

# Consumers' Factors on eWOM Diffusion in Social Networking Services (SNS)

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## Abstract

This present study seeks to uncover personal factors of social networking services (SNS) users' on eWOM diffusion in SNS through review of previous studies. This paper also aims to build a conceptual theory based on these findings and create a path for further studies and empirical research in the future. Literature from technology acceptance fields and social sciences were examined on eWOM diffusion via four levels of self-factors in individuals. The issues of level of trust, personal eWom experience, and self-efficacy are discussed in the prediction of eWOM, while different personalities are predicted to have different outcomes in eWOM diffusion. The insights of personal factors influence in eWOM would enhance consumers' ability to understand further how to navigate positive and negative perspectives of personal factors and act to use this discovery to assist own decision making.

**Keywords:** eWOM, SNS, self-efficacy, eWOM experience trust, personality.

## 1. Introduction

Knowledge is defined as "a justified belief that increases an entity's capacity for effective action" (Alavi and Leidner, 2001); whereas Ghosh and Scott (2007) defined knowledge sharing as "the combination of one or both parties seeking knowledge in response to the request, such that one or both parties are affected by the experience". Sources of knowledge are many, but one method that stands out is old-fashioned word-of-mouth (WOM). People have been benefiting from WOM to help make decisions in purchases of products and services for a long time. However, in recent past, WOM has progressed to a new verbal method of communication amongst groups and stranger (Arndt, 1967), expressly electronic word of mouth (eWOM) via social media (Erkan, 2016). eWOM definition includes all commentaries conveyed through internet be it neutral, negative, or positive testimonial by prospective, genuine, or former customers on a product, service or organization (Kaufman & Horton, 2015; Laudon & Traver, 2015; Strauss & Frost, 2014; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Before eWOM, information and knowledge are spread through word-of-mouth. WOM is a type of non-organized interaction in between individuals about product, brand, service, and even organisation (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1967; Harrison-Walker, 2001). Plenty of studies have been done on WOM mostly concentrating on retailers' websites (Anderson, 1998; Arndt, 1967; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Sun et al., 2006; Sweeney et al., 2012). For people involved in WOM, they volunteer knowledge willingly, not by coercion (Bock et al., 2005), which consequently generate a feeling of membership and commitment (Huysman & Wulf, 2005). WOM starts from a person that is known for his/her trustworthiness to the receiver of "news" (Chatterjee, 2001) and his/her trusted information is then passed along. In the light of the internet age, the situation conducive for transmitting information and knowledge exist. Naturally, the evolution of WOM electronically follows.

With the advancement of internet, immense upsurge in eWOM took place when individuals can get together and converse via online discussions, consumer reviews, weblogs, and SNS to exchange information and opinions. Importantly, past research has shown that such interactions influence consumers' purchase decisions (Muntinga et al., 2011; DEI Worldwide report, 2008; Lee et al., 2008). eWOM importance is apparent when it is considered to be the cause of 20-50% of all purchase decisions (Berger, 2013). Surveys conducted indicated that 84% of people trust an online review as much as a personal recommendation (brightlocal.com, August 2016; Illumine Marketing and Media, 2010) and the number of online reviews has reached 116 million, and it is rising every day (Lee, 2010). What is more, multiple studies have proven that individual choices are affected by interpersonal influences such as eWOM, where numerous consumer literature have publicised the power of interpersonal influence through word-of-mouth communication (Erkan, 2016; Herr et al., 1991; King and Summers, 1970; Arndt, 1967). However, after reviewing previous studies, there is lack of interest shown in discovering the multiple personal factors at play that propel a person to disseminate eWOM in SNS particularly.

### 1.1 Purpose of this paper

Researchers have shown interest in eWOM among consumers; and conduct substantial quantity of researchers relating to eWOM (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; King et al., 2014). There are numerous studies about eWOM in definition and structures. Nevertheless, there is sparse research conducted from the perspective of user's personal

self in social media, specifically in SNS and its impact on eWOM diffusion. The diversity of previous studies are wide-ranging, but somehow disjointed and still not ample. Lee and Lee (2009) have categorised two levels of eWOM communication impact: 1) market-level analysis and 2) individual-level analysis. This paper is set to further delve into individual-level eWOM analysis focusing on personal factors.

