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WHAT RATEMYPROFESSORS.COM REVEALS ABOUT HOW AND WHY STUDENTS EVALUATE THEIR PROFESSORS: A GLIMPSE INTO THE STUDENT MIND-SET

Katherine B. Hartman and James B. Hunt

This study examines RateMyProfessors.com ratings and comments as a form of electronic word-of-mouth communications. The data represent 2,371 user ratings and comments for 442 marketing professors from 51 U.S. colleges and universities. Qualitative comments were analyzed using updated thematic content analyses. The results indicate significant inclusion of qualitative comments about professors' personal characteristics and teaching attributes. Consistent with the literature on word-of-mouth, social communications theory, and equity theory, more positive and negative comments were found than neutral or mixed remarks. Contrary to popular belief and findings in the literature on conventional word of mouth, comments overall were dominated by compliments rather than complaints.

The marketing education literature is replete with studies examining student evaluations of teaching (SETs). Most of the previous studies have focused on official or traditional SET, which are evaluation instruments designed and administered by the schools. With the advent of RateMyProfessors.com (RMP) and similar online evaluation systems, students now have the ability to provide evaluations not for feedback to teachers or administrators, but as shared information for use by their fellow students. This new type of evaluation differs markedly from traditional SETs because of its intended audience and use as evaluative information for a community of instructor/course decision makers.

Reactions to these sites by the academic community have been mixed. On the one hand, some researchers cite serious flaws with the validity of the information provided because of sampling errors (Otto, Sanford, and Wagner 2005), ratings bias (Otto, Sanford, and Ross 2008), and results dissimilar from traditional SETs (Albrecht and Hoopes 2009). On the other hand, some studies have found RMP ratings to be positively correlated with official SET ratings (e.g., Brown, Baillie, and Fraser 2009; Sonntag, Bassett, and Snyder 2009; Timmerman 2008).

Regardless of its perceived validity, use of RMP by students and organizations suggests that RMP should not be discounted or ignored by the higher education community.

In May 2011, the Web site included over 11 million student-generated comments about more than 1 million professors from more than 6,000 universities and colleges in North America and the United Kingdom (RateMyProfessors.com 2011). Given this volume, it is not surprising that a recent survey of college students found that 71 percent used RMP to select among professors, 58 percent believed that raters are more honest on RMP than traditional SETs, and 47 percent believed that RMP ratings/comments are more representative of instructors' performance than traditional SET evaluations (Brown, Baillie, and Fraser 2009). In addition, RMP ratings represented the single largest factor (17.5 percent of the total) used to develop the *Forbes* 2010 ranking of America's Best Colleges (Center for College Affordability & Productivity 2010).

Because of its importance to the academic community, a small, yet growing, body of literature has examined RMP numeric ratings (e.g., Brown, Baillie, and Fraser 2009; Coladarci and Kornfield 2007; Freng and Webber 2009; Sonntag, Bassett, and Snyder 2009; Timmerman 2008). Unfortunately, little research has been done to systematically examine RMP comments (see Kindred and Mohammed 2005 and Silva et al. 2008 for exceptions). Examining RMP comments rather than just RMP ratings is important for many reasons, including (1) RMP comments represent electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) messages that can provide pertinent information for others' to use when making decisions (Schindler and Bickart 2005), (2) students believe RMP comments represent more honest assessments of instructors and their abilities than traditional SETs (Brown, Baillie, and Fraser 2009), (3) students rely on written comments more than ratings (Kindred and Mohammed 2005),

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(4) RMP comments provide a glimpse of the student mind-set in the professor evaluation and choice process, and (5) examination of the nature and valence of the comments may help us understand why students feel compelled to contribute to RMP.

Therefore, the purposes of this study are (1) to explore rater comments on RMP via thematic content analysis in order to extend the current literature and gain insight into the salient attributes and evaluative criteria students employ in choosing marketing professors, and (2) by looking through the lens of eWOM and equity theory, to better understand student motives for sharing comments on RMP.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

RMP provides college students an opportunity to rate their professors' teaching quality using an ordinal scale from 1 (worst) to 5 (best) for clarity and helpfulness. Raters also evaluate professors on easiness and "hotness" (i.e., sexiness), rate their interest in the class, and provide written comments up to 255 characters long. For each professor, RMP provides aggregated data represented by ratings for Overall Quality (calculated by averaging the Clarity and Helpfulness), Easiness, and "Hotness." All the posts are anonymous, voluntary, and publicly available.

