumers. The director of communication, Stephanie Ichinose, mentioned in an interview that Yelpers are supplying information to the bloggers, supporting local businesses, helping share potentially useful information with others and being a fixture in a local community of people zealous about sharing experiences (as cited in Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 90).

In 2009, Yelp carried more than 3.5 million reviews on the site and had 14 million unique visits. These numbers are continuing to grow with each passing day (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 90-91). The average Yelper, or web site visitor, comes to the site casually seeking to find information. Overall the types of establishments that Yelp has reviews on varied, with restaurants only accounting for 34% of businesses reviewed. This counters the popular notion that Yelp reviews are *mostly* on restaurants. The next largest area of reviews is the shopping category, which makes up 23% of the reviews (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 93).

Yelp is a part of a group of web sites called participatory sites, or Web 2.0 sites, that allow users to submit reviews on businesses, with other consumers being the primary audience. User ratings are what consumers trust most, according to numerous studies that cite that recommendations from customers like themselves have the largest influence on their purchasing decisions. Web 2.0 web sites, such as Yelp, create an environment where consumers can communicate about their experience at a particular business in frank and practical language (Funk, 2009, p. 11).

Interests of Yelp Users

Tancer (2008) found that the majority of Yelp users could be categorized into two divisions, using Experian's MOSAIC segmentation of the "Young Contemporaries" and the "Affluent Suburbia." The "Young Contemporaries" are composed of Millennials between the ages of 18 to 24 whose interests lie in plays, movies, comics and bands. These young adults were raised in an era filled with rapid technology advancements; thus, "they are very Internet savvy, spending their leisure time online to chat, job search, send instant messages, bid in auctions and frequent internet dating web sites" (Tancer, 2008, p. 134).

The "Affluent Suburbia" are people who "tend to be households that are occupied by baby boomers

and their children. They generally hold managerial and executive positions, with primary interests that include money management, travel, and gourmet dining” (Tancer, 2008, pp. 134-135). Tancer (2008) also points out that with the most prominent groups on Yelp being from two different generations, they thus have different viewpoints, which could create contrary experiences and evaluations (p.135).

Speech Code Theory

Communication patterns of members of the Yelp discourse community, a group of people that share a unique way of communicating, were analyzed using the speech codes theory. The theory is primarily concerned with the changes that an individual’s speech undergoes within a particular speech community as related to the content, style and tone in addition to the overall framework for delivering and interpreting information. (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 57). Philipsen (1997) notes in one of his earlier works that speech code is a method of “socially-constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (p. 126).

There are two critical elements to understanding how code is used in the speech codes theory. The first involves observer-analysts who create speech codes for the specific task of interpreting and explaining communicative behavior within a distinct speech community (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 57). The second involves located resources that are used to assign names, interpretations and judgments as related to communicative conduct. During the preliminary phase of purely observing random samples of reviews, commonalities in the way users communicate were sought to define various speech codes to be used for the content analysis. The identified codes are those that function best within the social community in accordance with the purpose of Yelp and are ultimately embedded in the social life of the participants. (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 57).

In this research, the following three questions were examined.

RQ 1. What common stylistic characteristics in online business reviews on Yelp consistently gather review reader feedback as *useful*, *funny* and *cool*?

RQ 2. Are the Elite Yelp reviewers’ evaluations receiving the most review reader feedback as *useful*, *funny*, or *cool*?

RQ 3. Is there an equal distribution of Non-Elite and Elite user reviews within each category?

III. Methodology

To execute this research, a systematic, quantitative and objective method of content analysis was used to answer the research questions.

To identify the characteristics that make online consumer reviews valuable, a content analysis was conducted. The coding themes were designed to capture the meaning or value that the reader gave the text, in accordance with the symbolic interaction theory. The following four categories were identified as the coding components:

- Elite Status – Elite or Non-Elite
- Star Ratings – One, Two, Three, Four or Five Stars
- Format – listed/number/bulleted items, words in all capital letters, short length(80 words or less), long length(350 words or more), repetition of letter, and repetition of words
- Statement – service quality, atmosphere, frequent visitor, 1st time visitor, prices, photo, and anticipated return

The District of Columbia’s “*Hot on Yelp* in the last month” is a list compiled by Yelp that features the top 50 businesses in a particular metropolitan area, the population used for this study. The list focused on the top four establishments that all happened to be restaurants.

