

DOCTORAL THESIS

The message features of Chinese language eWOM and the combined effects of valence and argument strength on product attitude and purchase intention: an elaboration likelihood perspective

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ABSTRACT

Technological developments, Internet expansion and the ubiquity of smartphones have revolutionized modern communication. Millions of people link to countless desktops or mobile e-platforms, and information transfer has never been faster or simpler. Previous research has consistently found that online reviews can mould consumers' attitudes toward a product, thereby influencing sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Ante, 2009), and highlighting the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication as a key factor affecting consumer purchasing decisions.

Message quality plays a decisive role in eWOM communication effectiveness (Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol, 2008; Cheema and Kaikati, 2010). A persuasive message is comprised of two critical components, message valance and argument strength (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), but understanding of their characteristics is limited. Until now, most eWOM investigations have ignored the written content of persuasive messages, tending to use quantitative measures, such as product ratings, to study WOM or eWOM communication (Schlosser, 2011). Additionally, the growing role of China in the global economy points to an increasingly important role for Chinese language communication. To-date English has been the primary language used in past eWOM studies, but findings from non-Chinese language studies may not apply to the Chinese language eWOM communications. The current study is intended to fill this gap.

Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study aims to identify the message features of Chinese language eWOM communication and understand the combined effects of valence and argument strength on attitude and purchase intention towards a product. This study takes both a qualitative approach and quantitative approach in its research design. First, a qualitative content analysis technique is used to examine the review content. Then experiments are performed to test and verify messages with respect to affecting the audience's attitude and product purchase intention. Findings show that different review types carry distinct message features and have varying levels of persuasiveness in eWOM communication.

The present study deepens the knowledge of eWOM communication because it integrates message features into the ELM of eWOM influence. It also extends Sweeny, Soutar and Mazzarol's (2012) traditional WOM study to the Chinese language eWOM context. Practically, this study introduces actual themes, languages and presentation approaches to product reviews that significantly or marginally affect a receiver's attitude toward a product and influence purchase intention. It provides an important reference for the eWOM givers on how to strengthen Chinese eWOM message content by understanding the message features of different review types.

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