

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENERATION Y STUDENTS' LINK SHARING MOTIVES AND WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION ON FACEBOOK

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—Abstract—

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is acknowledged as a highly persuasive form of consumption-related communication because of its inherent credibility. While WOM communication is essentially beyond the control of marketers, strategic efforts to stimulate positive WOM communication and manage the effects of negative WOM communication are critical to an organisation's competitive sustainability. Online social networking sites, of which Facebook is the largest, are especially suitable for the diffusion of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. Harnessing the power of Facebook to stimulate the spread of positive eWOM communication about brands necessitates understanding the influence of link-sharing motives on eWOM communication. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between Generation Y university students' link-sharing motives of information sharing and the social norm of link sharing, and their product information-sharing, opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of 311 students registered at four campuses from three South African higher education institutions - one from a comprehensive university, two from a traditional university and one from a university of technology. Data analysis included correlation analysis, structural equation modelling, reliability analysis and construct validity analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis established that the five-factor structure comprising information-sharing and social norm link-sharing motives, and product information-sharing, opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook exhibited acceptable model fit and good internal-consistency reliability, composite reliability and construct validity. The results of the path analysis suggest the link-sharing motives of information sharing and social norm positively influence product information-sharing behaviour on Facebook. In turn, the findings of the study suggest that product information-sharing behaviour positively influences opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook,

and that opinion-giving behaviour also positively influences opinion-seeking behaviour on the site.

Key Words: Electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM), Facebook, Link-sharing motives, Generation Y

JEL Classification: M31.

1. INTRODUCTION

The technological advancement from a static World Wide Web to the Web 2.0 brought about the creation of several new types of communication platforms such as wikis, forums, micro-blogs and social media sites, including social networking sites (SNSs) that facilitate an ever increasing level of interactivity, collaboration and content sharing (Allen, 2012). These new communication platforms quickly caught the attention of marketers, who are always looking for new and improved ways of reaching target audiences. Such platforms offer particular potential for reaching the Youth segment, currently labelled Generation Y (individuals born between 1986 and 2005) (Markert, 2004), who, having grown up in the digital age, tend to be technologically astute and heavy users of digital platforms (Nadeem, Andreini, Salo & Laukkanen, 2015).

In 2017, the largest SNS, both globally and in South Africa, was Facebook. Facebook, which was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg as an online forum for college students in the United States of America (Tosun, 2012), currently has 2.01 billion monthly active users worldwide (Titcomb, 2017) and an estimated 14 million monthly active users in South Africa (Shapshak, 2017). In terms of the demographics, Facebook tends to be dominated by adult Generation Y members (Duggan & Brenner, 2013), with 18 to 24 year olds making up 30 percent of the site's population (Statista, 2017). It also tends to be dominated by well-educated individuals who have a tertiary qualification or at least some higher education (Pew Research, 2017), and is especially popular amongst those attending higher education institutions (HEIs) (Botha & Reyneke, 2013; Special & Li-Barber, 2012). This is mirrored in the South African Facebook landscape, with most of the users being between 18 and 29 years of age (37.84%) and being either university graduates (26.58%) or having a postgraduate qualification (19.55%) (My Broadband, 2014).

Facebook offers several attractive features that account for its popularity. In addition to making and accepting friend requests, Facebook allows users to post status updates on their thoughts, opinions, activities and concerns, as well as upload photographs, pictures, videos and quotes that they find interesting (Bevan-

Dye, 2012). On average, 300 million photographs are uploaded to the site daily and 4.75 billion pieces of content are shared daily. It is estimated that every minute on Facebook about 510,000 comments are posted, 293,000 statuses updated and 136,000 photos uploaded (Zephoria, 2017).