#### 1.1.1 Electronic Word of Mouth – eWOM

eWOM is "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is accessible to the mass and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). eWOM transfers users' experiences both positive and negative (Sweeney et al., 2012.) Moreover, eWOM might include extra information, as eWOM typically includes informer's experiences and feelings (Dellarocas, 2003) through the written word (Sun et al., 2006). In the linear process of writing, words are arranged purposely with meanings. Therefore, written communication is more coherent than oral communication (Griffin, 2003). Through social media, in the form of eWOM, the individual has become freer and more willing to share opinions (Chu & Kim, 2011). eWOM actions help individual tremendously by enabling valued information and product awareness of others to circulate and be consumed (Chu & Kim, 2011). Moreover, information from personal sources is uniquely formed in eWOM (Sun et al. 2006) caused by people willingness to interchange tacit knowledge about products and brands in virtual communities (Hung & Li, 2007). After all, eWOM share mutual characteristics with traditional WOM. However, it differs from traditional WOM in some scales. These facts are unique to eWOM.

Firstly, eWOM communications have a higher measurability rate compared to previous WOM (Lee et al., 2008; Park and Kim, 2008). Communication in eWOM is observable concerning appearance, tenacity, and quantity with spectacular spread and diffusion rapidity. Similar to WOM, small groups of individuals share information synchronously (Avery et al., 1999; Li and Hitt 2008; Dellarocas 2003; Steffes and Burgee, 2009). eWOM communications offer various ways of information exchange not existing or occurring at the same time (Hung and Li, 2007). Secondly, eWOM occurs in numerous platform of electronic technologies such as review sites, social networking sites, blogs, newsgroups, the online discussion in the forum, and electronic bulletin board (Goldsmith et al., 2006). Thirdly, in contrast to the previous WOM, eWOM spread are better in permanency and range. In the internet, information is archived and readily-available for unspecified time (Herr et al., 1991; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Park and Lee, 2009; Hung and Li; 2007; Lee et al., 2008) and accumulate over time as historical references for later viewing (Chatterjee, 2001).

On the contrary side though, the nature of eWOM in most applications does not allow for transparency on the credibility of the sender due to anonymity and the sheer number of general users. Nonetheless, 83 percent of Internet shoppers have confirmed that online product reviews and consumers' feedback have influenced their purchasing decisions (Opinion Research Corporation, July 2008). This fact verifies eWOM as a reliable and a useful marketing tool. New researchers are continuing to explore eWOM ubiquitous presence, adding to the literature on the effectiveness of eWOM (Davis and Khazanchi, 2008; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006).

#### 1.1.2 Social Networking Services (SNS)

Social media has experienced unprecedented expansion and has evolved to become a fundamental tool in human lives culturally, socially, and in business (Odden, 2008). A direct effect of this phenomenon is, it has become a potent force for business with positive and negative consequences. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social media has progressed to become an essential medium for human communication for staying in touch, remain updated in new developments, and connect to the global world. Regardless of what people are looking for, it is almost sure that they will find their specific niche online. A subset of social media is SNS. It is a communication platform with capacities to accommodate communication at multiple locations with multiple people at all times. The attributes of social networking are wide-ranging that it offers different choices to different people with various interests.

It has been reported latterly that significant amount of companies choose to be involved in SNS at some level. SNS qualifies for being part of businesses' tools, especially as a part of marketing strategy (Constantinides and Fountain 2008; Waters et al. 2009; Tikkanen et al. 2009; Lerman and Hogg 2010; Spaulding 2010). The ways that SNS provide values to businesses include but not limited to:

- 1) A source of customers' voice for development of new products or services, personalised level of segmentation using useful and worthy information from SNS, and also savings of companies' resources (Li and Bernoff, 2011). When consumers converse among themselves in SNS, it becomes an attractive source for companies to derive information and comments to further help marketing strategies (Burmah and Arnhold, 2008).
- 2) It is also found from the previous study that social sites could influence users to buy products/services that a business promotes (Sarwar et al., 2013).

