The Influence of Tile Strength and Homophily through Electronic Word-of-Mouth towards Purchase Intention via Facebook

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Received May 9, 2022 & Revise May 29, 2022& Accepted May 30, 2022

Abstract

The objectives of this study were to investigate the influence of Tile Strength and Homophily through Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) consisted of opinion giving, opinion seeking, and opinion passing towards Purchase Intention via Facebook. The main theory of this study was based on Theory of Electronic Word of Mouth Communication, which proves the effect of tie strength and homophily underpinned by Social Network theory to promote electronic word-of-mouth (opinion giving, opinion seeking, and opinion passing) towards purchase intention.This study was quantitative research and used purposive sampling method to collect data from 400 Thai respondents, who are selected from researcher's Thai "friend" list on Facebook. The structural equation modeling using the AMOS program was applied to analyze the data. The objective found that the stronger tie strength and the higher eWOM opinion seeking influence the higher purchase intention. Similarly, the higher homophily and the higher eWOM opinion seeking influence the higher purchase intention. This study can contribute for marketing manager and consumer researchers should focus on especially opinion leaders in eWOM forums who post and pass their views rather than simply reading other's views. Because readers or opinion seeking will find these views from opinion leaders to make a decision-making product or service via Facebook.

Keywords: Electronic Word of Mouth, Tile Strength, Homophily, Purchase Intention via Facebook

Introduction

Traditional (offline) word-of-mouth has been shown to play a major role for customer's buying decision (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, which can be defined as "all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage or characteristics of particular goods or their sellers" is well established in academic literature (Westbrook, 1987). Researchers recognize this last form of interpersonal communication (opinion leadership and opinion seeking) as one of the most important WOM influences on product sales and brand choice (Bristor, 1990). In recent years, The Internet has become one of the major interpersonal communication channels for consumers, enabling them to exchange abundant information with fellow consumers. This online interpersonal communication of a product, a service, or a company is called electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) (Han, 2008). Despite the fundamental similarities in purpose between traditional WOM and eWOM, significant differences also exist. First, WOM is an immediate intimate conversation, eWOM is written and occurs for an indefinite period of time or which is most frequently an asynchronous process whereby sender and receiver of information are separated

by both space and time. Second, while WOM is generally a process of sharing information between small groups of two or more interested parties, eWOM harnesses then bidirectional communication properties and unlimited reach of the Internet to share opinions and experiences on a one-to-world platform rather than a one-to-one platform (Dellarocas, 2003). Third, traditional WOM emanates from a sender who is known by the receiver of the information, thereby the credibility of the sender and the message contents are known to the receiver. The electronic nature of eWOM in most applications eliminates the receiver's ability to judge the credibility of the sender and his/her message (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

The significance of this study contributes eWOM behaviors have been conceptualized as opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing which from the attributes of tie strength and homophily influencing on purchase intention. eWOM behaviors add on opinion passing, similar to opinion forwarding, operationalized SNS behaviors given the ease of passing along information and messages that is interested variable to measure and rarely research supported (Chu & Kim, 2011). The previous research on Internet-based eWOM has examined consumer-opinion platforms (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004), emails (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2004), and blogs (Thorson & Rodgers, 2006), empirical research on the eWOM phenomenon in social networking sites is scarce. Social network sites (SNSs) as web-based services that, allow users to create profiles on the site, to post information and share that information and communicate with other users of the site (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Statista Research Department in 2020, target population was 50.75 million Facebook users in Thailand or about 84% of the Thailand online population played SNSs in 2020. So, marketing manager and consumer researchers should focus on especially opinion leaders in eWOM forums who post and pass their views rather than simply reading other's views. Because readers or opinion seeking will find these views from opinion leaders to make a decision-making product or service via Facebook. It is a text or article published on social media areas. that it has an effect on the use How to find the answer in education to use as knowledge for doing business on Facebook.

Research Objectives

To investigate the influence of Tile Strength and Homophily through Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) consisted of opinion giving, opinion seeking, and opinion passing towards Purchase Intention via Facebook.

Literature Review

Theory of Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth Communication

Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) is any kind of informal interpersonal communication that takes place among two or more individuals or consumers. WOM is perceived to be more reliable, credible, and trustworthy from sender who is independent of market (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1995). According to traditional communications theory, WOM has a significant impact on behavior, particularly on consumers' information seeking, assessment, and subsequent decision-making (Brown & Reingen, 1987).