Previous research using data from RMP has focused on analyzing relationships among numeric RMP ratings and has found significant, positive correlations among ratings for RMP teaching dimensions (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke 2007; Felton, Mitchell, and Stinson 2004; Freng and Webber 2009; Otto, Sanford, and Wagner 2005). Studies have also found higher ratings for professors classified as "hot" (e.g., Bonds-Raacke and Raacke 2007; Felton, Mitchell, and Stinson 2004; Riniolo et al. 2006).

WOM and eWOM Communications

In addition to numeric ratings and indications of "hotness," raters may also provide open-ended written comments. As a publicly available review, RMP comments act as the message element of WOM communications. Arguably, WOM is one of the most influential sources of marketplace information for consumers because consumers generally trust comments made by peers more than they trust comments made by marketers (e.g., Bickart and Schindler 2001; Bone 1995; Sen and Lerman 2007).

RMP comments represent a distinct form of WOM known as *electronic word-of-mouth communications*, which is a

communication system that connects diverse individual consumers and extends the WOM network from one's immediate contacts to the entire Internet world (Cheung et al. 2009). eWOM differs from traditional WOM because eWOM tends to include positive and negative information, is more voluminous in quantity, and consists of multiple sources of information readily available and organized for consumers (Chatterjee 2001). In addition, eWOM often occurs between people who have little or no prior relationship with each other and can be provided anonymously (Dellarocas 2003). It can be argued that eWOM may be more powerful than traditional WOM because it is immediate, has significant reach, is made more credible by being in print, and is accessible to others (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

Park, Lee, and Han (2007) argue that eWOM communications can function as both informants and recommenders because they may provide user-oriented product information as well as recommendations by previous consumers. As an information provider, eWOM communications may be perceived as more credible, more consumer oriented, and more subjective than seller-created reviews (Park, Lee, and Han 2007). As a recommender, the content of the review contains direct suggestions to potential consumers. The inform/recommend function of eWOM communications can play a powerful role in student instructor and class choice decisions. For example, using two experiments, Edwards et al. (2007) established a causal link between information posted on RMP, students' subsequent evaluations of instructors, and, presumably, students' decisions about which instructor to take. Specifically, students who received positive eWOM about instructors rated instructors as more credible and attractive compared with students who received negative eWOM or none at all.

Motivations to Generate and Use WOM and eWOM Messages

The literature on conventional WOM generally indicates that WOM is social communication. Communication theory postulates that social communication induces both physical and psychological comfort and that people have an intrinsic need for interaction with others (Dimbleby and Burton 1992; Tubbs and Moss 2000). Marketing studies demonstrate that consumption information provides an important conversation topic for consumers to express their affection, kindness, friendship, and connections in social encounters (e.g., Schiffman and Kanuk 2000). Therefore, RMP communication may play an integral part of students'

social communication and provide communicative utility that serves their need to build, maintain, and enhance interpersonal relationships (Zinkhan et al. 2003).

Consumers may also engage in postconsumption communications to gain attention, recognition, image, or status (Westbrook 1987). Studies show that providing advice and feedback may be an outcome of the desire people feel to share information about which they consider themselves expert (Wang, Teo, and Wei 2005). Postconsumption communication can help other consumers in obtaining product and service quality information and in optimizing consumption decisions. Providing product and service information might be a result of some consumers' desire to help others (Wang, Teo, and Wei 2005). Therefore, communicating with people about the actual consumption experience can help a consumer derive other-involvement utility (Westbrook 1987). For example, Chen, Gupta, and Hoshower (2004) found that one of the reasons students are motivated to participate in SETs is to provide evaluations for other students to help them make course and instruction selection.