Based on this evidence, it shows that SNS is a suitable tool for promotional purpose via eWOM properties. It is further predicted that eWOM will increase compared with the rising numbers of users using social sites (Sarwar et al., 2013).

## 1.2 Theoretical literature review on personal factors of SNS users

### 1.2.1 SNS Users' Trust Level

Central to this work, the trust level is an independent variable. Trust is defined as the act of confidence either in other SNS users' information, brand name, advertising, or marketing messages by businesses. This paper makes use of psychology process marketing to achieve the final result of spreading eWOM to other users. In Williams et al. (2015) study of Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), it found that trust is one of the most frequently variable used as an external variable, right after self-efficacy, and attitude. A framework for establishing trust includes Morgan and Hunt (1994) relationship marketing success factor, in all its contexts, requires cooperative behaviours. According to Chow & Shi (2014), in SNS, consumers' loyalty and commitment are positively linked to trust in brand pages of a company. Additionally, McKnight and Chervany (2001) state that are trusting intention and trust-related behaviour describe the social psychological behaviour of people which are related to their adoption behaviours such as purchase intention and willingness to transact.

Now, to substantiate trust as an independent variable to eWOM diffusion, this paper presents several types of research as evidence. Among others, trust as an essential issue for multi-agent systems (Nyanchama and Osborn, 1995; Grandison and Sloman, 2000; Dimitrakos, 2001; Liu et al., 2004). A multi-agent system is an assembly of proxy that interacts with other proxies in the vibrant environment. A trust model proposed trustworthiness as a required evaluation criterion for agents (Liu and Ozols, 2002). Another finding found that the initial trust of a network can be derived as the set of regulations in a favoured rational framework. When these standard regulations work together, it forms a theory name theory of trust for a network (Liu, 2001). Furthermore, the theory of trusts establishes a set of rules, which acts as an instrument that becomes a set of reference points (Liu, 2001). Other works on trust include the investigation of concepts of trust, mistrust, and distrust, its correlation, and the effects of trust in proxies and the beliefs proxies have (Marsh and Dibben (2005). Where else, Michalakopoulos and Fasli (2005) surveyed the impact of trust, its characteristics, its nature, and each agent in the electronic market. Research proves that the connection of users in the SNS gives shared values and generate the favourable effect of users in trust (Wu et al. 2010). According to Liang et al. (2011), social commerce allows consumers to create content and can influence others, which are likely to develop values for both business and consumers. Findings from Hajli (2014) states that consumers' purchase intention is indirectly increased through due to a higher level of trust in information received. Hajli (2014) also found that consumers when facilitated by social media, generate online social support for their peers. These studies demonstrate that trust encourages SNS users to spread information by producing content in online communities, reviews, and recommendations.

Besides, trust in quality information or system, support from eWOM ignite SNS users purchase intention and actual purchase decision (Hajli, 2014; Gefen 2002). In particular, when potential consumers are encouraged to trust in vendors by their peers, and also to trust in SNS itself, they are more likely to buy through SNS. Meanwhile, according to Lu et al. (2010), the source of trust is garnered through social interaction as a result of users becoming familiar with one another. Subsequently, it is also found that trust on a brand denotes the result of public relations accompanying the brand (Esch et al., 2006). An important note for a service-oriented company, strong brands are needed to reinforce customer's trust because of invisibility (Berry, 2000).

Overall, a trustor believes that the other's promise is reliable and is acting in good spirit towards the trustor in any circumstances (Mayer et al., 1995). Hence, in a commercial setting, the belief in the supplier is because of customer's trust (Crosby et al., 1990). Consumer-based their trust on previous transactions, although a supplier's future action could not be guaranteed (Gefen, 2000). According to Kelly et al. (2010), a consumer may perceive information offered as credible if he/she trusts the media where the content is coming from. Furthermore, if a user does not trust the media, it is unlikely that consumer will take note of the advertising content (Bannister et al., 2013; Johnson and Kaye, 1998). In like manner, Mayer et al. (1995) asserted that trust must go beyond predictability because one does not trust the other party which is highly predictable to ignore the needs of others and act in a self-interested fashion. In the same token, Yin et al. (2012) findings show that shared values and communications have a positive influence on trust. All things considered, although trust has been defined in various ways, a particularly straightforward definition is "that one believes in, and is willing to depend on, another party" (McKnight et al., 1998, p. 474). Trust occurs only when those involved "are assured of others' willingness and ability to deliver on their obligations" (Ratnasingham, 1998, p. 314). In essence, all these works solidify the importance of trust in SNS. Hence, this paper posits for an individual to engage in eWOM diffusion, SNS user needs to trust the source of information before the spread of information via eWOM.

