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CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL, TRUST AND TIE STRENGTH IN A SAMPLE OF GERMAN AND PORTUGUESE MILLENNIALS

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Abstract

Nowadays consumers spread and seek opinions of peers through social networks like Facebook. Marketeers need to understand consumers' online engagement and the factors that influence such electronic word-of-mouth behaviour (eWOM). Culture specifically plays a vital role, however, has been paid limited attention in previous research studies. This study undertook an online survey with 107 German and 48 Portuguese Facebook users, focusing on Millennials, to understand how engagement in opinion seeking, giving and passing differs between both nationalities and which factors influence the behaviours respectively, namely the social relationship variables bridging and bonding social capital, trust and tie strength. The findings revealed no significant differences for Germans and Portuguese in the engagement and for the factor social capital. More importantly, differences were found in the characteristics of the social relationships within the network. For German eWOM, key influencing factors are bridging and bonding social capital, perceived tie strength and strong ties. Bridging social capital and weak ties regression wise predicted German opinion seeking and passing. For Portuguese, only strong ties and bridging social capital were found to influence eWOM, while regression analysis revealed no significant predictors. The findings suggest that users' eWOM engagement needs to be fostered by marketeers with targeted, engaging content.

Keywords: eWOM, Facebook, cross-cultural issues, social interactions

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Introduction

Today being online means being connected, engaged and involved on many different levels. From sharing personal experiences with friends and family, following classmates and neighbours on their likes and dislikes to communicating with brands and companies, SNSs like Facebook create a dynamic environment of interaction and exchange (Chu & Choi, 2011, Chu & Kim, 2011). One natural outcome is eWOM, the voicing of and seeking for opinions (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). Culture plays a vital role as it influences the dynamics of social relationships and SNSs like Facebook, and is the reason for differences in the online behaviour of users with dissimilar backgrounds (Chu & Choi, 2011). However, research about online behaviour on SNSs and its cultural differences is limited. The objective of this study was to find out which social relationship factors have an impact on Facebook users' behaviour and their motivation to engage in eWOM while identifying differences between two nationalities, Germany and Portugal. The report will first outline the theoretical background of eWOM and the social relationship variables social capital, trust and tie strength. After the literature review, the methodology is explained and the results obtained are described. Lastly the insights and practical implications are discussed and concluded with the main findings.

Literature Review

The era of the Web 2.0 has changed the relationship between consumers and companies (Mishra & Satish, 2016). According to Halliday (2016) and Abălăesei (2014) new technologies and forms of communication from peer-to-peer have shifted power towards the consumers. Fu, Ju and Hsu (2015) agree and note that they have evolved from passive users to active content creators. Furthermore, user-generated content and word-of-mouth have become integral parts of today's digital life of the empowered consumer (Halliday, 2016). Consumers use social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook to engage socially with friends and peers as well as share information and experiences (Chu & Choi, 2011, Abălăesei, 2014).

Kucukemiroglu and Kara (2015) add that SNSs have developed to a platform of discussion and consumer-to-consumer recommendations. Millennials have played a significant part in this evolution due to their familiarity with the media and high level of usage of SNSs to communicate and interact (Mangold & Smith, 2012). According to the authors, Millennials not only talk about and purchase products online but also are empowered to drive the success of a product or brand.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) can be defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Chu and Kim (2011) note that, "eWOM in SNSs occurs when consumers provide or search for informal product-related advice through the unique applications of these sites. For example, consumers associate themselves with a brand explicitly by becoming a friend or a fan" (p. 50). Compared to traditional word-of-mouth, it is "fast-spreading, wide-reaching, cost efficient, credible, persuasive and highly interactive" (Zhang & Lee, 2012, p. 118). Also, it can be considered a marketing tool due to the reason that positive eWOM can foster the intention of purchase (Abălăesei, 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Cheung & Lee, 2012).

Findings of several studies show that online consumer behaviour is influenced by culture (Chu & Choi, 2011; Richard & Habibi, 2016; Seidenspinner & Theuner, 2007). However, only a limited number of studies investigate how eWOM behaviour such as seeking and consuming information online varies in a cross-cultural context (Chu & Choi, 2011; Richard & Habibi, 2016; King, Racherla & Bush, 2014). The authors Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) agree that there is a lack of research about online communications and the impact of cultural differences, although Internet usage varies according to cultural aspects. In fact, "as culture is the guiding principle for consumer attitude and behaviour as well as relationship

with others, the prevailing values of the culture which consumers are from should influence their social engagement and eWOM behavior in SNSs" (Chu & Choi, 2011, p. 275).

Hofstede identifies five dimensions that help to understand cultural differences and the resulting consumer behaviours (Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014; Mishra & Satish, 2016), as well as offer a framework for a cross-cultural analysis. The four dimensions Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance and Long-term/Short-term Orientation have been proposed to use for examining different communication patterns between cultures (Goodrich and De Mooij, 2014). With the exception of the dimension Uncertainty Avoidance, the two countries Germany and Portugal lie on opposite ends of the dimensional spectrums (see Table 1), implying different cultural characterisations (Hofstede, 2016a).

