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### Who's driving this conversation? Systematic biases in the content of online consumer discussions

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# Who's Driving This Conversation?

## Systematic Biases in the Content of Online Consumer Discussions

Rebecca Hamilton, Ann Schlosser, Yu-Jen Chen  
Yale Customer Insights Conference – May 10, 2014

# Do online discussion forums influence content?

[Ask a question](#)



[boydog](#)

denver, co  
posts: 68  
reviews: 23

“ **seattle hotel** ”

Feb 07, 2012, 2:14 PM

Which is best Silver Cloud/[Broadway](#) or Red Lion 5th. Will be there two nights in August pre-cruise. Pike Place is major stop.

Thanks

Reply

# Participants respond to the query *and to each other*

## 2 replies



[davidgmg](#)

seattle

posts: 12,397

reviews: 64

1. Re: seattle hotel

Feb 07, 2012, 2:45 PM

Destination Expert for Seattle

I've stayed at Red Lion multiple times and its right in the heart of everything you want to see and do. Silver Cloud Broadway is actually on First Hill and not considered 'downtown'. Its in a nice area but you'd have to take a bus to do anything touristy. Really no comparison I think you should book Red Lion



[suze2you](#)

Seattle

posts: 22,597

reviews: 11

2. Re: seattle hotel

Feb 07, 2012, 7:38 PM

I don't know either hotel personally (since I live here), but the Red Lion is right downtown so by far the more central & convenient location. The Silver Cloud Broadway is up on Pill Hill/way south Capitol Hill I'm guessing a mile or two from [Pike Place Market](#).

# Does it matter if online discussion forums influence content?



- Consumers have multiple goals for engaging in online word of mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004)
  - Altruism
  - Self-enhancement
  - Anxiety reduction/vengeance
  - Affiliation with others
- Clearly, some of these goals work *against* accuracy



# Why examine online discussion forums?



- Much of the work on online WOM focuses on reviews, but the audience is ambiguous
- A discussion forum is more like a group in which participants *interact*
  - One person provides decision criteria and asks for advice; others respond to this post
  - Thus, the quality of responses can be evaluated “objectively”

# Do online discussion forums facilitate conversations among consumers?



- Conversational norms (Grice 1975; Schwarz 1994)
  - Clear
  - Truthful
  - Relevant
  - Appropriate quantity

# Who has the most influence on content?



- The advice seeker who posted the question?
  - Advice seekers may explicitly tell other consumers which decision criteria are most important.
  - **Conversational norm of relevance** → advice seeker *should* have more influence
- Or the first person to respond?
  - Normative influence suggests that consumers may adjust their content based on previous responses.
  - **Affiliation goals** → early responses may drive the conversation



# Analysis of three discussion forums



- Data:
  - 3 forums on Tripadvisor.com and DISboards.com
  - 2 categories (hotels and restaurants) in 3 different cities (Seattle, DC, Orlando)
  - 324 posts from 85 threads with at least 3 posts
- Content analysis:
  - For each category, we identified the 10-15 most frequently mentioned attributes
  - Two coders indicated whether each attribute was mentioned within each post

# Analysis of three discussion forums



- Previous responses to a query strongly influence attributes discussed in subsequent responses
  - The influence of previous responses was even stronger than that of the initial query!
- Limitation: discussion threads vary in length, structure, number of participants, information available to participants
  - We can hold these factors constant in lab studies...