Though word of mouth and electronic word of mouth are conceptually close whereas there are some important differences in the characteristics of some factors: mode, scope, and speed (Chu, 2009) as shown in Table1.

Table 1: Summarizes the similarities and differences between WOM and eWOM

		WOM	eWOM
Similarities		• Interpersonal communication • Influence decision-making • Bidirectional and interactive	
Differences	**Mode**	• Usually spoken, person-to-person • Usually identified sources • Consumers have lower control over WOM	• Through various online forms • Both identified and unidentified sources • Consumers have higher control over eWOM
	Scope	• With geographic and time constraints • One to one or in small groups	• Without geographic and time constraints • One to one or one to many
	Speed	Slow	Fast

Source: Chu (2009)

Thus, traditional word of mouth occurs face to face, that is, in a physical setting, primarily among intimates such as friends and family members (close ties), whereas EWOM on digital platforms is widely disseminated and occurs among people who are both known and unknown to one another but are linked by a common interest or need (weak ties). However, based on the principles from social psychology (Social Network theory) it is suggested that the perceptions of other members credibility could be the result of continuing evaluations based on the verbal contributions from those members to the group they all belong to, even though they are unknown to each other (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

Independent Variables:

- **Tie Strength**

A social network theory consists of a set of actors ("nodes") and the relations ("ties" or "edges") between these actors (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The nodes may be individuals, groups, organizations, or societies. The ties may fall within a level of analysis (e.g., individual-to-individual ties) or may cross levels of analysis (e.g., individual-to-group ties). These include communication ties (such as who talks to whom, or who gives information or advice to whom), formal ties (such as who reports to whom), affective ties (such as who likes whom, or who trusts whom), material or work flow ties (such as who gives money or other resources to whom), proximity ties (who is spatially or electronically close to whom), and cognitive ties (such as who knows who knows whom). Granovetter (1973) has distinguished between strong ties (such as family and friends) and weak ties (such as acquaintances). This distinction can involve a multitude of facets, including affect, mutual obligations, reciprocity, and intensity. Strong ties are particularly valuable when an individual seeks socioemotional support and often

entail a high level of trust. Weak ties are more valuable when individuals are seeking diverse or unique information from someone outside their regular frequent contacts.

- **Homophily**

Homophily can affect several aspects of social networks such as embeddedness and network density. Sociologists have used the strength of ties to examine the indirect effect of levels of homophily on the level of embeddedness and density (Turchi, 2007). Propinquity can also be more broadly defined as being in the same place at the same time. Studies of elites show that persons are more likely to have a connection, relationship, or friendship if they went to the same prep school at the same time. They may merely share an "old school" tie (they went to the same school but at different times), in which case we talk about homophily is defined as having one or more common social attributes, like the same social class. More technically, pairs can be said to be homophilous if they their characteristics match in a proportion greater than expected in the population from which they are drawn or the network of which they are a part (Verbrugge, 1977).

Mediator Variables: eWOM (Opinion Giving, Opinion Seeking, Opinion Passing)

Previous studies have contributed to the understanding of electronic word-of-mouth behavior by examining online feedback mechanisms (Dellarocas, 2003), consumers' motivation to articulate themselves on consumer opinion platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), responses and motivation to pass along email (Phelps et al., 2004), and the effects of electronic referrals on different stages of the decision-making processes (Bruyn & Lilien, 2004).

Opinion leaders are a major source of word-of-mouth communication, as they frequently communicate with others. They are regarded as valuable information sources because they have knowledge and expertise that will guide the decision making of opinion seekers (Lawrence, Linda, & Robin, 1986). They are trusted to be credible as they share both positive and negative information (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1995). Opinion leaders are the information generators or providers in WOM communications. And also, opinion leaders act as information transmitters who pass information from mass media on their peers and influence their opinions and choices often related to products or services (Watts & Dodds, 2007). In contrast, opinion seekers are those who desire to obtain information or opinions from others that help them evaluate products and services for their purchases (Flynn, Ronald, & Jacqueline, 1996).