Table 1 *Hofstedes' Dimensions for Germany and Portugal*

	Germany	Portugal
Power Distance (PDI)	35	63
Individualism (IDV)/Collectivism (COL)	67	27
Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)	65	99
Long Term Orientation	83	28

The dimension PDI is concerned with less powerful individual's acceptance of an unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 2016a). This means, in low PDI cultures such as in Germany, acceptance of inequality is less predominant and more equal structures are valued, whereas, in high PDI cultures such as in Portugal, hierarchy is respected. Based on this, Goodrich and De Mooij's (2014) findings can be interpreted that German users are less independent of societal connections and peers' opinions and rely more on facts whereas in Portugal users place more importance on recommendations from peers.

The IDV and COL dimension implies the level of interdependence between individuals, and whether a person's identity is reflected in "I" or "We" (Hofstede, 2016a; Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). In individualistic Germany, people are concerned with their closely related family and personal self-actualization; in collectivistic Portugal, people are

very loyal to their in-group and avoid loss of face (Hofstede, 2016a; Hofstede, 2916b; Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). Therefore, German users would be expected to increase personal utility through an online information search, whereas for Portuguese users the purpose of online engagement would be more to share information and thoughts with peers (Goodrich and De Mooij, 2014).

UAI explains how cultures deal with the threat of an unknown, ambiguous future (Hofstede, 2016a; Goodrich & De Mooij, 2014). According to Hofstede (2016b), both countries score relatively high, and especially Portugal can be characterised as uncertainty avoidant. In Germany with low PDI, users tend to seek expertise to reduce uncertainty; Portuguese value rules and codes of behaviour to maintain certainty (Hofstede, 2016a; Hofstede, 2016b). Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) suggest that high UAI cultures exhibit low levels of trust among its members and that therefore trust plays a key role in decision-making. The last dimension Long Term Orientation denotes if a culture is long or short-term oriented. Germany with a long-term orientation exhibits pragmatism, thrift and perseverance; Portugal with a short-term orientation values tradition, normative thinking (Hofstede, 2016a; Hofstede, 2016b) and peer-to-peer service (Goodrich and De Mooij). The authors note that the dimension is relatively new, however, can explain differences in the style of communication and self-presentation online, so that collectivistic, short-term oriented Portuguese users would be more expressive and self-enhancing compared to Germans.

Another model, the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) model, uses nine dimensions and measures culture in terms of "what should be" (the values) and "what is" (the institutional practices) (House, Javidan & Dorfman, 2001). On the basis of this, it clusters countries into cultural groups with Germany belonging to the Germanic Europe cluster and Portugal belonging to the Latin Europe cluster (GLOBE, 2016a; GLOBE, 2016b). Also, it is following and expanding Hofstede's model, whereupon six

dimensions of the GLOBE model are based on his and include Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, Collectivism I: Societal Collectivism, Collectivism II: In-Group Collectivism, Assertiveness and Future Orientation (Shi & Wang, 2011; House, Javidan & Dorfman, 2001). Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance remained, Individualism/Collectivism were divided to make it more psychologically valid and politically correct as follows: Collectivism I is reflecting institutional collectivism (Shi & Wang, 2011), meaning action and resource distribution in a collective manner; and Collectivism II, is reflecting in-group loyalty and cohesiveness (House, Javidan & Dorfman, 2001). The authors explain further that the dimensions Gender Egalitarianism, standing for minimizing gender inequality, and Assertiveness, being the level of assertive behaviour, correspond to Hofstede's masculinity/femininity. Future Orientation can be viewed as Hofstede's long-term orientation and future-oriented perspective (Shi & Wang, 2011; House, Javidan & Dorfman, 2001). Lastly, Performance Orientation reflects the striving for performance, and Humane Orientation the aspiration to altruism, kindness and fairness (House, Javidan & Dorfman, 2001).

According to GLOBE (2016a), concerning the Germanic cluster the "what is" reflects high scores on Performance Orientation, Assertiveness, Future Orientation and Uncertainty Avoidance, closely followed by a relatively high Power Distance. However, Gender Egalitarianism, Humane Orientation and both types of Collectivism score rather low levels. The researchers of the GLOBE model suggest a male dominated society, which values performance, rules and future-oriented behaviour with limited collectivistic practices and interpersonal caring. In terms of "what should be", the cluster wishes more gender equality and humane orientation plus lower levels of Power Distance, Assertiveness and Uncertainty Avoidance (GLOBE, 2016a).

For the "what is" of the Latin Europe cluster, GLOBE (2016b) has identified high Power Distance, low Humane Orientation and Gender Egalitarianism, while all other dimensions scoring medium. The findings note that compared to other clusters, Future Orientation and both Collectivisms score lower than average, wherein in-group collectivism is more dominant between the two. The cluster is family and group loyal and practices a more male-dominated, unequal power distribution (GLOBE, 2016b). The "what should be" represents the cluster's desire for more Performance, Future and Humane Orientation including higher Gender Egalitarianism and lower Power Distance (GLOBE, 2016b).

Hypotheses Development

eWOM engagement. Many studies examine eWOM behaviour within the frameworks of opinion seeking, opinion giving (leadership) and opinion passing, as they constitute the flow of information on SNSs (Chu & Choi, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). Opinion seekers search on SNSs like Facebook for recommendations and opinions of their network during the purchase decision-making process, because for example their friends' proposed products or brands are regarded as more trustworthy and reliable (Chu & Kim, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) suggest that Individualism/Collectivism and Power Distance can give insights into the information acquisition process and its role in purchase decision-making. The authors propose that in individualistic, low PDI cultures like Germany a high need for information prevails, users actively engage in the research process and the social network contacts present information sources. However, in contrast the authors point out, in collectivist, high PDI cultures like Portugal users search more for peer recommendations in form of opinions, ideas and feelings to conform. Abălăesei (2014) supports this idea reasoning that eWOM gives a feeling of belonging towards the group of social network contacts. Based on these cultural indicators, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a: Portuguese users engage in a greater level of opinion seeking behaviour on Facebook than German users.

