

# **#Silentmajority, #lurkposter, #hybridconsumer: understanding new lurking behaviours**

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this article is to better understand lurking behaviours while taking into account the most recent online platforms. A qualitative study based on 12 semi-directive individual interviews and focused on the tourism sector reveals a change in the behaviour of the silent majority of consumers who read a lot and did not speak online. This majority of consumers today is likely to adopt a hybrid behaviour, lurking a lot and posting occasionally. The results also reveal new lurking practices, new posting barriers and new motivations for consumers to post online. The article proposes several strategies for companies to better communicate and encourage the voice of this majority on the Web 2.0.

## **Key words**

Lurking, posting, eWOM, hashtag, online platform, tourism

## **Résumé**

L'objectif de cet article est de mieux comprendre les comportements de lurking en tenant compte des évolutions récentes des plateformes en ligne. Une étude qualitative basée sur 12 entretiens individuels semi-directifs et centrée sur le secteur du tourisme révèle une évolution dans le comportement de la majorité silencieuse des consommateurs qui lisaient beaucoup et ne s'exprimaient pas en ligne. Cette majorité de consommateurs semble adopter aujourd'hui un comportement hybride, avec un comportement de lurking intense et une activité de posting occasionnelle. Les résultats font également apparaître de nouvelles pratiques de lurking, de nouveaux freins à poster et de nouvelles motivations des consommateurs à poster en ligne. L'article propose plusieurs stratégies à destination des entreprises permettant de mieux communiquer et d'encourager la prise de parole de cette majorité sur le web 2.0.

## **Mots clés**

lurking, prise de parole en ligne, eBaO, hashtag, plateforme en ligne, tourisme

## Introduction

Consumers speaking online have a strong influence on the success or failure of firms through their e-reputation (Chun and Davies, 2001). Consequently, literature has paid particular attention to these active consumers on the Web 2.0. However, passive consumers, also called lurkers, have received less attention from marketing research. Yet, they represent the majority of consumers (Moe *et al.*, 2011): studies show that more than 90% of online community users consult content without creating any (Edelmann, 2013; Thomson *et al.*, 2014).

Encouraging lurkers to post about brands, products or services is a major challenge for marketers today for three main reasons.

First of all, a higher number of posts will improve natural referencing. Optimizing the online presence on search engines is an essential action to improve the visibility of brands online. Natural referencing and sustainable visibility represent a major challenge for companies, with sites appearing on the first page of Google results capturing 91.5% of clicks, while for the second page of results, traffic drops and captures only 4.8% of clicks<sup>1</sup>. If consumers become active posters, it will drain additional traffic and increase the number of visitors on the company's website.

Secondly, encouraging lurkers to post will contribute to a better reliability of the posted comments by their number and content. The number of reviews influences consumers' interpretation (Belvaux and Marteaux, 2007). Ideally, to have a real positive impact, a product should be evaluated by a minimum of 20 comments; however, for example on Amazon.com, only 5 to 10% of customers leave a review and many products have little or no reviews<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, an increase in the number of posts would make the content more representative of the variety of users (Sun *et al.*, 2014) and hence more reliable.

Finally, research shows that posting engages the consumer to the brand and generates more positive outcomes for the brand than lurking (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). Therefore, encouraging lurkers to post should contribute to developing customer relationship.

Understanding lurking consumers is a necessary step for finding solutions to encourage them to participate more. Existing research on lurkers is very limited in marketing (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011 ; Morrison *et al.*, 2013 ; De Veirman *et al.*, 2016) and mainly comes from information systems literature, with a focus on online communities (forums and blogs). Research

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<sup>1</sup> Data driven by Chitika Insights , June 2013

<sup>2</sup> <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/03/20/review-you-wrote-amazon-priceless/99332602/>

highlights lurkers' sociodemographic profile, explores their motivations to lurk and their barriers to post. This literature suffers from two important limitations. First, lurkers are often considered as a homogeneous group opposed to posters. However, lurking behaviours include different uses of content (reading articles, watching videos, tagging photos etc.) that are more or less close to posting. Considering online participation on a lurking – posting continuum is more relevant (Li and Bernoff, 2008; Muntinga et al., 2011). Additionally, lurking or posting behaviours may vary depending on the platform used by consumers (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011), making it irrelevant to classify consumers into one single group. Yet, very few empirical studies analyze motivations to lurk and motivations or barriers to post simultaneously (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). A second limitation of the current literature is that it does not take into account the more recent social networking sites that emerged in the past few years - Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat in particular since they are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the everyday lives of people worldwide (Phua *et al.*, 2017).

In this article, we will address the above-mentioned limitations of the literature. The purpose of this article is therefore to clarify and improve the knowledge of these lurkers on Web 2.0 by questioning the reasons that could explain their behaviour while taking into account 1) their degree of posting and lurking on a continuum and 2) the new social networking sites.