Building on the communication and speech work of Allen and Perrault (1986) and Grice (1969), Jansen et al. (2009) postulate that eWOM comments are "utterances," and one can deduce meaning in them by examining the underlying intentions. These intentions include sharing information and offering opinions that might inform, warn, assert, or promise. Anderson (1998) suggests that another incentive for people to transfer positive information is to gain social approval or self-approval. The altruistic behavior of sharing expertise with others has also been shown to motivate positive utterances (Fehr and Falk 2002), whereas hostility and vengeance motivate negative eWOM (Kimmel 2004).

Wang, Teo, and Wei (2005) note several motives for creating eWOM: habitual dependence on online communication, opinion leadership behavior, status, and economic rewards. Dellarocas, Fan, and Wood (2004) note the power of self-interest and reciprocity in motivating consumers to participate in what they term, "online reputation mechanisms." The reciprocation goal has been associated with conventional WOM communication and also observed in online channels of communication (Bailey 2004). People are found to share their satisfaction with a product or service through recommendations or to warn others against a bad experience through complaints. Van Der Heijden (2004) notes the hedonic and intrinsically gratifying utility that many people perceive through their usage of Internet communication.

On the other side of the dyad, consumers are also motivated to use eWOM messages. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) and Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identify several motives that explain why customers retrieve other customers' online articulations from Web-based consumer opinion platforms: to save decision-making time, to reduce risks associated with purchase, and to make better buying decisions. Duan, Gu, and Whinston (2008) indicate that people trust opinions from others outside their immediate social network, such as online reviews. For example, Kindred and Mohammed (2005) found that students' motivations for accessing RMP included information seeking, convenience, and interpersonal utility (i.e., feel a part of the community).

From the above discussion, it is clear that students have multiple motives for sharing and using RMP (e.g., psychological comfort, intrinsic need for interaction, to gain attention, altruism, information sharing, vengeance, convenience, information seeking). Although some comments may be made to fulfill a psychological need to compliment or complain, much of the information provided is submitted as choice criteria for other students to use. As noted earlier, it is our intention to explore RMP comments as indicators of salient attributes or evaluative criteria. Through an updated thematic content analysis, a set of criteria is developed.

The Valence of RMP Comments and Themes

As an example of eWOM communications, RMP represents voluntary efforts of users to share information anonymously with others. As explained previously, motivations for posting RMP comments vary. Equity theory suggests that individuals judge the fairness of a relationship based on input and outputs, where the individual compares the ratio of his or her perceived inputs and outputs to the ratio of perceived inputs and outputs for the other relationship partner (Adams 1965). In the service context, Barnes, Beauchamp, and Webster (2010) found that customers who are over-rewarded by service providers will make postconsumption efforts to balance the relationship by demonstrating higher levels of loyalty, commitment, and repatronage. Thus, in the RMP context, equity theory suggests that in order to balance the relationship, students may be motivated to share positive messages about professors when they believe they have been provided with exceptional service and negative messages when they perceive professors' lack of effort.

Consumption information delivery follows actual engagement in consumption of a good or service. Researchers have long observed that postconsumption experience

communications satisfy consumers' communication needs that arise from their involvement in the product and use situation (Dichter 1966; Westbrook 1987) and is a way to reciprocate the product and service received (Soderlund 1998). For example, after negative encounters, consumers could relieve their psychological discomfort by complaining through WOM communications (Schiffman and Kanuk 2000), which may generate influential effects on other consumers' consumption decisions. Researchers have observed a strong association between negative WOM transmission and the perceived negativity of consumption experience, but findings of positive WOM communication have been mixed (Wang, Teo, and Wei 2005).

Wang, Teo, and Wei (2005) argue that consumption processes may yield both cognitive and emotional reactions that influence product/service memory. Negative and positive consumption experiences generate more intense and accessible emotions (e.g., anger, regret, disappointment, happiness) and cognitions (e.g., how the consumer is dealt with, how the product performs) than neutral consumption experiences. Subsequently, memories of negative and positive consumption are easily activated when a consumer enters an eWOM context. The activated memory may arouse consumers' reciprocation goals, such that those with negative experiences tend to complain and those with positive experiences are inclined to compliment. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Statements embedded within eWOM comments will be predominantly positive or negative comments rather than neutral or mixed.