Opinion giving behaviour such as exhibited by opinion leaders includes sharing thoughts about products and brands online (Chu & Kim, 2011). SNSs like Facebook provide a wide audience for opinion giving, an environment to exchange experiences and opinions as well as the setting to lead trends (Chu & Kim, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). With regards to the cultural characteristics, it is anticipated that Portuguese users with a collectivist background tend to share more information and thoughts with their network compared to German users (Goodrich and De Mooij, 2014). This is in line with the proposed in-group orientation and group loyalty from the GLOBE (2016b) model. As mentioned by Goodrich and De Mooij (2014), Portugal's short-term orientation gives insights into online users' self-presentation and indicates high levels of self-enhancement, which is in accordance with being an opinion giver for peers . Therefore, the following second hypothesis is brought forward:

H1b: Portuguese users engage in a greater level of opinion giving behaviour on Facebook than German users.

Lastly, the concept of opinion passing or forwarding is an important result of eWOM behaviour according to Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn (2006). Opinion passing can be regarded as a tool for the exchange of information between opinion seekers and givers (Sun et al., 2006; Chu and Kim, 2011). Therefore, similar aspects as for the concept of opinion seeking can be given to anticipate whether German or Portuguese users engage more in opinion passing. Due to the higher importance of peer-to-peer recommendations, of sharing and support within social groups as well as of expressing oneself in an enhancing way online (Goodrich and De Mooij, 2014), Portuguese users can be expected to more actively pass on information and thoughts about products on SNSs than their German counterparts. This leads to the third hypothesis:

H1c: Portuguese users engage in a greater level of opinion passing on Facebook than German users.

Social relationship variables. Social relationships are the basis of SNSs such as Facebook and consequently play a significant role in eWOM communication (Chu & Choi, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). One of the primary activities among SNSs users is social relationship building and maintenance, which also includes assisting each other in purchase decision-making by providing information and opinion (Chu & Kim, 2011). Through the exchange of information, social relationships are strengthened and eWOM engagement is ultimately reinforced (Luarn, Huang, Chiu & Chen, 2015). Moreover, according to Chu and Kim (2011) to better understand the underlying dynamics of eWOM engagement behaviour, social factors can help identify the influence of different variables. Chu and Choi (2011) argue that social relationships are influenced and vary by culture.

Users engage in eWOM to benefit socially from online relationships through for example the feeling of belonging to a community or to benefit personally through fulfilling information needs (Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). The authors suggest eWOM to be a possibility to create social capital as eWOM nourishes online relationships, which then contribute to the exchange between network members. Social capital can be defined as the resources made available in a social network that can be accessed by all its members (Coleman, 1988) and it has been found to be positively related to eWOM engagement (Chu & Choi, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). Chu and Choi (2011) picked up on the study of Choi, Kim, Sung and Sohn (2011) and differentiate between bridging and bonding social capital, arguing that they reflect different cultural aspects. Choi et al. (2011) found out, SNSs build both bridging and bonding capital, however, the extent to which they are built up depends on the members' cultural background. Bridging capital is based on the exchange, mobilization and diversity of assets and information, requires reciprocal acting of

heterogeneous network members and is sought after for collective needs, political or material (Pigg & Crank, 2004). Bonding capital on the contrary is sought after to fulfil needs on a personal level, emotional or material, and it is based on reciprocal support and trust in homogeneous groups with shared norms (Pigg & Crank, 2004; Chu & Choi, 2011). Findings of Choi et al. (2011) imply that individualism with more independent members, a focus on self-actualization, and looser network structures is more related with bridging capital. This concludes that individualistic German users that are more performance than humane oriented, that show limited collectivist thinking and interpersonal caring (GLOBE, 2016a) and that are more fact and data focused (Hofstede, 2016a), subsequently can be associated more with bridging capital. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: German users gain more bridging capital on Facebook than Portuguese users.

Contrarily, collectivism with more interdependent members, a focus on group loyalty, support and belonging, as well as tighter network connections are related more to bonding capital (Choi et al., 2011). Collectivistic Portuguese users with an in-group orientation and loyalty towards family and friends (GLOBE, 2016b), that value peer-to-peer support and a caring community (Hofstede, 2016b), can therefore be associated more with bonding capital. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2b: Portuguese users gain more bonding capital on Facebook than German users.

Trust also has been found to positively influence eWOM engagement behaviour (Chu & Choi, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015). Compared to anonymous recommendations and opinions from for example review sites or marketeers, the associated higher trustworthiness and credibility of online contacts from the user's network as information sources are assumed to facilitate and increase eWOM communication (Chu & Kim, 2011; Kucukemiroglu & Kara, 2015; Chu & Choi, 2011). This is due to users mutually agreeing to become friends on SNSs like Facebook, thereby checking the other's profile and

assessing their credibility (Chu & Kim, 2011). The authors continue saying that users can take real life friendships to an online setting and in doing so transfer the established trust to the online network. Lastly, Chu & Kim (2011) suggest this has a positive effect on the levels of trust in the network and may increase users' willingness in terms of eWOM engagement. The level of trust between network members varies according to Chu & Choi (2011) depending on cultural orientation. As indicated by Goodrich & De Mooij (2014), Germany and Portugal both exhibit high Uncertainty Avoidance and trust plays a significant role in their information search and decision-making process to ensure certainty. As a result, German and Portuguese users can be expected to engage in eWOM as it is a more trustful source of information compared to impersonal marketing sources. The following hypothesis is brought forward:

H3: German and Portuguese users have a similar level of trust in their contacts on Facebook.

