SHARING WORD-OF-MOUTHS OR NOT: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INDEPENDENT AND INTERDEPENDENT SELF-CONSTRUAL

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Abstract

With the high penetration of Internet, consumers now can share their consumption experience online. Word-of-mouths (WOMs) are now an important information source to get product and service information before making purchase decision. However, not all consumers tend to share their own consumption experience online, the question then arises about which kinds of consumers will share WOMs online. The current study conducted an online questionnaire of 226 participants and adopted structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to explore the influence of self-construal on the intention to share WOMs. The current study explored participants’ WOM sharing intention in three WOM platforms of instant messaging service, social network websites, and product review websites. Two scenarios of positive and negative consumption experience were considered in the study. The empirical survey results interdependent self-construal participants were with higher intention to share WOMs than independent ones. Participants tend to post positive WOM in social network sites. The intention to post negative WOM is lower than to post positive one. The current study provides contributions about confirming the influence of self-construal on WOM and may serve as fundamental for future research on WOM behavior.

Keywords: Self-construal, Interdependent, Independent, Word-of-Mouth, WOM
1. INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is a major information source for consumers to evaluate product or service. Consumers often consult other consumers about the product or service to assist their purchase decision. Past research has revealed that WOMs are more persuasive than commercials since WOMs are non-commercial, two-way, experience-oriented, and immediate (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Silverman, 1997).

With the growing prominence of the Internet, consumers now can share their experience of consuming products or service through the network (Dellarocas, 2003; Hung & Li, 2007; Liu, 2006). With the convenience and immediate response of product review websites and search engines, electronic WOMs, the opinions about product or service posted online, have become an important information source, with similar effects as traditional WOMs. Previous research has also indicated that eWOMs are more credible than online advertisements (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). EWMs are more details and with better quality and have a wider range of sources than traditional WOMs (Alba & Lynch, 1997; Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Besides, eWOMs are easy to search (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996), persistent (Rice & Love, 1987), and can better protect to privacy (Gelb & Sundaram, 2002). Recently, with the popularity of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Plurk, people are getting more accustomed to accepting the eWOMs provided or recommended by their friends.

WOMs are consumption experience share by consumer who purchase the product or accept the service. However, not all consumers will share their opinions to others after consumption. Some consumers may prefer to share their consumption experience to their close friends or post their opinions in product review websites which can be read by other consumers. In contrast, some consumers do not use to share their consumption experience to others.

Since not all consumers will share their consumption experience, the question then arises about which kinds of consumers will share WOMs online. In the past, sharing WOMs to others in the physical world exist in the ordinary social interaction. People share their WOMs to close relatives and friends during their social activities. Nowadays, sharing eWOMs to others may be regarded as a kind of online social activities. Thus, factors influencing individuals’ social interaction behaviour may influence people’s WOM sharing intention. Self-construal reflects the extent to which individuals view themselves either as an independent entity or in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Self-construal may influence people’s social activities. Nevertheless, few studies have ever tried to examine the influence of self-construal on WOM intention.

People with independent self-construals consider themselves as unique and value characteristics that distinguish them from other members of the group. On the other hand, people with interdependent self-construals regard themselves as part of a group and consider themselves with respect to other group members (Agrawal & Maheswaran, 2005).

Academics and industry practitioners may be interesting in exploring determinates of WOMs generation. Self-construal may be a personality trait which will influence consumers’ intention to share WOMs. D. Lee, Kim, and Kim (2012) explored the relationship of self-construal and eWOM from the aspect of Social cognitive theory, and the results showed that the interdependent construal is an important factor on WOM. In this research, we explore the influence of self-construal on WOM.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Word of Mouth (WOM)

2.1.1. WOM and eWOM Communication

Arndt (1967) defined WOM as “face-to-face communication about products or companies between those people who are not commercial entities”, while Harrison-Walker (2001) defined WOM as
“informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization or a service.” WOM has received extensive attention from marketing managers and researchers. Since the early 1950s, researchers had demonstrated that personal conversations and exchange of information between strangers influence consumers’ choices and the pre-purchase decision-making (Arndt, 1967; Whyte Jr, 1954). WOMs would shape consumer expectations (Anderson, 2003), pre-consumption attitudes (Herr et al., 1991), and even post-consumption perceptions of a product or a service (Bone, 1995; Burzynski & Bayer, 1977). Previous research has demonstrated that WOMs are more persuasive than other commercial message sources such as print advertising, personal selling, and radio advertising (Engel, Kegerreis, & Blackwell, 1969; Feldman & Spencer, 1965; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

