

THE ROLE OF OPINION LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS AND BRAND COMMITMENT AS DRIVERS OF BRAND-RELATED ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH (EWOM) IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS)

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Abstract

Previous studies on the antecedents of Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) have either focused on the opinion leadership characteristics of individuals, or on brand commitment. It is the aim of this study to combine these two separate streams of research by evaluating the impact of opinion leadership characteristics and brand commitment as possible drivers of EWOM on Social Networking Sites (SNS). It is found that brand commitment is indeed a strong driver of brand related EWOM. Brand commitment mediates the motivation to engage in EWOM by those who already exhibit opinion leadership characteristics. In addition, the findings show that those who have opinion leadership characteristics and those who do not have opinion leadership differ in the type of EWOM they engage in. This can be defined as Active EWOM (content creation) and Passive EWOM (forwarding information). Marketers can use this information to design strategies that appeal to the needs of those with opinion leadership characteristics by creating novel experiences, or to enhance commitment by rewarding users who share positive information about the brand.

Keywords: EWOM, Active EWOM, Passive EWOM, Brand Commitment, Opinion Leadership, Social Network Sites

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of online communications has made consumers more engaged among each other, and also engaged with more brands (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; De Valck, 2009). Today consumers are no longer just passive receivers of information; they are active participants making proactive contributions through continuous engagement in brand interactions resulting in positive outcomes for brands including repeat purchases, retention, and ultimately loyalty (Grönroos, 1997; Vargo & Lusch, 2008; Verhoef, Reinartz, Krafft 2010; Hollebeek, 2011).

Brands hope to reap benefits from this rapid spread of opinions and information shared by consumers on their social networks, known as Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) this method of communication gives brands the opportunity to connect with the friends and acquaintances of their customers (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Although social media is widely used by brands, the study of social media's functionality in marketing is only in the early stages (Kane, Alavi, and Borgatti, 2014). Importantly, EWOM is more persuasive than marketing messages as it comes from a personal source, which is considered more credible (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Although past studies have explored how customers share brand related stories and experience, and how customers write reviews in their brand communities as a means of recruiting new users and retaining existing users

(McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; O'Guinn & Muniz, 2005; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Dholakia & Vianello, 2011; Brodie, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2011), there is still a gap in studying the flow of information in the user's personal network.

Another gap is the need to develop models in explaining the antecedents of EWOM (Cheung & Lee, 2012). Previous research, for instance the work of Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) identified five antecedents for positive EWOM i.e. 1) focus-related utility, 2) consumption-utility, 3) approval-utility, 4) moderator-related utility, and 5) homeostase utility. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) identified eleven motives for EWOM based on the utility of EWOM and segmenting the results for different groups based on their relevance. The eleven motives are 1) concern for others, 2) desire to help the company, 3) social benefits received, 4) exertion of power over the company, 5) post purchase advice seeking, 6) self-enhancement, 7) economic rewards, 8) convenience in seeking redress, 9) hope to have platform serve as moderator, 10) expression of positive emotions, and 11) venting of negative feelings. Sun, Youn, Wu, and Kuntaraporn (2006) identified three antecedents including innovativeness, internet usage, and internet social connection. Cheung

and Lee (2012) identified three antecedents namely sense of belonging, reputation, and enjoyment of helping. Bickart and Schindler (2001) explained that persuasive messages such as EWOM are more credible and have a positive impact on the brand. As can be seen, different approaches by researchers result in the formulation of varied antecedents of EWOM. Thus, this study aims to simplify the antecedents and group them as either individual opinion leadership characteristics or brand commitment as part of the model identifying the antecedents of EWOM.

Social Networking Sites (SNS) serve as the venue where consumers talk among themselves, exchanging information and generating their own personal profiles, especially in the form of Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) some of which is related to the brand (Chu & Kim, 2011; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Building on previous studies, this research aims to explore the factors that affect the flow of information within the personal Social Networking Sites (SNS) of consumers. As He, Li, and Harris (2012) explained, social networking sites (SNS) allow consumers to engage in social interactions through accessing their own online friendship networks. These connections are dynamic and interactive making it an interesting topic of study (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Forest & Wood, 2012; McAndrew & Jeong, 2012). The importance of studying EWOM in the personal SNS of users is supported by Hennig-Thurau et. al.

