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Word-Of-Mouth Communication As Helping Behavior

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Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has been characterized as a decision, involving weighing of costs and benefits (Gatignon and Robertson 1986). This research develops a cost-benefit framework to systematically test individual differences in altruism, or the internal motivation to help others, as an underlying driver of WOM. In three studies, benefits of information (e.g., diagnostic value) and/or communicator costs (either resource or social costs) of information-sharing are manipulated. Findings indicate that, high altruists' WOM behavior is driven by the perceived diagnostic value of information, whereas low altruists' WOM behavior is driven by perceived communicator costs.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY

It's a Two-Way Street: The Influence of Communicators and Recipients in Word-of-Mouth Contexts

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Word of mouth (WOM) is defined as person-to-person communication concerning a brand, product, or service in the marketplace (Dichter 1966). It is a key source of information for consumers, and its importance is growing due to increases in product complexity and quantity of information, as well as increased avenues for interpersonal communications such as the internet (Godes et al. 2005). Consequently, companies are increasingly relying on WOM to promote their products (Kaikati and Kaikati 2004).

This session takes a unique and broad perspective on the topic of interpersonal WOM communication by presenting WOM research from the vantage point of message recipients, as well as from the perspective of the communicators of the message. Specifically, the first two papers attempt to understand different characteristics of the communicator (self-construal, altruism) which are likely to influence the extent as well as conditions under which WOM is likely to be generated (cf. Cheema and Kaikati 2009). These papers identify conditions under which potential communicators are likely (vs. not likely) to consider the potential message recipient, and how consideration of the potential message recipient influences their decision to talk. The third paper focuses on the recipient perspective in attempting to examine factors that are likely to influence the persuasiveness of WOM (message content and source characteristics). The three papers together provide insights relating to how individual characteristics of (potential) communicators affect both the decision to share information and also the influence of information that is shared. Across studies, these effects are examined in both face-to-face offline and also online WOM contexts.

The Zhang, Feick and Mittal paper (presented by Lawrence Feick) attempts to understand which people share negative WOM experiences, and with whom, as a function of their level of self-construal. These issues are examined in a face-to-face interpersonal setting, to various relationship ties. Their theorizing suggests that image concerns are likely to deter negative WOM transmission to weak ties (but not to strong ties) by individuals for whom an independent construal is activated. Thus, independent-construal individuals are more likely to consider the identity of the potential recipient (e.g., whether the person is a strong or a weak tie) in their decision to talk.

The Kaikati and Ahluwalia paper (presented by Andrew Kaikati) proposes a cost-benefit framework to test how people decide to share information with others, as a function of their individual differences in altruism, or their internal motivation to help others, in both online and offline settings. Their theorizing suggests that high altruists' WOM decisions are driven more by the perceived diagnostic value of information, while low altruists' WOM decisions are driven more by the perceived costs to the communicator (resource costs, social costs) of sharing the information. Thus, high (vs. low) altruists are more likely to consider the potential recipient in their decision to talk.

The Karmarkar and Tormala paper (presented by Uma Karmarkar) uses an online setting to understand when consumers are likely be persuaded by others, as a function of source credibility and expressed certainty. Persuasion is greater for low credibility communicators who express certainty, and for high credibility sources who express uncertainty. The authors propose an incongru-

ity hypothesis, and identify involvement of the recipient as the underlying mechanism. Thus, the effect of source credibility on information recipients' acceptance of a message is dependent upon expressed certainty.

J. Peter Reingen will serve as the discussion leader. He is a well-accomplished researcher in the area of the word of mouth — in particular, as it relates to social ties, referral networks, and interpersonal influence. He will bring to bear his breadth of knowledge in this area by providing an integrative perspective on the role of communicators and recipients in WOM, and discussing future research directions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"Negative Word-of-Mouth: Self-Construal and Image Impairment Concern"

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After a negative consumption experience, are people more likely to transmit word-of-mouth (WOM) to strong rather than weak ties? The literature includes conflicting empirical results. For example, on the one hand, some research has found that consumers have a higher propensity to spread negative WOM to their strong ties than weak ties (e.g., Weenig, Groenenboom, and Wilke 2001). On the other hand, Wangenheim (2004) found that consumers are more likely to spread negative WOM to weak than to strong ties.

In this paper we articulate and test conditions that may explain at least part of this inconsistency. Specifically, we argue that after a negative purchase experience, consumers can experience two conflicting motives that affect their likelihood of transmitting WOM. On the one hand, they may feel the need to warn individuals about the product or service, but also, they may be concerned about maintaining a positive image (i.e., not revealing that they made a bad choice). The former of these motives is other-focused and the latter self-focused, and either can be more important for a given consumer in a given situation. We show in three studies that the effect of tie strength is related to the presence of either self-focused or other-focused motives.