EWOMs are informal communications about the usage or characteristics of products and services in Internet-based context (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Due to the advancement and popularity of Internet technology, people now can use the Internet to spread or receive WOMs. Customers now can post their opinions, comments and reviews of products or services on discussion forums, review websites, bulletin board systems, and social networking sites (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

Unlike traditional WOM which can diffuse to only a few persons, eWOM communications have unprecedented penetration speed and popularity. In traditional WOM communication, sharing of information is among small groups of individuals and societies (Avery, Resnick, & Zeckhauser, 1999; Dellarocas, 2003; Li & Hitt, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Unlike traditional WOM, eWOM communications are more persistent and are accessible for an indefinite period of time (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Hung & Li, 2007; J. Lee, Park, & Han, 2008; C. Park & Lee, 2009; D.-H. Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Sen, 2008). Besides, eWOMs information available online are more voluminous than traditional WOMs in the offline world (Sen, 2008). Therefore, researchers can retrieve a lot of eWOM messages throughout the Internet and analyze their characteristics related to the message context, customer participation or discussion for WOM, style of messages, and the like.

2.1.2. Positive WOM

WOMs could be positive or negative. When customers are satisfied with a product or a service, they may generate positive WOMs to provide positive comments on the product or the service. Positive WOM can help consumers generate more positive attitude and purchase intention for products or services (Doh & Hwang, 2009; East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008), and may facilitate consumers’ acceptance and purchase of the product (East et al., 2008). Thus, literature revealed that positive reviews and ratings can positively influence product sales (Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006).

2.1.3. Negative WOM

Negative WOMs are usually disseminated when dissatisfaction or service failure happen. Customers generate negative WOM to communicate their dissatisfying consumption experience (Anderson, 1998). Negative WOMs help customers to narrate the cause of their dissatisfaction to get solution (Thøgersen, Juhl, & Poulsen, 2009). Negative WOMs can also serve as a mechanism to vent negative feelings to reduce their unpleasant emotion or feelings (Nyer, 1997; Richins, 1984).

2.2 Self-Construal

The concept of self-construal refers to “the relationship between the self and others, and self-form a set of thoughts, feelings, and actions are concerned with separation from others” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It can be divided into two major distinctive components: independent and interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994).
2.2.1 Independent

Independent self-construal derives from individual’s configuration of internal attributes about wholeness and uniqueness (Johnson, 1985; Sampson, 1985, 1988, 1989; Waterman, 1981). It generates processes like “ability to express self”, “self-actualization”, “expressing one’s unique needs, rights, and capacities”, or “developing one’s distinct potential” and makes people regard themselves as autonomous, independent person (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Individuals with a strong independent self-construal emphasize selves as “stable, unitary, consistent, value self-promotion, autonomy, uniqueness” that separate from social. Inependent self-construal motivates individuals to express and validate their inner attributes in a more direct way (Hardin, Leong, & Bhagwat, 2004). Individuals with a strong independent self-construal take a positive manner to stand out from their group or others as someone who is successful (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Moreover, they tend to show high motivation on tasks to achieve or promote successful outcomes (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998).

2.2.2 Interdependent

Interdependent self-construal emphasizes the relationship between the self and others. In order to fit in with others, individuals with interdependent self-construal are motivated to fulfill and create an obligation to become part of various interpersonal relationships. It generates to process like “ability to adjust” and “retrain self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Interdependent self-construal represents a “flexible” and “variable” self that emphasizes external and public features (e.g., “status”, “roles”, and “relationships”), “belonging”, and being indirect in communication (Singelis, 1994), strives to fit in and maintain harmony with others in diverse social context (Heine et al., 1999), and avoid behavior that might cause social disruption in their lives (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakunkit, 1997). They tend to show higher motivation on tasks to prevent unsuccessful outcomes (Shah et al., 1998).

