Trust Me, I Know! the Impact of Source Self-Enhancement on Persuasion in Word-Of-Mouth

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Three studies demonstrate that trust cues impact whether source self-enhancement impedes or enhances recipient persuasion in online word of mouth. Self-enhancement increases (decreases) persuasion in the presence of a positive (negative) trust cue. Heightened recipient perceptions of source expertise mediate the effect at high (but not low) trust.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019832/volumes/v43/NA-43

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Sharing as Caring, Scaring, Bragging and Persuading: 
Motive Inferences for Sharing Word-of-Mouth on Social Media

Chair: Tejvir Sekhon, Boston University, USA

Paper #1: Does Sharing Signal Caring? Asymmetric Interpretations of the Informativeness of Own and Others’ Social Media Communications
Elanor F. Williams, University of California San Diego, USA
Mary Steffel, University of Cincinnati, USA

Paper #2: I Do It Out of Love! The Role of Brand Attachment in Consumtion Related Bragging
Tejvir Sekhon, Boston University, USA
Barbara Bickart, Boston University, USA
Remi Trudel, Boston University, USA
Susan Fournier, Boston University, USA

Paper #3: Trust Me, I Know! The Impact of Source Self-Enhancement on Persuasion in Word-of-Mouth Communications
Grant Packard, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada
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David Wooten, University of Michigan, USA

Paper #4: Sharing Turns to Scaring: Explaining Apple Versus Android Brand Community Conflict
Mina Seraj, Bogazici University, Turkey
Robert Kozinets, York University, Canada
Aysegul Toker, Bogazici University, Turkey

SESSION OVERVIEW

Since Dichter’s (1966) seminal article on word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, extensive research has looked at what motivates consumers to share product and brand related messages (Berger 2014). Less clear, however, is how WOM recipients ascribe motives to a source and how these motive inferences impact the recipients’ attitudes and behaviors. In fact, the general consensus is that consumers trust the motives of WOM sources (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007). Literature on skepticism of communicator motives has generally focused on inferences of the persuasive intent in firm-to-consumer communications (Friestad and Wright 1994). However, such suspicion of communication motives is likely to occur for WOM sources too especially when motives for sharing are ambiguous. The papers in this session use different methodologies to examine the consequences of inferring different types of WOM motives, both on attitudes and behaviors towards sources as well as the products and brands mentioned in the WOM communication.

The first paper, by Elanor Williams and Mary Steffel, examines consumers’ intuitions about their own and others’ WOM communications on social media. Consumers see their own communications as stemming from their status as fans of a brand and as equally genuine regardless of whether they were incentivized to share them, but perceive others as more likely to be influenced by incentives and their incentivized communications as less indicative of their true preferences. This research shows that both marketers and social media users may be miscalibrated about the effects of incentives on perceptions of WOM.

Bragging via mentions of high status brands on social media is the focus of the second paper by Tejvir Sekhon, Barbara Bickart, Remi Trudel and Susan Fournier. This research examines strategies whereby the extrinsic motive inferences that recipients make based on brand mentions on social media can be attenuated. They show that consumption-related bragging does not lead to negative evaluations if the communication includes cues signaling attachment to the mentioned brand since such cues lead to intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) motive inferences for brand mentioning.

The third paper by Grant Packard, Andrew Gershoff and David Wooten examines self-enhancement by WOM sources in online reviews and the impact of trust cues in the impact of such boasting on social persuasion. They show that while negative trust cues signal self-interest and impede persuasion by boastful reviewers, positive trust cues signal expertise and enhance persuasion.

Whereas the first three papers consider individual-level motivations and inferences, the fourth paper explores the social aspects of the phenomenon as indicated in brand community-based motivations and consequences of WOM sharing. Mina Seraj, Robert Kozinets, and Aysegul Toker show how extensive sharing on social media can create pods of communally-conflicted tension as is the case with the conflict between Apple and Android brand communities.