However, whether RMP comments will be dominated by complaints or compliments valence is less clear. Huefner et al. (2002) suggest two possibilities for this: RMP comments may be negatively valenced (complaints) as warnings to others or to damage the reputation of the professor as a result of dissatisfaction, or RMP comments may be positively valenced (compliments) in order to encourage others or to benefit the reputation of the professor as a result of satisfaction. On the one hand, traditional (offline) WOM literature would suggest a dominance of complaints. Richens (1983) states that providing negative information about a product is positively related to the seriousness of the problem where consumers put more effort into spreading negative WOM as the perceived severity of the problem increases. For example, Desatnick (1987), explains that a dissatisfied customer mentions his or her dissatisfaction to nine other people, whereas satisfaction is expressed to only five individuals. Smart and Martin (1988) found that 64 percent of consumer written

correspondence with companies is in the form of complaint letters, compared to praise or inquiry letters.

On the other hand, eWOM literature suggests a dominance of compliments. For example, in an analysis of over 150,000 microblog postings, Jansen et al. (2009) found that more than 50 percent of brand sentiment comments were positive and only 33 percent critical of the product or company. Using average professor ratings, Timmerman (2008) found that the RMP ratings were not dominated by griping. In addition, research by Kindred and Mohammed (2005) and Silva et al. (2008) found RMP comments generally positive. Collectively, these results suggest that perhaps the principles of praise versus complaints are actually reversed in eWOM compared to traditional WOM. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Statements embedded within eWOM comments will be positively skewed.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from online evaluations of marketing instructors from 60 randomly selected colleges and universities in the United States posted at RMP during July 2008. To obtain a representative sample, institutions were randomly selected using the 2008 edition of *America's Best Colleges* published by *U.S. News & World Report*. The sampling frame was a list of all the colleges and universities in the United States offering a degree in marketing. The sampling method was a systematic random sampling procedure beginning with a randomly selected starting point and selecting every thirtieth university or college. After collecting the data, four colleges and five universities were removed from the sample because no marketing professors were rated. The final sample identified 43 universities and 8 colleges ($n = 51$) representing 27 states and the District of Columbia (DC).

At the instructor level, summary scores for 442 marketing professors were collected from the final sample of colleges and universities. Marketing professors were examined in order to minimize potential errors from comparing professors teaching various disciplines. The number of ratings for each individual professor ranged from 1 to 72 (mean = 8.7, median = 5). More than 25 percent ($n = 119$) included only one or two ratings. Average ratings were calculated for Helpfulness (mean = 3.7), Clarity (mean = 3.6), Easiness (mean = 3.3), and Quality (mean = 3.7).

At the individual rating and comment level, the total number of professor comments was 3,888. In order to avoid overrepresentation by instructors with a large number of

comments, the most recent 10 ratings were selected for each instructor. The initial sample of ratings was 2,553. After excluding 175 ratings without comments and 7 ratings with comments that could not be coded, the final sample of ratings was 2,371. Excluding unusable ratings, the average word count was 37.01 (standard deviation = 19.3) with a range between 1 and 102 words.

Qualitative Data Coding

Comment data were coded using thematic content analyses. Preliminary themes were developed using the Silva et al. (2008) coding schema as a starting point. Silva et al. conducted a content analysis of RMP comments about psychology professors using 21 codes, including 18 codes generated from traditional SET categories (global quality, instructor characteristics, course elements, and student development) and three additional codes added after an initial assessment of the comments (emotion, general helpfulness, and personality). Unfortunately, the coding schema used by Silva et al. is limited because although comments about personality were found in 31 percent of their sample, they coded differing personality comments (e.g., “funny,” “cool”) into a single category.

Previous research suggests that instructor personality is strongly related to evaluation of instruction (Clayson and Sheffet 2006). For example, Gotlieb (2009) notes that “caring of the professor” has an impact on students’ evaluations of marketing professors’ teaching. As such, our coding schema developed the codes found in Silva et al. (2008) by dividing the personality code into eight new subcategories under the heading of “service provider personal characteristics.” As a starting point, the additional themes were developed using the principles of a motivating professor (Lantos 1997).