2.3 Self-construals and eWOM communication

In Internet-based context, customers can post their opinions, comments and reviews of products or services on discussion forums, review websites, bulletin board systems, and social networking sites (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Other users may reply their opinions to the WOMs which containing consumption experience of WOMs senders. The generation of WOMs and responses to WOMs form a kind of social interaction between WOM senders and receivers. With the passage of time, more participants joined the discussion of WOM in which people can share their consumption experience with others, thus generate more social interaction. Independent self-construal emphasize selves as “autonomous, unique, and inner attribute” aspect that is separate from social contexts (Hardin et al., 2004). Therefore, the independent-oriented people are less likely to scruple feelings of others. They will take direct action to vent their negative feelings when they experience a negative consumption experience such as “voice response” (Wei, Miao, Cai, & Adler, 2012). They are likely to generate negative WOM. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H1: Individuals with independent self-construal will have greater intentions to generate negative eWOM than one with interdependent self-construal.

In contrast, interdependent-oriented people concern for “external attribute”, “consideration of others’ minds, feelings and action” and emphasize the relationship features between the self and others. Therefore, the interdependent-oriented people strive to fit in and maintain harmony with others in diverse social contexts (Heine et al., 1999). Interdependent self-construal motivates individuals to become part of a team or a group; thus they were less likely to spread negative WOM because it may damage relationship between self and others. They will have higher intention to post positive eWOM that maintains group harmony and avoid being alienated from the society. The generation of positive
WOM also provides interdependent-oriented individuals an opportunity to make social interaction with others. Based on the above discussion, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2: Consumers with interdependent self-construal (versus independent self-construal) will have greater intentions to generate positive eWOM.

3. Methodology

The research primarily focuses on the influence of self-construal on eWOM communications when customers encounter positive or negative consumption experience. We adopted an online questionnaire survey to collect data and explore the influence of self-construal on the intention of eWOM generation.

3.1 Sample

We recruited voluntary participants from a large online community PTT (URL: www.ptt.cc). PTT is a large bulletin board system with more than one million registered users. We posted calls for voluntarily subject messages on the gourmet food board of PTT for two weeks. Volunteers clicked the hyperlink to join this study. A total of 395 voluntarily subjects participated in this study. After discarding incomplete data, 226 complete responses were used in data analysis. Among the participants, 122 (53.5%) were male and 104 (45.5%) were female. The average age were 25.5 years (SD = 5.00), ranging from 17 to 53. Among the participants 145 (64.16%) had college degrees, and 69 (30.53%) had master degrees. 130 (57.52%) of all participants were students, and 75 (33.19%) were employed. 21 (9.29%) participants were unemployed.

3.2 Procedures and measurement

The questionnaire contained three sections: self-construal, eWOM intention and demographics. The Self-Construal Scale by Singelis (1994) was widely used to measure the individual’s self-construal type. Thus, we adopted six items from the scale proposed by Singelis (1994) to measure the individual’s independent and interdependent score. The scale used in the current study consists of six items, among which three statements were related to the independent self-construal and three statements were related to the interdependent self-construal. Each item was anchored by 1 (“strongly disagree”) and 7 (“strongly agree”). Furthermore, we provided two statements about the independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal base on the research of Markus and Kitayama (1991) and Singelis (1994). Participants were asked to reveal which kind of self-construal they belong to.

The second part of questionnaire was designed to measure the subject’s intention to generate and spread eWOM. We created two scenarios in this part: positive consumer experience or negative consumption experience during a visit to a restaurant to celebrate with friends or family members. Intention to generate or spread positive eWOM to friend and public included three items, while the intention to generate and spread negative eWOM also included the same items. Among the three items, one item for private WOM communication was proposed by Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004), while the two items for public WOM communication were proposed by this study. The seven-point Likert scale anchored by 1 (“strongly disagree”) and 7 (“strongly agree”) was used.

In the last section, the demographic variables including the participant’s gender, age, education, and occupation were measured. To increase the questionnaire response rate, 200 units of virtual point which can be used in PTT were provided as incentive to each respondent who completed the questionnaire.
3.3 Reliability and validity

The self-construal scale consisted of six items. We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) through LISREL software to check the measurement model. After eliminating the factor loading lower than 0.6, five items remained for confirmatory factor analysis. The model has a goodness of fit index (GFI) of 0.99 and an adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) of 0.97, both are within the acceptable criteria range of GFI above 0.9 and AGFI above 0.8 (Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000). The ratio of Chi-Square and degrees of freedom was 1.29 (Chi-Square = 5.17, df = 4), which falls the established criteria below 5 (Bollen, 1998).

