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The Influence of Social Media Intensity and EWOM on Conspicuous Consumption

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Abstract

An increasing number of people all around the globe are spending tremendous amounts of time in the cyber world on activities such as connecting with one another and searching for information. It is undeniable that social media, such as social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), micro blogging sites (e.g. Twitter), photo sharing sites (e.g. Instagram), and video sharing sites (e.g. YouTube) play a considerable role in peoples' daily lives—changing the way people carry out their routines. This widespread consumption of social media has made an impact on the way marketers design their marketing activities, particularly in the promotion and distribution of their products. Grounded in sociology and marketing literature, this paper proposes a model linking the intensity of social media use with consumers' reliance on electronic word of mouth (EWOM) and their consumption of conspicuous products. Data were collected from Thai consumers that yielded a final usable sample size of 1,142. The results from structural equation modeling reveal both direct and indirect influences (i.e., via EWOM) of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption. Hence, social media and EWOM are effective tools to entice demand for conspicuous products. In sum, this paper extends social network analysis to investigate evolving consumer behavior, and also suggests innovative marketing tools that enable firms to capitalize on advanced communication technologies and to adapt to the new virtual life style.

1. Introduction

The introduction of Web 2.0 technologies, which bring about online social media including social networking (e.g., Facebook), micro blogging (e.g., Twitter), photo sharing (e.g., Instagram), and video sharing (e.g., YouTube), has changed the way we live our lives. Based on a study conducted by comScore, the worldwide average time spent on online social networking per person in one month (i.e. November 2012) is 5.2 hours.

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Thailand ranks fourth, after Argentina, Brazil and Russia, with a monthly average social networking engagement of 8.2 hours (comScore, 2012). According to the Thailand Ministry of Electronic Transaction Development Agency (ETDA), 93.8% of the 23,907 people surveyed use social media (Bangkok Post, 2013). The survey also indicates a dramatic increase in the average number of hours per week Thais spend on the Internet from 18 hours to 32 hours between 2011 and 2012 (Bangkok Post, 2013). The research also found that more Thais are shopping online and suggested that viral marketing plays a critical role in consumer marketing in the near future. These changes in the cyber world have called for attention from both academia and industry to investigate emerging trends in consumer behavior so that relevant theories can be applied to explain this new phenomenon and that appropriate marketing strategies can be implemented to exploit these changes.

As suggested by Wilcox and Stephen (2013), future consumer research should study the impact of social networking on consumers' decisions to purchase luxurious products since their study found that online social networking usage can enhance the users' self-esteem while altering their self-control, which has subsequently led them to engage in a more impulsive or indulgent behavior (Khan, U. & Dhar, R., 2006), (Wilcox, K., Kramer, T., & Sen, S., 2011). Given the aforementioned remarkable increase in the per capita Internet usage rate in countries such as Thailand in the past two years, coupled with the country's fourth-ranked globally in terms of the average hours per month per individual spent on social media engagement, this study aims to examine both direct and indirect impacts of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption behavior with the samples from Thai consumers.

2. The Direct Impact of Social Media Intensity on Conspicuous Consumption

Social networking has been found to increase the user's self-esteem (Gonzales, A. L., & Hancock, J. T., 2011). When people engage in social networking, they can control the information to be shared, so they tend to present positive information about themselves among their network of acquaintances (Gonzales, A. L., & Hancock, J. T., 2011). Such positive information usually solicits positive feedback, which enhances one's self-esteem and eventually provides several positive social benefits and well being (Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C., 2007), (Valkenburg, P. M., Peter, J., & Schouten, A. P., 2006). A recent study conducted by Wilcox and Stephen (2013) not only confirms this finding, but also discovers that higher self-esteem resulting from online social network use (e.g., Facebook, etc.) is likely to lower a person's self-control, which subsequently leads to more impulsive or indulgent behaviour (Khan, U. & Dhar, R., 2006), (Wilcox, K., Kramer, T., & Sen, S., 2011) such as unhealthy food choice and excessive spending. Khan and Dhar (2006) found that hedonic and luxurious product choices supersede the utilitarian and staple ones if a consumer has encountered a prior altruistic or virtuous act that created a positive self-concept. In the same vein, Wilcox et al. (2011) found that prior self-esteem tends to entice more indulgent behaviour. When people feel good about themselves, i.e. when their self-esteem is enhanced, they are more likely to lose control of themselves and may act on the basis of impulse or indulgence rather than rationalization.

