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ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH: AN INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND IDENTITY

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Over the past decade, electronic word-of-mouth communication (EWOM) has become more salient in online contexts. However, the extant literature on EWOM has largely depended upon theories developed in traditional offline contexts. We proposed that both individual and social settings should not be ignored in the study of EWOM and sought to integrate two perspectives: social influence and social identity. More specifically, we examined the impact of cognitive and emotional social identities on social influence. While both types of social identities were positively associated with social influence, the strength of influence varied depending on the type of products being consumed. We also found that fewer members identified with communities where there were high discrepancies in members' product expertise. Conversely, more members identified with communities where they had strong ties. These findings had strong theoretical and practical implications on EWOM.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth, social influence, social identities, product conspicuousness

Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) is the process of conveying information from person to person, including positive or negative statements made by potential, actual, and former customers about a product or a company, via online platforms. In recent years, EWOM has emerged as a salient force guiding consumer behavior (Davidow 2003; Silverman 2001). Examining EWOM is important, for both researchers and practitioners, as it influences consumers' purchase intentions and decisions (Arndt 1967; Keavenet 1995; Kiel and Layton 1981; Swan and Oliver 1989), and aids information diffusion (Engel et al. 1969; Rogers 1983). However, scholars have noted that the social contexts in which EWOM occurs have been largely ignored (Costa 1995; Ritson and Eilliot 1999; Ward and Reingen 1996). There are significant gaps in the understanding of EWOM. First, at the community level, there is a lack of understanding of how EWOM interaction in online communities or dyads aggregates to form large scale patterns on social influence. Second, at the individual level, very little is known about the social context (e.g., strength of social ties) within which EWOM communication is embedded.

Previous studies have found that social factors such as *expertise* and *tie strength* are crucial to fostering EWOM effectiveness (Bansal and Voyer 2000; Gilly et al. 1998; Gremler 1994; von Wangenheim and Bayon 2004). These factors have an impact on social influence, which can be explained by self-categorization and social identity theories that consider how consumers regard themselves and relate to others. Therefore, our study emphasizes EWOM as a social phenomenon where consumers are influenced through their relationships and identities with other members. We consider how social influence and social identity perspectives may be integrated, rather than focusing on either theory alone (Postmes et al. 2005). As such, we formally raise these research questions:

1. Are consumers' social identities associated with interpersonal factors (i.e., expertise and tie strength)?

2. Is social influence in online communities associated with consumers' social identities?

3. Does the impact of social identities on social influence differ for different types of product consumption?

Conceptual Development

Social influence theories have been used to explain the influence of EWOM. Deutsh and Gerard (1955) suggested two influence mechanisms in which individuals may be influenced. First, *informational influence* (operating through internalization processes) posits that individuals seek to gain information from others as evidences of reality. Second, *normative influence* (operating through compliance processes) suggests that individuals seek to gain positive outcomes and avoid negative outcomes from others. Internalization processes occur when individuals seek to enhance or support one's self-concept, and compliance processes occur when individuals conform to the expectations of another because of rewards or punishments (Kleman 1961). Therefore, our study focuses on two important sources of social influence: expertise discrepancy and tie strength (Bansal and Voyer 2000; Gilly et al. 1998; Gremler 1994; von Wangenheim and Bayon 2004).

Expertise discrepancy, a measure of the level of differences in members' knowledge and credibility, exerts informational influence through external validation during the internalization process (Friedman and Friedman 1979). It also exerts normative influence by inducing positive attitudes (Lutz and Mackenzie 1989) and value-expressive group influence during the compliance and identification processes (Park and Lessig 1977).

Tie strength, a measure of the length and quality of social relationships (Granovetter 1973), is an antecedent of source credibility (Roger 1983; Brown and Reingen 1987), which leads to social influence through the internalization process. Strong ties have the potential of exerting greater influence compared to weak ties (Anderson 1998; Brown et al. 2007). This is because strong ties are likely to indicate homogeneity (Fischer, 1982), or the similarity of opinions between the related parties. Tie strength may also exert influence through the compliance process, as with homophily (Lord et al., 2001), such that individuals who share similar attitudes and beliefs are likely to provide reinforcement and strengthen each other's beliefs (Byrne, 1971).