For reliability analysis, we used Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability (CR), to assess the model’s internal consistency. The Cronbach’s alpha of independent self-construal was 0.703 and that of interdependent self-construal was 0.721. Those two numbers are above the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). The CR of independent self-construal was 0.72 and interdependent self-construal was 0.76. According to the suggested for CRs by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the CR value of greater than 0.7 is accepted. The Cronbach’s alpha and CR are within the acceptable range, indicating good reliability and stability for the measurement items.

4. RESULTS

The current study considered three platforms to spend WOMs: instant messaging service, social network websites, and product review websites. When the WOMs are posted by instant messaging service, people can share their WOMs to their close friends. However, by posting WOMs in social network websites, the entire circle of friend in the social network website can get the shared WOMs. If people post their WOMs in the product review websites, the WOMs can be read by public rather than only their friends. Thus, the three kinds of WOM platform represent the range that WOMs can reach.

Table 1 reveals the participants’ intention to share their WOMs in the three platforms. In positive consumption experience, participants were with highest intention to share their WOMs in social network websites. The intention to share their positive consumption experience in social network websites is higher than all other situation. Besides, the intention to share their WOMs in product review websites is lowest in both positive and negative consumption experience. The intention to share their negative WOM by instant messaging and in social network websites are insignificant different and are lower than the intention to share their positive WOMs in social network websites. The results reveal that most participants did not choose to post their WOMs in product review websites. The finding is quit important since that product review websites are more and more popular recently. The users who provide their WOMs in product review websites cannot stand for all the consumers. According to the empirical survey results of the current study, most consumers choose to post their WOMs in social network websites rather than in product review websites.

The current study asked participants to reveal which kind of self-construal they belong to. We used the t-test to compare the difference in WOM communication between independent and interdependent self-construal participants.

As Table 2 revealed, in the positive consumption experience situation, the t-test results indicated significant different in intention to share positive WOM by instant message to their friends (t = -3.341; p < 0.01) and by social network websites (t = -2.130; p < 0.05) between independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal subjects. In the negative consumption experience situation, we can only observe the significant difference in intention to share negative WOM by instant message to their friends (t = -3.140; p < 0.05) between independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal subjects. According to the t-test results, interdependent self-construal participants had greater intention to share their positive consumption experience than independent ones.

The study used structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the structural relationship among independent self-construal, interdependent self-construal, and WOM communication. The current
study created two scenarios: One positive and one negative consumption experience. Thus, this study conducted two SEM analyses. Figure 3 shows SEM analysis results of positive consumption experience scenario. The GFI of this model was 0.97 and the AGFI was 0.93. Both of score are above the acceptable criteria range of GFI 0.9 and AGFI 0.8 (Gefen et al., 2000). The ratio of Chi-Square and degrees of freedom was 1.92 (Chi-Square = 26.94; df = 14), which was within the established criteria of 5 (Bollen, 1998).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOM platform</th>
<th>Positive consumption experience</th>
<th>Negative consumption experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S. D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Instant messaging</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Social network websites</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Product review websites</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ANOVA results post hoc test

\( (2) > (1) > (3) \)

\( (1), (2) > (3) \)

**Table 1. WOMs in three platforms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independent (N=73)</th>
<th>Interdependent (N=153)</th>
<th>t value</th>
<th>Sig. (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive consumption experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant Message</td>
<td>4.18 (1.97)</td>
<td>5.04 (1.43)</td>
<td>-3.341</td>
<td>.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social network websites</td>
<td>4.79 (1.84)</td>
<td>5.31 (1.41)</td>
<td>-2.130</td>
<td>.035*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product review websites</td>
<td>3.14 (1.69)</td>
<td>3.42 (1.62)</td>
<td>-1.234</td>
<td>.218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                           |                   |                        |         |                   |
| Negative consumption experience |             |                        |         |                   |
| Instant Message           | 4.03 (2.13)       | 4.92 (1.64)            | -3.140  | .002*             |
| Social network websites    | 4.52 (2.09)       | 4.67 (1.71)            | -0.543  | .588              |
| Product review websites    | 3.03 (1.78)       | 3.18 (1.62)            | -0.653  | .514              |