Since conspicuous products are those that display wealth through luxurious spending that satisfies a person's need for prestige (Podoshen, J. S. & Andrzejewski, S. A., 2012), the consumption of these goods represents more of a hedonic and indulgent than a utilitarian and necessity purpose. Building on prior studies on the impact of social networking, self-image, and self-control (e.g. Khan and Dhar (2006), Wilcox et al. (2011), Wilcox and Stephen (2013)), it is postulated that the intensity of using social media can lead people to make irrational choices by increasing their expenditures on luxurious goods, a.k.a. conspicuous goods. Following this line of reasoning, the first hypothesis of this study is stated as:

H_1: There exists a positive direct effect of social media intensity and conspicuous consumption.

3. A Mediating Effect of Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM)

Based on sociology literature (Granovetter, M., 1973) and marketing literature (Bass, F. M., 1969), (Katona, Z., Zubcsek, P. P., & Sarvary, M., 2011), (Reigen, P. H., Kernan, J. B., 1986), (Reigen, P. H., Foster, B. L., Brown, J. J., & Seidman, S. B., 1984) on social network analysis, a common friend in a social network becomes an effective medium of information dispersion. As assumed by Bass (1969), word-of-mouth (WOM) is a uniform interpersonal influence generated by a network of consumers who are connected to one another. A recent study by Katona and colleagues in 2011 also reveals that WOM influence is stronger in networks that are tightly connected than those that are larger in size. Moreover, the opinions from strong ties in the social network are given more importance by the members (Wilcox, K. & Stephen, A. T., 2013). Engaging in social media such as Facebook and Twitter allows users to interact with people from strong ties as well as those from weak ones. However, more interactions are between people with strong ties. As such, users tend to be selective in presenting positive information about themselves in these networking sites.

From a study conducted by Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner (2010), WOM has evolved over time through changes in communication technology from the 'organic interconsumer influence model', where WOM influence occurs at an one-on-one basis between two consumers without any interference from marketers, to 'the network coproduction model' in which WOM is directly prompted by marketers with the active co-production from virtual consumer networks. With the emergence of online social media, electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) has become a pervasive and influential source of product information. Since the opinions from the strong ties in the social network are particularly important to the network members in such a way that it influences the type of information presented on the networking site (Wilcox, K. & Stephen, A. T., 2013), the intensity of using social media should also indirectly influence the consumption of conspicuous goods via EWOM. This is because the consumption of conspicuous goods presents favourable images and prestige which gives positive feedback to the network users, who later will act indulgently. Moreover, the EWOM concerning the purchase of luxurious products from people who are connected to the same network increases the motivation of the network users to commit more expenditures on the conspicuous goods. Therefore, the second and third hypotheses of this study are formulated as:

H_2: The effect of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption is mediated by reliance on EWOM.

H_3: The direct influence of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption is stronger than the indirect path that is mediated by reliance on EWOM.

4. Methodology

Thailand was selected as a context for this study to represent emerging markets, whose utilization of social media is on the rise. The country's almost double-digit growth rate weekly Internet usage hours and its social media consumption rate make the country a good representative of many emerging countries with similar characteristics. In addition, Thailand is among top ten fastest growing countries on Facebook in 2012 (Socialbakers, 2013).

1.1 Sample and Data Collection

The data were collected using judgemental and quota sampling based on the demographics of the Thailand population. A final usable sample size of 1,142 was achieved, of which sixty percent are accounted for by people residing in the Bangkok metropolitan area and forty percent by people residing in the rural area. The respondents approached via intercept technique were almost equally split between male and female with the median age of 34 years old. This sample composition corresponds with the actual national demographic statistics (CIA, 2013). From the total sample, 100% of the sample use Internet ranging from one to six-and-a-half hours per day. Eighty-nine percent reported they had experience in using social networking. Despite a significantly higher average

consumption of Internet hours per day in the male sample ($p < .01$), the average hours spent per day on social networking sites is higher in the female group ($p < .01$). Table 1 shows the online behaviour of the sample.