Dependent Variables: Purchase Intention

There are five stage model of consumer decision-making being often cited in marketing literature. The steps that consumers go through are problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post purchase behavior. The buying process starts by recognizing a problem or a need that motivates the consumer to search for information about how to best satisfy this need. After enough information about solving the problem has been gathered the alternatives are evaluated based on the consumer’s choice criteria. The evaluation step is followed by purchase decision. There are however, two factors that may intervene with purchase intention and purchase decision: attitudes of others and unanticipated situational factors. The last stage of the model is post purchase behavior. This refers to the customer’s evaluation of the level of satisfaction that is dependent on relation between the customer’s expectations and perceived quality. (Kotler, 2003).

WOM has significant influences on consumers' decision-making processes (Bone 1992). WOM can be a stimulus for need recognition and the source of pre-purchase information to evaluate alternatives. Further, it can influence post-purchase evaluation by shaping consumers' expectations towards product quality (Brown et al., 2007). Recognizing these unique characteristics of eWOM, researchers have examined the effects of eWOM on consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and decision making.

Research Hypotheses

There were nine hypothesis statements for this research study.

H1: There is a significant relationship between tie strength and eWOM opinion giving on Facebook

H2: There is a significant relationship between tie strength and eWOM opinion seeking on Facebook

H3: There is a significant relationship between tie strength and eWOM opinion passing on Facebook

Brown and Reingen (1987) investigate the macro and micro level of information exchange (flow of communication across groups and the flow within pairs or small groups) while advancing the understanding of both tie strength's and homophily's impact on WOM behavior. Tie strength, the level of intensity of the social relationship between consumers or degree of overlap of two individuals' friendship varies greatly across a consumer's social network. Social network analysis has been used to study WOM behavior because its unit of analysis is the exchange of (tangible and intangible) resources between social actors and it looks at how exchanges between pairs build into networks (Wellman & Berkowitz, 1998). These strong and weak social ties of personal contacts lead to consumers' eWOM behavior in social networking sites (Chu, 2009). Consumers' decision making is often influenced by others with whom they have either random or loose relationships, or by those with whom they have relatively more frequent and intimate interactions in their personal networks (Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 2001). Granovetter's (1973) theory on "the strength of weak ties" provides a promising explanation of the process. A consumer's social relations with other relevant actors typically include a spectrum of ties ranging from strong primary (such as close friends) to weak secondary (such as seldom contacted acquaintances).

H4: There is a significant relationship between homophily and eWOM opinion giving on Facebook

H5: There is a significant relationship between homophily and eWOM opinion seeking on Facebook

H6: There is a significant relationship between homophily and eWOM opinion passing on Facebook

According to Brown and Reingen (1987), the strong social ties and homophilous lead to the strong WOM. Homophily is a distinct concept from the strength of ties among individuals, which may relate to similarity but is a different social motivator. In the study of eWOM on social network sites, feelings of similarity toward network "friends" were of negative influence on opinion giving, perhaps limiting sharing of diverse information because consumers hesitated to send information that may not appeal to all network members (Chu & Kim, 2011). Yet homophilous sources were preferred in eWOM opinion seeking for online professor recommendations (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

H7: There is a significant relationship between eWOM opinion giving and purchase intention on Facebook

H8: There is a significant relationship between eWOM opinion seeking and purchase intention on Facebook

H9: There is a significant relationship between eWOM opinion passing and purchase intention on Facebook

WOM can be a stimulus for need recognition and the source of pre-purchase information to evaluate alternatives. Further, it can influence post-purchase evaluation by shaping consumers' expectations towards product quality (Brown et al., 2007). Opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the purchasing behavior of other consumers in specific product fields. Opinion seeking happens when individuals search out advice from others when making a purchase decision. Opinion seeking has been conceptualized as a subset of product information search. Consumers seek opinions to make more need satisfying purchase decisions (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Additional study, Steffes and Burgee (2009) found that students seeking information on which professor to take weight the information they obtain from eWOM forums to be equally influential in their decision as their own primary experience with the professor. This research finds that some weak tie information sources are rated as more influential.

Conceptual Framework

According to the objectives of this study, the relationship among the six variables of Tile Strength, Homophily, eWOM opinon giving, eWOM, opinion seeking, eWOM opinion passing, and purchase intention is studied, and a theoretical research framework is constructed to make various assumptions, as shown in figure 1.