* \( p < .05; ** \( p < .01

**Table 2. Self-Construal and WOM communication**

As Figure 1 revealed, under positive consumption experience scenario, the influence of independent self-construal on WOM behaviours are not significant. Independent self-construal is not relative with intention to share WOMs by instant messages, intention to share WOMs in social network websites, and intention to share WOMs in product review websites. Besides, the results also reveal that
interdependent self-construal will positive influence intention to share WOMs by instant messaging to their close friends \( (t=2.27, p < 0.05) \) and intention to post WOMs to social network websites \( (t=4.54, p<0.01) \). However, the influence of interdependent self-construal on intention to share WOMs in product review websites is not significant.

Figure 2 shows SEM analysis results of negative consumption experience scenario. The GFI of this model was 0.98 and the AGFI was 0.94, which were both above 0.9 and 0.8. The ratio of Chi-Square and degrees of freedom was 1.53 \((\text{Chi-Square} = 19.94; \text{df} = 13)\), which was within the acceptable criteria of 5. Both of models’ indices revealed the proposed models were in accord with the established criteria range.

As Figure 3 revealed, under negative consumption experience scenario, independent self-construal is significant relative with intention to share WOMs in social network websites \( (t=2.15, p<0.05) \). However, the influence of interdependent self-construal on WOM intention to share negative WOMs to close friend by instant messaging and intention to post negative WOM in product review websites are not significant. Besides, the results also reveal that interdependent self-construal will positive influence intention to share negative WOMs by instant messaging to their close friends \( (t=2.03, p < 0.05) \). However, the influence of interdependent self-construal on intention to share WOMs in social network websites and in product review websites is not significant.

5. DISCUSSION

The empirical survey results of the current study show that self-construal is an influential factor to the intention of sharing WOM. Interdependent-oriented individuals would have greater intention to share eWOM. Individuals with interdependent self-construal are more likely to share positive eWOM. The difference in positive eWOM intention between independent and interdependent individuals may be due to the fact that eWOM possess a certain of social interaction (Avery et al., 1999; Dellarocas, 2003; Li & Hitt, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Individual with a strong independent self-construal were separated from social context (Hardin et al., 2004), thus they may not share their consumption experience with others.

From the “negativity effect” perspective (Fiske, 1980; Herr et al., 1991; Mittal et al., 1998), negative WOM or product review may have negative impact on restaurants and consumers. According to the research by Wei et al. (2012), individuals with an independent self-construal reported a greater likelihood of voicing complaints to vent negative feelings, and more likely to spread negative eWOM when they experience negative consumption experience. From this study, we found that independent-oriented individuals who have negative consumption experience will more likely post a negative eWOM on social network to vent their negative feelings.

D. Lee et al. (2012) offered a new theoretical perspective on consumers’ eWOM communication based on Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1991, 1997) and also highlights interdependent self-construal as one important construct of eWOM communication in social networking sites (D. Lee et al., 2012). This study differs from D. Lee et al. (2012) that we focused on the different platform of eWOM communication. For the positive consumption experience situation, interdependent self-construal subjects tend to post positive eWOM in social network website and share to their friends by instant messaging. In the negative consumption experience situation, spreading negative eWOM will influence friends or other people’s emotion and feeling. In order to fit in and maintain harmony with relevant others in diverse social context, interdependent-oriented people were more likely to express their negative consumption experience through indirect communication (Singelis, 1994). The empirical survey results of the current study revealed that the interdependent self-construal is significantly related to the negative instant message eWOM. Hence, we conclude that interdependent-oriented people prefer using instant message to send negative WOM rather than posting negative eWOM on social network or product review websites.
On the other hand, consumers with positive consumption experiences are more likely to post eWOM through social network. Because, it emphasizes not only the relationship between the self and others but also emphasizes external and public features (e.g., status, roles, and relationships), and belonging (Singelis, 1994). Accordingly, individuals with a strong interdependent self-construal will be motivated to fulfill the obligation to share their opinion or positive consumption experience. And strive to become part of various interpersonal relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

REFERENCE


