

## The consumer as advocate: Self-relevance, culture, and word-of-mouth

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**Abstract** This research examined the relation between self-relevance and word-of-mouth (WOM). The results of two studies suggest consumers are more likely to provide WOM for products that are relevant to self-concept than for more utilitarian products. There was also some indication that WOM was biased, in the sense that consumers exaggerated the benefits of self-relevant products compared to utilitarian products. Finally, self-relevance had a greater impact on WOM in individualist cultures than collectivist cultures, consistent with differences in the way self-concept is typically construed by these groups. Implications for marketing strategies concerning WOM are discussed.

**Keywords** Word of-mouth · Motivation · Self-concept · Culture

Imagine a consumer who has a shopping cart filled with a variety of different products. Some of the products in her cart are valued strictly for their utilitarian features (e.g., Tide is good at getting clothes clean), while other products are valued for more personal reasons (e.g., the bottle of wine she has tells others she is a person of sophistication and good taste). The current research examines the kinds of products consumers are likely to give WOM about, and more specifically whether WOM is more likely for self-relevant products than utilitarian products. We also examined whether the WOM

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generated for self-relevant products might be biased in a direction that has positive implications for consumer self-perceptions. Finally, this study examined whether culture moderates the effects of self-relevance on WOM.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is an informal mode of communication between private parties concerning the evaluation of goods and services (Dichter, 1966; Singh, 1988). It has been found to facilitate the sale of a wide range of products, including: professional services (Smith and Meyer, 1980), movies (Mizerski, 1982), automobiles (Swan and Oliver, 1989), and travel (Gitelson and Crompton, 1983). Other research suggests that consumer choice is especially likely to be influenced by WOM when the purchase is important (Lutz and Reilly, 1973). Consumers seem to appreciate WOM at least partly because it is considered more reliable and trustworthy than other sources of information (Day, 1971). Marketing practitioners also recognize the general importance of WOM, for instance suggesting it is “the most important marketing element that exists” (Alsop, 1984), and “the most powerful force in the marketplace” (Silverman, 1997).

Given the influence WOM seems to exert on consumer choice, companies have a good deal to gain by stimulating positive WOM about their products. However, this is not always easy to do. Consumers are knowledgeable about numerous products, but only give WOM about a subset of these items. Moreover, there is some indication that consumers are unlikely to engage in positive WOM when they have a good product experience, relative to their willingness to engage in negative WOM following product failure (TARP, 1979). While WOM is certainly positively related to product evaluations (Holmes and Lett, 1977; Swan and Oliver, 1989), such evaluations in-and-of-themselves are not always sufficient to initiate positive WOM. For instance, Holmes and Lett (1977) found that only 38% of respondents with favorable attitudes towards coffee actually talked about this product with other people.

One reason consumers often fail to provide WOM about products they like may be that it is relatively effortful to engage in such behavior, and therefore only consumers who are reasonably motivated to provide WOM are likely to do so (Chaiken and Trope, 1999). The current studies examined the effects of self-presentational motives on the likelihood consumers would engage in WOM. We predicted and show that consumers are more likely to provide WOM when the product is of personal significance than when the product is utilitarian in nature. This is because WOM concerning self-relevant products serves as a means of self-presentation, whereas WOM about utilitarian products does not provide the same social benefits. In addition, the self-relevance of the product led to a positive bias in WOM, where consumers exaggerated the benefits of the products they liked and identified with.

Consumers are most likely to engage in the effort required by WOM behavior when they are highly motivated (Ajzen and Sexton, 1999; Fazio and Towles-Schwen, 1999). Accuracy goals are likely to be an important source of motivation for communicating product information to other consumers (i.e., the need to express impartial/valid opinions). However, *impression goals* may also be important in driving WOM behavior (Schlenker, 1980). In addition to increasing the willingness to engage in effortful activities, impression goals often serve to bias the views that people express in a manner that fits the current social context. Rather than adhering strictly to the facts or to their own private opinions, impression motivated individuals express their beliefs more selectively (Chen et al., 1996; Fazio and Towles-Schwen, 1999). In particular, impression motivation can lead individuals to alter their views in a way that is likely

to create a positive impression, or self-promote, when interacting with others (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980). This is consistent with Dichter's (1966) suggestion that providing WOM is often a means of gaining attention, and showing connoisseurship.

