Acceptance of Implicit and Explicit eWOM: a Factor Based Study of Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT
Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) has gained an inescapable attention among both practitioners and academia. Its importance lies in its simplicity yet profound impact on customers’ attitude toward specific brands or goods, and consequently affecting important concepts such as customer loyalty and intention to purchase. Recently Social Networking Sites (SNS) have emerged as platforms to spread eWOM; however, less attention has been paid towards the persuasiveness of eWOM in SNS. Therefore, using the theoretical lens of Elaboration Likelihood Model, this study tries to identify factors that affect acceptance of implicit and explicit eWOM. It contributes to the existing literature on eWOM by suggesting two distinct types of eWOM- implicit and explicit, and by identifying central and peripheral routes of ELM that would have impacts on their acceptance.

Keywords
Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Social Networking Sites (SNS)

INTRODUCTION
Research on eWOM has attracted scholars from various disciplines, especially marketing and Information Systems. This is mainly due to the significant impact of users’ posted recommendations on potential buyers’ attitude toward brands or purchase intention. The term eWOM has different definitions, however, in this study we rely of the definition of eWOM by (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler, 2004) 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”.

Online consumer review websites are the most common platforms to study eWOM. Major published papers in this stream tend to investigate the effect of eWOM on brand reputation and sales (Amblee and Bui, 2011) as well as creditability of eWOM in consumer opinion platforms (Cheung, Luo, Sia, and Chen, 2009; Cheung, Sia, and Kuan ,2012). This is largely due to users’ intention to read recommendations about products from actual buyers’ perspective or to express their own opinions about products that they have already purchased.

Although online consumer opinion platforms are the major emphasis of research on eWOM, SNS have recently been identified as perfect platforms for eWOM, since consumers can freely post or share brand-related recommendations in SNS (Vollmer and Precourt, 2008). In essence, SNS have been highlighted as a component of integrated marketing communication (IMC) that facilitates close relationships among organizations and consumers (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). According to Chu and Kim (2011), the emergence of SNS as platforms for online branding and advertising has undergone tremendous growth in which advertising spending on SNS in the US is expected to reach $2.6 billion by 2012. The content analysis of 150,000 micro blog postings in Twitter reveals that nearly 19% of those postings contain brand names (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel and Choudury, 2009).

Among existing SNS, Facebook is the most popular one that has attracted various corporations to open their own fan pages to advertise their brands. As such, Facebook is widely considered a platform of choice for generating and spreading recommendations about specific brands or products and for engaging in eWOM activities (Chu and Kim 2011). In Facebook these recommendations have been considered as eWOM and categorized mainly into explicit and implicit types (Ebermann, Stanojevska-slabeva and Wozniak , 2011). The possibility to use direct and indirect communication channels in Facebook is analogous to categorization of recommender systems based on explicit and implicit types. In user profiles, information can be provided via status messages or in pre-defined categories such as likes and interests. The main goal of information provided in a user’s profile is to present the user and his/her preferences (Liu, 2008). Although the major goal of the information in a user’s profile is not to recommend something, it can have recommendation effects on other users reading it, since it may refer
to the products or services the user like (Ebermann et al., 2012). In other words, profile information that is not directed specifically at other users, which might have a potential unintended recommendation effect, is considered as implicit recommendation. Conversely, explicit recommendations are intentionally provided from one SNS user to another user. Such recommendations may in particular be given through direct communication channels such as webmail-like messaging within SNS or as a direct response to recommendation requests in status messages (Ebermann et al. 2012).

Given the emergence of SNS, especially Facebook, as new platforms to spread eWOM and corporate branding, this study tends to identify the factors that affect acceptance of implicit and explicit eWOM by using the theoretical lens of Elaboration likelihood Model (ELM). The implication of this study is twofold. From theoretical perspective, we address the acceptance of eWOM in Facebook by distinguishing between implicit and explicit eWOM and identifying central and peripheral routes of ELM in SNS context. From managerial perspective, understanding factors that affect consumers’ acceptance of eWOM in SNS could help marketers identify influential individuals in social networks and to effectively incorporate social media in promotional marketing of the products.