These sources of social influence have been found in previous studies to influence social identity. Social identity, consisting of cognitive and emotional dimensions, refers to an individual's perceived membership to a social group through attributing emotion and significance (Tajfel 1978). *Cognitive social identity* refers to an individual's knowledge of group membership. *Emotional social identity* refers to an individual's sense of emotional and value significance of group membership. Cognitive social identity utilizes the internalization process. As individuals

regard themselves as members of a social group, this process of categorization accentuates intragroup similarities and intergroup differences (Doise, 1978; Eiser and Stroebe, 1972; Tajfel 1969). On the other hand, emotional social identity exerts influence through compliance processes. Members, more so than non-members, are inclined to conform to group norms and identify with the group (French and Raven, 1959). Negative perceptions towards a group are likely to have individuals modifying their behaviors to distance themselves from a group to avoid any negative associations and repercussions that might arise.

In addition, the impact of social influence on product and brand decisions arises from two forms of conspicuousness that (1) dichotomizes product consumption as public and private and (2) dichotomizes product exclusivity as a luxury or necessity (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bourne 1957). The former affects brand decisions while the latter affects product decisions. Individuals who purchase public products were more susceptible to group influence on brand decision than those who purchase private products. Consumers who purchase luxury product were more susceptible to group influence on product decision than those who purchase necessities (Bearden and Etzel 1982). As we are interested in studying consumers' decision-making processes as it relates to brands, this study focuses on the public-private dimension of product conspicuousness.

Research Model and Hypotheses

We suggest that the expertise differences or discrepancies between a consumer's expertise and an online community's collective expertise will have a corresponding impact on the salience of a consumer's social identity within the community. When a consumer's expertise is significantly different from the community, a consumer is likely to see himself as different from the community-at-large (Doise, 1978; Eiser and Stroebe, 1972). Such differences may lead a consumer to disassociate himself from the community. Correspondingly, if expertise discrepancy is low, the similarities between a consumer and a community are accentuated and the consumer is likely to consider himself as part of the community. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): If the expertise discrepancy between a consumer and an online community about a product is lower, the consumer's cognitive social identity associated with the community is more salient.

Expertise discrepancy also enhances the emotional and value attachment a consumer associates with the community. Individuals are attracted to others who share the same beliefs and attitudes due to a high level of reward (such as opinion validation) at a low cost (Byrne, 1971). For example, when a consumer experiences low product expertise discrepancy with a community where his opinions are similar to that of others, he is attracted to the community. This is because similar opinions provided by the community rewards the consumer by validating his own beliefs, increasing emotional and value significance attached to the community. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): If the expertise discrepancy between a consumer and an online community about a product is lower, the consumer's emotional social identity associated with the community is more salient.

If a consumer is strongly tied to an online community, the relationship holds strong significance and meaning for the consumer (Brown and Reingen, 1987). As such, the consumer is likely to spend time and interact with the community to maintain this relationship (Perry-Smith, 2006). Consequently, the consumer is likely to perceive himself as similar to others in the community due as strong ties are forged between homogenous parties (Fischer, 1982). Such similarities between the consumer and the community accentuate the consumer's intragroup similarity, increasing the salience of cognitive social identity. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): If a consumer has stronger ties with an online community, the consumer's cognitive social identity associated with the community is more salient.

Similar attitudes and beliefs reward individuals by providing information that validates cherished personal attitudes and beliefs (Bryne, 1971). As such, a consumer is attracted to others who share his beliefs and attitudes as he can achieve a high level of rewards at a low cost. The stronger the tie strength, the more similar he would be with the community, and the more rewards he can potentially gain from that community. Such rewards makes increases a member's emotional social identity salience. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): If a consumer has stronger ties with an online community, the member's emotional social identity associated with the community is more salient.