Using the preliminary set of coding themes identified in Silva et al. (2008) as well as the expanded categories for personality, ten ratings and comments were analyzed by three different reviewers in order to refine and develop the coding schema. This process was repeated several times until arriving at a consensus set of themes that captured all the statements. The final thematic coding schema included 30 unique thematic codes classified into 5 groups: global quality (3), course elements (6), student development (4), instructor characteristics (9), and service provider personal characteristics (8). The codes associated with instructor characteristics captured comments traditionally associated with student evaluations of teaching (e.g., enthusiasm for material, knowledge), while codes associated with service

provider personal characteristics captured comments about the instructor’s personal attributes (e.g., humor, niceness). The Appendix provides the list of thematic codes and example comments.

Using the final data set of 2,371 comments, each statement in each RMP comment was reviewed and coded by two independent coders. The coding process began with a review of an RMP comment to deconstruct the RMP comment into unique statements. Each statement was categorized into one (or more) of the 30 thematic codes. Expanding on the notion of valence previously identified in the literature (e.g., Black, Mitra, and Webster 1998; Bone 1995; Goyette et al. 2010), each coder then evaluated the tone of the statement as either positive (P), negative (N), mixed (M), or neutral (L). Total percentage agreement between the two coders was 95.7 percent with a range between 100 percent and 73 percent. A third independent coder was utilized to review any discrepancies between the two independent coders. The final total number of unique statements coded was 10,944.

RESULTS

Before hypotheses were tested, two baseline analyses were conducted. First, RMP numeric ratings for the sample were analyzed to determine whether the numeric ratings for marketing professors were similar to those found in previous studies. Correlations were calculated for aggregate average ratings for easiness, helpfulness, clarity, and “hotness” ($n = 442$) and for comment-level ratings for easiness, helpfulness, clarity, and rater interest ($n = 2,371$). All the ratings were significantly and positively correlated ($p < 0.00$). The analyses for both average professor ratings and individual comment ratings identified results similar to previous research (e.g., Felton, Mitchell, and Stinson 2004; Otto, Sanford, and Wagner 2005). As such, the sample of marketing professors is similar to samples in previous studies. Table 1 provides the correlations.

Second, comment code category percentages were assessed in order to identify evaluative criteria information raters provide to other students in reviews of marketing professors. The results indicate comments included assessments about global quality (62 percent), course elements (74 percent), student development (43 percent), instructor attributes (46 percent), and service provider personal characteristics (49 percent). Post hoc analyses found more statements of overall instructor quality as compared to overall course quality ($\chi^2(1, n = 1,327) = 483.50, p < 0.00$), yet a statistically equal number of statements about instructor

Table 1
RMP Component Rating Correlations

	Average Ratings (<i>N</i> = 442)			Individual Comments (<i>N</i> = 2,371)		
	Easiness	Helpfulness	Clarity	Easiness	Helpfulness	Clarity
Helpfulness	0.41*			0.37*		
Clarity	0.42*	0.85*		0.37*	0.83*	
Hotness	0.17*	0.36*	0.34*	—	—	—
Rater Interest	—	—	—	0.17*	0.35*	0.38*

* $p < 0.01$.

attributes ($n = 1,550$) compared to service provider personal characteristics ($n = 1,587$) ($\chi^2(1, n = 3,137) = 0.44, p > 0.05$). As such, the results are consistent with previous research that indicates RMP comments focus on both instructor competence and general personality issues (Kindred and Mohammed 2005; Silva et al. 2008).

Hypotheses Tests

H1 predicted that statements in eWOM comments would be valenced rather than mixed or neutral. To test this hypothesis, the percentage of positive, negative, mixed, and neutral statements were calculated for the total number of unique statements recorded. Of the 10,944 unique statements, 55 percent were positive ($n = 6,000$), 38 percent were negative ($n = 4,139$), 4 percent were mixed ($n = 438$), and 3 percent were neutral ($n = 337$). As such, H1 is supported.