Table 1. Sample Online Behaviors

Construct/Items	Male	Female	t-statistics
Hours spent online per day	3.58	3.16	4.848 (.000)
Years experienced in social networking	6.31	6.37	-.256 (.798)
Hours spent on social networking per day	3.23	3.73	-2.175 (.030)

Note: p-values are in the parentheses.

1.2 Measures and Scale Assessment

The scales to measure three main constructs of this study are based on previous literature (See Appendix A for scale items). All items were rated on six-point Likert scales. Since Thailand is one of the East Asian nations whose culture emphasizes harmony due to the Buddhist ontology (Schwartz, S. H., 2003), employing an odd number frequency scale may not yield accurate responses (i.e. most responses will be at the neutral point). Therefore, the adoption of a six-point Likert scale was deemed appropriate. The social media intensity scale was adapted from Bush and Gilbert (2002) and Ellison, et al. (Gonzales, A. L., & Hancock, J. T., 2011). The conspicuous consumption scale, consisting of four items, was adopted from Chung and Fisher (2001). Reliance on EWOM is a new scale comprised of six items based on the concept derived from Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel's (1989) scale that was used to operationalize 'consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence'. The assessment of the scales is provided in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Construct Validity and Reliability

Construct/Items	Factor Loading (λ)	Squared Multiple Correlation (r^2)	Item-to-Total Correlation	Composite Reliability (ρ_c)	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Social Media Intensity (SMI)					
smi1	.741	.510	.680		
smi2	.812	.659	.726	.721	.853
smi3	.807	.651	.721		
smi4	.699	.489	.650		
Conspicuous Consumption (CSC)					
csc1	.834	.696	.772		
csc2	.879	.773	.821	.823	.897
csc3	.861	.741	.805		
csc4	.742	.551	.690		
Reliance of EWOM (EWOM)					
ewom1	.836	.699	.823		
ewom2	.906	.812	.892		
ewom3	.919	.845	.895	.913	.961
ewom4	.915	.837	.889		
ewom5	.890	.792	.875		
ewom6	.893	.797	.880		

Squared multiple correlations and item-to-total correlations were used to assess item reliability and construct validity. Both of these statistics reveal substantial relationships among the items composed of the same scale (Diamantopoulos, A. & Siguaw, J. A., 2000), so all items measuring the corresponding constructs are reliable and convergent validities are achieved since most of the item r^2 are above 0.60 and most of the item-to-total

correlations are above 0.70. Moreover, all constructs achieve construct validity because all standardized factor loadings are between 0.699 and 0.919, which is above the threshold suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), and all loadings are also significant at $p < 0.000$, indicating substantial associations (Diamantopoulos, A. & Siguaw, J. A., 2000). To assess the reliability of the scales, both composite reliability (ρ_c) and the coefficient alpha (Cronbach's α) were used. Both composite reliability (ρ_c) and the coefficient alpha are above 0.70, which present evidence of construct reliability (Bagozzi, R. P. & Yi, Y., 1988), (Bagozzi, R. P. & Yi, Y., 2012).

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted, Standard Error, Correlation among Constructs and Discriminant Validity

	AVE	Standard Error (SE)	SE x 2	SMI	EWOM	CSC
SMI	.393	.029	.058	**.627**		
EWOM	.539	.028	.056	.342	**.734**	
CSC	.635	.023	.046	.456	.555	**.797**

Note: Bolded number on the diagonal elements represent the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE).

The divergent validity of the scales was assessed by applying the procedures of 1) Fornell and Larcker (1981) and 2) Bagozzi and Warshaw (1990). Firstly, when the square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs are greater than their corresponding correlations with other constructs, the constructs establish sufficient discriminating properties. Secondly, all constructs exhibit discriminant validity because all correlations are less than '1' by the amount twice of the corresponding standard errors (see Table 3). All measurements of the constructs in this study indicate valid and reliable scales; therefore, the next section presents the results of hypotheses testing.