To meet this objective, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted in a tourism context (12 semi-directive interviews) that reveals an evolution in the behaviour of the silent majority of consumers. This majority of consumers today is likely to adopt a hybrid behaviour, lurking a lot and posting occasionally. The results also reveal new lurking practices, new barriers and new motivations to post online depending on the size of content (number of characters).

Firstly, we present a review of the literature on lurking, posting and influence of the type of online platforms. This is to define these concepts and to understand their relationships. Secondly, we present the methodology and the results. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications and their limits and draw conclusions from this study.

## **Defining lurking**

### *A wide range of definitions for lurkers*

There is no consensus among researchers regarding what qualifies a lurker. They are sometimes described in terms of commitment to the online community: viewed as “abusers of common good” and “free-riders” (Kollock and Smith, 1996), “social loafers” who contribute less to the online collective task (Ling *et al.*, 2005) or “hard to involve

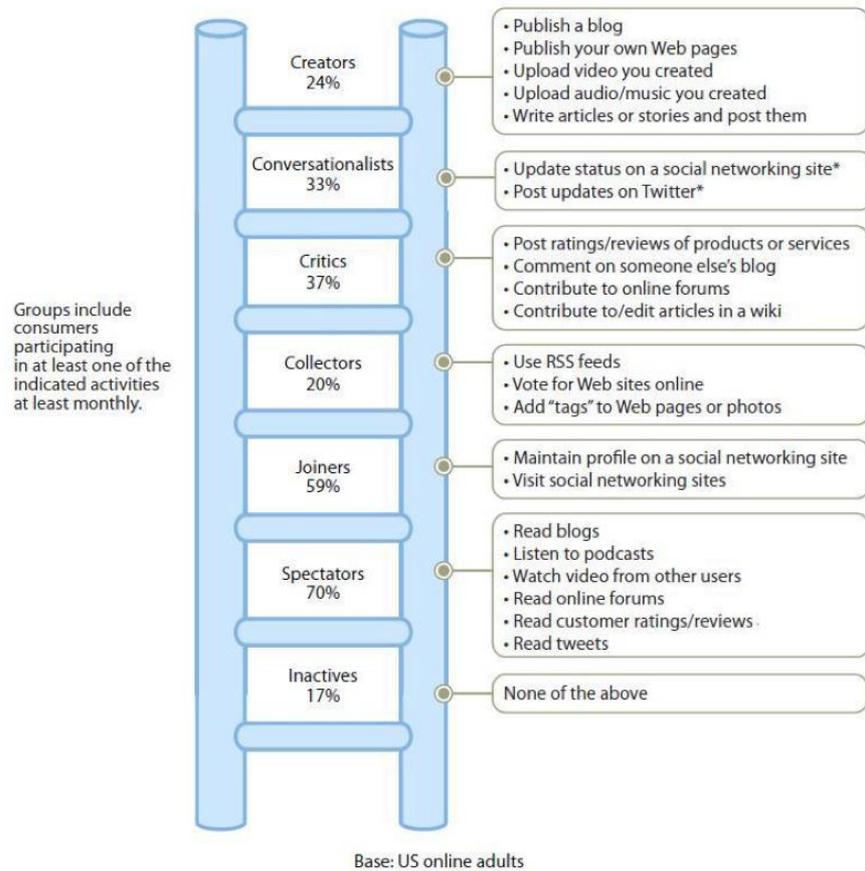
participants” (Rafaeli and Raban, 2005). Actually, lurking can be seen as a more or less negative behaviour. However, lurkers are mostly described based on how many posts they submit. For example, Taylor (2002) defines lurkers as members who post fewer times per month than the community average. Preece *et al.* (2004) consider lurkers as silent members who read online discussions regularly but post less frequently. For Ridings *et al.* (2006), lurkers are those who do not post or who post very infrequently. Rafaeli *et al.* (2004) point out that lurkers can be defined as a persistent but silent audience. In short, lurkers can be users who never post any new messages, who do not have any original posts in recent six months, or who just post infrequently (Edelmann, 2013; Sun *et al.*, 2014).

### *Being a lurker versus lurking*

Literature often opposes lurkers to posters in a dual approach (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). However, lurkers and posters are heterogeneous groups: different types can be distinguished depending on how they consult content and what content they post. From this perspective, Li and Bernoff (2008) developed a typology that is specific to social media and that ranks consumers on a seven-point scale according to their online participation (Figure 1). The scale allows us to better define the various uses of Internet and it shows how lurking and posting behaviours can be approached on a continuum, from spectators, joiners or collectors (lurking behaviour) to critics, conversationalists or creators (posting behaviours).

