Are High-Need for Uniqueness Consumers Willing to or Not to Recommend Products?

Considering Types of the Products and the Receivers

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have examined the effects of needs for uniqueness on consumers' intentions to generate word-of-mouth (WOM) and found that high-need for uniqueness consumers are unwilling to generate positive WOM for publicly consumed goods that they own. However, they have focused on only one (avoidance of similarity) of three types of need for uniqueness--creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity. With the background, the present study intends to examine how different types of need for uniqueness affect consumers' intentions to generate positive WOM. In the present study, we consider two moderators, the type of the product and the type of the receivers, between need for uniqueness and WOM generating.

This research examined the effects of types of need for uniqueness, the type of the product, and the type of the receivers on consumers' intentions to generate positive and neutral WOM using a 3 (types of need for uniqueness: creative choice counter-conformity/unpopular choice counter- conformity/avoidance of similarity) $\times$ 2 (the type of the product: identity-relevant/ functional) $\times$ 2 (the type of the receivers: in-group/out-group) between-subjects experimental design. The subjects of the experiment consisted of 50 Chinese university students and 65 Chinese working persons. We chose bag as the identity-relevant product and USB flash drive as the functional products. ANOVA was used to test the proposed hypotheses.

The results of the analysis showed that three types of need for uniqueness have different impacts on consumers' willingness to generate positive WOM. High creative choice counter-conformity consumers and high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers are more willing to generate positive WOM than high avoidance of similarity consumers. The effects are greater when consumers talk about an identity-relevant product to in-group persons. The implication of this study might help firms understand what factors would provoke or prevent WOM generating.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth, need for uniqueness, the type of the product, the type of the receivers.

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver, concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale" (Arndt, 1967). According to previous research, WOM is more credible than commercial advertisements (Mazzarol, Sweeney, and Soutar, 2007; Murray, 1991) and more effective for reducing consumers' perceived risks of purchasing unknown products and services (Arndt, 1967). Under this background, marketers are eagerly seeking ways to use the power of WOM (Wien and Olsen, 2014). As a consequence, understanding the underlying mechanism of the WOM phenomenon has been paid great attention to, especially the antecedents of its occurrence (Godes, Mayzlin, Chen, Das, Dellarocas, and Pfeiffer, 2005).

A lot of studies have identified satisfaction, loyalty, product/service quality, and commitment, etc. (Matos and Rossi, 2008) as antecedents of WOM generating. However, some researchers claimed that the situational factors, such as satisfaction and loyalty are not sufficient enough to motivate consumers to generate WOM, and emphasized that consumers should have individual motives to generate WOM (Mazzarol, et al., 2007; Godes, et al., 2005). In fact, Feick and Price (1987) investigated that market mavens are more likely to engage in WOM; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster (1998) found that some consumers spread WOM just because they have a helpful personality; and Cheema and Kaikati (2010) provided evidence that need for uniqueness would drive a person to generate WOM.

According to Cheema and Kaikati (2010), need for uniqueness is defined as the desire to be different from other members of one's reference group (avoidance of similarity). They characterized the subjects as high or low in their needs for uniqueness, claiming that in the domain of owned public goods, high-need for uniqueness decreases willingness to provide WOM that contains positive evaluations (positive WOM), but does not decrease willingness to provide WOM that only contains product details (neutral WOM).

Cheema and Kaikati (2010) did give new insights into the discussion of individual motives to generate WOM. However, there are two limitations in their study. First, according to Tian, Bearden, and Hunter (2001), consumers' needs for uniqueness have three types: creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity. Cheema and Kaikati (2010) examined only one of the three types--avoidance of similarity. Second, Cheema and Kaikati (2010) modeled product categories (public/private) and ownership (own/not-own) as moderators between consumers' needs for uniqueness and their intentions to generate WOM, notwithstanding a classic conformity study found that group identification and consumer products and experiences would affect individual need for uniqueness (Lynn, Snyder, and Lopez, 2002). In other words, the two moderators in Cheema and Kaikati's model may be less important.

In this study, we focus on the effects of consumers' needs for uniqueness of consumers' intentions to generate WOM. This study intends to enhance the understanding of the relation between consumers' needs for uniqueness and their intentions to generate WOM by considering all of three types of consumers' needs for uniqueness. Moreover, previous research used product category (identity relevant/functional), which is related with consumer products and experiences, and reference group (in-group/out-group), which is related with group identification, as moderators of the relationship between need for uniqueness and buying behavior (Berger and Heath, 2007). With the reason mentioned above, the present study models these factors i.e., the type of the product (identity relevant/functional) and the type of the receivers (in-group/out-group) while Cheema and Kaikati (2010) modeled product category (public/ private) and ownership (own/not own).