This session offers a holistic understanding of the nature and effects of sharing, and explores ways in which suspicions about motives for WOM sharing can be enhanced or attenuated. Papers in this session raise important questions: 1) As persuasion knowledge leads to suspicion of firm-initiated communication, what is the content of consumers’ knowledge about WOM motives that leads to discounting of WOM communication? 2) How are the cues impacting motive inferences for WOM communication similar (such as financial incentives) or different (such as brand attachment) than those for firm-initiated communication?

Does Sharing Signal Caring? Asymmetric Interpretations of the Informativeness of Own and Others’ Social Media Communications

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social media has brought many changes to the way people communicate. Because the effort, care, and intentions behind such communications are hidden to other users, there may be self-other asymmetries in how these communications are interpreted. These asymmetries may be especially prominent when businesses attempt to incentivize consumers to share brand-related content on social media. This research examines how well people believe their social media communications reflect their own or others’ true preferences and whether self-other asymmetries arise when marketers incentivize those communications.

There are two ways in which people might interpret their own and others’ social media actions differently. One possibility is that consumers may interpret others’ communications as genuine reflections of their true preferences but acknowledge that their own communications might be motivated by instrumental reasons. Consistent with pluralistic ignorance, they may assume that others’ behavior matches their preferences but realize that their own preferences and behavior may not correspond (Prentice and Miller 1993). Alternatively, consumers may believe that their own communications are genuine and free from bias by external incentives but that other people are more susceptible to the lure of an incentive, as people think others are more prone to bias than themselves (Ehrlinger, Gilovich, and Ross 2005; Pronin and Kugler 2007). Consumers may believe that their own communications reflect their true preferences no mat-
Sharing as Caring, Scaring, Bragging and Persuading: Motive Inferences for Sharing Word-of-Mouth on Social Media

In a pretest, we examined people’s intuitions about why they or other people like brands on Facebook. Participants ranked the degree to which several reasons motivated them or others to like brands and businesses on Facebook. They believed being “a true fan” had a greater influence on their decisions to like a brand ($M = 2.97, SD = 1.40$) than their friends’ decisions ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.42$; $t(235) = -2.06, p = .04$), but being incentivized had more influence on their friends’ decisions ($M = 2.45, SD = 1.30$) than their own ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.33$; $t(235) = 2.93, p = .004$). This suggests that people’s interpretations of their own and others’ shares are more akin to a bias blind spot, in which people believe that their own communications are motivated by their preferences whereas others can be swayed to misrepresent their preferences. Studies 1 and 2 test this hypothesis.

Study 1 investigated whether people believe that their own or other people’s social media actions are more revealing, especially in the presence of an incentive. MTurk participants imagined they were shopping with a friend, Jill, and stopped at a chocolate shop. This shop was debuting some new cake pops. The shop encouraged them to retweet an announcement about the cake pops on Twitter, which either they did or Jill did, depending on condition. Further, for half of the participants this request included an incentive, the chance to win a $100 gift card; for the other half, there was no incentive, simply the request. Then participants imagined they were considering buying either the cake pops or some chocolate-covered pretzels as a treat for the person who retweeted the announcement (themselves or Jill). Participants were less likely to choose the cake pops for Jill when she retweeted the ad with an incentive ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.89$) than without one ($M = 5.85, SD = 1.33$; $t(181.35) = 3.86, p < .001$). However, they were equally likely to purchase the cake pops for themselves regardless of whether or not there was an incentive ($M = 4.86, SD = 1.96$, and $M = 5.03, SD = 2.05$, respectively; $t(199) = -.60, p = .55$). Thus, people indicate that an incentive can lead others to misrepresent their preferences, but that they are not likely to be so swayed.