H2 predicted that statements embedded within the eWOM comments would be positively skewed. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were used to compare the percentage of positive comments to the percentage of negative comments. The percentage for neutral comments was excluded from the analyses. In addition, 2 of the 30 coded categories (personal growth and vocational skills) did not meet the sample size assumptions for the analysis and, as such, were excluded. Table 2 provides the frequencies and chi-square goodness-of-fit tests for comment code valence.

Nineteen (67.9 percent) of the 28 categories were positively skewed, including all 3 global quality measures (H2a), 4 of the 6 course element measures (H2b), 1 of the 2 student development measures (H2c), 6 of the 9 instructor attribute measures (H2d), and 5 of the 8 personal attribute measures (H2e). Conversely, only 6 (21.4 percent) of the categories were negatively skewed: participation/effort, organization/clarity, respect for students, communication skills, ego, and professionalism. Three of the categories contained a statistically equal number of complaints and compliments includ-

ing readings/assignments/exams, classroom atmosphere, and entertaining/interesting. As such, H2 is supported.

DISCUSSION

One purpose of this study is to extend previous research by examining RMP comments for content and tone from the theoretical perspective of eWOM communications. Coding content suggests that approximately one of every two comments include a statement of the global quality of the instructor (e.g., “great professor,” “worst professor ever”), yet only one of every ten comments include a statement of the global quality of the course (e.g., “great course,” “worst course ever”). This implies that the statements provided are consistent with the explicit purpose of the Web site where raters provide evaluations about the professor more than they provide evaluations about the course. Surprisingly, less than three in every ten comments included an explicit recommendation to take or avoid the professor.

Other comments support Lantos’s (1997) suggestions about the importance of professors’ attitudes and behaviors such as enthusiasm, sincerity, and rapport. Raters provided statements about the instructor in the role of professor (e.g., helpfulness, knowledge, and organization/presentation) as well as about personal characteristics of the instructor in the role of service provider (e.g., entertainment and niceness). As such, the results suggest that the raters share information about instructor competence and the instructor as a person. However, the total count of instructor attribute statements and the total count of service provider personal characteristic statements were statistically equal. These results suggest that eWOM communications on RMP characterize the professor in ways that may not be traditionally listed as part of a professor’s job requirements. For example, there were significantly more assessments of instructor’s niceness ($n = 393$) compared to

Table 2
Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit Tests for Statement Valence

Statement Codes		Total Number of Statements	Positive		Negative		Chi-Square
			Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
H2a	Overall course quality	249	179	68.1	70	26.6	47.72**
H2a	Overall instructor quality	1,016	759	71.3	258	24.2	248.04**
H2a	Recommendation	660	420	62.2	240	35.6	49.01**
H2b	Content relevance	644	355	54.5	289	44.4	6.77**
H2b	Readings, assignments, exams	1,084	501	46.2	501	46.2	0.00
H2b	Course interest	282	159	55.0	123	42.6	4.60*
H2b	Difficulty/challenge	941	503	53.4	438	46.5	4.49*
H2b	Classroom atmosphere	26	13	50.0	12	46.2	0.40
H2b	Evaluation and feedback	510	348	64.6	162	30.1	67.84**
H2c	Participation/effort	689	282	37.8	407	54.5	22.68**
H2c	Knowledge	357	218	61.1	139	38.9	17.48**
H2c	Personal growth	9	6	66.7	2	22.2	—
H2c	Vocational skills	45	41	91.1	4	8.9	—
H2d	Organization and clarity	244	101	41.1	143	58.1	7.23**
H2d	Enthusiasm for material	118	88	74.6	30	25.4	28.51**
H2d	Respect for students	102	14	13.7	88	86.3	53.69**
H2d	Knowledge of material	273	213	77.5	60	21.8	85.75**
H2d	Ability to motivate	32	24	75.0	8	25.0	8.00**
H2d	Real-world experience	112	89	78.1	23	20.2	38.89**
H2d	General helpfulness	419	325	77.0	94	22.3	127.35**
H2d	General caring	154	137	88.4	17	11.0	93.51**
H2d	Communication skills	80	6	7.0	74	86.0	57.80**
H2e	Ego	125	16	12.6	109	85.8	69.19**
H2e	Humor	135	120	83.9	15	10.5	81.67**
H2e	Coolness	123	85	68.0	38	30.4	17.96**
H2e	Niceness	382	324	82.4	58	14.8	185.23**
H2e	Likability	172	132	75.9	40	23.0	49.21**
H2e	Entertaining/interesting	479	235	49.1	237	49.5	0.01
H2e	Professionalism	66	13	19.4	53	79.1	24.24**
H2e	Appearance	73	48	60.8	25	31.6	7.25**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