Proposition 1 (P1): The higher an SNS user trust it source, the higher its willingness to diffuse eWOM. The next construct suggests that self-efficacy plays a role in eWOM diffusion.

### 1.2.2 Self-Efficacy impact on eWOM diffusion.

According to some studies, an individual's usage of technology could be caused by initial interest in using the technology itself. However, this reason is not sustainable over time (Agarwal and Prasad, 2007). Furthermore, being forced to use a technology evidently may cause an individual to act negatively later on (e.g., Ram & Jung, 1991). Hence, one of the proposed independent variables in this conceptual paper is self-efficacy. In Williams et

al. (2015) study of Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), Williams and cohort examined some external variables as essential constructs of UTAUT and found that self-efficacy is the most frequently used construct as an external variable.

Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's beliefs about own ability and motivation to achieve specific tasks (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Bandura (1997) states that the value of a psychological theory is, it rules not only by its explanatory and predictive power but by its powerful influence to effect change. A broader theory of human agency postulates self-efficacy is generated by internal self and other beliefs that produce other various effects (Bandura, 1997, 2001). The ability to understand and build upon own abilities enable an individual to enhance the experience and achieve personal ambitions, and this is true for improvements in society as well (Bandura, 1997, 2001). It is consistent with technology acceptance results, that self-efficacy appears relational to accepting a technology for individuals in recent studies. Correspondingly, self-efficacy is shown to be a crucial indicator or effort used toward completing tasks, intrinsic motivation and involvement in the task, and inducer for various activities (Ellen et al., 1991; Martocchio, 1994). A number of studies have shown considerable evidence supporting self-belief value in technology acceptance behavior, for example usage intentions (Davis et al., 1989; Mathieson, 1991; Szajna, 1996; Thompson et al., 1991) as well as system usage (Adams et al., 1992; Davis, 1993; Moore & Benbasat, 1991). In line with SNS's usage, only voluntary behaviour supported by self-efficacy are being considered to be the cause of eWOM diffusion. In the context of eWOM's diffusion, individuals with higher general self-efficacy are expected to be confident that they are usually able to have an opinion, ability to judge, and freedom to share their thinking and views with others. For self-efficacious consumers, they are confident that they have some say in helping others in either positive statement or helping others in the deterrence of bad product, service, or organisation. Thus, they would be willing to spread messages via eWOM. It would as if they did a social service as responsible individuals. Hence, this paper posits that for an individual to engage in eWOM diffusion, the individual would have to have a high self-efficacy.

Proposition 2 (P2): A self-efficacious SNS user will be more willing to engage in eWOM.

The next construct suggests that eWom experience will impact eWOM diffusion.

#### 1.2.3 Personal eWOM Experience

Besides the factors mentioned above, another critical aspect of possible involvement in eWOM is the eWOM experience itself. Recent studies have explored the relationship between internet usage levels with online shopping and found that it is significant that higher usage level causes higher online shopping to happen (Liao and Cheung, 2001, Chen et al., 2016). With the advancement of Web 2.0, social media enable users to quickly access other users for information, product review and comments at rapid speed. Hence, academic researchers have increasingly explored online reviews phenomena (Zhang et al. 2014) since eWom is considered as of crucial factors of consumer product evaluation and further affect purchase decision process. Another study found that members of online communities who have a higher number of acquaintances or more experience with a product or service would engage and facilitate eWom (Rossman et al., 2016). A study on airline travellers in China points out that subjects with personal factors of subjective knowledge are prone to share their knowledge compared to those who do not (Yuan et al., 2016). Thus, having specific ideas or previous experience tend to encourage people the intention to pass the knowledge along. Therefore, this paper posits that having prior experience in eWom is antecedent personal factors to eWom dispersion.