Prior research shows that some products are more likely to convey information about their owners than others. For instance, Shavitt (1990) suggests that while consumers value some products primarily for utilitarian reasons, other products are valued because of the social impressions they convey (e.g., social status), or due to the fact that the product serves an important self-esteem function (makes consumers feel attractive or smart). Belk (1988) suggests that consumers identify with products or brands to the degree that the product actually becomes part of the consumer's extended self. Other research suggests consumers tend to value possessions that are personally and socially meaningful more than products valued for utilitarian or financial reasons (Richins, 1994). Finally, the broad notion of symbolic consumption recognizes the idea that products are valued partly because they are symbolic of the consumer's personality or identity in some way (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). In the context of the current research concerns, products that are self-relevant seem to offer consumers an opportunity to communicate something important about themselves to others by providing WOM, compared to products that are more utilitarian in nature.

In addition to motivating greater WOM, self-relevant products also offer consumers an opportunity to self-promote. Individuals often adjust their behavior according to self-presentational goals, despite their privately held beliefs, in order to convey a more positive self-image to others (e.g., Chen et al., 1996; Fazio and Towels-Schwen, 1999). Initial evidence that consumers are willing to exaggerate product claims in the interests of self-promotion is provided by a series of studies that examined consumer lying (Sengupta et al., 2002). These studies show consumers were willing to claim a counterfeit watch they owned was actually a genuine name brand product (e.g., a real Swatch), in order to create a positive impression and gain social status. These findings suggest consumers might also be tempted to exaggerate when they provide WOM, especially when consumers own and identify with the product. We examined this *bias hypothesis* in a relative sense rather than an absolute sense. Specifically, we compared the valence of WOM for self-relevant products and utilitarian products, where these product-types were initially rated as equally good. If consumers are completely accurate when giving WOM, no difference in WOM valence should be observed between the two product types because there is no difference in the initial evaluations. Therefore, any tendency for consumers to give more positive WOM for self-relevant products over utilitarian products can be attributed to bias.

Finally, we also examined whether the effects of self-relevance would be moderated by culture, in order to provide an additional test of our conceptual model. The construal of self-concept has been one of the predominant interests in research examining cultural differences in behavior (see Heine et al., 1999). This body of research suggests that eastern and western cultures differ in whether they are collectivist or individualist in focus. Collectivist cultures tend to emphasize the self in relation to others and promote social harmony (interdependent self), whereas individualist cultures place more emphasis on standing out, differentiating oneself from others, and seeking personal recognition (independent self). "The nail that stands out gets pounded down" in collectivist cultures, whereas "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" in individualist cultures

Means for Self-relevant versus utilitarian products in Study 1

<i>Measure</i>	Self-relevant ( <i>n</i> = 36)	Utilitarian ( <i>n</i> = 32)
Positive WOM	3.42	1.56
Negative WOM	1.33	0.47

(Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 224). This literature suggests that the self-relevance of a product should be less important in motivating WOM in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures. That is, collectivist consumers are less likely to see WOM as an opportunity to gain attention and praise from others compared to consumers from individualist cultures.

Two studies were conducted. The general approach was to give consumers an opportunity to engage in WOM about a product they generally liked and were knowledgeable about, while manipulating whether the target product was related to their self-concept or was utilitarian in nature. Study 1 examined whether self-relevance would be related to the amount and valence of WOM given in a relatively naturalistic experimental setting. Study 2 further compared the effects of self-relevance on WOM in individualist and collectivist cultures.