Study 2 examined whether people believe that others are less likely to behave in line with their professed preferences than they themselves are, when those preferences are elicited by an incentive. Participants imagined they were planning on attending a music festival with a friend, and they or their friend shared a photo on Facebook to spread the word about the festival. Half of the participants knew that the event sponsors were offering discounted admission for sharing the photo; for the other half, there was no mention of a discount. Participants indicated how likely the person who shared the photo would be to buy an advance ticket to another, similar music festival. Participants rated their friend as less likely to attend the second event when an incentive was offered to share the photo ($M = 4.93, SD = 1.50$) than when no incentive was offered ($M = 5.59, SD = 1.28$; $t(200) = -3.38, p = .001$). However, participants indicated they were equally likely to attend the second event regardless of the incentive ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.81$ and $M = 4.87, SD = 1.75$, respectively; $t(197) = -.30, p = .77$). Consumers believe they are more likely to behave in line with their social media shares regardless of circumstance, whereas only others’ unincentivized shares are indicative of future behavior.

Our findings show that consumers believe their own social media communications reflect their true preferences regardless of whether those communications were incentivized, but others convey less about their true preferences when they are incentivized than when they are not. Further, they believe that future brand interactions will follow this same pattern: one’s own behavior will match their social media actions, whereas incentives distort others’ messages so that they are not predictive of their behavior. This research will help researchers and practitioners understand what drives consumers to share brand-related material via social media, and the inferences they draw from others’ such shares. This work will shed new light on the nature of social media and what people share and believe they are sharing with the world.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In line with Veblen’s (1899) conceptualization of conspicuous consumption, the consumption literature has mainly focused on self-presentation via conspicuous ‘display’ of status signaling possessions to an immediate audience (Han, Nunes, and Dreze 2010). With the advent of social media, however, consumers have an opportunity to craft their self-presentations for a much wider audience via explicit mentions of brands (Schau and Gilly 2003). We define consumption related bragging as conveying an association with a brand that signals status to a particular reference group by mentioning the brand in a message. While consumption-related bragging can create desired status associations, it can also lead to less than favorable impressions of both of the communicator and potentially, of the brand itself (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013). In this research, we examine one way to attenuate the negative evaluations that others make based on consumption related bragging. Specifically, we show that mentioning a high status brand in social media communications does not lead to negative evaluations if the message includes cues signaling attachment to the brand.

Research has shown that if the communication context provides an explanation for bragging, then negative evaluations become less likely (Holtgraves 2002). Kirmani and Zhu (2007) also demonstrated that certain message cues can provide context to a communication making ulterior motives less salient. We suggest that people interpret consumption related bragging in the context of the communicator’s relationship with the mentioned brand. Fournier (1998) showed that consumers can form strong relationships with brands. The strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self is defined as brand attachment (Park et al. 2010). Consumers are attached to brands that are inherently tied to their self-concept and thus, these brands are likely to be mentioned for self-expression purposes (Thomson, Mackinnis, and Park 2005). People have an inherent tendency to express themselves and self-expression is intrinsically rewarding (Tamir and Mitchell 2012). When brand attachment is conveyed in a message, the audience may infer that the communicator is authentic and is attempting to express his true self. Therefore, inclusion of cues indicating attachment to the mentioned brand leads an audience to infer intrinsic motives (such as self-expression or personal enjoyment) and not extrinsic motives (such as status signaling). These intrinsic inferences mitigate any negative evaluation the audience might have made in the absence of the attachment cues.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted three studies in the context of tweets mentioning high status brands. Based on our exploratory research (Sekhon et al. 2015) and reviews of the literatures on brand attachment (Park et al. 2010), and consumer brand relationships (Batra Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Fournier 1998), we identified and pretested cues that indicate a consumer’s attachment to a brand. In study 1, we tested the effect of attachment cues on the impressions of consumers who mention the high status brand Mer-
cedes in social media communications. MTurk participants (n=239) were asked to imagine that they were checking their Twitter feed and saw a tweet from a casual acquaintance named Pat. Then they saw a tweet either with or without attachment cues and responded to a series of questions regarding perceptions of Pat’s attachment to the brand, an assessment of Pat’s motives for tweeting and attitude towards Pat. We manipulated absence (presence) of attachment cues with the tweet—“It (She) is looking so good after a wash #MyCar (#MyLove) #Mercedes pic.twitter.com/26WiMS5v”.