Nevertheless, this typology is limited by the fact that consumers can only belong to one profile, which oversimplifies reality (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Indeed, consumers often engage in multiple roles and may lurk on an online platform and post on one another.

Consequently, this article focuses on lurking behaviours and not on lurkers, considering practices are more stable than individuals. We define lurking as a platform-dependant behaviour that consists in consuming content (e.g. reading posts, watching videos, using articles) without contributing - or contributing marginally - to its production and to the governance of the platform.



Source: North American Technographics® Empowerment Online Survey, Q4 2009 (US)  
 \*Conversationalists participate in at least one of the indicated activities at least weekly.

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

**Figure 1 - Consumer Participation Scale on Web 2.0 (Li and Bernoff, 2008)**

## **The lurking phenomenon and its consequences for online platforms and brands**

### *The extent of lurking*

Lurking is far more frequent than posting (Morrison *et al.*, 2013). For many researchers, over 90% of the online groups' members only lurk (Edelmann, 2013; Thomson *et al.*, 2014). The « 90-9-1 » principle gives an overall picture of user participation: in a study of collaborative websites, Nielsen (2006) takes into account the participation continuum and observes that 90% of the members are usually just readers, 9% of the members edit content and only 1% actively create new content. Similarly, Van Mierlo (2014) shows that on average, 1% of the members create 73.6% of the posts, the next 9% create 24.7% and the remaining 90% create only 1.7%.

The percentage of lurking users varies depending on the type of website or community (Preece *et al.*, 2004; Morrison *et al.*, 2013). For example, Nonnecke and Preece (2000) show

that lurking is higher in software support communities (around 82%) than in health support communities (around 45.5%). Morrison *et al.* (2013) show that 50% of frequent visitors of websites focused on news and public affairs lurk, while they are 75% on websites about products and services.

### *The benefits of lurking*

Despite a frequent negative underlying assumption, lurking generates valuable benefits. Lurking indicates content quality (Antin and Cheshire, 2010; Zhang and Zhu, 2011). Lurking generates website traffic and hits (Malinen, 2015). It helps propagate information online and offline, adding value to the online platforms: inactiveness in new content creation does not necessarily mean inactiveness in other behaviours (Takahashi *et al.*, 2003; Edelman, 2013). Lurking is necessary since it is usually the first step before posting and it enables users to learn how the online platform works (Nonnecke *et al.*, 2006; Steinhoff and Palmatier, 2016).

## **Why posting should be encouraged**

### *Benefits of posting for the online platform*

While lurking is necessary, too much lurking threatens the sustainability of online platforms. Online platforms with little posting become less informative and lose attractiveness (Amichai-Hamburger *et al.*, 2016). The more active participants there are in online groups, the larger the pool of resources will be for the entire group. Thus the lack of engagement of lurking users often serves as a threat to the continuity of online groups (Yeow *et al.*, 2006). Also, with an excessive number of lurking users, knowledge shared may not be representative of the average users anymore (Sun *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, a high level of posting signals user loyalty and satisfaction with the online platform (Blanchard and Markus, 2004). From this perspective, posting should obviously be encouraged in online discussions.

### *Benefits of posting for the brands*

Benefits of lurking for brands are also not as high as benefits of posting. For example, John *et al.* (2017) show that posting content on a brand's social network leads to positive outcomes while just "liking" a brand on Facebook does not. Posting content related to a brand helps reach a good level of natural referencing. It increases the brand's visibility, brand awareness and brand involvement (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). This electronic word-of-mouth is very

effective because it generates higher credibility and lower consumer resistance (De Vries, *et al.*, 2012).

Many empirical studies support that posting affects several individual-level outcomes: a) consumers' spending/willingness-to-pay in a product category (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Pavlou and Dimoka, 2006) b) levels of trust and loyalty (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008; Ba and Pavlou, 2002; Gauri *et al.*, 2008) and c) consumer engagement (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Nambisan and Baron, 2007; Schau and Muniz, 2002). Consequently, posting also affects several firm-level outcomes, such as product sales, revenues and stock prices (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Trusov *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, in terms of information collected by marketers, a very low number of posters in an online brand community may lead to misinterpretations: posters may be interested in features that are of low interest for the silent majority and vice versa, leading to erroneous conclusions about the target market (Thomson *et al.*, 2014).

## Reasons for lurking and posting

### *Motivations for lurking*

In the words of Nonnecke and Preece (2001) “there is no single answer to why lurkers lurk” (p. 6). A variety of factors are often involved in determining why users consume content without posting: Nonnecke *et al.* (2006) found a set of relationships between lurking and factors such as personality, needs, satisfaction and topic attraction.

The most influential factors affecting knowledge-sharing behaviours are motivational factors (Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014). Table 1 summarizes the main motivations for lurking identified in literature.