We take a social-identity perspective that leads us to examine the role of self-construal and image-impairment concern in moderating the relationship between tie strength and (negative) WOM

transmission. Study 1 focused on self-construal. The self can be seen as being more connected to others (an interdependent self-construal) or being more distinct from others (an independent self-construal) (Markus and Kitayama 1991; 1996). According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), those with activated independent self-construals are likely to be affected most by self-focused motivations. In contrast, those with activated interdependent self-construals are likely to be affected most by other-focused motivations. In our context then, consumers who are focused on the needs of others are likely to engage in negative WOM regardless of whether the ties are strong or weak. Thus, we expect that individuals with an interdependent self-construal will view weak ties altruistically and share information with them. In contrast, those with an independent self-construal will adopt this perspective only when interacting with strong ties. These arguments suggest that after a negative experience, self-construal will moderate the effect of tie strength on the likelihood of WOM transmission: we expect that under an independent self-construal, consumers are more likely to transmit negative WOM to strong ties than weak ties. In contrast, under an interdependent self-construal, consumers are equally likely to transmit negative WOM to strong ties and weak ties.

Study 1 employed a 2 (Self-Construal Priming: Independent vs. Interdependent) X 2 (Tie Strength: Weak vs. Strong) in which 78 student participants reacted to a negative consumption scenario. The results support our hypothesis: differences in WOM transmission likelihood between strong and weak ties only emerge when the independent self-construal is primed. With an interdependent self-construal, WOM is equally likely to strong and weak ties.

Study 1 results are consistent with our hypothesis, but do not address the question of how more or less self-focused thinking affects WOM transmission likelihood. We theorize that the process underlying the results involves the differential salience of image-impairment concern under independent versus interdependent self-construal. More specifically, we expect that under an independent self-construal, individuals' focus on the self allows image impairment concerns to become salient, while it is not made salient under an interdependent self-construal.

For individuals with an independent self-construal, we argued and demonstrated that a self-focused perspective dominates decision making. For such individuals, image concerns are salient (whether or not there is an additional effort to make them salient). Thus, we should expect that for such individuals we obtain results similar to those in Study 1, that is, greater WOM transmission likelihood to strong than to weak ties. On the other hand, for an interdependent self-construal, we have demonstrated that other-focused concerns are salient because an interdependent self identity motivates people to think about others and pursue relational goals. Consequently, for interdependent self-construal there was no difference between strong and weak ties in WOM transmission likelihood. However, if image impairment concerns are made salient for this group, we should see a reversal in the pattern of results. Specifically, individuals with either an interdependent or independent self-construal should be concerned with their image and should be likely to withhold negative WOM to both strong and weak ties. In summary then, we expect a three way interaction among these variables.

In Studies 2 and 3, we examine this hypothesis. Study 2 and 3 tested the same set of three variables: self-construal, tie strength, and image impairment concern. Study 2 was an experiment in which a sample of 195 students reacted to a negative consumption scenario. Study 2 used manipulated variables in a 2 (Image Impairment Concern: High salience vs. Low salience) X 2 (Self-Construal Priming: Independent vs. Interdependent) X 2 (Tie Strength: Weak

vs. Strong) between-subjects design. In contrast, Study 3 was a survey of 401 adult consumers in which image impairment concern and self-construal were measured and tie strength was manipulated between subjects. A marketing research company used probability sampling from its online panel of U.S. adult consumers to obtain participants.

Results from Studies 2 and 3 support the hypothesis. Image impairment concern moderates the interactive effect of self-construal and tie strength on the likelihood of negative WOM transmission. When image impairment concern is made salient, WOM transmission is similar between self-construals. When image impairment concern is not made salient, we find greater WOM transmission for strong than weak ties for an independent self-construal and no effect of tie strength for an interdependent self-construal.

In combination, the results of our studies show that the process of managing one's image is integral to understanding the likelihood of WOM transmission. Further, our results reinforce the importance of understanding the motives—structural and psychological—that drive WOM decisions and also provide insight into the mechanisms underlying the effect of self-construal on information processing.

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"Word-of-Mouth Communication as Helping Behavior"

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A person who acquires marketplace information must decide whether to share that information. WOM occurs only if a person is motivated to talk after weighing the associated costs and benefits (Cheema and Kaikati 2009; Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993). One potential benefit of sharing product-related information could be facilitating recipients' future decisions by helping them to make informed decisions and to avoid costly pitfalls. At the same time, sharing this information could result in potential costs to the communicator. There are social costs; for instance, information conveyed may reflect poorly on the communicator if others act on that information and disagree with it, or if others perceive the communicator to be a complainer. There are also resource costs. For instance, information involves a certain amount of time and effort to transmit.