## Study 1

### Method

*Participants and design.* The participants were 68 students in an introductory marketing class at a Canadian university. A Product-Type (self-relevant, utilitarian) x Valence (positive WOM, negative WOM) mixed factorial design was employed, where product type was manipulated between subject and WOM valence was a within subject factor.

*Procedure.* Data collection occurred in two stages. Two months prior to the experimental session, all the subjects completed an initial survey in a classroom setting, where they were asked to identify a product (including the brand name) they perceived to be self-related (“tells others who you are as a person”), and also a product they perceived to be primarily utilitarian (“serves mainly a practical, utilitarian purpose”). These terms were defined for subjects. Importantly, subjects were further instructed to select only products they evaluated as “reasonable to positive.” This restriction was imposed to hold attitudes constant across product conditions. The stipulation that product attitudes should be positive was consistent with the main focus of this research. The initial responses were later used to manipulate the product type variable in an idiographic manner. This method has proven useful in personality research (Bem and Allen, 1974), and has the advantage of being sensitive to the unique and idiosyncratic nature of self-concept (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

In the second stage of the procedure, subjects were randomly assigned to either the utilitarian or self-relevant product condition. Each experimental session included a participant, as well as a confederate who posed as another student participating in the study. The confederate was blind to the purpose of the research and was used to probe for WOM. At the start of the session, the experimenter explained that she was still setting up the study materials, and asked that they wait in a separate room until she was ready to begin. This procedure was used to create an opportunity for subjects to

provide WOM in a situation that appeared to be outside the context of the actual study. Before leaving the room, the experimenter mentioned the study she was preparing was concerned with general opinions about a particular type of product, and she suggested that subjects start thinking about what they would say while they were waiting. The product she mentioned was either the self-relevant or utilitarian product subjects had indicated in the initial survey weeks before (according to the condition).

After the experimenter left the room, the confederate began to probe for information about the general product category at first, and then asked about the specific target brand if the subject did not mention it spontaneously. In accordance with Walker and Beckerle (1987), the confederate began by establishing eye contact with the subject, and then probed for the specific brand by asking, “Is there a specific brand that you’re familiar with?” If subjects mentioned any brands other than the target brand, the confederate would further ask if they had heard of the target brand. Because some of the products were relatively common, and therefore generally well-known to consumers (e.g., Tide laundry detergent), there was some concern that it would seem strange for the confederate to ask for product information. In order to make this more plausible, the confederate told subjects he/she was an exchange student, and did not know much about the target brand. All the confederates we used naturally spoke English with an accent. The conversations lasted approximately 5 to 7 minutes and were unobtrusively audio-taped.

After the conversation, the experimenter re-entered the room, and asked subjects to complete a short questionnaire about the target product. Subjects indicated whether the target product was primarily self-relevant or utilitarian. In addition, they rated their product attitudes (mainly negative to mainly positive) and knowledge (not at all to very much) using scales that ranged from  $-3$  to  $+3$ . Finally, subjects rated ( $-3$  to  $+3$ ) the extent to which giving WOM about this product would convey an impression of being “with-it” or would make them “look good.” These responses were averaged to create an index for the smart shopper motives ( $r = .83$ ).

*Coding word-of-mouth.* The taped conversations were later transcribed and the responses were independently coded for instances of positive and negative WOM by the first author and an additional coder. Both coders were blind to condition. Any statements of praise, positive recommendations, or other statements that had positive implications for the brand were coded as positive evaluations (e.g., “Guinness is awesome”). Any complaints or concerns, negative recommendations, or other statements that implied a negative view of the brand were coded as negative evaluations (e.g., “If you’re a business person who needs to make calls during business hours, another phone plan would be more suitable”). Agreement between coders was 87% and 82% for positive WOM and negative WOM, respectively. All disagreements were resolved through further discussion between the coders.