Proposition 3 (P3): User's eWom experience directly impact his or her willingness to engage in eWOM diffusion.

#### 1.2.4 Influence of Personality on eWOM behavior

Many studies have researched effects of communications between the sender(s) (communicator) and receiver(s) on purchase decision process caused by eWOM (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001; Park and Kim, 2008; Park and Lee, 2008, Cheung, Lee, and Thadani, 2009). A consumer usually shares both positive and negative shopping experienced by with circle of families, friends, and acquaintances especially of exclusive discounts, exceptional services, suspected fraud, or horrible service. Again, with SNS availability at fingertips, the experience "news" travel earlier in eWOM. However, not everyone has the same behaviour of habit to share and tell. According to previous studies, online social interaction pattern is different among different personalities, and personality can explain the reason why one acts in a certain way online (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002, Hamburger and Ben-Artzi, 2000). Purchase decision process involves series of processes: thinking, searching, weighing, plus own personal standards, which are affected by eWOM communication.

Integration of distinctive and unique individual behaviors has been written in scientific terms of personality in the field of psychology. Allport (1961) and Carver and Scheier (2000, p.5) have defined personality in contemporary terms: "Personality is a dynamic organisation, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create a person's characteristic patterns of behaviour, thoughts, and feelings." It is further defined by Funder (2001), as well as Myers (2007) whereby personality is classified as having different clusters broken down to behavioristic, psychoanalytic, humanistic, and trait paradigms. In this work, one class of personality conceptions is the trait perspective as the focus. Personality traits attempt to portray personality consistently and permanently in an

individual subject. According to psychologists (DeYoung, 2010) and neuroscientists (Adelstein et Al., 2011), personality is defined as an effect processing system that describes persistent human behavioural responses to broad classes of environmental stimuli. It characterises a unique individual, and it is involved in communication processes and connected to how people interact with one another. Consequently, newer general models of personality appeared to become widely accepted (Funder, 2001).

Big Five Model is a framework involving personality traits of users. Reliably, users' personality traits have been shown to predict various behaviours, including communication (Moberg, 2001; Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000) and information seeking (Heinstrom, 2005; Weiler, 2005). The five-factor model of personality, also called "Big Five", is a personality classification with five traits dimension of extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experience, and conscientiousness. These five factors have proven its consistency in different assessments, languages, and cultures, exhibiting structural robustness of the model (for a review see Hogan and Ones, 1997; McCrae and Costa, 1999).

More importantly, previous studies have empirically examined the determinants of online eWOM communication, with focus on the relationships of eWOM adoption and eWOM content (Lee et al. 2006; Cheung et al. 2008). Nonetheless, few studies have assimilated personality and eWOM in the study of consumers' shopping experience. Hence, this paper posits that personality as an antecedent factor of individual's decision on the choice to diffuse e-WOM or not.

Proposition 4 (P): User's personality traits are an antecedent factor in SNS user willingness to engage in eWOM diffusion.

Undeniably, much work has been done in uncovering eWOM's mechanism in dispersing information. Nonetheless, it is with much anticipation that this paper would contribute to understanding better how each participant in SNS has fundamental differences which influence their ways of communication. User's Personal Factors impact on eWOM diffusion in SNS.