As hypothesized, presence of attachment cues led to more positive attitude towards the communicator (M=4.9) as compared to the no cue condition (M=4.4; p<0.05). Inferr ed motives for tweeting were marginally more intrinsic in the cue condition. The effect of attachment cues on attitude was partially mediated through inferred motives.

Study 2 followed the same procedure as Study 1 with the only difference being that the tweet the participants saw either mentioned a high status (Mercedes) or a low status (Ford) car brand based on a pretest. MTurk participants (n=98) read the same tweet mentioning either Mercedes or Ford, and either with or without an attachment cue. Then, they responded to the same series of questions as in study 1. We found that the attitude towards the communicator mentioning Ford was not different in the cue (M=5.12) and the no cue (M = 5.24) condition. However, attitude towards the communicator mentioning Mercedes was significantly more positive in the cue condition (M=5.4) as compared to the no cue condition (M = 4.1; p<0.01). Similarly, the inferred motives for tweeting were perceived as more intrinsic in the cue condition (M=3.9) as compared to the no cue condition (M=2.9; p<0.01). We also found evidence for moderated mediation such that the presence of attachment cues led to inference of intrinsic motives, which subsequently impacted the attitude towards the communicator mentioning Mercedes but not towards the communicator mentioning Ford.

In study 3 (n=301), we replicated the results across multiple high status car brands (Mercedes, BMW, and Audi) with a different set of tweets. We manipulated absence (presence) of attachment cues with a different tweet—“Driving around on Friday night #Mercedes/BMW/Audi (LoveMyMercedes/LoveMyBMW/LoveMyAudi). Presence of attachment cues led to more positive attitude towards the communicator (M= 5.6) as compared to the no cue condition (M=4.9; p<0.01). There was no main or interaction effect of the brand suggesting that this effect holds true for mention of any high status brand. Similarly, the inferred motives for tweeting were perceived as being more intrinsic in the cue condition (M=4.4) as compared to the no cue condition (M=3.3; p<0.01). The indirect effect of attachment cues on attitude towards the communicator through inferred motives was significant. However, there was no direct effect of attachment cues on attitude.

Overall, our findings show that brand attachment cues lead to intrinsic motive inferences for brand mentioning mitigating negative evaluations. Future studies will examine the boundary conditions of this effect pertaining to the communicator, the recipient and the communication medium. This research can be a first step towards developing a theory that can guide practitioners on how to encourage brand mentions in ways that can enhance brand value.

**Trust Me, I Know! The Impact of Source Self-Enhancement on Persuasion in Word-of-Mouth**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

By some accounts, boasting online has become a social epidemic (Bernstein 2012). For example, over half of people in one recent survey indicate they boast about their travel exploits online even before they return home (Travelmail Reporter 2012). A recent book documents the pervasiveness of online ‘humblebrags’—people who post information using false modesty as cover for their self-enhancing boasts (Wittels 2012). What’s more, a growing body of evidence suggests that self-enhancement is a central motive in the transmission of word of mouth information (cf. Berger 2014 review). For example, a consumer returning from a vacation may post a review of a hotel that includes self-enhancing (i.e. boastful) information about herself, such as positive boasts of her travel expertise or experience.

But what are the consequences of source boasting on word of mouth recipients? Much research finds that people have negative perceptions of people who make self-enhancing statements about their own abilities (Godfrey, Jones, and Lord 1986; Robinson, Johnson, and Shields 1995; Sedikides, Gregg, and Hart 2008). This suggests that self-enhancement might decrease the persuasiveness of a boastful source of product information. Yet other work reveals that people seldom perceive ‘ulterior motives’ in consumer word of mouth sources (Dellarocas 2003; Henning-Thurau and Walsh 2003), suggesting that boasting could be idle in this context. However, it is also plausible that consumers might perceive information that comes from a boastful source as especially useful. Boastful claims of consumer experience or status might enhance persuasion by influencing perceptions of source expertise, important information that is generally scarce in technology-mediated settings (Dellarocas 2003). To sum, consumer boasting in word-of-mouth transmission may be idle, impede or even improve word of mouth persuasion.