## Results and discussion

*Initial analyses.* A check on whether subjects still considered the target product to be self-relevant or utilitarian showed that all but two responses were consistent with the pretest. The exception was two subjects who had moved from the utilitarian condition in the pretest to the self-relevant condition. These subjects were reassigned to the self-relevant condition. (It should be noted that the findings are virtually identical if

these two subjects are removed from the analyses.) Product attitudes were generally positive ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), and did not differ across experimental conditions ( $p > .70$ ). Consumer knowledge was also similar across conditions ( $p > .25$ ). Finally, subjects indicated they were more motivated to demonstrate they were smart shoppers for self-related products than utilitarian products ( $M_s = 4.60$  vs.  $3.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

*Main analyses.* A product-type (self-relevant, utilitarian)  $\times$  valence (positive-WOM, negative-WOM) mixed ANOVA was computed to test our hypotheses. This revealed a significant main effect of valence [ $F(1,66) = 21.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ], suggesting that subjects provided more positive than negative WOM [ $M_s = 3.42$  vs.  $1.33$ ]. Consistent with predictions, there was also a significant main effect of product-type, indicating consumers provided more WOM for self-related than utilitarian products [ $M_s = 4.75$  vs.  $2.03$ ,  $F(1,66) = 14.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Finally, there was some tendency for consumers to offer more positive WOM than negative WOM for self-related products [ $M_s = 3.42$  vs.  $1.33$ ] compared to utilitarian products [ $M_s = 1.56$  vs.  $.47$ ], however the predicted interaction was not reliable [ $F(1,66) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .15$ ]. Therefore, any tendency for consumers to exaggerate the benefits of self-related products over utilitarian products was unreliable in this study.

*Summary.* Overall, the findings in this initial study were consistent with the prediction that consumers would be more motivated to engage in WOM for self-relevant products than for utilitarian products. Importantly, this finding could not be explained by differences in attitudes or product knowledge. However, there was little support for the bias hypothesis. Although subjects indicated they were particularly motivated to show they were smart shoppers when giving WOM for self-relevant products, the relative valence of the WOM did not differ reliably across product type. However, there was some possibility that our ability to test the bias hypothesis was limited in the current study. This is because it was not clear whether or not subjects actually owned the target products they discussed. There is reason to believe that WOM is more likely to be biased for products that consumers actually own (Barone, et al., 1999). We therefore conducted an additional study that specifically limited consumers to products they actually owned, in order to provide a more direct test of the bias hypothesis. Study 2 also examined whether the effects of self-relevance on WOM would depend on whether consumers were members of relatively individualistic or collectivistic cultures. As mentioned above, these cultural differences should act to moderate the effects of self-relevance on WOM.

## Study 2

### Method

*Subjects and design.* This study used a Culture (individualist, collectivist)  $\times$  Product-Type (self-relevant, utilitarian)  $\times$  Valence (positive WOM, negative WOM) mixed design. Culture and product-type were between subject factors while valence was a within subject factor. Participants were introductory marketing students from universities located in Canada ( $n = 68$ ) and Singapore ( $n = 84$ ). According to Hofstede's Individualism Index (1991), Canadians score closer to the individualist end of the continuum, whereas Singaporeans are more collectivist.

Means for self-relevant versus utilitarian products in study 2

Measure	Canadian sample		Singaporean sample	
	Self-relevant (n = 34)	Utilitarian (n = 34)	Self-relevant (n = 45)	Utilitarian (n = 41)
Positive WOM	4.26	3.18	2.36	2.10
Negative WOM	0.65	0.71	0.18	0.20

*Procedure.* A survey methodology was used in the current study. Identical procedures were followed in Singapore and Canada. Each subject was randomly assigned to either the self-relevant or utilitarian product condition, and was asked to identify a product (and its brand) that fit the product condition to which they had been assigned. The product types were again defined for subjects. In addition, when choosing a target product, subjects were instructed to consider only products that they actually owned and evaluated positively. Subjects were then asked to imagine talking with another student who was thinking of buying the same product, and write down what they would say about the target product. These responses were later coded for positive and negative WOM. Subjects were also asked to rate their product attitudes and product knowledge, and indicated the price they paid for the target product. The latter measure was included to control for any price differences across product conditions. Finally, smart shopper motives were assessed by having subjects rate the degree to which their WOM conveyed an impression of being “with it” and would make them “look good” ( $r = .53$ ).