(2004) who explained that information provided by consumers in their own personal space is more influential to other consumers. Social media platforms are important in terms of creating knowledge and opinions through conversations and reviews about products (Quach & Thaichon, 2017). Thus, first, it is the major contribution of this study to explore the drivers of EWOM in SNS, specifically the personal page of the user. Second, the results of the research may be used to further develop a model in explaining the antecedents of EWOM in the personal SNS of users.

Among the social media platforms, Facebook is the most significant platform in Thailand as Facebook has the highest number of active users in Thailand with a total of 52 million users (Hootsuite Digital Report 2019). Expanding the context into research, Anurit and Khumpong (2013) studied the case of NIVEA Thailand's Facebook Fan Page. The researchers concluded that Facebook is a very effective tool for drawing an emotional connection from the target group. This is in line with previous research which explains this phenomenon stating that users form communities including information exchange, friendship, social support, and recreation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Daugherty, Lee, Gangadharbatla, Kim, & Outhavong, 2005; Schau, Muniz & Arnould, 2009). As a consequence, conducting the study among Thai Facebook users is justified.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) consists of statements made by “potential, actual, or former customers” regarding a product, company or service that is made available to a large number of people via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004). In this research, EWOM is defined as personal experiences and opinions transmitted through the written word via Social Networking Sites (SNS) (Sun et al., 2006).

Word of mouth (WOM), which is the precursor of Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM), was conceptualized in the seminal work done by Dichter (1966). There are three possible motivators of EWOM, which are 1) product involvement, 2) self-involvement, and 3) other involvement, as adapted by Sun et al. (2006). Product involvement is defined as a strong feeling for the product (Belk, 1978; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Liang, 2012). Self-involvement is defined as the means in using the product to gratify the emotional needs of the individual (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Other-involvement is the feeling of wanting to contribute and share with others (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Based on the previous studies cited above, these factors were adapted to explore the opinion leadership characteristics and brand commitment for use in this study.

The first category of EWOM antecedents is the opinion leadership characteristics (Feick and Price 1987; Brown, et al., 2005; Sun et al. 2006).

Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) explained that opinion leadership characteristics such as innovativeness, drive EWOM. This is akin to the concept of self-involvement and other-involvement wherein opinion leaders usually task themselves with disseminating information to less knowledgeable or experienced members of their network (Chaney, 2001). The behaviors of these opinion leaders include providing information, sharing and chatting (Phelps et al., 2004; Sun et al. 2006). Thus, this personal factor of opinion leadership is defined in this study as one of the antecedents of EWOM.

Another type of antecedent of EWOM to be explored comes from the consumer relationship to the brand. The value of the relationship consumers have with a brand, is rooted in the view that the consumer has, of the perceived benefits derived from the exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). These benefits can be anything deriving directly from the product usage or rewards received in the form of mental or physical activities that help consumers satisfy their needs.

Critical to having a relationship is the concept of commitment. Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992) defined commitment as a long-term or enduring desire that drives an individual to maintain a relationship that is valued. In the context of this study, the relationship is between the consumer and the brand. Brown et al. (2005) explained that commitment as it relates to EWOM is an action that helps maintain a relationship. For the purposes of this study the definition

proposed by Beatty and Kahle (1988) is used for brand commitment. As such brand commitment is defined as an attitudinal statement resulting from reasoned action as a consequence of a satisfied brand experience. Consequently, brand commitment is used in this study as a measurement for the product involvement antecedent of EWOM.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bettencourt (1997) found a positive relationship between consumer commitment to a grocery store and the measure of loyalty in the form of positive WOM. This study suggests the mediating effect of customer satisfaction on positive WOM. Another study by Walker (2001) examined the relationship between affective commitment and WOM activity. The study of Brown et al. (2005) found that brand commitment has both a mediating and moderating effect on WOM. Therefore, the set up for the conceptual framework starts with testing the moderating effect of commitment.

HYPOTHESES

Opinion leadership characteristics determine the tendency for an individual to use their ability and motivation to share information (Shoham & Ruvio, 2008). Smith, Coyle and Lightfoot (2007) found that opinion leadership characteristics serve as antecedents of EWOM. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Opinion leadership characteristics directly influence electronic word of mouth.