	<b>Motivations for lurking</b>	<b>Literature</b>
<b>Personal reasons</b>	Reducing risk	Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006
	Entertainment	Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Kaye, 2007; Courtois <i>et al.</i> , 2009 ; Park <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Shao, 2009; Muntinga <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Pöyry <i>et al.</i> , 2013; De Veirman <i>et al.</i> , 2016
	Surveillance	Courtois and al., 2009
	Getting	Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2003;

	information easily	Schindler and Bickart, 2005; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Kaye, 2007; Muntinga <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Pöyry <i>et al.</i> , 2013
	Because it is cool	Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006
<b>Relationship reasons toward other customers</b>	Doing like others	Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006
	Social Integration	Nonnecke and Preece, 1999; Kaye, 2007; De Veirman <i>et al.</i> , 2016
<b>Relationship reasons toward the brand</b>	Empowerment	Kaye, 2007
<b>Material reasons</b>	Remuneration	Muntinga <i>et al.</i> , 2011
	Securing lower prices	Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006

**Table 1- Motivations for lurking**

### *Barriers to posting*

Research shows that barriers to posting are not identical to motivations to lurk (Table 2). In particular, research highlights the role of trust: lower levels of trust prevent from participating in the conversation of the community (Ridings *et al.*, 2006). Familiarity with the online community and persistent involvement contribute to active participation. This means that once the user feels confident and comfortable as part of the community, he/she might stop lurking and become an active participant.

	<b>Barriers to posting</b>	<b>Literature</b>
<b>Personal reasons</b>	Do not need to post (reading is sufficient); Goal-oriented information seeking; Nothing to offer	Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Nonnecke <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Preece <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Küçük, 2010; Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014
	Shy, anonymous; Need for privacy and safety; Unwillingness to be emotionally involved; Introversion; Not comfortable writing their ideas online	Preece <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Ross <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Nonnecke <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014
	Time management	Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Beaudoin, 2002; Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014

	Worried about their performance and lack of confidence in their ability to post	Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014
<b>Relationship reasons toward other customers</b>	Need to find out more about community; Afraid of receiving criticism or judgment from others	Preece <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Guan, 2006
	Think posting would not be helpful for others; Think others will not post/answer	Ardichvili <i>et al.</i> 2003; Nonnecke, Preece, Andrews and Voutour, 2004; Preece <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014
	Lack of reciprocity; Low intimacy with other members and lack of commitment to the group	Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014
	Joining in is more important than posting	Lee, Chen and Jiang, 2006
	Lack of trust towards online community	Rindings, Gefen and Arinze, 2006; Liao and Chou, 2012;
<b>Environmental reasons</b>	Can not use community tools; Lack of understanding of the online communities and its structure; Technology considerations; Not knowing how to post	Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Nonnecke, Preece, Andrews and Voutour, 2004; Preece and al., 2004; Wise, Hamman and Thorson, 2006; Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014
	Lack of trust towards security and privacy issues	Noonecke and Preece, 2001; Sun <i>et al.</i> , 2014

**Table 2 - Barriers to posting**

### *Motivations for posting*

Posting is crucial for the sustainability of online platforms (Sun *et al.*, 2014) and is of major interest for brands who aim at engaging their consumers (Jahn and Kunz, 2012). Moreover, consumers are likely to play different roles depending on the platform they are using: consumers lurking on a platform may post on another (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the main reasons for posting are summarized in Table 3 and contribute to a better understanding of lurking practices and potential posting behaviours.

While studies on motivations for posting are numerous, few of them distinguish occasional from frequent posting. Muntinga *et al.* (2011) were the first to link different motivations to specific brand related activities that differ in their participation level (consuming, contributing and creating). Hui-Min and Tsung Teng (2014) analyse posting motivations depending on

lurking or posting usual behaviour and show that motivations differ. While posting is strongly determined by intrinsic motivational factors (i.e., enjoyment in helping others and knowledge self-efficacy), lurking is affected by extrinsic motivational factors (i.e., reciprocity). Moreover, factors related to the online platform, such as perceived moderator's enthusiasm, offline activities or enjoyability, affect both lurking and posting (Lai and Chen, 2014).