From a marketing perspective, an important feature of Facebook is that users can also add organisations and brands to their list of friends by 'liking' their page. They are then able to 'like', comment on and/or share the content posted by their Facebook friends (Kabadayi & Price, 2014), including content from organisations that form part of their list of friends. This content may then be 'liked', commented on and/or shared with each of those respective friends' list of friends. This feature translates into Facebook being a salient platform for the spread of consumption-related word-of-mouth (WOM) communication.

While WOM communication has long been acknowledged as a highly persuasive form of consumption-related communication because of its inherent credibility (Assael, 1987), it takes on a new significance in online environments such as SNSs given the accelerated speed and reach of its diffusion in the digital world (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Despite both traditional and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication being essentially beyond the control of marketers, strategic efforts to stimulate positive WOM communication and manage the effects of negative WOM communication are critical to an organisation's competitive sustainability (Schiffman, Kanuk & Wisenblit, 2010). Harnessing the power of SNSs to stimulate positive eWOM communications essentially involves understanding the factors that influence individuals to engage in product information-sharing behaviour and consumption-related opinion-giving and opinion-seeking behaviour (Chu & Kim, 2011).

Several studies have explored the antecedents of eWOM communication. For example, Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) found that consumers' desire for social interaction and desire for economic incentives, together with their concern for other consumers, and the opportunity to enhance their own self-worth were the primary antecedents of eWOM communication. Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn (2006) found innovativeness, Internet usage and Internet social connection as significant predictors of eWOM behaviour. Chu and Kim (2011) identified tie strength, trust, normative and informational influence as being positive predictors of eWOM in the SNS environment. Cheng and Lee (2012) identified reputation, a sense of belonging and an enjoyment of helping to be the significant positive predictors of consumers' eWOM communication intentions.

Taking a slightly different stance, this study considers SNS link-sharing motives as possible predictors of eWOM communication behaviour. Specifically, it considers the influence of the link-sharing motives of information sharing and the social norm of sharing links on Generation Y university students' product information-sharing behaviour and consumption-related opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook in the South Africa context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Word-of-mouth communication behaviour

One of the earliest writers on opinion leadership, Katz (1957), observed that information and persuasive messages in the mass media often influence opinion leaders first who, in turn, pass on this information to those around them. This hypothesised two-step flow of information encapsulated the concept of the informal interpersonal communication flow that takes place from opinion leaders to opinion seekers or recipients. While it was originally assumed to be a two-step process whereby one individual (the opinion leader) informally influenced the attitudes or behaviour of others (the opinion seekers), further research uncovered that it is rather an interactive two-way process in which an opinion leader may also be an opinion seeker, giving rise to the term WOM communication (Schiffman et al., 2010).

The value of WOM communication to marketing lies in its inherent credibility, which renders it one of the most persuasive forms of communication (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Buttle, 1998; Dichter, 1966). Dichter (1966) explains that this credibility stems from the fact that the opinion leader providing the consumption-related advice is perceived as doing so out of a genuine concern for the needs of the opinion recipient's well-being rather than for any material gain. He adds that the recipient also perceives the opinion giver to have experience with and knowledge about the product category being recommended.

While traditionally the diffusion of WOM communication was slow, confined to two or a few people (Cheng & Lee, 2012), occurred in a spontaneous manner and then disappeared once the conversation was ended (Stern, 1994), the advent of the Internet gave rise to eWOM communication, which is substantially different from traditional WOM communication. The diffusion of eWOM communication is easy and rapid, and is capable of reaching a large number of geographically dispersed individuals, who, in turn, can interactively add their own opinions (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). Moreover, eWOM is more accessible and persistent in that it being typically text-based, can be archived, making it available

and accessible indefinitely (Cheng & Lee, 2012). As such, consumers' ability to gather unbiased consumption-related advice from a multitude of other consumers from across the globe has significantly increased. In addition, digital platforms provide opinion leaders with access to a substantial worldwide audience (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004).