Each Yelp review completed by Elite Yelp reviewers and non-Elite Yelp reviewers was assessed against the previously mentioned criteria. Reviews that received three or more user votes for any of the three categories, *useful*, *funny* or *cool*, were included in the sample. Among a total of 763 reviews examined, 106 reviews (14%) were recorded because they met the selection criterion.

IV. Findings

Among the qualifying reviews 68 reviews (64.2%) were rated as useful, while the *cool* reviews accounted for 35 reviews (33.0%), and the *funny ones*, 21 reviews (19.8%), as shown in Table 1 below. Of all reviews that received votes, 95 reviews (89.6%) mentioned the atmosphere of the restaurant to some extent. The next common characteristic was the discussion of service quality in the review, which represented 80.2% of the data collected (85 reviews).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for three categories of reviews

Category	Number	Percentage	Star Rating Average
Useful	68* out of 106	64.2%	3.3
Cool	35* out of 106	33.0%	4
Funny	21* out of 106	19.8%	4

Note: *A total of 17 selected reviews were included in *multiple* categories.

Reviews Voted Useful

The largest group of the three categories was the *useful* category. In this area Yelp reviewers seemed to be the most critical by assigning an average star rating of 3.3 for the overall experience. This was also a group of reviews that was not tremendously skewed in favor of Yelp Elite reviewers. It turned out that the Elite only represented 56%, while Non-Elite reviews did the rest (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics by elite / non-elite ranking

Elite Status	Useful	Cool	Funny
Elite	38 (56%)	28 (80%)	17 (81%)
Non-Elite	30 (44%)	7 (20%)	4 (19%)

Readers did not seem to mind reading a review that was longer. According to Table 3 below, 37% of all the *useful* reviews were at least 350 words or more. Short reviews, 80 words or less, were less likely to be *useful*, only accounting for 6% of all *useful* reviews. *Useful* reviews were also more likely than either the *cool* or *funny* categories to use all capital letters for some words to emphasize reviewers' point (41%). Among useful reviews, 15% have bulleted list or numbered items.

People who were visiting an establishment for the first time were more likely to write a *useful* review, accounting for 44% of *useful* pieces. Among useful reviews, 76% mentioned service quality, more prevalent in the *useful* category than in the *funny* and *cool* categories. The price of items on the menu or other things in the restaurant facility showed up in their reviews at a frequency of 43%, which is the highest of all groups. *Useful* reviews were the least likely to include whether the writer intended to visit an establishment again in the future, making up a mere 34% of reviews.

Reviews Voted Cool and Funny

Reviews that were voted as *cool* was the second largest group, representing 28% of the data, while *funny* reviews constituted the smallest portion of all with 17%. Regarding both the *cool* and *funny* reviews, average star rating was 4 stars for the complete restaurant experience, thus these reviews tended to include more positive feedback than the *useful* reviews. Yelp Elite reviewers created much more *cool* (80%) and *funny* (81%) reviews than the non-Elite reviewers (see Table 2 above).

The formatting style of *funny* and *cool* reviews favored a more informal delivery and diction for expressing their opinions than the *useful* reviews. *Cool* and *funny* reviews' frequency of the repetition of letters (funny 14%) and words (cool 9%) was high considering the amount of reviews in comparison to the *useful*

reviews. Both the cool and funny reviews were most likely to be short, which accounted for 9% and 10% respectively for each area's reviews.

The *cool* and *funny* reviewers would more likely to return to the reviewed restaurant a second time than *useful* reviewers. The reviews voted as *cool* were also most inclined to include information about the general atmosphere of the restaurant of all three categories with 80 percent.