	<b>Motivations for posting</b>	<b>Literature</b>
<b>Personal reasons</b>	Perceived moderator's enthusiasm	Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014
	Knowledge self-efficacy Reinforce the ego, Expertise, Self-presentation, Self-expression	Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009; Muntinga <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014
	Offline activities	Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014
	Enjoyability	Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014
<b>Relationship reasons toward other customers</b>	Social integration	Muntinga <i>et al.</i> , 2011 ; Daughtery <i>et al.</i> , 2013; De Veirman <i>et al.</i> , 2016
	Enjoyment in helping others	Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009; Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014
	Reciprocity	Liao and Chou, 2012; Hui-Min and Tsung Teng, 2014
<b>Relationship reasons toward the brand</b>	Empowerment, Exert power	Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009; Muntinga <i>et al.</i> , 2011
	Vengeance	Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009
	Helping companies	Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> , 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009

**Table 3 - Motivations for posting**

### **Influence of the type of online platform**

Most marketing researches on lurking practices do not take into account the type of online platform. However, literature suggests it can play a role in consumer participation (Wasko et Faraj, 2005; Morrisson *et al.*, 2013). According to Amichai-Hamburger *et al.* (2016), different levels of lurking may be due to the fact that all online platforms are not able to satisfy the same socio-emotional needs. For example, empathy is likely to be expressed by participants in health related groups and could explain why lurking is very low. Groups related to technical or illness support are usually very welcoming to new users, which could also explain low levels of lurking. Finally, online social network groups enable users to have direct contacts with each other: these groups (e.g. Facebook) have higher participation levels than information exchange groups (e.g. TripAdvisor).

Social media platforms are of particular interest in this research since digital marketers are increasingly incorporating them in their online branding strategies (Phua *et al.*, 2017): they enable to transmit brand content at a fast rate, to a large audience and at a low cost (Qualman, 2013).

## **Methodology**

We conducted a qualitative study to explore lurking in the tourism sector. The tourism industry has been particularly impacted by developments of online platforms. Destinations and travel entities, such as hotels and restaurants, despite not exercising total control over communications, find themselves faced with three new phenomena: (1) the omnipresence of specialty community sites, TripAdvisor in particular; (2) the growing influence of online travel agencies which currently account for nearly three quarters of all comments published; and (3) the emergence of new “voices” by dint of travel blogs, traveler forums, and social networks. The travel industry provides an example of a sector with respect to which a sound e-reputation is not only strategically important, but also a prerequisite for survival. Stakeholders thus become brand carriers capable of altering how a company is perceived, shaping a company’s e-reputation and ultimately impacting commercial success (Chun and Davies, 2001). Online reviews have become an essential source of information for potential customers when planning a trip (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006; Xiang and Fesenmaier 2006; Xiang and Gretzel 2010). However, only a minority of travelers post comments, ratings, and online reviews pertaining to destinations, hotels, and restaurants (Yoo and Gretzel, 2012).

Twelve semi-directed individual interviews were conducted with consumers:

- familiar of tourism activity (respondents should have made at least one trip for professional or personal motives during the past year);
- having an access to the Internet and being at least aware of the existence of online touristic platforms (ex. TripAdvisor) or social media (ex. Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, etc.);
- having already searched, read or compared touristic activities on the Internet;
- not considering themselves or being considered by researchers as hard posters.

The study aimed to identify the practices, to better understand why individuals seek out or share personal opinions on the Internet and to investigate the way they proceed, taking into account the frequency of behaviours and the platforms used.

The study was carried out in Annecy, a lakeside town in France's northern Alps. Each interview lasted one hour on average. The first segment of the interview guide dealt with visitors' relation to tourism and trips. A second part dealt with their speaking activity online. A third part dealt with their lurking activities. In particular, they were requested to consult a panel of online reviews and provide feedback. By proceeding in this manner, we were able to position them as opinion platform users and bring to the fore a number of themes that regularly recur with online platform users. To analyze content, we grouped together respondent observations by theme (Tesch, 1990; Savoie-Zajc, 2000). We then coded observation operations. Employing an abductive approach, the data were analyzed and categories of meaning were allowed to emerge from respondent remarks. These categories were subsequently compared with existing literature, the object being to identify potential changes in lurking behaviours and to ascertain potential relationships between emerging categories and motivations to lurk or post and barriers to post.

## **New lurking practices**

### *A hybrid consumer: lurking a lot, posting occasionally*

Although Morrisson *et al.* (2013) indicate that some consumers appear passive by reading a lot of content online without ever posting any, our results suggest a hybrid behavior in the sector of tourism, with most lurking consumers having already posted at least a few times.

Lurking consumers have a very intense activity of consulting online platforms (discussion forums, blogs, community sites, social networks) to prepare their trips. For Colombe (34), she "*decided to go to Portugal by looking at the 10 things to see in the Algarve through blogs*", she "*never takes accommodation that does not have an opinion on AirBnB*" and goes "*often on Tripadvisor to check restaurant reviews*", just like Steve (31) "*for restaurants we always*

*look for other consumers online reviews when we wonder why we would go to one restaurant rather than another, it is really the online opinions that decide for us” or Rachel (30) “Before making the choice I check 15 to 20 online reviews on average. We search really hard. I check reviews on Tripadvisor, Booking, I cross information coming from different websites”.*

Their posting activity, which is *"very occasional"* (Colombe, 34), *"from time to time"* (Axelle, 19), can be explained by collaborative platform types that strongly encourage reviews: *“On AirBnb, you kind of have to leave a comment, it’s the same on Blablacar, they keep sending you messages to leave a comment until you actually do it”* (Cyril, 35). Occasional posting can also be explained by the ease of use of specific platforms such as Instagram: *"For me a hashtag is a summary, with a word we summarize the moment"* (Rachel, 30); *"With the hashtag you go back to the basics by just putting the important words without making long sentences. I think that just putting a few words is quick and easy"* (Colombe, 34).

