

Selective Electronic Word-of-Mouth: The Roles of Issue Controversiality and Issue Involvement

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Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is associated with “going viral” that communicators strive for when designing their messaging strategies. These referrals could increase brand awareness, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions. The study focuses on cause-related marketing (CRM) strategies by exploring the effects of social issue controversiality (highly controversial issues vs. moderately controversial issues) on selective Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) by considering source cues and issue involvement. The researchers conducted a two-wave survey experiment to explore the research topic. The findings suggest individuals’ decisions to eWOM

depend on issue types and issue involvement. Social media users are motivated to share CRM featuring moderately-controversial issues rather than highly-controversial issues to a wider audience on Facebook. People who perceive the issue information with more personal involvement are more likely to share highly-controversial issues with their close friends. There is no source cue effect. The theoretical and practical contributions were discussed.

Keywords: eWOM, issue controversiality, issue involvement, source cue, cause-related marketing

Internet-based channels allow users to exchange valuable information either in real-time or asynchronously with one another and express their opinion at the same time (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Studies on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) have discussed that referrals would happen between people who know each other and acquaintances on the Internet. eWOM refers to an online communication “between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence” (Litvin et al. 2008, p. 461). The scope of the eWOM was commonly limited to consumers’ experience, evaluation, and opinion about a product, a service, a brand, or a company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013; Park et al., 2007).

However, the newer eWOM co-production model has evolved from an organic inter-consumer influence model (Kozinets et al., 2010). The newer model suggests that customers' eWOM engagement is also through brand information passing and sharing (Hu & Ha, 2015; Yeh & Choi, 2011). The sharing integrates mass and interpersonal communication that influences social interaction and brand decisions (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Lookadoo & Wong, 2019; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). However, sharing brand information often reveals the sharers' stance on the message (Kim & Ihm, 2020), increasing the risk of self-presentation. Fortunately, the current affordance of social media allows individuals to choose with whom to share. However, selective eWOM that focuses on sharing with which audience group lacks exploration from the previous research.

Many scholars have studied cause-related marketing (CRM) and explored how individuals respond to the brand. It is important to understand individuals' decisions to share a social cause and whom to share with as they choose to express their opinion publicly, which is critical to marketing and communication scholars and industry practitioners who want to understand the consumers' responses to social marketing and social activists. Furthermore, forwarding CRM messages bring benefits to society. It fosters continued political discussion (e.g. Kim et al., 1999) and mutual empathy of out-groups (e.g. Nicholas, 2016), and helps people make moral interpersonal social life decisions (e.g. Zeitzoff, 2017).

The current study examined selective eWOM by audience groups on Facebook, namely, the general public, Facebook friends, and choice of friends, when taking social issue type, issue involvement, and source cue into account. Sharing brand information on social media serves the function of maintaining a positive impression and presenting an ideal self-image (Kim et al., 2017) to their audience who would influence how the individuals, in turn, position themselves. People are often concerned about what others think about them. Issue type matters when considering audience groups. Highly-controversial issues can generate public debates to resolve social conflict among different people and groups. However, sharing such issues may contain social risks because the "general public" on Facebook is "imagined" that people do not know the reaction of their anticipated audience. It exposes individuals to more social risks than moderately-

controversial issues, especially when their audience is unknown. It is important to know the effects of issue type on individuals' selective eWOM behavior on social media, which has not yet been studied.

Furthermore, issue involvement and source effects may moderate how issue types influence selective eWOM. Individuals highly involved in a highly-controversial issue might be less likely to express opinions to others in the context of social media because of the impact of hostile media effect and third-person perception because more personal involvement leads people to perceive the message as biased against their own opinion and higher perceived impact on others has been found to discourage online expression (Chia & Tu, 2021; Guo et al., 2019).