# Participants respond to a query

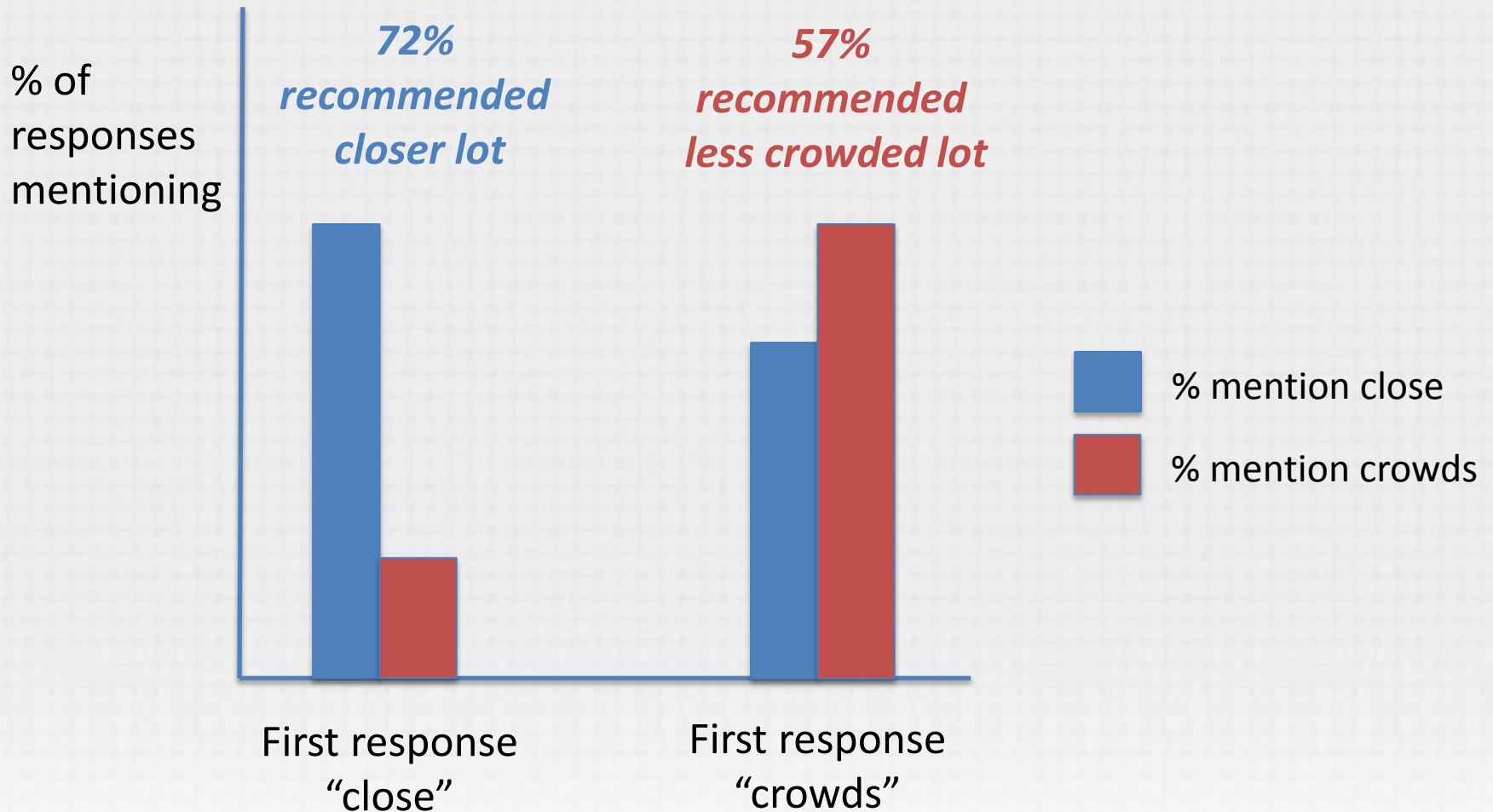
EXPLORE OUR WORLD OF FEARLESS IDEAS

**MARYLAND**  
**DAY 2013**

SATURDAY, APRIL 27, 10 AM-4 PM  
[marylandday.umd.edu](http://marylandday.umd.edu)

- 80 UMD students and alumni responded to a query asking where to park on Maryland Day
- Previous response either mentions one attribute (crowdedness) or another attribute (close to events)

# Participants respond to a query



# Participants respond to a query



- Posted content and recommendations were significantly influenced by the content of previous posts.
- Will this be true even when one of the attributes is critical to the advice seeker's decision?