## Results and discussion

*Initial analyses.* Once again the product conditions did not differ on measures of attitude or product knowledge ( $ps > .20$ ). The prices paid for self-relevant and utilitarian products were also similar ( $p > .20$ ). Finally, smart shopper motives were higher for self-related products than utilitarian products [ $Ms = 4.42$  vs.  $3.76$ ,  $F(1, 148) = 6.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ].

*Main analyses.* A product-type (self-relevant, utilitarian)  $\times$  culture (individualist, collectivist)  $\times$  valence (positive-WOM, negative-WOM) mixed ANOVA revealed a number of significant effects. A valence main effect indicated that subjects provided more positive WOM than negative WOM [ $Ms = 3.72$  vs.  $.68$ ,  $F(1,150) = 172.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. There were also significant main effects for product-type and culture [ $F(1,150) = 2.88$  and  $28.14$ ,  $ps < .10$  and  $.001$ ], which were qualified by a significant product-type  $\times$  culture interaction [ $F(1,150) = 28.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Consistent with predictions, individualist consumers provided more WOM for self-related products than for utilitarian products [ $Ms = 4.91$  vs.  $3.89$ ], while collectivist consumers provided less WOM regardless of the product type [ $Ms = 2.54$  vs.  $2.30$ ]. In addition, there was a marginally significant product-type  $\times$  valence interaction [ $F(1,150) = 3.38$ ,  $p < .07$ ], which suggested WOM was more positive for self-relevant products than for utilitarian products. This finding was consistent with the bias hypothesis. Finally, there was also evidence that WOM valence was a function of culture. A significant valence  $\times$  culture interaction [ $F(1,150) = 6.74$ ,  $p < .01$ ] suggested that WOM provided by

individualist (Canadian) consumers was generally more positive [ $M_s = 3.72$  vs.  $0.68$  for positive vs. negative WOM] than WOM from collectivist (Singaporean) consumers [ $M_s = 2.23$  vs.  $0.19$ ]. Since attitudes and product knowledge were similar across these cultural groups, this finding suggests consumers from individualistic cultures tended to exaggerate WOM more than consumers from collectivistic cultures, as predicted. Moreover, the threeway interaction with product-type was not significant ( $p > .25$ ), meaning that individualists exaggerated more than collectivists regardless of product type.

*Summary.* Overall, the current study replicated the findings of Study 1 by providing additional evidence that self-relevance increased the overall amount of WOM. In addition, the evidence in Study 2 suggested that self-relevance, to some extent, caused consumers to exaggerate product benefits relative to the WOM provided for utilitarian products. It is important to emphasize that these effects were observed despite the fact that self-relevant and utilitarian products were similar in terms of consumer evaluations, knowledge, and the price paid. There was also evidence that culture was important in determining both the total and valence of WOM. Consumers from collectivist cultures were somewhat less likely to distinguish between self-relevant and utilitarian products when giving WOM compared to consumers from individualistic cultures. In fact, collectivistic consumers tended to give less WOM than individualist consumers in general. Finally, WOM valence also seemed to vary by culture, such that individualists were more likely to exaggerate the benefits of products they owned than were collectivists.

## General discussion

This research suggests that the self-relevance of a product can influence both the overall amount of WOM and the valence of WOM. Evidence for the latter was observed mainly in Study 2, where it was clearer that subjects actually owned the products they described. These findings were generally supportive of our predictions concerning the role of impression goals in determining WOM behavior (Chen et al., 1996). Consistent with predictions, self-relevance increased the amount of WOM consumers gave about the products they liked.