Cognitive social identity exerts informational influence. The process of categorization accentuates intragroup similarity (Tajfel, 1969; Doise, 1978; Eiser and Stroebe, 1972). With increased salience of cognitive social identity,

a consumer is likely to be more aware of his similarity with other consumers within the community and regards the information from the community as valid. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5 (H5): A consumer with more salient cognitive social identity associated with an online community will have more influence from the community.

The influence power of emotional social identity relies on the attractive power (French and Raven, 1959) and positive value derived from the online community. When a consumer is strongly attracted to a community, he is more likely to modify his behavior to conform to community norms. Furthermore, the positive values the consumer derives from the online community acts as a reward for the consumer that drives him to comply with group norm (Kleman, 1961). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 6 (H6): A consumer with more salient emotional social identity associated with an online community will have more influence from the community.

Bearden and Etzel (1982) and Childer and Rao (1992) showed that the impact of social influence for publicly consumed products was stronger than for privately consumed products. As cognitive social identity exerts influence through internalization process, publicly consumed products and opinions are more visible and accessible. Hence, consumers' beliefs about publicly consumed products are more susceptible to social influence. In addition, emotional social identity exerts influence through identification and compliance processes, such that as the online community possesses greater attractiveness or positive values, consumers are more likely to identify with online communities and their norms. With more visible public consumption behavior, this allows members to demonstrate positive attitudes towards the community and promote positive values derived. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 7a (H7a): The effect of cognitive social identity on the community's influence on the member will be stronger when the member is searching for information about publicly consumed product.

Hypothesis 7b (H7b): The effect of emotional social identity on the community's influence on the member will be stronger when the member is searching for information about publicly consumed product.

Research Methodology

Participants

We conducted a preliminary field study on an online community to test our research model. This online community has approximately 120 million global members as of 2010. An online survey was administered to gather the responses of the community members. A total of 416 community members participated in our survey, with 209 respondents completing a survey pertaining to privately consumed products (103 for mattress, 106 for blanket) and 207 respondents completing a survey for publicly consumed products (103 for handbag, 104 for camera). 151 respondents were male and 245 respondents were female. The average age of participants was 28, with the average member participating in 4 community forums and reported 3 years of community experience. The unit of analysis is the individual.

Measurement

Expertise Discrepancy. We adapted measures for expertise from Mitchell and Dacin (1996), and calculated expertise discrepancy as the difference in expertise of a member and that of community. We captured expertise levels of members rather than perceived expertise discrepancy to reduce the potential of self-reported bias.

Tie strength. We captured the strength of members' ties to the online community (Brown et al. 2007), and adopted measures from Brown and Reingen (1987) in the study of social ties and word-of-mouth behavior. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the community over five items, which included "The online community is merely an acquaintance to me", and "I am not that close to the online community".

Cognitive Social Identity. We captured cognitive social identity over three categories: self-identification, self-reflection, and perceived similarity (Zucker 2003; Ellemers et al. 1999; Henry and Arrow 1999). The three items were "I consider myself to be a typical member of the online community", "the online community is an important reflection of who I am", and "I am similar to other members of the online community".

Emotional Social Identity. Our study defines emotional social identity as the sense of emotional and value significance a member attaches to his membership (Henry and Arrow 1999; Ellemers et al. 1999; Huo et al. 1996; Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). The six items included "I enjoy interacting with the members of the online community", and "I do not like many of other people in the online community".

Product Conspicuousness. A pretest was conducted to select appropriate products to represent product conspicuousness. Based on the pretest results, one product for each category was chosen in order to reduce the situational confounding factors (Chintagunta 1999; Villas-Boas and Winer, 1999). Handbag and camera were selected as publicly consumed product while mattress and blanket were selected as privately consumed product.

Social Influence. We defined social influence as the degree of influence exerted from the community to the member when information exchange has taken place (Gilly et al., 1998). We adopted five measures from Gilley et al. (1998) that focus on community's influence on member's purchase intention and on member's brand decision, including "the opinion of the online community will influence my choice about purchasing [product]", and "the online community did not change my mind about purchase [product]".