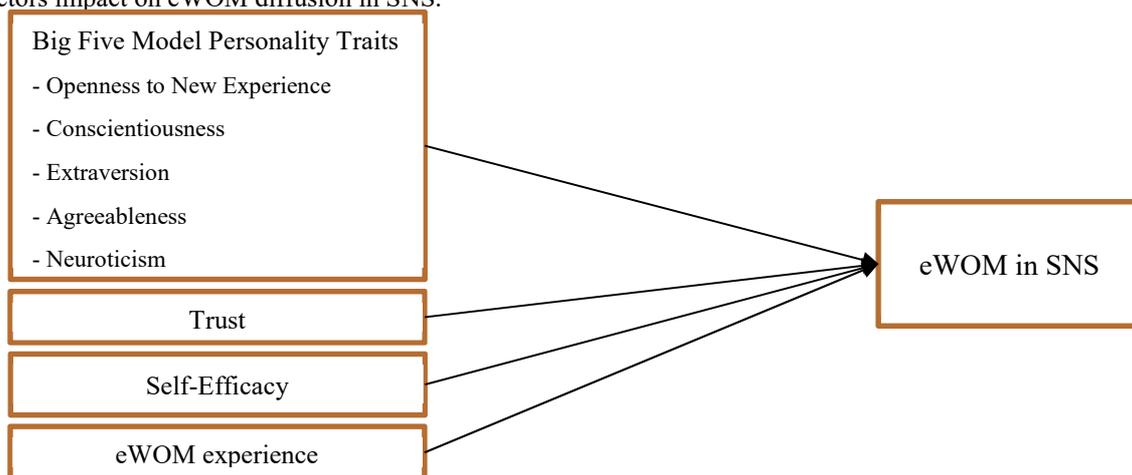


Figure 1. A conceptual model of SNS user's factors on eWOM diffusion in SNS

This model depicts individual factors concerning involvement with eWOM in SNS.

The theoretical model (see Figure 1) depicts individual factors concerning involvement with eWOM in SNS. With higher self-efficacy and trust, a positive eWOM is a result of a good consumer shopping experience. On the contrary, negative shopping experience and low trust would produce negative eWOM with a bad impact on businesses. However, depending on different personalities, a consumer uses eWOM subjectively. From previous studies, SNS users' reaction to different situations is reflected by own personality. Therefore, eWOM is proposed to transmit differently from different users, and sometimes not at all. For businesses to discover the ways eWOM are impacted by individual's personality, self-efficacy level, and trust level, subsequent empirical work will be beneficial to offer answers.

### 2.1 The implication of the study of personal factors influences on eWOM diffusion.

The ability to understand antecedents to eWOM behaviour is an immediate step to increase the efficiency of SNS providers further. As found by Erkan (2016) information adoption process is an antecedent to behavioural intention for eWOM. Future work can work on a proposed model to empirically validate personal factors as causes of eWOM diffusion. By comprehending personal factors in an SNS user, company's success or failure in promotional or marketing segmentation could be traced back to determinants suggested by this paper. The second implication of this model is that businesses could work on specific context messages, product, services, or event and be able to trace to which type of people responds based on the eWOM generated. In particular, sociodemographic segmentation based on personality traits. Third and final implication of this model is the straightforward relation of constructs and to eWOM dissemination applies to basic makeup of most human being. Be that as it may, the

findings could help uncover high impact knowledge to understand eWOM diffusion causes. In reality, businesses would not have the power to control eWOM. Nevertheless, proactive efforts could be made by companies, through companies' websites to positively channel genuine messages on the review of products or services and produce good eWOM spread through other consumers input.

### 2.2 Implications for Managerial Practice.

The major purpose of this article is to reiterate personal factors in individual behaviours impact in the virtual world. Although SNS is a virtual world with the considerable amount of anonymity, it is with the hope that businesses would always consider the delicate importance of an individual in SNS that could make or break a company. Hence, ethics, care for quality, and responsibility is a must to businesses. eWOM could also be a source of motivation to businesses to be active in SNS because of the technology's advantage in its low-cost investment and ease. Through SNS too, news and information travel fast, and businesses should reap this opportunity in getting across to customers or potential customers with superb planned promotion schedule and efficient strategy in place. Having a contingency plan in place in case of adverse situations should be a reasonable protocol in today's day and age too.

### 2.3 Conclusion

In attempts to further integrate SNS beneficially into human lives, it is crucial for all to understand SNS effects to society, businesses, and researchers as well. One of SNS's prominent outcome is eWOM: a direct result of interactive communication among users. Like it or not, there are times when situations will not be favourable to society. For example, if there is corrupted organisation that is spewing bad products or services into the market, eWOM could become a mechanism for the community to alert each other and rectify such occasions. On the other hand, through eWOM, businesses could be attacked by a vicious ill-meaning group of individuals. Thus, by all means, businesses could utilise eWOM and reverse the unwanted situation. Therefore, SNS and communication researchers are encouraged to investigate the many points that have been brought forth in this article. It is believed that the findings could be of assistance to consumers, managers, and also SNS users too.

#### Declaration of Conflicting Practices

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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