We suggest that the effect of these costs and benefits on WOM behavior may differ as a function of the person's underlying values. Values are abstract representations about desired end states that are hierarchically organized in terms of their importance to the self (Bardi and Schwartz 2003). High-priority values are central to

one's self concept, and serve as motivational constructs that may define as situation, elicit goals, and guide action (Torelli and Kaikati 2009; Verplanken and Holland 2002). Actions become subjectively more attractive to the extent that they lead to attainment of valued goals; thus, each person defines a situation, and weighs its associated opportunities and constraints, in terms of his or her own important values.

Specifically, the current research develops a cost-benefit framework to systematically test the effect of individual differences in altruism, which is the internal motivation to help others that is based on one's personal values, on WOM. One of the primary motivations suggested in the WOM literature is the desire to help other consumers (Price, Feick, and Guskey 1995); however, there has been little systematic experimental research examining when this motivation is relevant and what its effects are on the likelihood of sharing information.

It is expected that individuals who score high (vs. low) in altruism are more focused on the needs of others, and that their behavior will be proportional to the magnitude of the perceived informational benefit (Bendapudi, Singh, and Bendapudi 1996). In a WOM context, this means that these individuals' WOM likelihood increases with information diagnosticity. Furthermore, they should be less sensitive to other factors, such as their own level of expended resources and the potential social costs of sharing information. Individuals who score low (vs. high) in altruism, on the other hand, focus less on the needs of others, and are thus less likely to be affected by the diagnosticity of information. However, they should be sensitive to the expended resources and potential costs of a situation.

Three studies were designed to test these propositions. Across three studies, participants either read a hypothetical consumer scenario or reported on a prior product experience. In each study, the relative benefits and/or costs associated with WOM were manipulated (based on pretests of these costs and benefits). After reading the study materials, participants reported their likelihood of sharing information about the product or service with others in either a face-to-face (study 1 and 2) or an online (study 3) context. They also completed a series of measures, including altruism.

In study 1, the benefits and costs of WOM communication were manipulated simultaneously via characteristics of the information (negative versus positive restaurant experience) to test the likelihood of information sharing. Pretests confirmed that compared with positive information, negative information is more useful to recipients (Feldman and Lynch 1988), but it also carries more social costs for the communicator because others may perceive him or her as a complainer (Laczniak, DeCarlo, and Ramaswami 2001). Results confirmed that high altruists were more likely to communicate negative as compared to positive information, since it offered more benefits to others, even at greater social costs to oneself. In contrast, low altruists exhibited the opposite pattern of WOM behavior—they were more likely to communicate positive versus negative experiences to others, since the latter tended to carry more social costs to the self.

In study 2, only the information value was manipulated (costs were held constant), using the context of information about an in-store special for a popular consumer product (digital cameras). The informational value (benefit) was manipulated as either moderate (store located further away) or high (store located closeby). Consistent with expectations, high altruists were more likely to talk to someone about the digital camera sale when the store was closer, due to greater information value. Low altruists, however, were unaffected by the information value of WOM, and were equally likely to engage in WOM in both conditions.

Study 3 was a computer-based study that tested the implications of the framework in an online context. In this study, only the resource cost of sharing information was manipulated (information value was held constant). Participants first reported on the most recent new movie they had seen. On the next screen, the number of existing online movie reviews for that movie was manipulated to be either very low (two reviews) or moderate (35 reviews). Pretests confirmed that WOM may take more time and effort (higher costs) when there are fewer reviews, but that the information is perceived as equally beneficial to recipients in the two conditions. Results indicated that low altruists were less likely to post a review when there were fewer existing reviews, because of the additional time and effort required. High altruists' WOM, however, was not affected by the number of reviews.

In total, three studies suggest that level of altruism, which is based on one's personal values, is an important driver of WOM motivation. Specifically, findings indicate that high altruists' WOM behavior is driven by the perceived diagnostic value of information, whereas low altruists' WOM behavior is driven by perceived communicator costs.

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"The Dynamic Effect of Source Certainty on Consumer Involvement and Persuasion"

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Suppose a traveler is planning a vacation through a popular travel website and reads a reviewer's recommendation for a particular beachside resort, containing several strong arguments in its favor. It seems reasonable to surmise that the more certainty the reviewer expresses about this recommendation, the more likely the traveler will be to take his or her advice. However, is it possible that by voicing certainty the reviewer will undermine his or her persuasiveness? Are there conditions under which the reviewer could gain influence by expressing uncertainty about his or her attitude? In this research, we explore the possibility that the effect of expressed

certainty on persuasion can vary dependent on the expertise of the message source.