Previous research found that in addition to the opinion leadership characteristics there are also brand related constructs that can be included as antecedents of EWOM. Brown et al. (2005) found in their study that commitment may influence EWOM. Another study by Harrison-Walker (2001) found the relationship between affective commitment and EWOM activity. Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) and Van Doorn, et al. (2010) found that preference for the brand and a commitment to the brand tends to drive EWOM. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Brand commitment mediates the effects of opinion leadership characteristics on EWOM.

To ensure content validity the item scales were based on a review of existing literature, and were subjected to Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using SEM to test the reliability of the scales.

The measurement items were designed to measure the following constructs: (1) personal factors, specifically the opinion leadership characteristics from Feick and Price (1987); (2) EWOM behaviors including online forwarding and online chatting, adapted from the work of Sun et al. (2006); and (3) brand commitment, adapted from Brown et al. (2005). The previous researchers claimed that all constructs showed Cronbach's alpha values

ranging from 0.84 to 0.95.

The initial questionnaire generated from the reviewed items was pre-tested on 10 respondents using a convenience sampling technique. Following this, one redundant item was removed from the scale measuring EWOM. The questionnaire was consequently developed before being translated and then further revised by two lecturers experienced in translating questionnaires for research purposes. After completion of this process the questionnaire was again pre-tested on 40 respondents using convenience sampling as suggested by Hair (2010). Analysis of pre-test data determined that no further modifications were required, and the questionnaire was approved for use in the collection of the actual research data.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Dellarocas and Narayan (2006) stated that early research works on Word of Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM) were usually done using the survey method. Previous studies using the survey method include Bowman and Narayandas (2001); Brown and Reingen (1987); Reingen and Kernan (1986); and Richins (1983). Thus, the research methodology for this study employs an on-line survey to suit the subject of the study, which is EWOM.

In order to capture the level of brand commitment, the selection of the product for the study was based on the work of Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988). The authors proposed the idea

that the product for the study of WOM should be owned by a large percentage of the general population. It must also be capable of eliciting high levels of situational involvement. Therefore to confirm product involvement, which is one of the antecedents of WOM (Dichter, 1966), the researcher conducted brief interviews with a group representative of the desired population of Internet users defined as those using the Internet for at least 3 years. The interviews lasted until the list did not have any new entries based on the concept of convergent interviewing (Rao and Perry 2003). Using convenience sampling, 30 respondents were asked to list five products with which they had an enduring engagement. A list of 15 products was generated from the results. In the next step another set of 10 different respondents selected one product with which they felt enduring engagement. The resulting product selected was the mobile phone, which is reasonable since the mobile phone is a relatively high-priced item which users are involved with almost continuously.

Sampling Design

The snowball sampling technique was selected as it allows access to respondents who have the experience or knowledge to answer the questions (Riege & Nair, 2004). Additionally, it was expected that the use of snowball sampling would mitigate the weakness of a low response in online surveys. Invitations with a link to the survey site were

shared to the 30 initial respondents used in the pre-test. The link on survey.au.edu was open for 2 weeks. Some respondents responded within the first week. Another invitation was sent to a different group to be distributed. The responses of the two groups were compared.

A total of 177 responses were gathered, and any incomplete questionnaires were deleted from the analysis, resulting in a total of 155 usable questionnaires being retained for analysis. This sample size is considered adequate. In using SEM, Hair (2010) stated that the traditional view requiring a sample size of 300 is no longer valid. Hair stated that the minimum sample size is 100 for models containing five or fewer constructs. Consequently, a sample size of 155 is considered appropriate for this study as it explores only 3 constructs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study had 49.7% male respondents and 50.3% female respondents. The majority (61.3%) of the respondents were aged between 18 and 21 years, while 24.5% were aged between 22 to 28 years, and about 14% of the respondents were older

than 28 years. This shows a skew towards a younger group than the average internet user in Thailand, which might result from the snowball sampling since most of the pre-test respondents were students and first jobbers. Most were company employees (49.7%) followed by students (25.2%). About two-thirds (63.2%) were Bachelor degree holders, while 29.7% were Master degree holders.

The total EWOM scale has a Cronbach's Alpha of .852. However, upon further examination the factor analysis showed that there appears to be a split into two factors. In fact, the factor loadings that show an improvement in the Cronbach's Alpha's scores prove that this On-line General EWOM scale can be split into Active and Passive EWOM with the two scales resulting in Cronbach's Alpha .876 and .831 respectively. The items in the Active EWOM scale include creating positive recommendations, introducing new products, and convincing others to buy. The items in the Passive EWOM scale include sharing positive recommendations of products, sharing news about the product, and sharing favorite product information.