HYPOTHESES

Antecedents of Generating WOM

Early WOM studies have claimed that situational factors, such as satisfaction, loyalty, product/ service quality and commitment, would serve as consumers' motivations to generate WOM (Matos and Rossi, 2008). Several researchers have found that satisfaction is an antecedent of WOM. Satisfied customers would spread positive WOM automatically (Gremler and Brown, 1999; Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst, 2005), while dissatisfied consumers intended to vent their discontentment and spread negative WOM (Anderson, 1998; Sweeney, Soutar, and Mazzarol, 2005). Moreover, it has also been claimed that loyalty also influence consumers' intentions to generate WOM (e.g., Dick and Basu, 1994). Dick and Basu (1994) defined that customer loyalty could be viewed the strength of the relationship between individual's relative attitude and repeat purchasing, and claimed that it had positive impacts on generating WOM.

Individual motives can also play an important role on generating WOM (Mazzarol, et al., 2007; Godes et al., 2005). Market-mavenship (Feick and Price, 1987) and helpful personality (Sundaram, et al., 1998) have been identified as individual motives. Cheema and Kaikati (2010) also provided evidence that consumers' needs for uniqueness serves as antecedents of generating WOM. They regarded the most significant expression of the need for uniqueness as the loss of interest to products that consumers once favored when it became commonplace. It has been concluded that high need for uniqueness consumers are less willing to generate positive WOM which recommends others to buy products. They hold the point of view that positive WOM is more persuasive to encourage others to buy products, and others' possession of the product will decrease the consumers' own uniqueness.

Relationship between Consumers' Needs for Uniqueness and Generating WOM

Consumers' needs for uniqueness are defined as the traits of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of developing and enhancing one's self-image and social image (Tian, et al., 2001). Tian, et al. (2001) categorized consumers' needs for uniqueness into three types, i.e., creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity.

According to Tian, et al., consumers with different types of needs for uniqueness express their own uniqueness in different ways. First, high creative choice counter-conformity consumers try to choose a product that not only has not been chosen by others but also will be considered as a good choice by others. Second, high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers express strong willingness to show their uniqueness others, even if the choice is of high risk in being considered strange. Finally, high avoidance of similarity consumers express their needs for uniqueness through losing interest in their own possessions that become commonplace.

With consideration of these three types of consumers' needs for uniqueness, it is reasonable to assert that hypothesis in Cheema and Kaikati (2010) is not sufficient enough to explain the effect of consumers' needs for uniqueness on their intentions to generate WOM. In other words, there remains room for research that focuses not only on high avoidance of similarity consumers, but also on high creative choice counter-conformity consumers and unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers.

High creative choice counter-conformity consumers are proud of their creativeness and are willing to show their superiorities beyond others (Cohen and Prinstein, 2006). Therefore, high creative choice counter-conformity consumers are willing to generate WOM. Bryson (1996) found that people prefer different types of music to reinforce boundaries between themselves and others they dislike even if the latter are majority. Similarly, high avoidance of similarity consumers would like to reinforce boundaries between themselves and groups they dislike by sending WOM as well. In other words, they are willing to generate WOM. Note that notwithstanding high avoidance of similarity consumers' desire to distinguish themselves from the majority, they are still in the group. Therefore, high avoidance of similarity consumers are not as highly willing to generate WOM as high creative choice counter-conformity consumers. Although high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers weigh their personal identity more than social identity, they do not want to be considered strange and disliked by the majority. Therefore, high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers are reluctant to generate WOM comparing with the other two types of consumers.

H$_1$: High creative choice counter-conformity consumers express the highest intention to generate positive WOM, following high avoidance of similarity consumers ranking the

second and high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers ranking the third in intention to generate WOM.

Moderators of Consumers' Needs for Uniqueness on WOM: Types of Receivers and Types of products

Cheema and Kaikati (2010) considered product category (public/private) and ownership (own/not-own) as moderators of the effect of consumers' needs for uniqueness on their intentions to generate WOM. However, it is obvious that in order to express their uniqueness through consumer goods, consumers need to show their goods publicly. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that Cheema and Kaikati may overlook some more important moderators between consumers' needs for uniqueness other than product category and ownership.

Berger and Heath (2007) identified products' identity relevance and taste holders as moderators of the relationship between consumers' needs for uniqueness and consumption behaviors. Products' identity relevance is defined as the extent to which the products express the identity of the owners. Taste holders refers to the people with whom the consumers share their tastes. Both products' identity relevance and taste holders can also moderate the effect of consumers' need for uniqueness on their intention to generate WOM. In the context of WOM, receivers of WOM can be regarded as taste holders. Therefore, the effects of consumers' needs for uniqueness may be affected by the types of the products and receivers. Based on the discussion, we hypothesize as follows:

H_2: Differences among three types of high need-for-uniqueness consumers (i.e., high creative choice counter-conformity consumers, high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers, and high avoidance of similarity consumers) in terms of the level of intention to generate WOM is greater when they talk about identity relevant products than when they talk about identity irrelevant (functional) products.