Traditionally, WOM communication is conceptualised as a two dimensional concept comprising opinion seeking and opinion giving behaviour (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996). Based on the notion that many opinion leaders also manifest as opinion seekers because of their desire for more knowledge due to their elevated interest in a specific topic or product category (Schiffman et al., 2010; Assael, 1987), certain studies have tested and found that opinion-giving behaviour is also a significant positive predictor of opinion-seeking behaviour (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Sun et al., 2006).

With eWOM, the traditional two-dimensional construct of opinion-giving and opinion-seeking behaviour is extended to include a third dimension of opinion passing, forwarding or sharing behaviour (Sun et al., 2006). This pass-along effect is peculiar to the online environment and is the result of the ease in which digital content can be duplicated and disseminated across spatial distance, social distance and time (Norman & Russell, 2006). In the case of consumption-related eWOM communication, this opinion passing refers to product information- or opinion-sharing behaviour. While product information-sharing behaviour is a dimension of eWOM communication, it is the contention of this study that opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook presuppose product information-sharing behaviour. This proposal is based on the notion that opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour involve active engagement with consumption-related content, while product information-sharing behaviour is passive in nature, merely involving pressing the share button on Facebook, without giving or seeking advice related to that information. Moreover, the act of sharing product information in a SNS environment is likely to stimulate both opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour concerning the brand or product category in question. It is also the contention of this study that this product information-sharing behaviour on Facebook is influenced by the link-sharing motives of information sharing and the social norm of sharing links on the site.

2.2 Link-sharing motives

Link-sharing motives on SNSs such as Facebook can best be conceptualised in terms of the Uses and Gratifications theory of media behaviour, which includes

individuals' motives for using media and the factors that influence those motives (Baek, Holton, Harp & Yaschur, 2011). The theory adopts a psychological communication perspective, in that it assumes that individuals communicate or use media to gratify certain needs or wants (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). The primary purpose of the theory is to explain why people use certain media and what motivates them to engage in certain media-use behaviours (Ko, Cho & Roberts, 2005). The needs gratified by mass media include information gain, entertainment, passing time and habit (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

In terms of digital media platforms that facilitate interactive communication, together with content creation and sharing, the Uses and Gratifications theory can be extended to include interpersonal communication processes rather than just mass media communication processes, which creates the opportunity to gratify new needs (Sun, Rubin & Haridakis, 2008). On these digital platforms, needs such as self-expression, communication with friends and family, information sharing, including the sharing of information that may be entertaining to others, and passing time, which includes aspects of the social acceptability of sharing content online have been identified as important motives (Papacharissi, 2002).

From the viewpoint of eWOM on SNSs, the information-sharing motive and the social acceptability of sharing consumption-related information may be viewed as particularly salient link-sharing motives. In attitude towards advertising models, the informative and entertainment value are often cited as being positive predictors of people's receptivity to advertising messages (Ducoffe, 1996; Pollay & Mittal, 1993), and this is likely to also apply to their attitude towards receiving eWOM. Given that SNSs are by their very nature social, there are also certain social norms that have to be adhered to, including the social acceptability of sharing links of the site (Kumar, Ramachandran & Panboli, 2015). Just as perceptions of the irritation and invasiveness of advertisement can result in a negative attitude towards marketing messages (Ducoffe, 1996), so too can sharing links on a SNS when it is not considered the social norm.

Based on the above literature review, it was hypothesised that (1) the information-sharing link motive is positively associated with product information-sharing on Facebook, (2) the social norm of sharing links is positively associated with product information-sharing on Facebook, (3) product information-sharing on Facebook is positively associated with opinion-seeking behaviour on the site, (4) product information-sharing on Facebook is positively

associated with opinion-giving behaviour on the site, and (5) opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook is positively associated with opinion-seeking behaviour on the site.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

A descriptive research design, using the single cross-sectional approach was followed in the study.