Table 1: Factor Loadings for the Passive WOM Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.876	.876	4
	Mean	Factor Loadings
Item 1	2.34	.818
Item 2	2.28	.814
Item 3	2.58	.824
Item 4	2.54	.761

Table 2: Factor Loadings for the Active WOM Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.831	.831	3
	Mean	Factor Loadings
Item 1	2.34	.797
Item 2	2.28	.855
Item 3	2.58	.707

This concept is similar to the work of Rohit Bhargava Senior Vice President at Ogilvy who is quoted in Rosen (2009). He proposed a categorization for new media influencers that revolves around content creation, consumption, and sharing, as content creators and content sharers who pass it on. This is defined by the research of Norman and Russell (2006), and Sun et al. (2006) as opinion-passing behavior. This finding is an additional contribution of this study. However,

for the purposes of further analysis the overall EWOM scale was used.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for the analysis of the relationships between the latent constructs investigated, as it is a more rigorous test of construct validity, and can be conveniently tested in a single research (Mentzer & Garver, 1999). The review of literature and initial testing of the factors ensures that the constructs truly reflect the latent constructs using the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (Edwards &

Bagozzi, 2000).

The chi-square ($N = 153$, $df = 88$) = 291.246, $p < 0.001$ shows that the model does not fit the data well. This may be due to the need for further refinement of the measurement model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), and was explored by assessing the standardized regression weights. It is unlikely that this is due to an over parameterized model as there are only 3 constructs being tested. For SEM analysis, Hair (2010) indicated that the ideal sample size is 300. However, Hair (2010) also stated that the minimum sample size is 100 for models containing five or less constructs as is the case in this study. The CMIN/DF (3.3) falls in the range from 2 to 5, which indicates a

reasonable fit (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985).

However, in order to better assess the fit of the model other indices such as the NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI were analyzed (Hoyle & Panter, 1995; Ho, 2006). Results of the NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI were close to 0.9 (range from 0.811 to 0.884), which shows a good model fit (Ho, 2006). Consequently, this means, given the range of the computed baseline comparison fit indices, the remaining possible improvement in the fit for the hypothesized model (range: .117 to .189) appears to be small as to be of little practical significance. The unstandardized regression weights are all significant by the critical ratio test (> 1.96 , $p < 0.05$).

Table 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model Fit Summary

CMIN Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF
Default model	32	291.246	88	.000	3.310
Saturated model	120	.000	0		
Independent model	15	1836.588	105	.000	17.491

Table 4: Incremental Fit Indices

Model	NFI Delta1	RFI rho1	IFI Delta2	TLI rho2	CFI
Default model	.841	.811	.884	.860	.883
Saturated model	1.000		1.000		1.000
Independence model	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

The standardized regression weights range from 0.451 to .932. These values indicate that the measurement variables are significantly represented by their respective latent constructs. The explained variances for the measurement variables are represented by the squared multiple correlations table. The percentage of the variance explained ranges from .204 or 20.4% to .868 or 86.8%. The residual variances were calculated by subtracting each explained variance from 1. Thus, the residual variances ranged from 0.749 to 0.123 or 74.9% to 12.3%. The construct causing this low score is brand commitment, the reason for which will be discussed in the limitations section. Table 5 presents the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistics with their baseline comparison of fit indices for the hypothesis testing. The direct model (H1) chi-square ($N = 153$, $df = 51$) = 178.683, $p < 0.001$ and indirect model (H2) chi-square ($N = 153$, $df = 52$) =

193.488, $p < 0.001$ are all significant. The baseline comparison of fit indices of NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI for both models are all close to 0.9 (range: .825 to .906). These values show that the two models fit the observed variance-covariance matrix relative to the null or independent model (Ho, 2006). The improvement in fit can range only from 0.165 to 0.094. This shows that all of the hypotheses are supported.

The mediating effect of brand commitment was further analyzed by taking into consideration the regression weights, the standardized regression weights, and the squared multiple correlations. All of the constructs were significant according to the critical ratio test ($p < 0.05$). The interpretation can be made as follows. The opinion leadership characteristics when mediated by brand commitment resulted in greater EWOM behavior (.471). This is higher than the direct path model from opinion leadership to EWOM (.307).