THEORY AND PROPOSITIONS

This study is built on ELM. The main motivation to use ELM as our theoretical lens is related to its power to understand how people process messages that are intended to be convincing (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). According to ELM, persuasiveness of message can be determined by central and peripheral route. When someone processes a message using central route elements, he/she basically assesses the quality of the argument. Therefore, process a message through the central route demands high cognitive efforts. On the other hand, processing a message through peripheral route undergoes less cognitive efforts. That means, persuasiveness of a message is highly associated with heuristic cues such as source creditability (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Cheung et al. 2012). Despite the distinctness of these two routes, Sussman and Siegal (2003) argue that, in practice, people evaluate a message at a moderate level employing both routes. The suitability of ELM has been examined in various contexts. For instance, Bhattacherjee and Sanford (2006) use ELM to examine the influence processes for Information Technology Acceptance. Sussman and Siegel (2003) employed ELM in a non-experimental setting to study knowledge adoption via electronic mail by consultants at a public accounting firm. The use of ELM in the context of eWOM is new and some studies use the lens of ELM (Cheung et al., 2012) and Dual Process Theory (Cheung et al., 2009) to examine creditability of eWOM in online consumer platforms. The previous empirical studies on ELM and its application to evaluate persuasiveness of the message prove the fitness of this theory as the theoretical foundation of this study. In addition, Facebook due to its hedonic nature and non-anonymoussness of users provides contextually different platform to investigate acceptance of eWOM. To this end, consistent with Whetten (1989) guidelines on theory development, the theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. First, unlike other studies that only investigate persuasiveness of explicit eWOM, we theoretically differentiate between implicit and explicit eWOM in SNS and essentially posit that implicit eWOM is particular to SNS. Second, we extend the use of ELM in SNS by identifying antecedents of peripheral routes of ELM that are specific to SNS context and introducing the factors that moderate the effect of central and peripheral routes on acceptance of implicit and explicit eWOMs. From practical perspective, this study urges the practitioners to have more emphasis on identifying influential nodes in SNS analysis based on determined peripheral routes of ELM in SNS context.

**Central Route**

**Argument Quality**

Argument quality or strength of argument has been the most common and established antecedents of central route in the context of message persuasiveness studies (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Cheung et al., 2009; Cheung et al., 2012). Petty and Cacioppo, (1981) define Argument quality as “the audience’s subjective perception of the arguments in the persuasive message as strong and cogent on the one hand versus weak and specious on the other”. In other words, it is extent to which the recipient of message perceived the position of argument as valid or conceiving. Therefore, it demands a careful deliberation about the merits of the message and, consequently, stronger argument yields more favorable response (Cheung et al., 2012). The quality of information has been empirically proven as an important antecedent of knowledge adoption in organizations (Sussman and Siegal, 2003); believability of web information (Wathen and Burkell, 2002) and creditability of eWOM in online consumer platforms (Cheung et al., 2009; Cheung et al., 2012). Therefore, we put forth following proposition:

P1: Argument quality has a positive effect on acceptance of explicit eWOM in Facebook.
Peripheral Routes

Source creditability

Creditability of source has been long a major antecedent of Peripheral routes of recommendation creditability in online review websites (Bhattacharjee and Sanford, 2006; Cheung et al., 2009; Cheung et al., 2012). Past studies reveal the important effect of communication in off-line and online environments (Eagley, Wood and Chaiken, 1978; Grewal, Gotlieb and Marmorstein, 1994). In case of online consumer review websites, this concept is so important since members of these communities are basically anonymous to each other and lack of trust between members affect creditability of eWOM in these platforms. Therefore, to address these problems, online consumer websites provide some mechanisms to evaluate the creditability of members by providing their average recommendation rating and history of previous recommendations (Cheung et al., 2009). Unlike online consumer platforms, eWOM provided by social network friends is perceived as more credible than anonymous or personally unknown sources (Ebermann et al., 2011). Facebook enables users to maintain their social relationship and established trust may extend to other contacts as well (Chu, 2011). Given the importance of source creditability we put forth following propositions:

P2a: Source creditability has a positive effect on acceptance of explicit eWOM in Facebook.

P2b: Source creditability has a positive effect on acceptance of implicit eWOM in Facebook.

Sender attractiveness

Attractiveness and physical appearance are part of information source that can impact persuasiveness of a message. These concepts are difficult to assess in online consumer platform, where users are anonymous, and therefore are less relevant to persuasiveness of eWOM (Cheung et al., 2012; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). In Facebook, however, we argue that these factors are more salient since Facebook is user centered and some users might be perceived attractive by other members (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009). Given the fact that people that we admire influence us more (Gabriel and Lang, 2006), we posit that source attractiveness is one of antecedent of peripheral routes in the context of SNS. Moreover, in terms of implicit eWOM, we posit that users’ have more motivation to process implicit eWOM from attractive senders. For instance, one might be so curious to check places or browse brand’s webpage on Facebook when one of his/her attractive friends check-in to a place or share/like a specific brand or products.

P3a: Sender attractiveness has a positive effect on acceptance of explicit eWOM in Facebook.

P3b: Sender attractiveness has a positive effect on acceptance of implicit eWOM in Facebook.