The present research predicts that trust cues are central to determining the meaning of source self-enhancement in word of mouth persuasion. We leverage and extend the persuasion knowledge model (Fristad and Wright 1994), arguing that in addition to negative trust cues, positive trust cues can have an important impact on recipient perceptions and persuasion. First, because consumer (firm) persuasion agents are perceived as normatively other- (self-) interested (Fristad and Wright 1994; Henning-Thurau and Walsh 2003), boasting will have a null (negative) effect on their persuasiveness. Similar to firm persuasion agents, self-enhancing consumer sources of word of mouth information will be perceived as motivated by self-interest in the presence of a negative trust cue, impeding their persuasion. However, because trustworthy endorsers are likely to be unthinkingly accepted (Priester and Petty 2003), given a positive trust cue, self-enhancing consumer boasting will be accepted as a signal of source expertise, enhancing persuasion. Three studies examine these predictions.

Study 1 provides an initial test of whether the normative motives inferred for different sources of product information (firm vs. consumer persuasion agents) act as trust cues resulting in different baseline responses to persuasion attempts. Participants were presented with an online product opinion in a 2 (source boasting: high, low) x 2 (source: consumer, firm agent) design. Boasting decreased persuasion when the source was normatively associated with distrust (firm agent). However, the same boastful statements failed to impede persuasion when the source was normatively associated with trust (consumer).

Study 2 tests our prediction that the valence of a trust cue may have important consequences in interpersonal persuasion. The study manipulated a known cue of trust in word of mouth: source-recipient similarity (Karmaker and Tormala 2009; Rogers 1995). Participants were presented with a consumer product review in a 2 (source boasting: high, low) x 2 (source-recipient similarity: high, low) design. Given high (low) demographic similarity between the reviewer and recipient, trust was heightened (attenuated), leading to increased (decreased) persuasion by a boastful reviewer.
In Study 3, we directly manipulate the trustworthiness of the source to isolate the process through which trust cues moderate the impact of self-enhancement on persuasion. We predict that the presence of trust cues result in a “change of meaning” (Friestad and Wright 1994) of source boasts of consumer expertise. Trust was manipulated to high or low levels using a “rate the reviewer” score for the source prior to the source’s product review, which was either high or low in source self-enhancement. Given high manipulated trust, the consumer accepted the boastful source’s claims of category expertise with less scrutiny than in the low trust condition (as measured by processing time; Priester and Petty 1995), leading to heightened persuasion. Under low trust, recipients rejected the source’s boastful claims of consumer expertise and their persuasion attempt. Bootstrap tests confirm moderated mediation of the relationship between boasting, trust cues and persuasion by recipient perceptions of source expertise.

Overall, the results suggest that modesty is not in itself a virtue—or immodesty a vice—when it comes to interpersonal persuasion. Trust cues modify the recipient’s perceptions of source boasting, determining whether self-enhancement is idle, impedes, or increases persuasion. We hope our research may help inform consumers as they evaluate word of mouth information and managers who wish to optimize online social persuasion, and guide future research exploring the impact of source self-enhancement on consumer judgment and decision-making.

Sharing Turns to Scaring: Explaining Apple versus Android Brand Community Conflict

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social media creates extensive sharing possibilities for people to act in collective fashion. This sharing has been widely noted in the online interactions and experiences of people who assemble virtually around common consumption interests, causes, or brands (Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015; Kozinets 1997; Rheingold 1993; Von Hippel 2005). Online deeds related to sharing knowledge, experience, ideas, and emotions intensify through the proliferation of online communal engagement; yet these sharing practices also trigger occasions of conflict. Why, we ask in this research, do members of one online group attack the members of another? What motives can we infer?