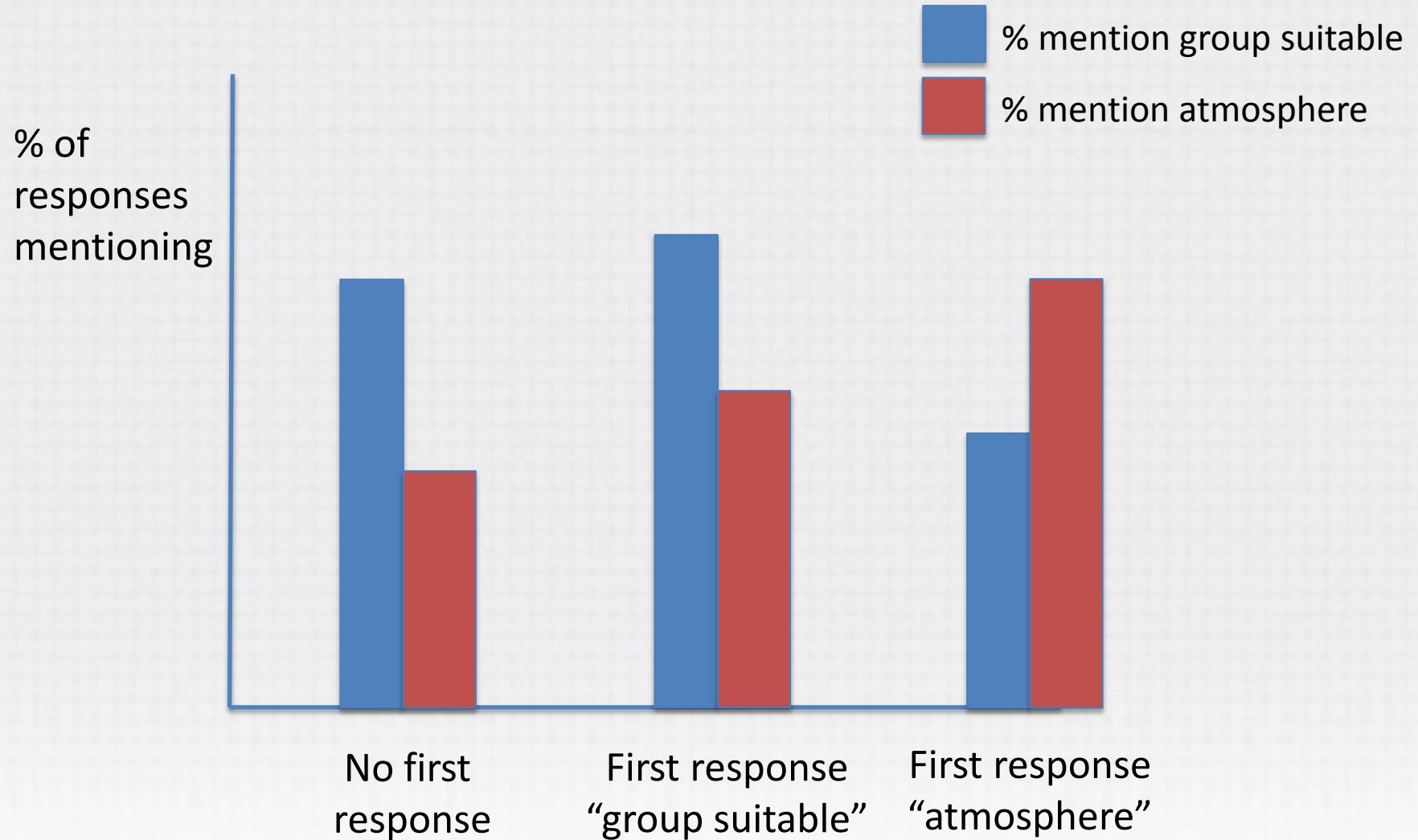


# Varying number of previous posts



- 205 UW students responded to a query asking about the appropriateness of two Boston restaurants for a group dinner
  - Participants provide first, second or third response to the query
  - Previous responses either mention a critical attribute (suitability for groups) or mention a different attribute (atmosphere)