The user's evaluation of information exchanged and received on the SNSs can significantly depend on the source of the information and its relationship to the user (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). The concept of tie strength characterizes the relationship and closeness of the sender and the receiver of information (Luarn et al. 2015) and studies have found evidence for its positive influence on eWOM engagement behaviour (Luarn et al., 2015; Chu & Kim, 2011). Wang, Yeh, Chen and Tsydypov (2016) point out that relationships vary in strength and closeness, and accordingly Chu and Choi (2011) characterize strong ties as relationships with family, relatives and friends and weak ties as relationships with colleagues, classmates or acquaintances. Furthermore, strong ties are associated with bonding capital, which implies reciprocity and support (Pigg & Crank, 2004). Weak ties are associated with bridging capital, which implies a more diverse network of information exchange (Pigg & Crank, 2004). In total, both strong and weak ties have been found to positively influence users in terms of encouragement to engage in eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011; Chu & Choi, 2011; Wang et al.,

2016). Regarding the cultural application, due to the individualistic orientation, the focus on self-actualization and performance as well as the association with bridging capital, at first glance German users could be expected to have a looser network with weaker ties that encourage diverse eWOM interactions. However, Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) suggest that German users tend to be more selective in their online friendships, which leads to a smaller number of friends and limited unknown contacts on SNSs proposing a network of strong ties. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4a: German users have more strong ties on Facebook than Portuguese users.

Concerning Portuguese users, due to the collectivistic orientation, high level of group loyalty and support as well as the association with bonding social capital, at first glance Portuguese users could be expected to build tight online networks with strong ties that lead to eWOM engagement. However, Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) propose their online network to consist of many friends to increase their peer-to-peer exchange and self-enhancement suggesting a majority of weak ties. The following hypothesis is proposed:

H4b: Portuguese users have more weak ties on Facebook than German users.

As discussed above, social factors and relationships are related to and expected to influence eWOM communication between network users. To better understand how different variables impact consumers' engagement in eWOM on Facebook and how they differ cross-culturally, the following research question is put forward:

RQ: What factors influence eWOM engagement behaviour on Facebook and what are the cultural differences between Germany and Portugal?

Methodology

A self-administered online survey was used to test eWOM on Facebook in two cross-national samples. The two nationalities chosen for examination have been Germany and Portugal. Both countries exhibit different, in many regards even oppositional characteristics in

terms of cultural orientation, as has been illustrated above based on Hofstede's and GLOBE's cultural models, and therefore have been deemed appropriate to be compared in this study. The sample was made up of mostly German and Portuguese Millennials, which represent "the driving force of online communications" (Mangold & Smith, 2012, p. 141). According to the authors they are familiar with digital media, use it every day, are very well connected and ultimately seek information about and recommendations for products online.

Sample

Originally 323 respondents started to fill out the questionnaire, however, 155 participants dropped out before finishing it. These incomplete questionnaires were not included in the analysis. Also, 13 participants indicated to be of another nationality than German and Portuguese and subsequently were not regarded in the analysis. This led to a total of 107 German and 48 Portuguese respondents who completed the online survey. All participants were recruited over a link distributed on Facebook to ensure familiarity with the SNS. Specifically, the link was posted in Facebook groups of major universities in Portugal and Germany. Also, the participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity and were required to complete all questions. The final German sample consisted of 73.8% female respondents, the age ranged from 18 to 39 years and the average age was 26 years. The final Portuguese sample consisted of 62.5% female respondents, the age ranged from 17 to 53 years and the average age was 23 years. Based on the average age of the German and Portuguese respondents, the sample was deemed appropriate to represent millennial Facebook users.

Measures

The questions of the survey were designed to assess eWOM engagement behaviour on Facebook and the social relationship constructs discussed in the literature review. Moreover, the questions and scales were adapted from Chu and Choi (2011) to ensure validity of the

constructs. In addition, measures about demographic information were included. Prerequisite to being allowed to complete the survey was the participants' usage of Facebook, which was ensured through a respective question at the beginning of the questionnaire. Reliability of the items was assessed based on Cronbach's Alpha. All coefficients were larger than 0.7, with the exception of opinion giving and a α-value equal to .698, indicating adequate questions to measure the constructs. See Table 2 for the specific questions as well as the coefficients of reliability.

Table 2 *Measures and Cronbach's Alpha*

Do you have a Facebook account
Yes/No

Opinion giving (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .698)	
1	I often persuade my contacts on Facebook to buy products that I like.
2	My contacts on Facebook rarely come to me for advice about choosing products.
3	My contacts on Facebook pick their products based on what I have told them.
4	My opinion of products seems not to count with my contacts on Facebook.
5	On Facebook, I often influence my contacts' opinions about products.
6	When they choose products, my contacts on Facebook do not turn to me for advice.