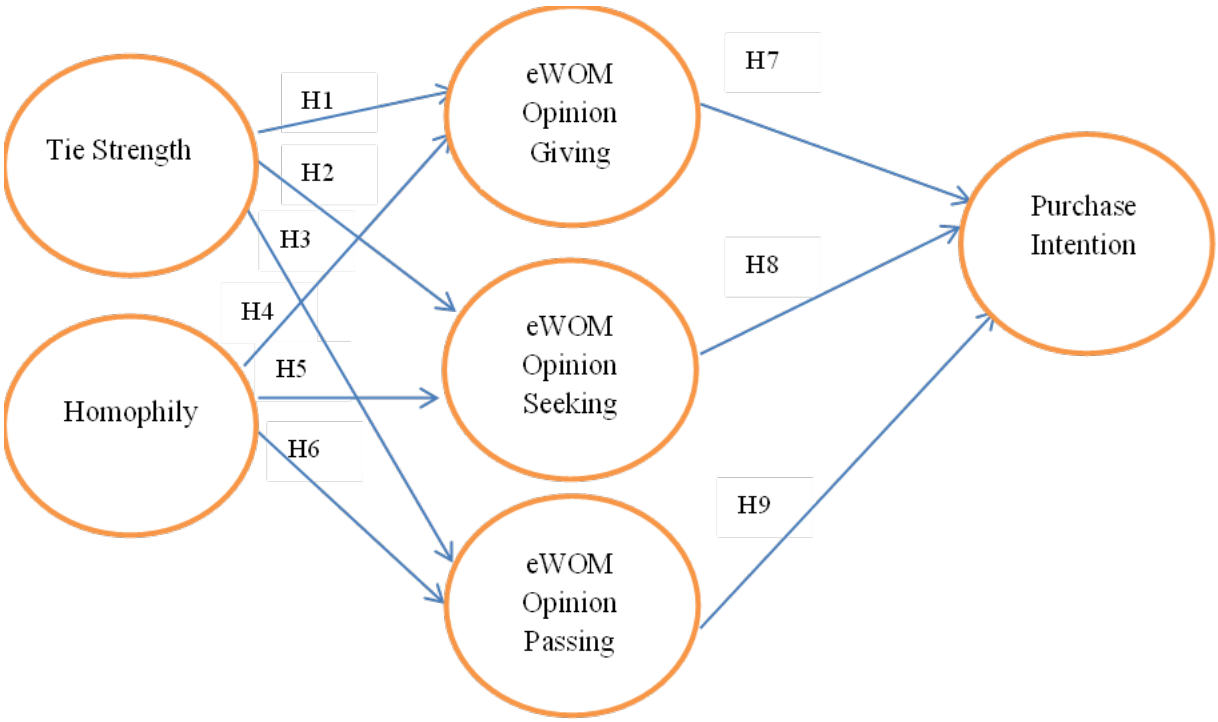

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Population and Sample

According to Statista Research Department in 2020, target population was 50.75 million Facebook users in Thailand, the sample size is 400 respondents. Although SEM requires a larger sample relative to other complex and advanced statistical techniques, but there is no certain rule of thumb for sample size. However, the sample size of this study is based on Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1973) with 95% confidence level for minimum number of samplings (0.05 margin of error).

Data Collection and Sampling Procedure

Data were collected from the samples during the 1st -15th of November, 2021. Purposive sampling was used to survey respondents who made questionnaires via online setting. The researcher selected researcher's Thai "friend" list on Facebook from many relationships (family, close friend, acquaintances, classmates, etc.) participated in the study to represent the population on Facebook. All of them were Thai nationality and had a variety of personal data (gender, age, education, occupation, and income).

Research Instrument/Questionnaire

The research tool was the questionnaire divided into 7 parts as following:

Part 1: Tie Strength was guided by Social Network Theory (Chu, 2009)

Part 2: Homophily was guided by Social Network Theory (Chu, 2009)

Part 3: Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Opinion Giving was guided by Theory of Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth Communication (Chu, 2009)

Part 4: Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Opinion Seeking was guided by Theory of Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth Communication (Chu, 2009)

Part 5: Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Opinion Passing was guided by Theory of Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth Communication (Chu, 2009)

Part 6: Purchase Intention was guided by Theory of Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth Communication (Chu, 2009)

Part 7: Personal Data by Gender, age, education, income

The measurement scale developed is an interval scale which excluded a demographic of the respondents. The respondents were asked to indicate their response to all questions on a scale of 1 to 5 consisting of 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree to 5 = strongly agree.