Study 2 provided some additional evidence of cultural differences in WOM. This seems to be the first evidence of such differences reported in the WOM literature. Importantly, the cultural WOM differences we observed here were largely consistent with the general finding that members of individualist cultures tend to be more focused on individual expressions of self-concept than members of collectivist cultures (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Individualist consumers expressed themselves indirectly by providing more WOM for products that were relevant to their self-concept than for products that were utilitarian in nature. In contrast, collectivist consumers did not distinguish between self-relevant and utilitarian products when giving WOM. In fact, they seemed less motivated to provide WOM overall. There was also a greater tendency for individualist consumers to exaggerate the benefits of the products they owned compared to collectivist cultures. This was true regardless of whether the products were self-relevant or utilitarian. This finding is consistent with the predicted cultural differences in the sense that individualist consumers were more likely to exaggerate the



benefits of products they owned, whereas collectivist consumers were more balanced in their WOM (but see qualifications below).

This research extends our understanding of WOM behaviour beyond the idea that WOM simply reflects product attitudes or consumer knowledge. Past research shows that attitudes are reasonably good predictors of WOM (Holmes and Lett, 1977; Swan and Oliver, 1989), and that consumers generally see WOM as trustworthy and accurate (Busch and Houston, 1985; Day, 1971). Ironically, other research suggests that WOM can actually be quite inaccurate (Allport and Postman, 1946). For instance, the details of WOM can be lost through levelling, and/or distorted or embellished through sharpening. Levelling and sharpening are processes that are usually viewed as limitations in the consumer's *ability* to process information accurately (e.g., memory loss or a lack of knowledge). However, the current research suggests that *self-promotional motives* can also bias WOM, in addition to any cognitive sources of error. Those who provide WOM may be less impartial than consumers assume, especially when the products are self-relevant to the WOM provider.

The current research also has practical implications in terms of providing some insight into situations in which consumers are more or less likely to provide positive WOM. Although consumers may maintain positive attitudes towards a product, they may or may not express such opinions to others. The current research suggests that WOM is more likely when the product is considered self-relevant rather than utilitarian, and therefore WOM marketing strategies seem more appropriate in the former product category than the latter. In addition, the current findings suggest marketers may also benefit from creating or strengthening associations between their brand and consumer self-concept. This idea is worth investigating in future research. Of course, many marketers have already developed successful advertising campaigns that create links between their products and the consumer's sense of self. These ads are mainly aimed at changing consumer attitudes towards the ad and the product by associating the brand with positive self-images. The current research suggests that these efforts may also encourage WOM. Finally, the cultural differences observed in WOM suggest that it may be necessary for marketers to adopt different strategies in promoting their products across cultures. Self-concept was less likely to increase WOM in the collectivist culture we examined than in the individualist culture.

Our research focused on self-relevance and impression goals in WOM. However, WOM is also likely to be driven by other goals. For instance, accuracy goals may lead to a more balanced view of the pros and cons when providing WOM. Such goals might be particularly important when the costs of making a bad recommendation are high. Future research should examine a broader set of WOM motives. In addition, we examined only products that consumers evaluated positively. This raises the question of whether similar or different factors influence whether consumers engage in negative WOM when they dislike products.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current studies. For instance, the WOM in Study 2 was hypothetical in nature. These subjects did not actually provide WOM to the other consumer described in the scenario. In addition, the predicted cultural differences in WOM were interpreted in terms of the individualism versus collectivism that is typically associated with Western versus Eastern cultures. Despite the fact the results generally matched the predictions it is conceivable that the observed differences are related to other differences between the two cultures. In

addition, the basis for determining whether WOM was biased or not depended on the idea that, given initial attitudes were similar for utilitarian and self-relevant products, there should have been no difference in the valence of the WOM for these products if subjects were completely accurate. This interpretation relies on the assumption that attitudes towards the utilitarian and self-relevant products were equivalent, which was verified for both studies. Also, Study 2 suggested that utilitarian and self-relevant products were similar in terms of how knowledgeable subjects were about the products and the prices they paid. However, it is conceivable that other differences between utilitarian and self-relevant products could have played some role in producing the observed differences in WOM.

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