Opinion seeking (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .801)	
1	When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on Facebook for advice.
2	I don't need to talk to my contacts on Facebook before I buy products.
3	I like to get my contacts' opinions on Facebook before I buy new products.
4	I rarely ask my contacts on Facebook about what products to buy.
5	I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten my contacts' opinions on them on Facebook.
6	When choosing products, my contacts' opinions on Facebook are not important to me.

Opinion passing (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .917)	
1	I tend to pass on information or opinion about products to the contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook when I find it useful.
2	On Facebook, I like to pass along my contacts' comments containing information or opinions about products that I like to other contacts on Facebook.
3	When I receive product related information or opinion from a friend, I will pass it along to my other contacts on Facebook.
4	On Facebook, I like to pass along interesting information about products from one group of my contacts on my "friends" list to another.
5	I tend to pass along my contacts' positive reviews of products to other contacts on Facebook.
6	I tend to pass along my contacts' negative reviews on products to other contacts on Facebook.

Bridging social capital (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .861)

1. Interacting with people on Facebook makes me interested in things that happen outside my town.
2. Interacting with people on Facebook makes me want to try new things.
3. Interacting with people on Facebook makes me interested in what people different from me are thinking.
4. Talking with people on Facebook makes me curious about other places in the world.
5. Interacting with people on Facebook makes me feel like part of a larger community.
6. Interacting with people on Facebook makes me feel connected to the bigger picture.
7. Interacting with people on Facebook reminds me that everyone in the world is connected.
8. I am willing to spend time to support general community activities on Facebook.
9. Interacting with people on Facebook gives me new people to talk to.
10. I come in contact with new people on Facebook all the time.

Bonding social capital (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .870)

1. There are several members on Facebook that I trust to help solve my problem.
2. There is a member of Facebook I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions.
3. There is no one on Facebook that I feel comfortable talking to about intimate personal problems.
4. When I feel lonely, there are members of Facebook I can talk to.
5. If I needed an emergency loan of €500, I know someone on Facebook I can turn to.
6. The people I interact with on Facebook would put their reputation on the line for me.
7. The people I interact with on Facebook would be good job references for me.
8. The people I interact with on Facebook would share their last dollar with me.
9. I do not know members of Facebook well enough to get them to do anything important.
10. The people I interact with on Facebook would help me fight an injustice.

Trust (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .913)

1. Generally speaking, most contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook can be trusted.
2. I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook.
3. The contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook will do everything within their capacity to help others.
4. I trust most contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook.
5. I have confidence in the contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook.
6. My contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook offer honest opinions.
7. I can believe in the contacts on my "friends" list on Facebook.

Perceived tie strength (adapted from Chu & Choi, 2011, α = .854)

1. Approximately how frequently do you communicate with the contacts on your "friends" list on Facebook?
2. Overall, how important do you feel about the contacts on your "friends" list on Facebook?
3. Overall, how close do you feel to the contacts on your "friends" list on Facebook?

Personal information	
1	Gender: male/female
2	Age (open question)
3	Nationality: German/Portuguese/Other
4	Number of contacts in "friends" list (adopted from Chu and Kim, 2011): Family, relatives, close friends, acquaintances, classmates, neighbours, others

Opinion giving, opinion seeking and opinion passing. The three constructs opinion giving, opinion seeking and opinion passing were used to learn more about the participants' eWOM engagement behaviour (Chu & Choi, 2011). Each construct included six items and was enquired using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to "strongly disagree" to seven being equal to "strongly agree" (Chu & Choi, 2011). In the constructs opinion giving and opinion seeking, the questions number two, four and six were each asked reversely to verify the response behaviour. For the analysis, they were turned back to be in line with the meaning of the other questions.

Social Capital. The construct social capital was divided into bridging and bonding social capital with each including ten items. As a result, a 20-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to "strongly disagree" to seven being equal to "strongly agree" was used to examine social capital (Chu & Choi, 2011). In the construct bonding social capital, the questions number three and nine were each asked reversely to verify the response behaviour. For the analysis, they were turned back to be in line with the meaning of the other questions.

Trust. The variable trust was assessed using five items and a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to "strongly disagree" to seven being equal to "strongly agree", thereby reflecting the perceived trust of the respondents in their Facebook contacts (Chu and Choi, 2011).

Tie strength. Based on Chu and Choi's (2011) approach, four different questions were used to examine the construct tie strength: to gain information about their perceived tie

strength the first three questions asked about the frequency of communication on Facebook (measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to "never" and seven being equal to "very frequently"), the perceived importance of Facebook contacts (measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to "not at all important" and seven being equal to "very important") and the perceived closeness to Facebook contacts (measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one being equal to "not at all close" and seven being equal to "very close") of the participants. The fourth question was related to the social relations of the participants and asked them to indicate the number of their family, relatives, close friends, acquaintances, classmates, neighbours and others contacts in their Facebook "friends" list. Here, the answers of the respondents had to be modified into numerical data by adding or subtracting one if the entered value included a "<" or ">" sign (for example <400 was turned into 399 and 400> was turned into 401), by choosing the middle value if a range was entered (350-400 was turned into 375) and by turning responses such as "I don't know" or "-" into missing values with the label "-1". To identify the average amount of strong ties, in accordance with Chu and Choi (2011), the average numbers of family, relatives and close friend contacts were summed up (Germany $M = 21.16$; Portugal $M = 23.69$). The same method was used to calculate the average number of weak ties, hereby using the average number of acquaintances, classmates, neighbours and other contacts (Germany $M = 244,58$; Portugal $M = 323,94$). Beforehand, the dataset was exempted from outliers via the method of interquartile range times 1.5. The outliers were not included in the calculations.