1.3 Results and Discussion

The hypotheses of this study were tested by means of structural equation modelling. To assess the model fit, chi-squared statistics, and several fit indices recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (2012) were used. The model χ^2 is 354.184 (*d.f.* = 71) which is significant at $p < .01$. However, as documented in the structural equation modelling literature, chi-squared statistics should not be solely used for model fit assessment due to its sensitivity to the sample size. Given a relatively large sample of this study, it is inevitable to see extremely large χ^2. As such, other fit indices are to be considered. The CFI, TLI (NNFI), and RMSEA are 0.979, 0.973, and 0.059, respectively (Bagozzi, R. P. & Yi, Y., 2012). When CFI and TLI are above 0.97 and RMSEA is below 0.60, the structural model presents a very good fit of data. The results show strong support for all three hypotheses. As shown in Figure 1, the unstandardized structural coefficients are positive and significant at $p < .01$ with the corresponding standard errors shown in parentheses. The intensity of social media has a positive and significant impact on the consumption of conspicuous goods ($\beta = .385$, $p < .01$), which supports H_1.
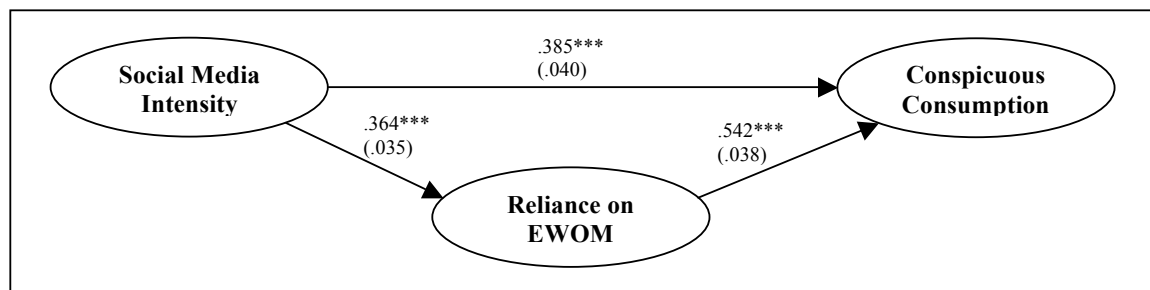

Fig. 1. Unstandardized Structural Coefficients of the Hypothesized Relationships

Hypothesis 2 postulates that the relationship between social media intensity is mediated by reliance on EWOM. This hypothesis is supported by the significant direct relationships between social media intensity and reliance of EWOM (β = .364, p < .01) and between reliance on EWOM and conspicuous consumption (β = .542, p < .01). In fact, the direct relationship between reliance of EWOM and the consumption of conspicuous products is strongest among the three paths, as shown as the highest standardized structural coefficient in Table 4 (0.452 as compared with 0.385 and 0.364). However, the direct effect of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption is stronger than the indirect effect of social media intensity on conspicuous consumption via reliance on EWOM. As indicated in Table 4, the standardized total effect of SMI on CSC is 0.456 while the indirect effect of SMI on CSC through EWOM is 0.194. Hence, this result lends a strong support for H3.

Table 4. Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects (Standardized Structural Coefficients)

	Direct	Indirect	Total
SMI → EWOM	.342	-	.342
SMI → CSC	.301	.197	.456
EWOM → CSC	.452	-	.452

Consistent with intuition, this study empirically shows that the intensity of social media influences people's consumption of conspicuous products. This study indicates that the more people are active on online social media, the more likely they are to consume conspicuous products, which present sense of prestige. Moreover, this influence can be intervened by the consumers' reliance on EWOM. When people communicate with others in their social network and/or consume other social media, they are more convinced and more motivated to consume products that are not necessary but impulsive. This finding is consistent with the recent study conducted by Wilcox and Stephen (2013), which found that the utilization of social networking sites makes people feel good about themselves while stimulating their spending. Therefore, people tend to make irrational choices when they spend too much time on social media and/or rely heavily on EWOM.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

This study investigates the emerging social phenomenon that has tremendous effects on peoples' lives by empirically testing the relationships among the intensity of social media utilization, the reliance on EWOM and the consumption of conspicuous goods from a sample of Thai consumers. Thailand provides a classic representation of emerging economies whose citizens have recently increased their consumption of social media and the Internet. These recent changes in consumer behaviours not only call for academic attentions to advance theories, but also businesses to develop innovative marketing strategies to capture these changing consumers' trends.