assessments of instructors' knowledge of material ($n = 275$). Even though it is not the objective of this paper to argue that personal characteristics are more important than teaching role behaviors in ultimately leading to positive learning outcomes, it may be important to recognize each set of variables being used. Even though it is an empirical question, it is likely that professors rating highly on both sets of characteristics will be more effective than teachers who are strong in only one.

Student comments were primarily valenced rather than being mixed or neutral. More specifically, 55 percent were positive, 38 percent were negative, 4 percent were mixed, and 3 percent were neutral. These findings are consistent with the literature on WOM, social communications

theory, and equity theory. Students who are rewarded/delighted by teachers may make postclass efforts to balance the relationship by demonstrating higher levels of loyalty and commitment. They are probably more likely to take another class from the professor. Thus, recommendations may not be made to simply inform other students, but also for reciprocity, social communication, and more fundamental emotional and psychological benefits. Likewise, students are likely motivated to share negative messages about professors when they perceive professors' lack of competence or effort.

The results also indicate that students made more positive than negative comments about their courses and instructors. More than 55 percent of the 10,944 unique

statements were positive while only 38 percent were negative. For example, there were almost three times as many positive statements about overall instructor quality as compared to negative statements. The most frequent complaints were statements about readings, assignments, and exams (e.g., “too many tests”), course difficulty (e.g., “class was too hard”), and participation/effort (e.g., “too much work to get an A”). In contrast to student raters, many professors may actually perceive these complaints as positive attributes of the course.

Although some previous research, including Timmerman (2008), supports the hypothesis concerning the positive valence of the comments, this study and the corresponding conclusions contribute something new to the existing literature. While Timmerman’s research concludes that ratings are positively skewed, ratings represent only three concepts—easiness, helpfulness, and clarity—and represent only numeric scores. Because the current study evaluates the valence of comments, we are able to report the skewness of 28 unique concepts, which provides a more comprehensive understanding of the eWOM communication messages. Arguably, the comments provide insight into the salient attributes and evaluation criteria used by raters beyond the three numeric rating categories offered by RMP.

As a whole, the results suggest that RMP as a form of eWOM communications is dominated by compliments rather than complaints. Anecdotally, professors likely assume RMP is essentially used by students to vent their frustrations about a bad experience, so it is encouraging to find so many positive statements even if negative comments are freely expressed. However, as Park and Lee (2009) reported in their study on the role of eWOM with varying product types, negative eWOM may have a greater effect than positive eWOM. This is consistent with research in the impression formulation literature that has clearly shown that negative comments to have a greater effect than positive remarks (Skowronski and Carlston 1989).

Fortunately, it should be noted that previous research suggests that a few negative messages can actually be helpful in promoting credibility of eWOM messages. Using an experimental design that varied the proportion of positive and negative eWOM messages, Doh and Hwang (2009) suggest that a single negative message itself can be harmful to consumer evaluations; yet negative messages in a set of eWOM messages may be beneficial because they increase the perceived credibility of the set of eWOM messages. Applied to the RMP comments, a few negative

statements within a majority of positive statements may not be critically harmful to reviewers’ attitudes toward the professor.

CONCLUSION

There are two principal limitations to this study. First, because the data were obtained from a naturally occurring database, there is a lack of knowledge about the participants who provided information. Anyone can potentially contribute to the data and provide multiple comments. This error may be minimized because of the large size of the sample. Second, as a content analysis study using secondary data, the content coding relies on researcher interpretations of the comments rather than the known intent of the rater. The use of multiple raters was an attempt to minimize this issue.