Results

To begin with, scales were obtained for the several constructs by adding up the corresponding items and calculating their average. For the construct tie strength, the scale perceived tie strength was computed by obtaining the mean value of the three questions frequency of communication, perceived importance and perceived closeness. Furthermore, the

tie ratio of each sample was calculated to receive the share of strong ties of the total amount of relations indicated. However, in both samples the strong ties were equally distributed.

The proposed hypotheses were tested through conducting t-tests in order to identify differences between Germany and Portugal in the mean values of the variables (see Table 3). Furthermore, correlation and subsequent regression analysis was undertaken to detect which social relationship constructs are positively related with eWOM engagement, namely opinion giving, seeking and passing.

Hypotheses Testing

Opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing (H1a-c). The first three hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c proposed differences in the amount of opinion giving, seeking and passing between German and Portuguese Facebook users, namely that Portuguese users would engage more in these behaviours than Germans. With t-tests for independent samples the three types of eWOM engagement were analysed and contradictory to the prediction, there were no differences between the German and Portuguese sample. More precisely, for opinion seeking (Germany M = 2.29, Portugal M = 2.44, t(153) = -.70, p = .484), for opinion giving (Germany M = 2.87, Portugal M = 2.61, t(153) = 1,37, p = .171) and for opinion passing (Germany M = 2.21, Portugal M = 2.61, t(153) = -1.76, p = .081), no statistically significant differences were identified. Therefore, the hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c were rejected.

Social capital (H2a+b). The hypotheses H2a and H2b suggested that German users would gain more bridging social capital and Portuguese users more bonding social capital on Facebook. However, the results of the independent samples t-test show that the predictions were wrong and no differences between the German and Portuguese samples were identified. Neither for bridging social capital (Germany M = 4.23, Portugal M = 4.29, t(153) = -.30, p = .767) nor for bonding social capital (Germany M = 3.90, Portugal M = 3.84, t(153) = .27, p =

.784) statistically significant differences are given and both nationalities gain the same amount of bridging and bonding social capital. As a result, H2a and H2b were not supported.

Trust (H3). The next t-test examined trust and the third hypothesis, which proposed that German and Portuguese users have a similar level of trust in their Facebook contacts. In contrast to the prediction, German users exhibit a higher level of trust than their Portuguese counterpart (Germany $M = 4.23$, Portugal $M = 3.65$, $t(153) = 2.88$, $p = .005$). The difference between the mean values is statistically significant and disconfirms the hypothesis H3.

Tie strength (H4a+b). The last two hypotheses claimed that German users have more strong ties and Portuguese users have more weak ties on Facebook. In addition, the perceived tie strength of the respondents was examined. The results of the independent samples t-test indicate that German and Portuguese users have a similar amount of strong ties in their network (Germany $M = 21.16$, Portugal $M = 23.69$, $t(153) = -1.07$, $p = .286$) and that Portuguese users have approximately 80 more weak ties than German users (Germany $M = 244.58$, Portugal $M = 323.94$, $t(70.161) = -1.96$, $p = .054$). The hypothesis H4a was subsequently rejected and hypothesis H4b was supported. Regarding the perceived tie strength (Germany $M = 3.78$, Portugal $M = 4.32$, $t(153) = -2.30$, $p = .023$) there is also a significant difference between the two nationalities and Portuguese users show a higher level of perceived tie strength on Facebook.

Table 3 *T-test Results of eWOM Engagement and Social Relationship Constructs*

	Germany		Portugal			
	M	SD	M	SD	t	df
Opinion giving	2.87	1.09	2.61	1.16	1.37	153
Opinion seeking	2.29	1.17	2.44	1.43	-.70	153
Opinion passing	2.21	1.27	2.61	1.34	-1.76	153
Bridging social capital	4.23	1.04	4.29	1.21	-.30	153
Bonding social capital	3.90	1.28	3.84	1.37	.27	153
Trust	4.23	1.06	3.65	1.34	2.88**	153
Strong ties	21.16	13.81	23.69	13.11	-1.07	153
Weak ties	244.58	183.32	323.94	252.26	-1.96	70.161
Tie ratio	.14	.17	.14	.20	-.063	153
Perceived tie strength	3.78	1.32	4.32	1.44	-2.30*	153

*p< .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001.

Research Question – Impact of Social Relationship Variables on eWOM Engagement

In the next step correlation analysis was applied to examine the degree of the statistical relationship between the different variables (see Appendix C and D). For both nationalities, all three types of eWOM, opinion giving, seeking and passing influenced each other. The relationships between opinion giving and seeking (Germany: $r(105) = .412$, $p = .000$, Portugal: $r(46) = .653$, $p = .000$), opinion giving and passing (Germany: $r(105) = .426$, $p = .000$, Portugal: $r(46) = .462$, $p = .001$) as well as between opinion seeking and passing (Germany: $r(105) = .616$, $p = .000$, Portugal: $r(46) = .606$, $p = .000$) were moderate to strong and positive, meaning for example the more opinion seeking, the more opinion passing and vice versa.