While an extensive literature speaks to the important consequences of attitude certainty for a consumer's own attitudes and behavior (see Tormala and Rucker 2007 for a review), far less attention has been devoted to exploring the impact of expressed attitude certainty on other consumers. In terms of word of mouth communications, one straightforward prediction would be that expressing certainty generally increases persuasion. Consistent with this hypothesis, research in other domains suggests that individuals who express high levels of confidence tend to be perceived as more credible than those who express lower level of confidence (e.g., Price and Stone 2004; Tenney, MacCoun, Spellman, and Hastie 2007). Thus, source certainty might have a positive effect on persuasion that is mediated by perceived source expertise.

In contrast to this main effect hypothesis, we propose that in subjective consumer contexts source certainty can have a dynamic effect on persuasion that is moderated by perceived source expertise. Under low expertise conditions (e.g., when a consumer receives a message from a nonexpert source), we predict that source certainty will have a positive effect on persuasion such that consumers are more persuaded when the source of a message expresses high compared to low certainty. Under high expertise conditions (e.g., when a consumer receives a message from an expert source), however, we predict that source certainty will have a negative effect on persuasion, such that consumers are more persuaded when the source expresses low compared to high certainty.

This interaction hypothesis is based on past research exploring the effects of informational incongruity on message processing. Most germane to our concerns, mismatches between various source attributes have been shown to increase message processing, which can boost persuasion when message arguments are strong (e.g., Ziegler, Diehl, and Ruther 2002). Thus we posit that consumers will feel greater involvement with a message when source expertise and source certainty are incongruent (low expertise/high certainty or high expertise/low certainty) rather than congruent (high expertise/high certainty or low expertise/low certainty). Furthermore, to the extent that the message itself is reasonably strong, or compelling, greater involvement should foster greater persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). In essence, we hypothesize that incongruity between perceived expertise and certainty should violate expectancies, which feels surprising and motivates involvement. Increased involvement, in turn, can enhance persuasion in response to strong arguments. However, in a situation with weak arguments, incongruities leading to greater involvement should have no appreciable benefit for persuasion and may even cause reactance against it.

In Experiment 1, we tested the impact of source certainty and source expertise on expectancy violations. A favorable restaurant review was presented from a source who varied in expertise and level of expressed certainty. Following the message, we assessed participants' perceptions of how unexpected and surprising the content of the material was. Although source expertise and certainty did not interact to influence the perceived similarity, likeability or trustworthiness of the source, they did interact to affect expectancy violations. We found that expressions of certainty induced greater surprise and unexpectedness when the source was low in expertise, whereas the converse was true for high expertise sources.

Experiment 2 examined the implications for persuasion. In this experiment, all participants received a strong and favorable restaurant review ostensibly taken from a consumer website. As in Experiment 1, the source of this review was described as either an expert or nonexpert on food and dining, and he expressed either high or low certainty about his recommendation. Following the

review, we measured participants' willingness to pay (WTP) for a meal at the restaurant. Results indicated that participants who received a recommendation from a nonexpert source reported greater WTP when that source expressed certainty rather than uncertainty. Conversely, participants who received a recommendation from an expert source reported greater WTP when that source expressed uncertainty rather than certainty.

Finally, Experiment 3 sought to establish the mediating role of involvement, as measured by cognitive elaboration, in the persuasion effect revealed by the second experiment. Replicating the restaurant review paradigm with strong arguments, we found that participants generated more positive thoughts and reported more favorable attitudes and intentions when a high (low) expertise source expressed uncertainty (certainty). However, when a review with weak arguments was presented, these effects disappeared (and tended to reverse). Furthermore, the three-way interaction between source expertise, source certainty, and argument strength on attitudes and intentions was mediated by thought favorability. In short, then, incongruity between source expertise and source certainty fostered increased elaboration, which enhanced persuasion under strong but not weak argument conditions.

Discussion. Previous research exploring the effects of source certainty generally supports the existence of a confidence heuristic, whereby expressed confidence, or certainty, is interpreted as a marker of expertise (e.g., Price and Stone 2004). In the current experiments, we found that source certainty and source expertise were distinct constructs that could be manipulated without impacting other types of source perceptions. Furthermore, the current studies suggest that the effects of source certainty are dynamic, being completely contingent upon the source's level of underlying expertise. In particular, nonexperts (e.g., other consumers) can gain interest and influence by expressing certainty regarding their opinions and recommendations. In contrast, experts appear to gain interest and influence when they express uncertainty about their opinions and recommendations. Implications for interpersonal influence in word of mouth marketing contexts are discussed.

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