# Varying number of previous posts



# Varying number of previous posts



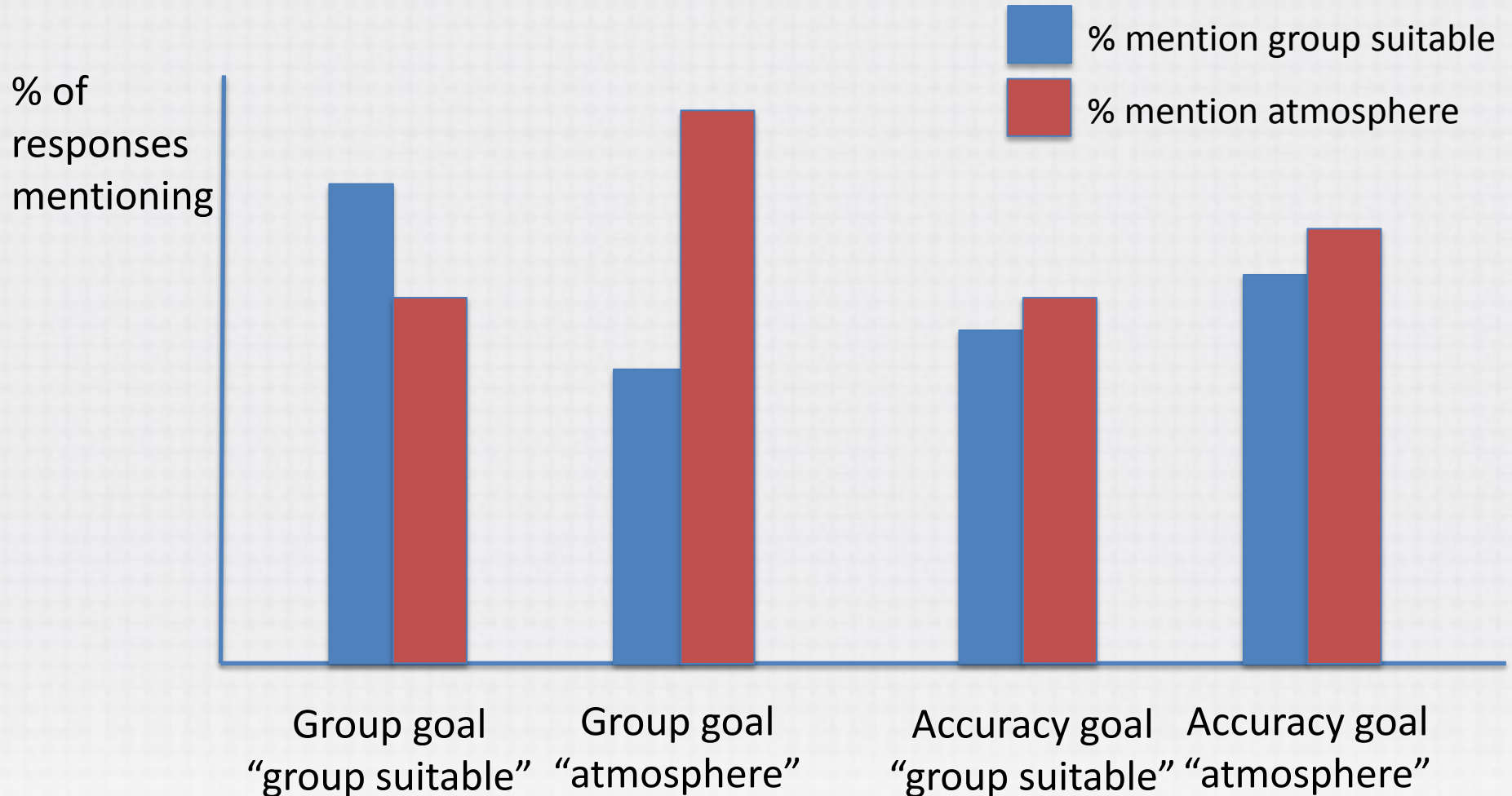
- Like forum data, lab data suggest previous responses strongly influence attributes mentioned in subsequent posts
- Why does this happen?
  - Are respondents trying to validate others by mentioning shared information?
  - Do respondents believe others are more expert than they are, and take their lead?

# Testing for normative influence

- 156 UW students responded to the same query about two Boston restaurants
  - First response mentions either suitability for groups OR atmosphere.
  - Ps given one of two goals
    - Group Goal: “Your goal is to have a friendly conversation with others who share your interests”
    - Accuracy Goal: “Your goal is to provide accurate and relevant information to help the person making the decision”



# Testing for normative influence





# Study 5: Testing for normative influence



- Normative influence seems to be driving the effect
  - Group goal condition replicates earlier results
  - Accuracy goal attenuates the effect



- Why do consumers care about the opinions of other forum participants?
- What are the implications of a motive to affiliate with others on discussion forums?
  - Design forums to meet affiliation needs as well as information sharing
  - Should segmentation be broad or narrow?

**Thank you!**