3.2 Sampling method and data collection

For the study, the target population was specified as Generation Y students aged between 18 and 24 years, registered at public South African HEIs. The sampling frame was limited to those HEI campuses situated in South Africa's Gauteng and North-West provinces. Judgement sampling was used to select four HEI campuses so as to ensure that the sample included participants from each of the three types of public HEIs in the country, namely traditional universities, universities of technology and comprehensive universities. As such, two were selected from a traditional university, one from a university of technology and one from a comprehensive university. Thereafter, 400 questionnaires were distributed by fieldworkers following the mall-intercept survey method across the four campuses to a convenience sample of students who agreed to participate in the study.

3.3 Research instrument

The required data were gathered using a self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire included a section requesting demographic data and a section containing scales from published studies.

The link-sharing motives were measured using items harvested from Baek et al. (2011) and Papacharissi (2002). The information-sharing motive was measured using five items, namely 'I share links on Facebook to provide information', 'I share links on Facebook to share information that may be useful to others', 'I share links on Facebook to share information that might be entertaining to others', 'I share links on Facebook about my special interests' and 'I share links on Facebook to share news'. The social norm of sharing links was measured using three items, namely 'I share links on Facebook because everyone else is doing it', 'I share links on Facebook because it's a popular thing to do' and 'I share links on Facebook because it is a habit'.

The eWOM communication behaviour was measured utilising three scales adapted by Chu and Kim (2011) from the published studies of Flynn et al. (1996) and Sun et al. (2006). Product information-sharing was measured using three items, namely ‘When I receive product-related information or opinion from a friend, I will pass it along to my other contacts on Facebook’, ‘On Facebook, I like to pass along interesting information about products from one group of my contacts on my “friends list” to another’ and ‘I tend to pass along my contacts’ positive reviews of products to other contacts on Facebook’. Opinion-seeking behaviour was measured using the three items of ‘When I consider new products, I ask my friends on Facebook for advise’, ‘I like to get my contacts’ opinions on Facebook before I buy new products’ and ‘I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten my contacts’ opinions on them on Facebook’. Opinion-giving behaviour was measured using the three items of ‘I often persuade my contacts on Facebook to buy products that I like’, ‘My contacts on Facebook pick their products based on what I have told them’ and ‘On Facebook, I often influence my contacts’ opinions about products’. A six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6), was used to record responses to the scaled items.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The questionnaire used to collect the required data was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, North-West University (Vaal Triangle Campus) for ethical clearance prior to distribution. Ethical clearance was subsequently granted (Ethical Clearance Number: ECONIT-2015-010). In addition, all responses were reported in aggregate and student participation was voluntary.

3.5 Data analysis

The captured data was analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS), Versions 24 for Windows. Data analysis procedures used included Pearson’s Product-Moment correlation analysis, collinearity diagnostics, reliability and validity analysis, and structural equation modelling using the maximum likelihood method.

4. RESULTS

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 311 usable questionnaires were returned, which equates to a response rate of 78 percent. The sample included participants from each of the seven age categories specified in the target population as well as participants from each of South Africa’s nine provinces. Of the participants, 61

percent were female and 39 percent male, and 48 percent were registered at the traditional university (Traditional A & B), followed by 40 percent from the university of technology (Technology) and 11 percent from the comprehensive university (Comprehensive). A description of the study's sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample description

	Frequency	Percent (%)		Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender			Province		
Female	190	61.1	Eastern Cape	18	5.8
Male	121	38.9	Free State	23	7.4
Age			Gauteng	159	51.1
18	48	15.4	Kwazulu-Natal	12	3.9
19	102	32.8	Limpopo	44	14.1
20	67	21.5	Mpumalanga	15	4.8
21	40	12.9	North West	30	9.6
22	33	10.6	Northern Cape	7	2.3
23	9	2.9	Western Cape	3	1.0
24	12	3.9			
Institution					
Traditional A	107	34.4			
Traditional B	43	13.8			
Technology	126	40.5			
Comprehensive	35	11.3			

