



## The role of self-construal in consumers' electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites: A social cognitive approach

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### ABSTRACT

The current study reconceptualized self-construal as a social cognitive indicator of self-observation that individuals employ for developing and maintaining social relationship with others. From the social cognitive perspective, this study investigated how consumers' self-construal can affect consumers' electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behavior through two cognitive factors (online community engagement self-efficacy and social outcome expectations) in the context of a social networking site. This study conducted an online experiment that directed 160 participants to visit a newly created online community. The results demonstrated that consumers' relational view became salient when the consumers' self-construal was primed to be interdependent rather than independent. Further, the results showed that such interdependent self-construal positively influenced consumers' eWOM behavioral intentions through their community engagement self-efficacy and their social outcome expectations.

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### 1. Introduction

The online brand community has been paid much attention by both marketing practitioners and scholars. With the recent popularity of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.), the online brand community has expanded its boundary to the virtually networked society. In such a social networking site, both marketers and consumers can easily create online communities and promote the consumer–brand relationships with current and potential community members (Hung & Li, 2007; Lee et al., 2011; Schau, Muniz, & Arnold, 2009; Leimeister, Sidiras, & Krcmar, 2006). For example, in Facebook, Chevrolet is promoted in online brand communities by marketers (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/chevrolet>) and consumers (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Chevrolet/112714735407038>). Consequently, the rapid emergence of the online brand community empowers marketers to encourage community members to voluntarily engage in various community behaviors such as membership intention, recommendation, active participation, and so forth (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2011; Pai & Tsai, 2011).

However, not all online brand communities are always successful in motivating consumers to participate in the desirable community activities. Some consumers actively exchange opinions, ideas and information on the brand, product, or company in some online

brand communities, but others may just want to observe ongoing discussion and come and go without any active participation, leading the communities to be ghost towns. Establishing active online brand communities should be challenging for both consumers and marketers.

One particular approach to promoting the active membership participation is to encourage the community members to advertise the positive benefits of the membership to potential members by spreading their words. This line of approach can be termed electronic word of mouth (eWOM), one of the most reliable sources of information for consumers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Hung & Li, 2007). For example, Hung and Li (2007) recognized the possibility that online communities can provide a dynamic, multimedia, and social interactive platform for eWOM. (Brown et al., 2007) also highlighted the importance of eWOM in the setting of online brand communities, suggesting that eWOM can be a major driving force to promote active community membership participation. Similarly, Bickart and Schindler (2001) demonstrated that consumers' eWOM behaviors provided high credibility, empathy and relevance to other community members. Because successful online brand communities rely on consumer–consumer relationship rather than consumer–brand relationship, online brand communities should promote consumers' autonomous eWOM behaviors.

Active eWOM participation can be evoked by how consumers see themselves in relation to other members in their online brand communities. This relational view can be termed “interdependent self-construal” (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). Previous studies

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have examined the effect of the relational self-concept on various marketing outcomes such as consumer–brand relationships (Swami nathan, Page, & Gürhan–Canli, 2007), consumers' attitude toward the advertising (Han & Shavitt, 1994), consumers' evaluation on brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2005) and purchase behavior (Zhang & Shrum, 2009). In the current context, consumers with interdependent self-construal are likely to engage in cooperative and supportive behavior (van Baaren, Horgan, Chartrand, & Dijkmans, 2004) such as eWOM. Thus, consumers with interdependent self-construal are more likely to help other consumers by passing along information on the internet. Consequently, this self-construal should be understood as the internal factor motivating consumers to engage in eWOM behavior.

However, little empirical research has examined how consumers' interdependent self-construals motivate their active eWOM engagement behavior particularly in a context of social networking sites. Based on Bandura's (1991, 2001) social cognitive theory (SCT), this study attempts to explore whether and how interdependent self-construal elicit consumers' motivations to engage in eWOM behavior. Specifically, from the social cognitive perspective, this study expects that consumers' eWOM behaviors for online brand communities will be a function of consumers' cognitive judgment on their capabilities to engage in activities for online brand communities (self-efficacy in social cognitive terms) and their assessment of the social benefits associated with their eWOM behaviors (social outcome expectations). Further, this study predicts that such community engagement self-efficacy will be directly instigated by consumers' interdependent self-construal.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. eWOM behavior in online brand community