With regards to bridging capital, it influenced opinion giving ($r(46) = .306$, $p = .034$), seeking ($r(46) = .305$, $p = .035$) and passing ($r(46) = .438$, $p = .002$) moderately for the Portuguese sample, however, for the German sample it correlated only with opinion seeking ($r(105) = .363$, $p = .000$) and passing ($r(105) = .377$, $p = .000$) in a moderate, positive way and not with opinion giving. Differences can be identified for bonding social capital. In the case of Germany, it weakly influenced all three types of eWOM (opinion giving: $r(105) = .200$, $p = .039$; opinion seeking: $r(105) = .195$, $p = .044$; opinion passing: $r(105) = .235$, $p = .015$), for Portugal bonding social capital influenced none of the three.

The variable trust had no influence on eWOM for both nationalities. Regarding tie strength and Germany, weak ties were not correlated to eWOM but strong ties were weakly, negatively related to opinion passing ($r(105) = -.206$, $p = .033$) suggesting a decrease in German opinion passing with more strong ties. The variable perceived tie strength was weakly related to German opinion seeking ($r(105) = .250$, $p = .010$) and moderately to opinion passing ($r(105) = .320$, $p = .001$), not to opinion giving. In contrast, for Portugal a weak to moderate, positive correlation of strong ties with opinion giving ($r(46) = .299$, $p = $

.039) was identified suggesting an increase in opinion giving with more strong ties. This relationship did not apply to opinion seeking and passing. Also, weak ties and perceived tie strength had no influence on eWOM behaviour in the Portuguese sample.

Moreover, regression analysis was executed to better understand the relationship and development of the dependent variables opinion giving, seeking and passing with the independent social relationship variables as predictors of eWOM behaviour (see Table 4). Examining the impact of all independent variables at the same time, the following findings were revealed: concerning opinion giving in Germany, only weak ties (β = -.205, t = -2.094, p = .039$)$ were found to significantly predict this type of eWOM. The impact, however, is negative, meaning one more weak tie contact decreases German opinion giving by -.205 units. In contrast, only strong ties (β = .339, t = 2.393, p = .021) were identified as a significant predictor for opinion giving in Portugal. Here, the impact of strong ties is positive suggesting an increase by .339 units with one contact in the strong tie category. Comparing the two regression models, both are not significant (Germany: R^2 = .032, F = 1.589, p = .158; Portugal: R^2 = .144, F = 2.315, p = .051) and the impact needs to be considered cautiously.

With regards to opinion seeking, bridging social capital was found to be a significant predictor for Germany (β = .308, t = 2.773, p = .007). The impact was positive and with an increase in the bridging social capital gained, opinion seeking was increasing by .308 units. The same applies to weak ties, which were found to significantly predict German opinion seeking (β = -.197, t = -2.122, p = .036). Here, the impact however was negative and with one more weak tie, German opinion seeking decreased by -.197 units. Also, the German regression model was assessed to be significant and suitable to describe 12.6% of the variance (R^2 = .126, F = 3.545, p = .003). For Portugal, none of the independent variables were identified as predictors for opinion seeking and the regression model was found insignificant.

Lastly, bridging social capital significantly predicted opinion passing of Germany (β = .258, t = 2.401, p = .018) as well as weak ties significantly predicted German opinion passing (β = -.181, t = -2.010, p = .047). Opinion passing increased by .258 if bridging social capital increased, however it decreased by -.181 with one more weak tie contact. Moreover, the German regression model was significant and 18.4% of the variance were explained through the regression line (R^2 = .184, F = 4.984, p = .000). Similarly, bridging social capital significantly predicted opinion passing of Portugal (β = .484, t = 2.717, p = .010), which increased by .484 units with an increase in bridging social capital. However, the Portuguese regression model was not identified as significant (R^2 = .123, F = 2.102, p = .074) and bridging social capital's impact needs to be regarded with caution.

Table 4 *Regression Results Germany and Portugal*

Independent Variables	Germany			Portugal		
	β	R^2 adj	F	β	R^2 adj	F
Opinion giving		.032	1.589		.144	2.315
Bridging social capital	.069			.208		
Bonding social capital	.229			-.304		
Trust	-.020			.061		
Strong ties	-.040			.339*		
Weak ties	-.205*			-.061		
Perceived tie strength	-.023			.264		
Opinion seeking		.126	3.545**		-.010	.924
Bridging social capital	.308**			.274		
Bonding social capital	.083			-.119		
Trust	-.018			.036		
Strong ties	-.037			.137		
Weak Ties	-.197			-.034		
Perceived tie strength	.054			.080		
Opinion passing		.184	4.984***		.123	2.102
Bridging social capital	.258*			.484**		
Bonding social capital	.081			-.101		
Trust	-.102			.069		
Strong ties	-.173			-.125		
Weak ties	-.181*			-.081		
Perceived tie strength	.196			-.026		

*p< .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyse which social relationship factors are influencing eWOM engagement, namely opinion giving, opinion seeking and opinion passing. Furthermore, the cultural background was added to the examination to assess its impact differentiating the two countries' Facebook users' behaviour. Based on their varying cultural orientations and characteristics, the two nationalities chosen to test differences of eWOM and its predictors, were German and Portuguese. Moreover, Millennials represent the most advancing, forward pushing online users due to their high exposure to and frequent usage of digital medias and SNSs (Mangold & Smith, 2012). Therefore, the online survey focused on this group of Facebook users to find out the factors that influence their motivations to engage in eWOM.