The measurement model proposed in the study was that eWOM on Facebook is a five-factor model comprising the information-sharing motive (five items), the social norm of link sharing motive (three items), product information-sharing behaviour (three items), opinion-seeking behaviour (three items) and opinion-giving behaviour (three items) and. In order to evaluate the nomological validity of the proposed model, a correlation matrix of Pearson's Product-Moment correlation coefficients was constructed, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation matrix

	Information sharing motive	Social norm motive	Product information sharing	Opinion seeking
Information sharing motive				
Social norm motive	.266*			
Product information sharing	.364*	.248*		
Opinion seeking	.356*	.295*	.678*	
Opinion giving	.288*	.379*	.655*	.708*

* $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

As is evident from Table 2, there were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) positive relationships between each of the pairs of latent factors, thereby suggesting the nomological validity of the measurement theory. The strongest correlation occurred between the latent factors of opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour ($r = 0.708$) and, given that this coefficient is well below the recommended level of 0.80, there were no obvious signs of serious multicollinearity. Furthermore, with none of the tolerance values exceeding the cut-off of 0.10 and the average variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1.89 being below the cut-off of 10, there was also no evidence of more subtle forms of multicollinearity (Field, 2009).

Structural equation modelling, using the maximum likelihood approach, was then undertaken on the five-factor model. The first loading on each of the latent factors was fixed at 1.0, which resulted in 153 distinct sample moments and 44 parameters to be estimated, equalling 109 degrees of freedom based on an over-identified model. In addition, there were no problematic estimates such as Heywood cases or standardised loading estimates above 1.0 or below -1.0 (Hair et al., 2010). Reliability and construct validity of the latent factors were assessed by checking the Cronbach alpha values (α), the composite reliability (CR) values, the standardised loading estimates, the average variance extracted (AVE) values, the multiple shared squared variance (MSV) and the differences between the square root of the AVE values (\sqrt{AVE}) and the correlation coefficients. These are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Measurement model estimates

Latent factors	Standardised loading estimates	Error variance estimates	<i>a</i>	CR	AVE	MSV	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$
Information sharing	.867	.752	.905	.906	.658	.610	.81
F1	.859	.738					
	.835	.698					
	.728	.530					
	.758	.575					
Social norm	.819	.671	.791	.803	.580	.171	.76
F2	.837	.701					
	.608	.369					
Opinion seeking	.827	.684	.903	.907	.765	.610	.87
F3	.919	.845					
	.876	.768					
Opinion giving	.855	.731	.895	.896	.741	.610	.86
F4	.858	.735					
	.869	.756					
Product information-sharing	.786	.618	.870	.873	.697	.563	.83
F5	.880	.775					
	.836	.699					
Correlations	F1↔F2:.250	F2↔F3:.326		F3↔F5:.750			
	F1↔F3:.375	F2↔F4:.413		F4↔F5:.731			
	F1↔F4:.299	F2↔F5:.263					
	F1↔F5:.263	F3↔F4:.781					

The results outlined in Table 3 indicate that the association between each observed variable and their latent factor is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$). Cronbach alpha values and CR values above 0.70 suggest internal-consistency as well as composite reliability. Standardised loading estimates and AVE values above 0.50 suggest convergent validity, while latent factor AVE values exceeding their respective MSV values suggest discriminant validity. Additional evidence of discriminant validity is that the square root of the AVE exceeds the correlation coefficients associated with each respective latent factor. This convergent and

discriminant validity, together with the nomological validity established in Table 2 suggests construct validity (Malhotra, 2010).

In terms of model fit, despite a significant chi-square value of 260.256 with 109 degrees freedom (df), a standardised root mean residual (SRMR) of 0.05, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.061, a goodness-of-fit index (GFI) of 0.914, an incremental fit index (IFI) of 0.958, a Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) of 0.947 and a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.958 all suggest good model fit (Byrne, 2010).