Finally, intense lurking and occasional posting is linked to the development of apps that make it easier for consumers to lurk and post: *“I use the Tripadvisor app when I’m travelling, because I only have my mobile and not my computer, and the app is much easier to use than the mobile website”* (Steve, 31); *"I've never made a comment in the tourism. But, I have an application called Vinted, it's an application where you make transactions for clothes and fashion... And I use it a lot because it's easy to put a comment"* (Aurélie, 28).

### *The art of interpreting reviews*

Literature highlights several factors influencing the usefulness of online reviews for lurking consumers. While the number and valence of reviews play a major role (Belvaux and Marteaux, 2007), consumers may as well be influenced by the ranking or rating of the author, the amount of details provided by the review and its quality or readability (Liu and Park, 2015; Filieri, 2015).

Our research shows new determinants of online content’s usefulness for lurking consumers. First, customizing the review can bring credibility to the comment: *"In addition we can see the photos of the travelers, who complete the photos of the hotel. These are the real pictures of people; it is not a showcase that the hotel could put. So I have confidence in that."* (Cécile, 32); *"To prepare my travels, I use forums in order to have a real opinion on a lived experience, I have more confidence in a forum than in a book guide or some other tourism office website for example. Subjectivity gives me confidence."* (Rachel, 30). Then some personal criteria, such as nationality can also be taken into account to sort the opinions: *"We look at the comments of non-French people a lot because French people are always negative,*

*we realized this. If we look at the foreign reviews, we see that it's actually fine... and it usually turns out to be true!"* (Steve, 31). Furthermore, the company's response to a registered comment is a source of confidence: *"The restaurant owner or the hotel owner can respond to the comment. If I see that he has answered "yes, we were in the process of cleaning up the room "or" You happened to have the only room that was not redecorated..." I'm quite tolerant, I give them the benefit of doubt!"* (Cécile, 32); *"If there is a very violent opinion, a very dark one, I look at the response from the owner. It is rare that they leave them unanswered"* (Carole, 51).

### *Using hashtags to search for information*

Online content appears to be very convenient for consumers in organizing their trip, especially with regard to searching for landscapes or places to see via the hashtag (#): *"I type a lot of #Greece to see the pictures, the landscapes and it gives me even more desire to go to this destination (...) When I'm interested in a picture, based on the #, I record it directly and when we'll go to Greece, I'll say ah ah I saw a nice beach on Instagram, I would like to go there "* (Axelle, 19); *"For my trip to Madrid I did it, I did use hashtags to see if there were not something I missed that was nice to see ..."* (Virginie, 42).

Our study confirmed the motivations for lurking indicated in literature (Table 1) and brought three main new informations about lurking practices. New barriers to post and new motivations to post occasionally were also revealed: they are presented hereunder.

### **New barriers to post**

Our study confirms the influence of barriers to post identified in literature (Table 2) and highlights three new barriers to post content.

### *Complexity to post facing the diversity of websites and ways of posting*

Website diversity is a barrier for consumers who do not know how to post (Sun *et al.*, 2014). This obstacle is amplified by the creation of new online platforms and by their diversity in terms of use: *"I do not use Twitter, I was there 8 years ago for my company, but I didn't like it, I did not know where things came from. I tried to unsubscribe, it's been 6 years since I tried to unsubscribe, and sometimes I still get tweets. Snapchat, I have a friend in the United States that was on Snapchat, so I opened an account, but I still do not understand what's the point. I*

*tried to take pictures ... but they get erased? Finally she got a Facebook account, so I do not use it anymore."*(Carole, 51).

### *Inhibition to post negative comments*

Consumers become aware of the impact that their negative comments might have on the company / brand / destination and self-censor by not posting negative comments: *"It's never happened to me to be really disappointed and to write a negative comment to warn people. If it is a country that lives from tourism activities, maybe I would feel guilty, they need travelers, I do not want to hurt them (...) Sometimes I carpool, I'm a little disappointed because the driver does not talk too much. But I do not leave a negative comment; I do not want to punish him saying that he does not make too much effort... So, when it's like that I do not write anything online."* (Cécile, 32).