Although intra-communal conflict has been discussed in a peripheral sense in research focusing on communities related to distance running (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013), culinary practices (de Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga 2009), and premium cola consumption (Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015), the discussion of inter-communal conflict where divergent communities challenge and attack each other’s consumption choices, convictions, and even identities is an emergent field.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) provide relevant conceptualization for the activity in their discussion of consciousness of kind and its apparent consequence, oppositional brand loyalty. Oppositional brand loyalty is defined as a social process that propagates the members of a community to demarcate themselves as different and unique by defining their identities based on their brand utilization as well as their anti-brand attitudes and avoidance of rival brands. This “us” vs. “them” theme is developed in the discussion of cola wars by Muniz and Hamer (2001). However, there is still much conceptual work to be done to follow these pioneering efforts. In particular, we seek to define inter-communal tension as well as the factors that aggravate the reciprocated practices of virtual violence among opposing brand communities.

Our research uses a 38-month long participative netnographic and ethnographic engagement with the phenomenon to study the conflict between Apple and Android brand communities. The engagement encompasses both online and face-to-face settings. The Apple versus Android site provides a clear, contemporary, and technology-brand driven example of inter-communal brand conflict. Personal relationships between people turn into collective conflict through an aggressive rhetoric that is exacerbated by the idealized personality differences that manifest within Apple and Android communities.

How can this brand-related aggression be so widespread and so vitriolic? Certainly, the tension between Apple and Android users can be partly explained by out-group/in-group tensions, social identity and realistic group conflict theories (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Campbell 1965; Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015; Levine and Campbell 1972). The norms of these relationships have also been culturally shaped and shared by identity-centric mass advertising communications such as Apple’s Mac versus PC guy commercials and the Samsung ads mocking iPhone’s ‘next big thing’ followers. Consistent with advertising portrayals, Apple users tends to be more sociable, loyal, and elitist, while Android users are more individualistic, curious, frustrated and aggressive in nature.

The product of this cultural engineering is that adversarial and oppositional brand relationships in this technology sphere are both attractive norms and behavioral frames. Community members build on these tensions, enjoying the escalating tension in rhetoric that facilitates the community to further define its ethos and identity through conflict as well as to augment its intellectual, social, and cultural value through increasing the possibilities for multidimensional human engagement, including aggression. Thus, autotelic brand violence provides its participants not only with hostility and anger, but humor, identity, communality, and pleasure as well.

Our conceptualization draws on Schinkel (2004), who discusses the concept of autotelic violence as a phenomenon where the means and ends to violence merge. In autotelic violence, violence becomes a performance, aggressive acts happen for the sake of its own intrinsic pleasure rather than in order to reach a specific objective. We hypothesize in this research that social media tendency to reflect and represent personalities amplifies the tendency for autotelic violence to occur. Because individuals are performing for their community, which acts as their audience, a charged and intensified inter-communal brand rivalry is created, where differences are salient and aggressive interaction the norm. Unlike oppositional brand loyalty, challenges in these personal and social media settings occur not only for the sake of challenging brand choices of opposite groups or daring to convert them to the supported brand, but also as entertainment.

From this, we theorize that the conflict we observe is motivated by autotelic violence, a culture of widespread oppositional ideologies, and capitalistic competitive mind-sets. As each side is prod- ded to respond, conflict endogenously generates and distinguishes opposing idealized communal personalities that reciprocally elicit both auxiliary inter-communal conflict and consistent brand identity-related responses.

The research provides theoretical contributions to brand and consumer research literatures in two broad areas. First, it refines our conception of oppositional brand loyalty by developing the concept of inter-communal conflict based in autotelic violence. Second, it explores the relationship between advertised brand identity and communal personality differences, specifically locating them in the context of social media reciprocal conflict. Why do members of one brand using group attack members of another? A culturally informed answer is that they do it because they identify with oppositional
brand images in advertising, they internalize oppositional brand identities, they are empowered by their brand communal audience, and because they find the aggression entertaining.

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