According to Hennig-Thurau, Qwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) electronic world of mouth (eWOM) is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 39). The eWOM has long been an important topic among marketing researchers and practitioners (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Studies have shown that eWOM is more influential than traditional marketer-created information because eWOM is perceived to be convenient and have higher credibility (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

Several studies have suggested that consumers are likely to participate in eWOM communication because consumers have concerns for others' consumption behavior in an altruistic manner (Dichter, 1966; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993; Lee et al., 2011). For example, Dichter (1966) showed that consumers' WOM behaviors satisfied their need to share something important to the other consumers. Also, Engel et al. (1993) reported that consumers passed along information to others because they had a genuine desire to help others make a better purchase decision and save others from negative experiences. Similarly, Lee, Kim, and Kim (2011) investigated consumers' attribution style in online brand communities and found that consumers' attribution to the communities' intrinsic motivations of altruism increased their intention to engage in brand community behaviors including eWOM communication.

Consumers' perception on online social tie (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006), social trust (Hau & Kim, 2011), and similarity with others (Chu & Kim, 2011) have been found to be the important antecedents affecting eWOM behaviors. For example, Sun et al. (2006) found that, online social tie with others was positively related to eWOM behavior because social ties played an important role in the flow of information from consumer to consumer. Previously, strong social ties between consumers were found to be more

influential than weak ties in shaping eWOM communication process (Sun et al., 2006). Hau and Kim (2011) also reported that social trust toward others significantly influenced consumers' intention to share information in online community. In a similar fashion, Chu and Kim (2011) also found that similarity with others influenced ones' willingness to provide their message to other consumers. These findings suggest that consumers' perception on the self–other relationship with other members in the virtual community should motivate their active participation in eWOM communication.

### 2.2. The role of self-construal in online brand community

As such, how consumers perceive themselves in relation to other members can be an important individual factor predicting their eWOM behavior. Such an individual sense of self in relation to others can be termed self-construal (Cross et al., 2000; Lewis, Goto, & Kong, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Two types of self-construal have been identified: the independent and the interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individuals with independent self-construal are likely to value their individual uniqueness and autonomy because they primarily view themselves as an independent individual entity, as distinct from the group. With this self-concept, individuals essentially perceive themselves separate from others and their independent self-construal becomes salient consequently, those with independent self-construal are likely to pursue their own goals of expressing individuality regardless of any social context (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). On the contrary, individuals with interdependent self-construal are likely to value connectedness and group harmony because they predominantly view themselves as part of a larger group. With this self-concept, individuals perceive themselves in connection to others, their interdependent self-construal becomes prominent. Consequently, those with interdependent self-construal tend to seek to achieve their goals of social cohesion in particular social contexts (Trafimow et al., 1991; Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). As such, differences in self-construal have distinctive relevance to the self-related processes of how individuals think, feel, and behave regarding their social relationship to others.

In particular, interdependent self-construal has been shown to positively influence individuals' cooperative and supportive behaviors (Holland, Roeder, van Baaren, Brandt, & Hannover, 2004; van Baaren et al., 2004). The individuals with an interdependent self-construal were also found to have a preference for relationship with others, both psychologically and emotionally (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002), suggesting that interdependent self-construal are likely to influence eWOM communication requiring reciprocity between community members. In this sense, it is likely that consumers with interdependent self construal would pass along information to others to help to make a better consumption decision.

In fact, several studies have demonstrated that consumers' self construal influences social consequences in the marketing context (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Han & Shavitt, 1994; Swaminathan et al., 2007; Zhang & Shrum, 2009). For example, Swaminathan et al. (2007) found that the effects of self-concept connection on consumer–brand relationship varied based on consumers' self-construal. Han and Shavitt (1994) also showed that consumers with interdependent self-construal and independent self-construal responded differently to the advertisements with individualistic versus collectivistic appeals. In a similar fashion, Escalas and Bettman (2005) demonstrated that consumers with independent self-construal evaluated the brands more negatively when the brands' images are not consistent with in-group. Zhang and Shrum (2009) also revealed that consumers with independent self-construal engaged in more impulsive consumption than ones with interdependent self-construal.

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