The academic contributions of this paper lie in the fact that it confirms and extends both social networking and consumer behaviour literature by empirically presenting the influence of social networks on consumers' decisions. In the virtual world such as Facebook, Twitter, Instgram, and YouTube, people can choose what they want to be presented. Most likely and oftentimes, people choose to portray positive information because they know that their close acquaintances from the network are following their activities and whereabouts. The mutual feedbacks are returned from the positive postings—all of which enhances the social media users' self-esteem, which may eventually result in positive social benefits and well being (Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C., 2007), (Valkenburg, P. M., Peter, J., & Schouten, A. P., 2006). Nevertheless, there is always a downside of being proud of oneself, which can be a loss of self-control. When people feel overwhelmingly good about themselves, they tend to make decisions that are irrational, impulsive, and indulgent. This finding confirms the study of Khan and Dhar (2006) and Wilcox, Kramer, and Sen (2011).

Provided the importance of the strong ties in a social network, the utilization of social media offers the users the opportunities to interact more with people of the strong ties than those of the weak ones. When consumers make decisions on product choice, they highly value the opinions from their strong ties, e.g. those on their social networking sites, and they are more careful in sharing information in which they believe will enable them to gain

positive feedback from other members. As a result, their consumption choice is heavily reliant on the opinions of others in their close network as well as their active involvement in online social media. Therefore, this study confirms the social network perspective and extends the consumer behaviour literature by presenting the motivations of actions and choices.

The positive direct and indirect (via EWOM) impacts of social media intensity and conspicuous consumption found in this study also provide marketers with some innovative tools in communicating and distributing their products. As conceptualized by Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner (2010), the evolution of word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) has come to the era of 'the network coproduction model' where the messages that marketers direct to the opinion leaders in a network can be coproduced and enhanced. In this case, the results of this study imply that marketers need to identify the 'opinion leaders' who possess strong connections or 'ties' with their social networks and target the communications that will eventually generate positive word-of-mouth about their products. In order to do this, the marketers need to closely monitor the networks used by their targeted customers and to identify the network's key members. As alluded by Kotana et al. (2011), for products that consumers may be highly involved, determining the key individuals with fewer but tight connections in the network can allow firms to prompt the messages that will be widely distributed to the members. For low-involvement products, members, who are connected to many people, represent the primary target for information distribution and consequently the source of positive word-of-mouth (Bass, F. M., 1969).

Future research may consider other factors such as consumers' expectations in the purchase of the products, the degree of consumers' materialism, and/or the tendency to overuse credit or overspending in the study to gain greater insights on consumer behaviour in today's cyber environment. In addition, comparative studies of the model investigated in this study across different national contexts should be conducted so that generalizability can be attained for further theoretical developments.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Measurement

A.1. Social Media Intensity (SMI)

How active are you in using the following types of social media? (1 = "Not At All Active" to 6 = "Very Active")
  SMI1: Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, and Linkedin)
  SMI2: Microblogging sites (e.g. Twitter)
  SMI3: Photosharing sites (e.g. Instagram, Flickr and Snapfish)
  SMI4: Video sharing sites (e.g. YouTube)

A.2. Reliance of EWOM (EWOM)

To what extent do you agree to the following statements? (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 6 "Strongly Agree")
  EWOM1: When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on the social networking site for advice.
  EWOM2: I usually talk to my contacts on the social networking site before I buy products.
  EWOM3: I like to get the opinions of my contacts on the social networking site before I buy products.
  EWOM4: I often ask my contacts on the social networking site about what products to buy.
  EWOM5: I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten opinions from my contact on the social networking site.
  EWOM6: When choosing products, my contact's opinions on the social networking site are important to me.

A.3. Conspicuous Consumption (CSC)

Before purchasing a product, ... ? (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 6 "Strongly Agree")
  CSC1: it is important to know what friends think of different brands or products I am considering.
  CSC2: it is important to know what kinds of people buy brands or products I am considering.

CSC3: it is important to know what others think of people who use certain brands or products I am considering.
CSC4: it is important to know what brands or products to buy to make a good impression on others.