Research Findings

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profiles of a total of 400 respondents described their characteristics as the following: Most of respondents are female (86%), age 26-35 years (42%), bachelor degree (69%), private employee (41%), and income is 10,000-20,000 Baht/month (44%).

Electronic Word of Mouth, most of respondents give comments (61%), seek comments (34%), and pass comments (5%) on Facebook. For eWOM opinion giving, the majority of respondents gives positive comments (52%) and negative comments (48%) with the frequency about 1-2 times per 6 months. And the most product or service category that most of respondents give comments is Electronic & IT (27%) to their family contacts (43%). For eWOM opinion seeking, the majority of respondents seeks positive comments

(65%) and negative comments (35%) with the frequency about 1-2 times per 6 months. And the most product or service category that most of respondents seek comments is Mobile (37%) to their friend contacts (33%). For eWOM opinion seeking, the majority of respondents seeks positive comments (65%) and negative comments (35%) with the frequency about 1-2 times per 6 months. And the most product or service category that most of respondents seek comments is Mobile (37%) to their friend contacts (33%). For eWOM opinion passing, the majority of respondents passes positive comments (55%) and negative comments (45%) with the frequency about once per 12 months. And the most product or service category that most of respondents seek comments is Mobile (39%) to their friend and cousin contacts (33%).

Reliability Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The reliability analysis presented that the Cronbach's Alpha's value ranged between 0.71 and 0.93 according to Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2010) suggested that these criterion values are acceptable points.

The model fit in the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) can provide better results for the path analysis. There are two main types of goodness-of-fit measures that assess the overall fitness of the hypothesized model which are absolute fit measures and incremental fit measures. The results of absolute fit measures of the measurement model are; $X^2/df = 1.53$, $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.88 and RMSEA = 0.04 which are close to the recommended rule of thumb that $X^2/df < 2.0$, GFI > 0.9, and RMSEA <0.08 (Hair et al., 2010). In terms of incremental fit measures, the scores of baseline comparisons fit indices of NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI are close to or exceed 0.9 (range: 0.82-0.94) which are close to the recommended rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2010). Given the range of the computed baseline comparison fit indices, the remaining possible improvement in the fit of the hypothesized model (range: 0.06-0.18) appears as small as to be of little practical significance.

Hypotheses Testing

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to investigate and explain the relationships among the predictor variables and dependent variables for hypothesis 1-9.

The results of absolute fit measures of the measurement model are; $X^2/df = 1.60$, $p < 0.05$, GFI = 0.87 and RMSEA = 0.04 which are close to the recommended rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2010). Chi-square and other statistics show that the model represent a satisfactory fit the data set. In terms of incremental fit measures, the scores of baseline comparisons fit indices of NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, and CFI are close to or exceed 0.9 (range: 0.83-0.93) which are close to the recommended rule of thumb (Hair et al., 2010).

Given the range of the computed baseline comparison fit indices, the remaining possible improvement in the fit of the hypothesized model (range: 0.07-0.17) appears as small as to be of little practical significance. Therefore, the baseline fit indices have indicated a satisfactory fit for the structural model as most of the indices are close to the recommended point. Furthermore, this table demonstrates the square multiple correlations of this structural model. For this hypothesized model, first, 12.1% of the variation in eWOM opinion giving is unexplained; alternatively, 87.9% of the variance is accounted for by the joint influence of tile strength and homophily. Second, 7.8% of the variation in eWOM opinion seeking is unexplained; alternatively, 92.2% of the variance is accounted for by the joint influence of tile strength and homophily. third, 5.8% of the variation in

eWOM opinion passing is unexplained; alternatively, 94.2% of the variance is accounted for by the joint influence of tile strength and homophily. Similarly, 5.7% of the variation in the support for purchase intention is unexplained; alternatively, 94.3% of the variance is accounted for by the joint influence of eWOM opinion giving, eWOM opinion seeking, and eWOM opinion passing.

According to path model for the prediction of purchase intention, Table 2 summarizes the hypothesis testing results of this study.