Despite potential limitations, the results indicate that RMP as a form of eWOM provides user-oriented service information as well as recommendations by previous consumers. RMP, like eWOM in general, shows all the signs of becoming even more important in the future as social networking applications become more widespread. If so, what can professors learn from RMP evaluations?

First, the results indicate significant inclusion of qualitative comments about professors’ personal characteristics and teaching attributes. Comments include statements about global quality, course elements, student development, the instructor as a professor, and personal characteristics of the instructor as a service provider. As such, professors should be concerned with students’ attitudes toward the professor captured using traditional SETs (e.g., helpfulness and knowledge) as well as with attitudes toward the professor not captured using traditional SETs (e.g., entertaining, niceness, and coolness). Professors are known for different qualities, and each has his or her unique “brand.” Just as with commercial brands, a professor’s personal brand can become a means of affirming identity, highlighting ability, and establishing reputation. It seems that RMP is now an important aspect of student expression of brand satisfaction and may have a critical effect on a professor’s brand image.

Second, students will share information for a variety of reasons/motives, including psychological comfort, intrinsic need for interaction, to gain attention, altruism, information sharing, vengeance, convenience, and information seeking. Comments will tend to be positively or negatively valenced to, in an equity theory sense, balance their relationship with the instructor.

Third, and contrary to popular belief and findings in the literature on conventional WOM, RMP comments overall were dominated by compliments rather than complaints. Professors should not automatically dismiss RMP as a forum designed to only capture student griping, and they should recognize that some negative mixed with positive comments may actually build credibility and be beneficial.

As students increasingly use communication technologies for trusted sources of information, insights, and opinions, student perceptions of professors and the related class choice decisions will be increasingly influenced by Web communications and social networking mediums such as RMP. Viewed as a glimpse into the student mindset, professors and administrators can gain a better understanding of the evaluative criteria used by students in professor and course selection. A deeper understanding of the factors that drive voluntary participation in online feedback systems such as RMP will allow researchers, professors, and administrators to have a better theoretical foundation to devise effective evaluation mechanisms.

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APPENDIX

Coding Schema and Examples

Category	Codes	Positive Example	Negative Example
Quality	Course	Loved this class	Hated this class
Quality	Instructor	Great professor	Bad professor
Quality	Recommendation	Take this class with him	Don't take him
Course	Content relevance	Provided real examples	Discussed irrelevant material
Course	Readings, assignments, exams	Big project was enjoyable	Too many exams
Course	Course interest	Interesting class	Boring class
Course	Difficulty/challenge	Easy	Hard, difficult
Course	Atmosphere	Welcoming	Tense class
Course	Evaluation and feedback	Feedback was helpful	Impossible to get feedback
Development	Participation/effort	Easy if you go to class	Had to work hard
Development	Knowledge	Learned a lot	Total waste of time
Development	Personal growth	Better person after taking	Worse after taking
Development	Vocational skills	Built my skill set	Won't help after graduation
Instructor	Organization and clarity	Very clear and organized	Presentation is scattered
Instructor	Enthusiasm for material	Loves marketing	Doesn't like the subject
Instructor	Respect for students	Respects student opinions	Has a bad attitude
Instructor	Knowledge of material	Knows everything	Clueless about material
Instructor	Ability to motivate	Inspired me to learn	Made me not want to learn
Instructor	Real world experience	Lots of experience to share	Never worked in the real world
Instructor	General helpfulness	Willing to help	Not helpful
Instructor	General caring	Cares a lot about students	Doesn't care about students
Personal	Communication skills	Easy to understand	Talks so softly you can't hear her
Personal	Ego	Humble	Full of herself
Personal	Humor	Hilarious	Jokes are not funny
Personal	Coolness	A cool guy	A total geek
Personal	Niceness	Nicest guy you'll ever meet	She's just mean
Personal	Likability	Liked her a lot	Nobody in class liked her
Personal	Entertaining/interesting	Makes it interesting	Boring professor
Personal	Professionalism	Very professional	Unprofessional
Personal	Appearance	Dresses well	Looks sloppy