### *Consumers' skepticism toward brand consideration*

Although companies analyze the online comments in order to improve their offers and customer relationship (Munzel *et al.*, 2011), some consumers think that the brand does not care about their posted opinions. Inhibition to post could be linked to a perception of an imbalance of power between consumers perceived power as too low compared to company power: *"I don't know if they take into account the comments or not, it would be necessary to go back there to see if finally it was taken into consideration (...) In the big structures it would surprise me, maybe in the private things, the small hotels they will be careful but in the big chains I'm not sure ..."*(Virginie, 42).

### **New motivations for occasional posting**

Posting is more or less demanding depending on the online platform. For this reason, we make a distinction between online platforms based on classical comments (high number of characters) and more recent social networking sites that require very low numbers of characters to post (Phua *et al.*, 2017).

### *Motivations to post a high number of characters*

The determinants of posting indicated in literature (Table 3) were also identified in our study (self-confidence, ego-reinforcement, helping the company, altruism towards other customers), with the exception of vengeance, which did not appear in any verbatim.

*Posting to improve one's e-reputation.* Users of collaborative online platforms often leave a comment about the service they received since reciprocity will encourage the service provider to leave a comment on them as well, and eventually will contribute to their e-reputation: "I try to do it systematically on AirBnb. People who rent their apartments, they'll have the list of comments about me from people I've been to, I think that's good, because they'll know who I am, that I arrived on time and left the apartment very clean, that there was no problem... It makes people more secure to rent me their apartment." (Cyril, 35); "On AirBnb, I left a comment on my accommodation in Barcelona, because I knew it would help me for my trip to Lisbon, or for any other trip... The comments are public and are useful to me." (Colombe, 34).

### *Motivations to post a limited number of characters*

Motivations to post a limited number of characters are partly identical to motivations to post a high number of characters. However, the results reveal new and more varied self-oriented motivations: to become popular, to be cool, to value positive experiences, to inspire desire...or envy, to be noticed by the brand.

*To become popular.* On traditional online platforms such as blogs and Facebook, becoming popular requires posting high number of characters, involving a significant investment in terms of time and creativity. On those platforms, comments with a limited number of characters do not lead to any popularity. On the opposite, new social network sites such as Instagram enable users to become popular with only a few hashtags and a limited amount of content: "On Instagram I put artistic photos and I expect those photos to generate many views. It's really artistic photos, it's made for that, I put # to be found. When I post a photo I love, I want to have as many subscribers as possible, I want it to be seen a lot, so I'll put a # in French, in English.... This way when the person will arrive and click on the #, he or she came across my photo " (Axelle, 19).

*To be cool.* Posting a limited number of characters via the hashtag is also motivated by a desire to be in: "In my opinion, it's just a buzzword. I put it on Instagram by mimicry because I saw that everyone was signing like that, I thought it was the new way to go on Instagram" (Carole, 51); "I write #motheranddaughter #loveofmylife. If you write this without the hashtag

*it sucks, it seems weird"* (Virginie, 42); *"The hashtag is a way of writing and communicating that is modern. For example, today instead of writing "April under the sun", now I would write "#April #sun". I started the hashtag because I saw people doing that and I thought it was a pretty cool way to express themselves."* (Colombe, 34).

*To value positive experiences.* Self-presentation motives explain posting comment with a high number of characters for positive and negative experiences. However, for a short comment and especially when using a hashtag, consumers mostly post on positive experiences: *"The hashtag is for positive experiences, if I miss a plane I will not put it!"* (Steve, 31); *"The # is more about positive experiences, or if it's not positive, it's about something funny, so it's still pretty positive"* (Colombe, 34).

*To inspire desire...or envy.* People post short comments to inspire desire: *"A hashtag is to say .... we were lucky one day to see that....it's a way of sharing and we hope people will say "we'll go there one day", we hope to inspire desire."* (Steve, 31). Sometimes, the motivation goes as far as to arouse jealousy: *"When I post the photo I say to myself that people are going to be jealous because it's beautiful, it's my boyfriend who has this car and who wears this watch that I bought him ..... it will make people envious"* (Axelle, 19).

*To be noticed by the brand.* Using hashtags facilitates connections between brands and consumers, enabling consumers to appear in the search results of brands more easily: *"When I wrote the names of the brands that were on the photo, it was because the photo made me think of an ad, deep inside of me I thought... Maybe my picture will be found and the brand will offer me to take a photo for Seat or Festina.... And it will be shown on their account."* (Axelle, 19).

## **Discussion, conclusion and areas of research**

### *Theoretical contributions*

This research could suggest the disappearance of the « silent majority » in the tourism sector: our study - although exploratory - highlights that lurking consumers do create content, but to a very small extent. They contribute by posting critics and comments, especially on collaborative platforms that strongly encourage participation, or by generating content with a

limited number of characters through hashtags. The past few years, a great number of new platforms have been developed, with constant effort to facilitate their use. At the same time, collaborative economy is born, founded on a principle of exchange and a new definition of consumers' roles. This partly led to new practices and new motivations.