A structural model, based on this measurement model, was then specified in accordance with the literature whereby it was hypothesised that the link-sharing motives of information sharing (F1) and social norm of sharing links (F2) have a direct positive influence on product information-sharing (F5) behaviour, which, in turn, has a direct positive influence on opinion-seeking (F3) and opinion-giving (F4) behaviour. Moreover, given that opinion leaders tend to also be opinion seekers, it was hypothesised that opinion-giving (F4) behaviour has a direct positive influence on opinion-seeking (F3) behaviour. Table 4 presents the unstandardised and standardised regression coefficients estimated by AMOS for the structural model.

Table 4. Structural model

Paths	Unstandardised β	β	SE	p
Information sharing \rightarrow Product information-sharing	.345	.354	.060	0.00
Social norm \rightarrow Product information-sharing	.259	.215	.077	0.00
Product information-sharing \rightarrow Opinion seeking	.376	.401	.067	0.00
Product information-sharing \rightarrow Opinion giving	.681	.739	.055	0.00
Opinion giving \rightarrow Opinion seeking	.494	.485	.073	0.00

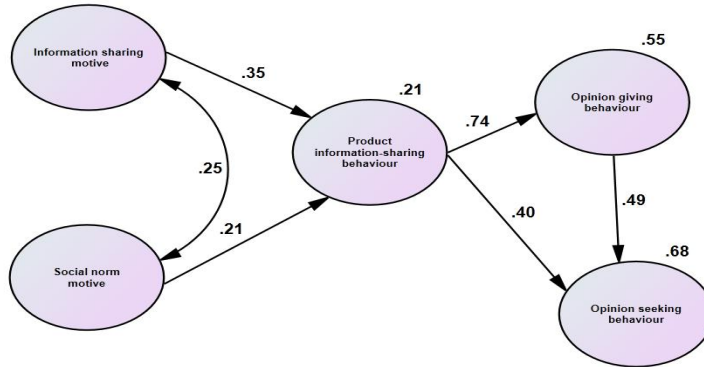
β : beta coefficient; SE: standardised error; p : two-tailed statistical significance

As is evident from Table 4, all paths tested were statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$) and positive. The link-sharing motives of information sharing ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.01$) and the social norm of sharing links ($\beta = 0.215$, $p < 0.01$) are statistically significant predictors of product information-sharing on Facebook, which, in turn, is a statistically significant predictor of opinion-seeking ($\beta = 0.401$, $p < 0.01$) and opinion-giving ($\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.01$) behaviour. As per the literature, opinion-giving behaviour ($\beta = 0.485$, $p < 0.01$) has a statistically significant influence on opinion-seeking behaviour on Facebook. In terms of the squared multiple correlation coefficients (SMCs), the model explains 21 percent of the variance in product information-sharing behaviour on Facebook, 55 percent of the variance in opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook and 68 percent of the variance in opinion-

seeking behaviour on Facebook. The structural model with the standardised regression estimates and SMCs are illustrated in Figure 1.

Concerning the fit indices of the structural model, while the chi-square value of 285.058 with 113 degrees freedom (df) remained significant, a SRMR of 0.067, a RMSEA of 0.070, a GFI of 0.904, an IFI of 0.952, a TLI of 0.942 and a CFI of 0.952 all suggest good model fit (Byrne, 2010).

Figure 1. Structural model



5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between Generation Y university students' link-sharing motives of information-sharing and the social norm of link sharing, and their product information-sharing, opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook. Confirmatory factor analysis established that eWOM is a five-factor structure comprising information-sharing and social norm link-sharing motives, and product information-sharing, opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour. The measurement model exhibited acceptable model fit and good internal-consistency reliability, composite reliability and construct validity. The results of the path analysis suggest that Generation Y university students' link-sharing motives of information sharing and social norm positively influence their product information-sharing behaviour on Facebook. In turn, the findings of the study suggest that Generation Y university students' product information-sharing behaviour positively influences their opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviour on Facebook, and that their opinion-giving behaviour also positively influences their opinion-seeking behaviour on the site.

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