Table 3: Distribution of all reviews among each category

	Useful (68 reviews)	Cool (35 reviews)	Funny (21 reviews)
300 or more words	25(37%)	7(20%)	4(19%)
80 or less words	4(6%)	3(9%)	2(10%)
Photos	3(4%)	2(6%)	0
Word in all capitals	28(41%)	13(37%)	7(33%)
Bulleted, numbered list	10(15%)	4(11%)	2(10%)
Word Repetition	7(10%)	3(9%)	1(5%)
First time client	30(44%)	13(37%)	6(29%)
Service quality	52(76%)	22(63%)	12(57%)
Price	29(43%)	11(31%)	4(19%)
Atmosphere/Facilities	54(76%)	28(80%)	16(76%)
Intention of Second visit	23(34%)	16(46%)	8(38%)
Letter Repetition	1(2%)	2(6%)	3(14%)

V. Conclusions

Electronic word of mouth is a concept that has seemed to grow by leaps and bounds over the past decade. Yelp has expanded to reach markets beyond the first metropolitan area, San Francisco, and now has a presence in over 21 other U.S. markets, in addition to recently entering international markets in Europe.

The opinion leaders of Yelp, the Elite members, are in fact the more active members of the community who are participating in the site more by responding to other members or their readers/fans, filling out their entire profiles and earning compliment badges from peers, completing at least a double digital number of reviews among many other tasks. Lyons and Henderson's (2005) observations held true in evaluating Elite Yelp members; opinion leaders in this online environment are more active in the communities and provide more explanatory information. These Elite members are also creating more audience-engaging content, in which *funny* and *cool* reviews by Elite members dominate both categories with 81% for *funny* and 80% for *cool*.

As Funk (2009) noted, the authority of users in Web 2.0 communities is worn on their sleeves. This directly applies to Yelp, where key identifying information -- elite status, number of friends, number of reviews written to date and their location -- are included to the right of the review by each person. This information allows users to make more informed decisions about the character of a review writer.

Using the speech code theory, a few associations can be made between the type of language used and what it means in the Yelp speech community. First, a discussion of the atmosphere and service are typical characteristics of a review across any of the three groupings for reviews. Second, *cool* review writers were most likely to return to an establishment, mentioning: "I'd go back for drinks..." or "...will definitely be returning to try..." Third, first time patrons, 44%, and the inclusion of prices, 43%, were major staples in the *useful* category. *Useful* reviews also seemed to be the most critical of all reviews receiving ratings with an average star rating of 3.3, while the other areas' average star rating was 4.

In future research a more in-depth analysis of the Elite population's power and supposed psychographics could be assessed. Additional research could focus on evaluating the speech codes found in Yelp reviews in U.S. markets versus international markets, once the international sites grow to a size comparable to the U.S. markets.

Acknowledgments

This author is thankful to Dr. Glenn Scott at Elon University for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published. The author also appreciates numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

References

- Dellarocas, C. (2003). The digitization of word of mouth: Promise and challenges of online feedback mechanisms. *Management Science*, 49(10), 1407-1427.
- Funk, T. (2009). *Web 2.0 and beyond: Understanding the new online business models, trends, and technologies*. Westport, CO: Praeger.
- Gudykunst, W. B., Philipsen, G., Coutu, L., & Covarrubias, P. (2005). Speech codes theory: Restatement, revisions, and response to criticisms. *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 55-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hamburger, Y. (2005). *The social net: understanding human behavior in cyberspace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinions platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), 38-52.
- Keller, E. B., & Berry, J. L. (2003). *The influentials*. New York: Free Press.
- Lyons, B., & Henderson, K. (2005). Opinion leadership in a computer-mediated environment. *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 4, 319-29.
- Philipsen, G., & Albrecht, T. L. (1997). *Developing communication theories*. Albany, NY: State University Of New York Press.
- Safko, L., & Brake, D. (2009). *The social media bible*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Senecal, S., & Nantel, J. (2004). The influence of online product recommendations on consumers online choices. *Journal of Retailing*, 80, 159-169.
- Steffes, E., & Burgee, L. (2009). Social ties and online word of mouth. *Internet Research*, 19, 42-59.
- Tancer, B. (2008). *Click: What millions of people are doing online and why it matters*. New York: Hyperion.
- Westbrook, R. (1987). Product/consumption-based affective responses and post purchase processes. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 24, 258-70.
-