Control Variables. Internet experience has been found to impact behavior and responses (Novak et al., 2000; Bruner and Kumar, 2000; Hoffman and Novak, 1996), so we captured this construct by considering the number of communities member participate in and the years of community experience. Other control variables included demographic information, such as age and gender were included as control variables.

Analytical Procedures

We adopted partial least squares (PLS), a structural equation modeling (SEM) technique, for analyzing relationships between variables in the research model. We calculated the interaction effects between public-private product conspicuousness and social identity by centering the indicators for the direct and moderating constructs. We then created pairwise product indicators by multiplying each indicator from the direct construct with each indicator for the moderate construct, to reflect the interaction construct and to test the research model.

Results

PLS involves the assessment of the measurement model and the explanatory power of the model (i.e. structural model). For the measurement model, convergent validity was assessed by reliability of questions, composite reliability, and variance extracted (see Table 1). Our analyses demonstrated adequate shared variance, with item-to-construct loading reporting more than 0.70, and adequate average variance average, with reported scores of at least 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981). There was adequate composite reliability with reported scores above 0.80 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Internal consistency was also adequate, with Cronbach's alpha for each construct reporting far above the 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernsterin 1994). We assessed discriminant validity by considering the loading and correlation of survey items (Fornell and Larker, 1981). All items are loaded on the target factors and item correlation showed that variance extracted by each construct exceeded the shared variance between that construct and all other constructs (see Table 2) (Igabaria et al., 1994).

With adequate measurement model, we tested the hypotheses by examining the structural model. Figure 1 illustrates the overall computed structural model. Expertise discrepancy was negatively related to cognitive social identity salience. Thus, H1 was supported. The predicted effect of expertise discrepancy on emotional social identity salience was not statistically significant. Thus, H2 was not supported. Tie strength was positively related to both cognitive and emotional social identity salience. Thus, H3 and H4 were supported. Cognitive social identity salience was positively related to social influence. Thus, H5 was supported. However, the effect of emotional social identity salience on social influence was not statistically significant. Thus, H6 was not supported. Public-private product conspicuousness failed to moderate cognitive social identity salience. Thus, H7a was not supported. By contrast, public-private product conspicuousness moderated emotional social identity salience in the negative direction. That is, for more public product, emotional social identity exerted more social influence. Thus, H7b was supported. In addition, expertise discrepancy on influence and tie strength did not directly relate to social influence, pointing towards the importance of the social identity as a mediator.

Table 1. Measurement Model

Construct	Item #	1	2	3	4	Reliability	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha	AVE
Cognitive Social Identity	1	**0.920**	0.097	0.144	0.012	0.938	0.946	0.914	0.854
	2	**0.917**	0.132	0.125	0.018	0.921			
	3	**0.906**	0.122	0.127	0.023	0.913			
Emotional Social Identity	1	0.022	**0.866**	0.067	-0.012	0.863	0.926	0.900	0.715
	2	0.076	**0.862**	0.020	-0.058	0.853			
	3	0.103	**0.777**	0.065	0.000	0.801			
	4	0.103	**0.875**	0.054	-0.009	0.881			
	5	0.086	**0.811**	-0.016	-0.047	0.827			
Influence	6	0.127	-0.058	**0.854**	0.200	0.895	0.950	0.929	0.825
	2	0.089	0.073	**0.847**	0.162	0.871			
	3	0.129	0.034	**0.912**	0.176	0.932			
	4	0.106	0.026	**0.923**	0.145	0.933			
Expertise	1	0.041	0.027	0.126	**0.848**	—	—	0.925	—
	2	0.037	0.036	0.122	**0.849**				
	3	-0.024	-0.170	0.071	**0.861**				
	4	-0.030	-0.056	0.097	**0.906**				
	5	0.065	0.071	0.142	**0.835**				
	6	-0.012	-0.072	0.249	**0.765**				