In terms of eWOM engagement levels, the findings of the study did not reveal significant differences between Germany and Portugal. Contrary to the prediction based on the work of Goodrich and De Mooij (2014), Facebook users of both countries were found to engage to a similar extent with opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing. Both nationalities are statistically rather negatively disposed to all three types of eWOM. Regarding the social relationship constructs that were proposed to show differences in the two groups, an opposite picture emerged from the findings. Neither for bridging nor for bonding social capital the results revealed differences in the amounts gained through eWOM engagement. The expectations in accordance with Choi et al. (2011) and Chu and Choi (2011) were disconfirmed and German and Portuguese Facebook users tended to gain the same and not a different amount of bridging as well as of bonding social capital from engaging on the network. Hereby, it was the case that each nationality gained more bridging than bonding social capital. The fact that both countries received similar social capital gains on Facebook appears to correspond with the finding of similar amounts of eWOM engagement.

Nonetheless, the results of the variable trust showed that German users are having more trust in their Facebook contacts than their Portuguese counterparts. Lastly the social relationship variable tie strength was tested to reveal cultural differences. Concerning the number of strong ties, both nationalities had the same amount of strong tie contacts, what can explain the result that both received the same amount of bonding social capital through eWOM. But concerning the number of weak ties, Portuguese users had significantly more weak ties among their contacts than German users which is in line with Goodrich and De Mooij (2014) as well as a higher level of perceived tie strength in their Facebook network. This means that even though they had a larger network that comprises many loose connections, Portuguese users did not perceive them to be particularly weak but to have stronger relationships within their network. Contrarily to the expectation based on Pigg and Crank (2004), a higher number of weak ties did not lead to more bridging social capital due to a more diverse network for the Portuguese users suggesting that a larger network not necessarily increases the amount of bridging social capital gained.

Furthermore, the findings of the study showed similarities and differences between Germany and Portugal in terms of the influence of the variables social capital, trust and tie strength on eWOM behaviour. Bridging social capital was found to influence opinion seeking and passing in Germany and all three types of eWOM in Portugal. In contrast, bonding social capital did not influence any eWOM behaviour in Portugal but all three types in Germany. More differences were revealed in the case of strong ties and perceived tie strength. The construct strong ties was found to be connected to opinion passing in Germany in a negative way but was positively related to opinion giving in Portugal. Perceived tie strength was found to only be related to opinion seeking and opinion passing in Germany. With regards to similarities, both in Germany and Portugal all three types of eWOM were influencing each other proposing that if a user engages in opinion giving, the predisposition to also engage in

opinion seeking and passing is larger and vice versa. Finally, there was no relationship found between the variable trust and eWOM in neither country. Also, no relationship between weak ties and eWOM were identified neither for Germany nor Portugal.

Further analysis of the simultaneous influence of all social relationship variables brought forward differences with regards to which factors significantly predict eWOM engagement. In the case of Portugal, no statistically significant predictors were found for opinion giving, opinion seeking and opinion passing. In Germany, bridging social capital and weak ties were identified to be significant predictors for opinion seeking and opinion passing. No predictors for German opinion giving were revealed.

The practical implications for Germany gained include that brands targeting the German market should increase the value-added content online and provide diverse, useful information. Because bridging social capital was found to increase eWOM in Germany, by promoting the social capital benefits gained from eWOM, marketeers should try to foster the information exchange among German users and to kick off a cycle of eWOM. Moreover, since German users placed a higher trust in their Facebook contacts, they can be expected to also trust more their peers' recommendations and opinions. Even though trust had no influence on eWOM, marketeers should emphasize community feelings and a trustful online space of exchange. Even though no specific predictors were found, marketeers in Portugal should encourage Portuguese users to be more active in eWOM and in sharing their opinion to increase their reach. Portuguese users have been found to have a larger network with a wider field of opportunities to be confronted with eWOM and opinions form peers. Brands could take advantage of that by creating engaging content and attracting users to engage in eWOM that is spread far across their network. Lastly, marketeers in both countries need to turn around the negative predisposition of Facebook users towards eWOM and convince them of the benefits they can gain through engaging more in sharing as well as seeking for opinions

online. As all three types of eWOM are interrelated and influencing each other in a positive way, by increasing the willingness of users to engage in eWOM social media messages will spread more easily and widely and increase the scope of companies' Facebook activities.

When evaluating the findings of this study, the following limitations need to be taken into consideration. The sample was statistically small and mostly made up of Millennials. Therefore, by nature the results cannot be representative nationwide for Germany and Portugal, the societal diversity and different ages of users represented on Facebook. A generalization of the findings is limited, which also applies to the results in terms of culture. More nationalities need to be examined and compared in order to ensure findings that are more generally applicable to similar cultures. Also, more variables influence and may predict eWOM engagement that have not been tested within the scope of this study. Concerning the practical execution of the survey, the indication of the numbers of contacts of the different categories may not have been accurate since respondents can be expected to have indicated a memorised, approximate contact number.

Conclusion

In the case of Germany and Portugal, cultural differences do not impact user behaviour on Facebook but the relationship users hold with their contacts. The study revealed no differences in how German and Portuguese Facebook users behave online and what they gain through engaging on Facebook. Users of both countries perform the same amount of opinion giving, opinion seeking and opinion passing and gain the same amount of bridging and bonding social capital. However, findings showed differences in how they perceive their online network, how they feel about the strength of the connection to their Facebook contacts and the level of trust they place in them. Finally, different factors were found to influence and predict eWOM in Germany and in Portugal suggesting different aspects for marketeers to tackle in each country to kick off eWOM engagement.

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