Table 5: Model Fit and Baseline Comparison

Model	CMIN	DF	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI
H1: Opinion leadership characteristics to EWOM	178.68	51	.873	.835	.906	.877	.905
H2: Opinion leadership characteristics to EWOM mediated by Brand commitment	193.48	52	.862	.825	.895	.866	.894

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The research confirms the behaviors of information seeking, creation, and passing along, which is in line with the study conducted by Chu and Kim (2011). The findings reveal that opinion leadership when mediated by brand commitment results in greater EWOM. The findings are in line with previous findings that brand commitment will drive consumers to make an effort to take actions that are conducive to relationship marketing success (Bowman & Narayandas, 2001; Brown et al., 2005; Sun et al., 2006).

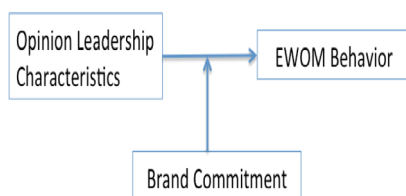


Figure 1: Opinion Leadership and Brand Commitment Antecedents for EWOM in Personal SNS

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are similar to the research of Henderson and Lyons (2005) who stated that those who exhibit opinion leadership characteristics usually have more enduring involvement and tend to be innovative. Thus, novelty of the experience may be one way to increase EWOM. This is in line with Schultz and Schultz (2004) who stated that the customer creates their own

dreams or fantasy where the product or brand makes some sort of aspiration possible, and results in the creation of a distinctive brand experience consumers can share with their associates. This willingness to share with less knowledgeable or experienced associates is identified as one of the hallmarks of opinion leadership characteristics.

Managerial Implication:

The study was conducted focusing on the mobile phone. Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) suggested that the product for the study should be owned by a large number of people and capable of eliciting high levels of commitment. Thus, when examining brand commitment, which is defined as the willingness to maintain a relationship with the brand, it is important to focus on the value users derive from this relationship. Beyond just providing a good product or service, it is suggested that recognizing users who are opinion leaders and rewarding them for sharing would strengthen their commitment to the brand. This is in line with the work of Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009). It is a similar idea to Customer Relationship Management (CRM) but instead of concentrating on the monetary worth of an individual customer, their value as an opinion leader capable of disseminating good news about the brand is considered. These incentives can be in the form of economic rewards or opportunities for social interaction (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001).

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

The limitations of this research can be classified into two major aspects. The first has to do with the data collection, while the second involves the definition of the items used in measuring the construct. Firstly, it was found that the age of respondents was skewed towards a younger audience, which may be the result of using the snowballing technique. Due to a greater focus on the criteria of having used the Internet for three consecutive years, and attempts to increase the response rate, there was a failure in obtaining a varied group of respondents in terms of demographics.

The second limitation is the weakness in using only one brand related construct, which is brand commitment. Although the scale items belonged well in previous research and did pass the criteria of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (Cronbach alpha .921), it had the lowest prediction power (20.4%) when subjected to the Confirmatory Factor Analysis test in SEM. The reason for such a low explanatory power may be due to the fact that other brand constructs may be needed to drive EWOM. As Crosby and Taylor (1983) explained, brand commitment can be considered the ego involvement that drives the selection of the brand due to consistency with personal values or self-image. Consequently, a broader definition may include brand characteristics such as brand image or reputation, because, as stated in the

previous section, the novelty of the experience may be an aspect that needs to be considered as a driver of EWOM.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study was done on the product purchase situation that fits the description of Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988), namely owned by a large percentage of the general population and capable of eliciting high levels of situational involvement. As a result, testing on products eliciting low levels of situational involvement may have different results. It is hypothesized that the situational involvement for products with low-involvement should come from consumption experience or events, which can be explored further.

This research has confirmed that product involvement and self-involvement are motivators of EWOM as posited by Sun et al. (2006). However, as explained in the limitations of the research, the brand commitment definition should be further explored in order to generate a comprehensive framework for explaining EWOM in users' personal Social Networking Sites (SNS).

In addition, the findings of this study show that there are two types of EWOM. Further exploration of the possible different antecedents of these active (content creation) or passive (forwarding) behaviors would be useful in understanding this phenomenon. For instance, the Uses and Gratifications Theory could be

used to explain motivation as a possible antecedent of different forwarding behaviors in future research.

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