Typically, the typology of Li and Bernoff (2008) that classifies consumer online participation could be refined by adding a new level: between "collectors" who add tags or vote online and "critics" who post ratings/reviews and comments, we could add a new category that includes "hashtagger" who use very short comments associated to hashtags.

Our research also sheds light on consumer expertise when they lurk and use online reviews. Indeed, consumers today are confronted to a high number of comments online and are becoming experts in interpreting them, using not only the valence or number of comments but also their qualitative attributes (e.g. level of customization, nationality of author, company's response). This result echoes a contradictory literature on the effects of online review valence, that does not always predict purchase behaviour (Wu, 2013). Consequently, consumer expertise is a new factor that should be taken into account when analysing lurking behaviours. Regarding barriers to posting, our results highlight an inhibition to post negative comments. While literature strongly emphasizes consumer vengeance through online comments (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Trusov *et al.*, 2009), consumers expressed benevolence toward other customers and companies online. This benevolence could be linked to the context of a growing collaborative economy based on peer-to-peer reviews (e.g. AirBnB or Blablacar) in which consumers have to gain a reputation to be trusted in the social marketplace (Botsman and Rogers, 2010). In this context, consumers seem more aware of the potential impact of negative comments.

The growing collaborative economy and the new social networking sites could also explain why consumers seem more oriented toward others when posting. Indeed, we identified new motivations to post that are not all intrinsic, in opposite to the results of Hui-Min and Tsung Ten (2014). Apart from the self-oriented motivation of valuing positive experiences, becoming popular, improving one's e-reputation, inspiring desire or being noticed by the brand are all extrinsic motivations.

From a brand perspective, our research highlights a new type of customer engagement online. Customer engagement is defined by Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) as "a vast array of behaviours, beyond purchases, including word-of-mouth (WOM) activity, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging [and] writing reviews". While Muntinga *et al.* (2011) show that a high level of engagement with the brand requires elaborated posting with a high number of

characters (e.g. a brand-related weblog or article), this study indicates that consumers may also engage with the brand via hashtags and content with very few characters.

### *Managerial contributions*

While companies focus on a minority of heavy-posting-consumers to increase their engagement (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2010), this study suggests taking lurking behaviours into account: lurking consumers are posting occasionally and brand actions online may eventually increase their posting activities. They also still represent the majority of consumers.

Managers should take into account the fact that consumers have become experts in interpreting reviews. They analyse reviews not only based on their valence or number but also on various characteristics such as customization. Consequently, online reviews could be enriched with new types of information (e.g. nationality of author) and should present as much details as possible. Moreover, our results strongly highlight the role of companies' responses to negative comments, which significantly influence consumers' interpretation, especially when comments are very negative. Therefore, managers should keep providing responses to consumers online and promote the role of community managers. Furthermore, systematic responses from companies could impact posting by reducing consumer skepticism toward the brand: some consumers do not post any comments since they believe those won't be heard.

Our results on new lurking behaviours also indicate that consumers use hashtags when searching for content in order to gain time and access new combinations of content that are often more recent. Given this usage, instead of creating hashtags with the name of the brand or destination, marketers should make an active watch and use the most popular hashtags that also embody their products and values in order to be found easily and to connect directly to consumers, on a more personal level. For example, the bag manufacturer Poler and Herschel Supply Co used the hashtag #welltravelled on Instagram when publishing travelling pictures featuring their bags. Those pictures were not professional pictures, they were taken by employees. Rapidly, consumers got involved and used the hashtag to increase the number of views of their own pictures. Using hashtags will have an impact on the size of brand communications since the shorter the message is, the most impact it has.

However, using hashtags is limited by the fact that recent platforms are numerous and complex: many consumers have difficulties using them (to post or lurk) and making the most of the possibilities they offer. Consequently, companies using the most recent social

networking sites face the challenge of explaining to novice consumers how to deal with such online platforms, which should encourage new ways of lurking and posting.

### *Limits and areas of research*

While abundant and adequate precautions have been taken, our study is not without a number of limitations that could be eliminated or examined in future research. Firstly, considering the limited scope of the research, a quantitative study could be drawn to better evaluate the number of real passive consumers in tourism sector and validate the new category of consumer we suggest (the "hashtaggers"). It also would be interesting to test the impact of new lurking and posting behaviours identified in this article on engagement through a quantitative study. Secondly, we focused on a single product category: tourist trips. We believe that our results are relatively general, and it may be significant to investigate other categories with different types of consumption and to extend our research to other population groups since culture could impact consumer inhibition online.

Finally, considering the ease of use of hashtags, its positive nature and its growing impact on brand awareness, we believe it would be interesting to understand how to push consumers to become hashtaggers.

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