Homophily

The third construct related to peripheral routes is homophily. It is defined as the level to which pairs of individuals share similarities in attributes such as age, gender, education and social status (Rogers, 1983; Solman, 2007; Thelwall, 2009). It is a well-accepted nature of human interaction that people like to interrelate with those who are similar to themselves (Steffes and Burgee, 2009). It has been also stated that friends of social networks tend to be similar in gender, age, race as well as beliefs and attitudes (Gilly, Graham, Wolflinburger, and Yale, 1998). Homophily also empirically has been proven to play an important role in shaping persuasive process on discussion forums (Wang,Walther, Pingree, and Hawkins, 2008) and engagement in eWOM in Facebook (Chu ,2012). Given the importance of homophily, we put forth following propositions:

P4a: Homophily has a positive effect on acceptance of explicit eWOM in Facebook.

P4b: Homophily has a positive effect on acceptance of implicit eWOM in Facebook.

Tie Strength

The strong effect of social tie on WOM propagation has been established in past studies (Brown and Reingen, 1987). Social Tie has been defined as “potency of the bond between members of a network”’ (Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare, 2008). Granovetter (1973) argues that the degree of overlap of two individual’s friendship network varies directly with the strength of their ties to one another. In that sense, Social ties can be classified as strong or weak. Strong ties, such as family and friends, constitute stronger and closer relationships that are within an individual’s personal network (Chu and Kim, 2011). Prior studies suggest tie strength is an important factor that affects the communication of WOM in personal relationship aspect (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Chu and Kim, 2011; Leonard-Barton, 1985; Steffes and Burgee, 2009). It is important to mention that homophily and social tie are two distinct constructs and strength of social tie does not necessarily affect the level of homophily between ties (Steffes and Burgee, 2009).

P5a: Social Ties have positive impacts on acceptance explicit eWOM in Facebook.
P5b: Social Ties have positive impacts on acceptance implicit eWOM in Facebook.

**Moderating role of Recipient’s Expertise and Involvement**

ELM states that recipient’s ability and motivations moderates the degree of influence of central and peripheral routes on persuasiveness of message (Cheug et al., 2011). Past studies have empirically supported the moderating role of recipient’s expertise and involvement in ELM (Cheug et al., 2011; Sussman and Siegal, 2003; Zhang and Watts, 2003). Recipient’s expertise refers to the recipient’s prior knowledge about an issue, while recipient’s involvement refers to the personal relevance of the issue (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). According to ELM, central routes will have a greater impact on recipient’s judgment when he/she is able and motivated to process the message. In other word, recipient of message tend to accept a message based on strength of its argument when he/she has high level of expertise and involvement about the context of a message. Therefore, we put forth following proposition:

P6a: The effect of argument quality on acceptance of explicit eWOM is stronger when Recipient’s expertise is higher.

P6b: The effect of argument quality on acceptance of explicit eWOM is stronger when involvement is higher.

On the other hand, peripheral routes are likely to have a more important role when the recipient doesn’t have the pertinent expertise to assess the quality of a message source. Equally, people who are not involved are essentially not stimulated to cognitively evaluate the context of a message (Zhang and Watts, 2003). In this case, peripheral routes such as source creditability play more important roles in acceptance of the message. If someone perceives one of his/her social network friends credible, the consistency of his/her previous recommendations persuade the recipient to accept his/her message given his/her low level of expertise and involvement. Generally, the influence of peripheral cues is expected to be stronger when the recipient’s expertise and involvement are at lower levels (Cheung et al., 2012). Therefore, we put forth following propositions in regard to other peripheral routes:

\begin{itemize}
  \item P7a-P7d: The effect of source creditability on acceptance of explicit and implicit eWOM in Facebook is stronger when recipient’s expertise or involvement is lower.
  \item P8a-P8d: The effect of sender attractiveness on acceptance of explicit and implicit eWOM in Facebook is stronger when Recipient’s expertise or involvement is lower.
  \item P9a-P9d: The effect of homophily on acceptance of explicit and implicit eWOM in Facebook is stronger when Recipient’s expertise or involvement is lower.
  \item P10a-P10d: The effect of Social Tie on acceptance of explicit and implicit eWOM in Facebook is stronger when recipient’s expertise or involvement is lower.
\end{itemize}
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study we plan to use questionnaire survey to collect data. The measurement scales will be adapted from past studies. To ensure content validity and face validity of our instrument, we will invite a panel of experts comprising both faculty members and Doctoral students with research background in social media to evaluate our instrument. Based on their feedback we will revise the questionnaire if needed.

A pilot study will be then conducted to a small number of university students with appropriate knowledge and experience of using SNS. After analyzing construct validity and reliability using the pilot data, we will replace and reword some items if needed.

Finally, in the main study, we will conduct a survey using random sample of university students. Previous studies have shown that students are good representative of population in empirical studies on SNS (Chu and Kim, 2011; Mangold and Faulds 2009). Also, student population constitutes a major percentage of Facebook users, which in turn increases external validity of our study.

REFERENCES