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

Constructs	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Conspicuousness	3.87	1.95	—						
2. Expertise Discrepancy	1.03	0.76	-0.087	—					
3. Tie Strength	3.66	0.95	0.064	0.064	—				
4. Influence	4.77	1.17	0.085	0.011	0.191	**0.908**			
5. Cognitive Social Identity	4.55	1.43	-0.011	-0.152	0.489	0.276	**0.924**		
6. Cognitive Social Identity * Product Conspicuousness	—	—	0.068	0.007	-0.037	0.042	0.127	**0.904**	
7. Emotional Social Identity	5.15	1.41	-0.184	-0.066	0.275	0.060	0.220	-0.014	**0.845**
8. Cognitive Social Identity * Product Conspicuousness	—	—	0.125	-0.035	-0.010	-0.103	-0.035	0.300	0.212

Figure 1. Structural Model
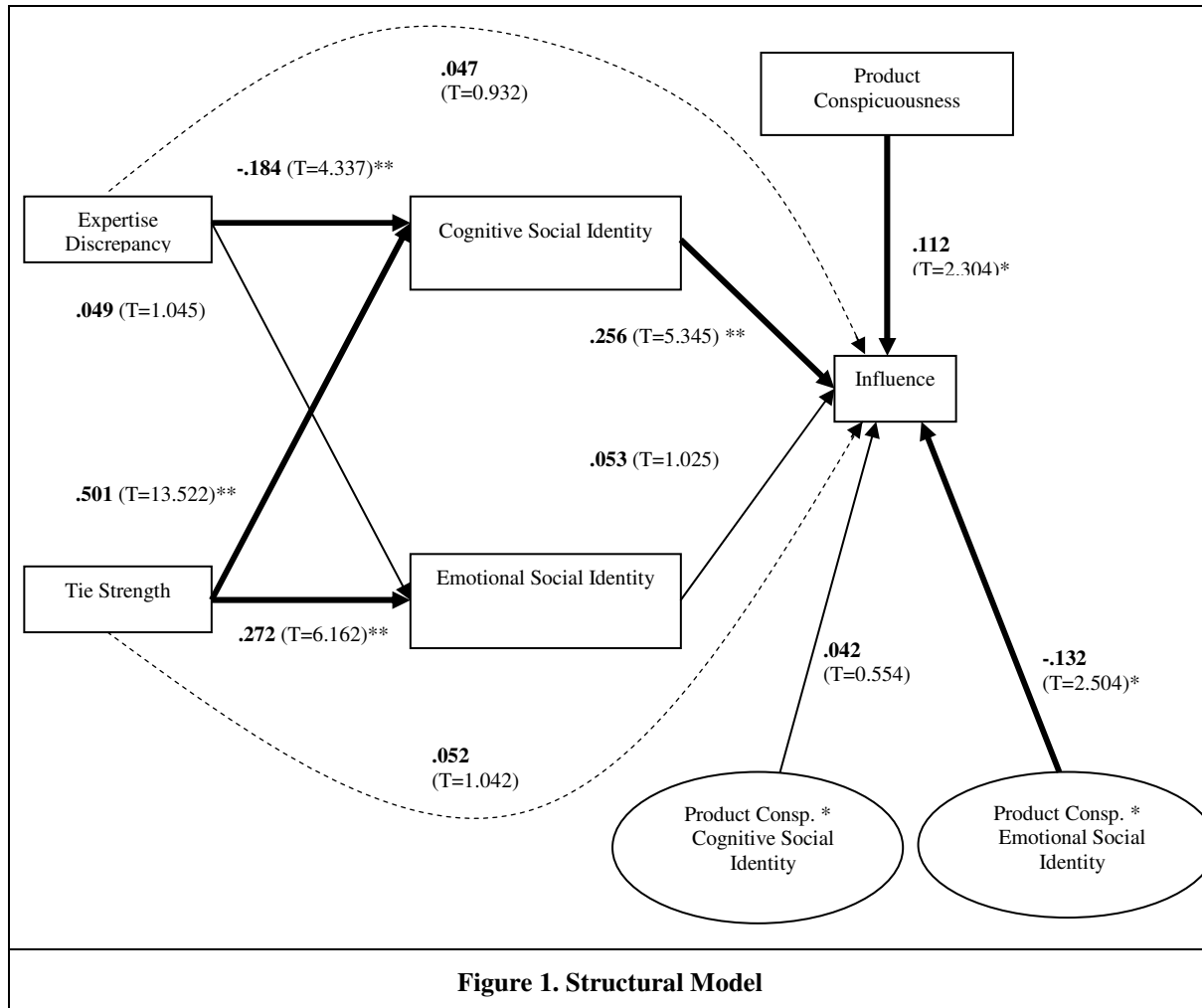
Discussion

This study demonstrated that interpersonal factors between member and community could exert influence by making different aspects of member's social identity salient. Expertise discrepancy was found to influence cognitive social identity salience. With a large expertise discrepancy between member and community, a member would avoid identifying himself as part of the community because of the perceived difference. Contrary to what we predicted, the effect of expertise discrepancy on emotional social identity salience was not statistically significant. The community may be a source of attractiveness (Lott and Lott, 1975) for members with expertise lower than that of the community, rather than for members with higher expertise.

Our results also showed that the tie strength between a member and a community increased the salience of a member's cognitive social and emotional social identity. Past studies have shown that tie strength corresponds to the commitment between two parties (Stanko et al., 2007), which in turn increases the perceptual and affective responses of social identity (Ellemers et al., 2000).

Cognitive social identity was positively associated with influence of the online community while emotional social identity was not. One explanation is that our selected products are different not only across public private dimension of product conspicuousness but also across utilitarian-hedonic dimensions. Utilitarian products are primarily cognitive-driven while hedonic products are primarily affect-driven (Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998). Therefore when evaluating utilitarian products, consumers are more susceptible to informational influence. The evaluation process for hedonic products tends to be highly subjective, therefore when evaluating hedonic products, consumers are more susceptible to normative influence.