H_3: Differences among three types of high need-for-uniqueness consumers (i.e., high creative choice counter-conformity consumers, high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers, and high avoidance of similarity consumers) in terms of the level of intention to generate WOM is greater when they talk to in-group persons than when they talk to out-group persons.

METHOD

Sample

A dataset was collected through a consumer survey. Questionnaires were randomly

6

administered to 115 respondents; including 50 Chinese university students and 65 Chinese working persons. Subjects were asked to answer a questionnaire after reading a scenario about a product. The average age of respondents were 23 years old and the ratio of gender was balanced at 6 (femail) to 5 (male).

Measurement

To examine consumers' needs for uniqueness' effects on WOM generating intention, we used several existing scales. The scales for consumers' need for uniqueness were based on the work of Tian, et al. (2001). The scales for positive WOM generating intention was based on the work of Cheema and Kaikati (2010).This study used seven-point scale (1: strongly disagree to 7: strongly agree).

Design

We employed a 3 (the consumer's need for uniqueness: creative choice counter-conformity/ unpopular choice counter-conformity/avoidance similarity) x 2 (the type of the product: identity relevant/functional) x 2 (the type of the receivers: in-group persons/out-group persons) between- subjects design.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: identity relevant x in-group persons, functional x in-group persons, identity relevant x out-group persons, and functional x out-group persons. In each condition, consumers are asked to read a scenario about a unique product. Then they were asked to imagine that they recently bought the product which was mentioned in the scenario, and met a group of friends with the former product. Regarding the products, half of the participants read a scenario about a bag, which is an identity relevant product; the rest read a scenario about an USB flash drive as a functional product. Regarding the group of friends, half of the participants read that there are a lot of their close friends in the group, the rest read that there are not so many close friends in the groups. After reading all the scenario, participants were asked if they are willing to talking WOM to the group of friends (1= "not at all likely" and 7= "very likely"). We divided participants into 3 groups: high creative choice counter-conformity consumers, high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers, and high avoidance of similarity consumers based on their scores on each type of need for uniqueness. Then, we compared consumers' intentions to generate WOM among three types of high need-for-uniqueness consumers.

Results

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) with intention to generate positive WOM as a dependent variable, and the type of need for uniqueness (creative choice counter-

conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity), the type of the product (identity-relevant/functional) and the type of the receivers (in-group/ out-group) as independent variables. We found that high creative choice counter-conformity consumers tended to generate more positive WOM than high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers, and high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers tended to generate more positive WOM than high avoidance of similarity consumers. Also, we found a moderating effects of the type of the product and the type of receivers on the relationship between the type of need for uniqueness and intention to generate positive WOM.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how three types of need for uniqueness (creative choice counter-conformity/unpopular choice counter-conformity/avoidance of similarity) affect consumers' intentions to generate positive and neutral WOM. We also considered two moderators—the type of the product (identity-relevant/functional) and the type of receivers (in-group/out-group), between need for uniqueness and WOM generating.

The results showed that the three types of need for uniqueness have different impacts on consumers' willingness to generate positive WOM. High creative choice counter-conformity consumers express the highest intention to generate positive WOM, following high unpopular choice counter-conformity consumers ranking the second and high avoidance of similarity consumers ranking the third, in turn. Moreover, we found that these effects are exaggerated when the product is identity-relevant and the receivers are in-group persons. The findings of this study imply that whether high need for uniqueness leads to generate positive or not is depending on the type of need for uniqueness.

We contributed to the WOM literature by considering all three types of high need for uniqueness and investigating the impacts of each types of high need for uniqueness on consumers' intentions to generate positive and neutral WOM. Moreover, we found that the impacts are moderated by the type of the product and the receivers.

The present study also has implications for marketers. Since positive WOM has a great impact on the sales of new products, it is important for marketers to identify the consumers who are willing to generate positive WOM. Our findings imply that high creative choice counter-conformity consumers are likely to send positive messages about the products. Therefore, marketers should find such consumers and satisfy them.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Although we solved some unsolved problems in previous research on WOM, this study has some limitations. First, we focused on only traditional face-to-face WOM. The impacts of need for uniqueness in the electronic WOM (eWOM) context may be different from those in

the face-to-face WOM context, because WOM senders in the former contexts are anonymous. Future studies should focus on eWOM context. Second, we only considered positive and neutral WOM as dependent variables following previous studies. Future studies should investigate the relationship between need for uniqueness and consumers' intentions to generate negative WOM. Finally, this study examined only two moderators. Future studies should consider other moderators, including senders' other traits, such as loyalty status and satisfaction.

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