Table 2. Structural Relationships between Tile Strength, Homophily, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (Opinion Giving, Opinion Seeking, Opinion Passing), and Purchase Intention

Hypothesis No.	Structural Path	Standardized Regression Weight (β)	Critical Ratio (C.R.)	Results
H1	Tile Strength → Opinion Giving	0.353***	4.23***	Supported
H2	Tile Strength → Opinion Seeking	0.15*	1.99*	Supported
H3	Tile Strength → Opinion Passing	0.24*	3.04*	Supported
H4	Homophily → Opinion Giving	-0.16*	-2.31*	Supported
H5	Homophily → Opinion Seeking	0.20*	2.65*	Supported
H6	Homophily → Opinion Passing	-0.01	-0.10	Not Supported
H7	Opinion Giving → Purchase Intention	0.03	0.45	Not Supported
H8	Opinion Seeking → Purchase Intention	0.19*	2.72*	Supported
H9	Opinion Passing → Purchase Intention	0.13	1.87	Not Supported

Note: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, * p<0.05, Not Supported = not significant

Discussion of Research Results

This study has fulfilled the main research objective to investigate the influence of Tile Strength and Homophily through Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) consisted of opinion giving, opinion seeking, and opinion passing towards Purchase Intention via FACEBOOK. The results show these relationships as the following:

The relationship between Tie Strength and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

The degree of social ties between a receiver and a communicator of eWOM which represents the strength of a consumer's relationship with others (Bone, 1992).

H1 is supported, there is positively significant relationship between tie strength and eWOM opinion giving on Facebook.

H2 is supported, there is positively significant relationship between tie strength and eWOM opinion seeking on Facebook.

H3 is supported, there is positively significant relationship between tie strength and eWOM opinion passing on Facebook.

According to Granovetter (1973), it has been found that the receiver considers the information from the communicator as highly credible. Consumers are more likely to be influenced by WOM information from strong tie sources (family, cousins, friends) for decision making (Bansal &Voyer, 2000; Brown & Reingen, 1987). From the survey results, the most relationship contacts are family, friend, and cousin, which are strong ties, who will give, seek, and pass information to/from them.

The relationship between Homophily and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

With regard to how perceived homophily among social networking site users relates to eWOM in social networking sites.

H4 is supported, there is negatively significant relationship between homophily and eWOM opinion giving on Facebook

H5 is supported, there is positively significant relationship between homophily and eWOM opinion seeking on Facebook

H6 is not supported, there is not significant relationship between homophily and eWOM opinion passing on Facebook

In the study of Electronic Word-of Mouth on social network sites, feelings of similarity toward network “friends” were of negative influence on eWOM opinion giving, perhaps limiting sharing of diverse information because consumers hesitated to send information that may not appeal to all network members (Chu & Kim, 2011). Yet homophilous sources were preferred in eWOM opinion seeking for online professor recommendations (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Whereas homophily does not influence on opinion passing with previous research also do not support this relationship (Chu, 2009).

The relationship between Electronic Word of Mouth and Purchase Intention

H7 is not supported, there is not significant relationship between eWOM opinion giving and purchase intention on Facebook

H8 is supported, there is positively significant relationship between eWOM opinion seeking and purchase intention on Facebook.

H9 is not supported, there is not significant relationship between eWOM opinion passing and purchase intention on Facebook

According to Steffes and Burgee (2009) found that students seeking information on which professor to take weight the information they obtain from eWOM forums to be equally influential in their decision as their own primary experience with the professor. Whereas opinion leadership occurs when individuals try to influence the purchasing behavior of other consumers in specific product fields that may cause these hypotheses are not supported.

Therefore, the stronger tie strength and the higher eWOM opinion seeking influence the higher purchase intention. Similarly, the higher homophily and the higher eWOM opinion seeking influence the higher purchase intention.

Recommendation and Future Study

Furthermore, future research could examine eWOM in a cross-cultural setting. Current cross-cultural research suggests that different cultures produce distinctly different media usage and communication styles that, in turn, influence consumer behavior online (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Ang 2006). Thus, opinion giving, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior that affect purchase decisions may vary from country to country because of cultural variations. A careful investigation of eWOM in different cultural contexts is valuable for our understanding of the universal phenomenon, product-focused eWOM in social networking sites and the roles of culture in social relationships and communications online. Additionally, future studies should further examine the role of product, brand knowledge, and product involvement because these constructs may affect eWOM behavior. Some brands have established reputations in consumers' minds. Loyal consumers may be attached to a brand and their levels of product and brand knowledge may be different from those who are less loyal, which could affect eWOM behaviors. If product categories in Facebook ads tended toward low involvement products, consumers may be less likely to pass them along or give to their individual network since the impact might be inconsequential. However, if consumers are highly involved with a product, they may be more likely to pass along information.

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