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings have several important implications to EWOM. First, and perhaps the most significant, is the importance of social identity in analyzing EWOM. Past WOM research have focused primarily on the individual without systematic consideration to social contexts. This study demonstrated the role of social identity over a large online community and provides opportunities for future WOM research to consider the social context. Past research treated interpersonal factors and social identity factors as mutually exclusive (Postmes et al., 2005). Our results showed that interpersonal factors and social identity factors are not mutually exclusive but closely related. They also demonstrated the significance of personalized roles and unique communication of online communities (Brown et al. 2007). In addition, our findings supported the observations that public-private dimension of product is not sensitive to information influence but to normative influence exerted by the emotional social identity. This is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Childer and Rao, 1992).

This study provides several strategies for practitioners to promote publicly and privately consumed products in online communities. Overall, practitioners should target consumers with strong relationships to online communities. Specifically, for publicly consumed products, practitioners can influence members by targeting their cognitive and emotional social identities. For example, practitioners can distribute exclusive products to online communities and target attitudinal similarities between members. For privately consumed products, it is more effective to promote product in a community where the average expertise is similar to the expertise of target customers. By utilizing cognitive social identity, the advertising message is able to portray products as a symbol of community membership. Thus, practitioners should select the proper communities to advertise their products based on the private-public dimensions of their product conspicuousness.

Conclusion

Our study makes two significant contributions to the current literature. First, while a number of researchers called for WOM research on group processes (Brown and Reigen 1987; Bristor 1990), to our knowledge, no other studies have studied WOM as part of group interaction. Second, this study incorporates both interpersonal and social identity factors that past research has considered as mutually exclusive (Postmes et al., 2005). This study uncovers several interesting observations in online community and contributes to the development of the extant EWOM literature. Practically, the findings can provide guidance for marketers and advertisers of products on online community in order to consider the best approach to take in influencing consumers based on private-public dimension of products. As EWOM research is in its infancy, we call for more contextualized EWOM research to better understand how consumers are influenced in online community and how firms can utilize online community to drive value creation activities.

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