In addition, source cues might have an impact on the persuasiveness of the content. As one-third of U.S. consumers bought a brand for the first time because of its position on a controversial issue and want them to address social issues such as gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and poverty (Harris Poll, 2018), both nonprofits and for-profits use CRM as a strategy to promote their images. Hence, it is important to understand how the source affects the diffusion of the cause, which would benefit social media campaigns that has a positive impact on organizations' revenue, reputation, and development. Also, Facebook is one of the most widely used social media sites, compared to other platforms, and generates the most advertising revenue (Pew Research Center, 2018). But social media algorithms usually prioritize posts from friends and family over content publishers such as brands (Cohen, 2018). Hence, it is important to understand the phenomenon so that organizations' messages can be diffused to a wider audience to increase the organic reach of the content.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sharing as Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Word-of-mouth (WOM) studies began in the 1960s. Arndt (1967) defined WOM as "oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service" (p. 3). Scholars and marketers perceive WOM as a source to reduce the perceived risk of a product when customers make their purchase decision (Roselius, 1971; Woodside & Delozier, 1976). In the 1990s and the 2000s, WOM studies shifted from traditional media

to digital media when customers began to seek electronic forms of WOM (eWOM) to compare and choose a product. Recently, eWOM communication has evolved from the organic inter-consumer influence model to a brand-related information exchange model, to the most current network co-production model—customer eWOM engagement is through “one-to-one seeding and communication programs” (Kozinets et al. 2010, p. 72). Among the limited research on the newer scope of eWOM, Hu and Ha (2015) defined eWOM as passing along “any information, including not only customer's statements but also shared/forwarded posts from retailers or other published sources, which are exchanged among potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (p. 17). They suggest that eWOM not only includes organic user-generated content, but also messages that have been endorsed through sharing. Yeh and Choi (2011) also conceptualized eWOM as brand information giving and passing, suggesting online sharing is an important dimension of eWOM. The audience becomes active agents who are “gatekeepers” and decentralize the creation and distribution of information. This study focuses on “sharing” as eWOM—a behavior of forwarding organizations’ information to others via the Internet.

Selective eWOM and Self-presentation

Previous studies found that the motivations of eWOM were to help other customers access wider information and help with the decision-making process (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002; Krasnova et al., 2010; Nicholas, 2016). Individuals who share organizations’ information would either consciously or unconsciously express their values and opinion to their audience. Motivations of self-confirmation and the need to belong would also encourage information transmission that, in turn, fosters social interaction and the eWOM sharers' identity-building process (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Therefore, individuals may carefully choose what to share and share with whom. Willnat et al., (2002) also discussed the motivations of outspokenness associated with sharing behaviors. Scholars also explored the factors associated with sharing including the fear of being socially isolated (e.g. Fox & Holt, 2018), perceived importance of the issue (e.g. Willnat et al., 2002), issue types (e.g. Gearhart & Zhang, 2015), self-concepts (e.g. Willnat et al., 2002), perceived opinion incongruence (e.g. Chia & Tu, 2021; Fox & Holt, 2018), and perceived media influence (e.g. Chia & Tu, 2021).

Technology affordance of social media has significantly impacted sharing what with whom. The technology affordance allows users to engage with online content and others including commenting and sharing (Choi, 2016; Park et al., 2021). Choi (2016) suggested online internalizing and externalizing behavior when individuals opted to read news and disseminate news to other users. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) also revealed that social media affordances could “shape discussion networks and influence deliberation in different ways” (p.1159). Some scholars have also explored the technology affordance of different platforms (e.g. Vaast & Pinsonneault, 2022). For instance, Masip et al. (2021) identified affordances such as privacy, personalization, engagement, and segmentation to influence how users interact with media content. Syed and Silva (2023) analyzed frames of the Women’s March Movement on Twitter and found that social media could sustain connective action. Kalogeropoulos (2021) argued that open social network site like Facebook allows users to share selected news about their niche interests anywhere at any time.

Because of individual and technological factors involved in a sharing situation, many people may feel easier to share with a specific group rather than with "everyone" on the Internet. They may also tailor messages for different groups to maintain their persona. The willingness to eWOM should consider how large the audience group an individual wants to share the content with. Litt (2012) proposed a framework that aimed to study the phenomenon by aggregating theories of psychology, sociology, and communication, explaining how people share based on their perceived audience, and highlighting the factors of motivation, such as self-presentation, to decide what they disclose and to whom. Goffman (1959) has found self-presentation could reduce uncertainty, misunderstanding, and confusion in interactions. Computer-mediated communications do not rely on physical contact. Hence, sharing online messages such as brand information would serve as an "inference" in the process (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013).

Every message has embedded beliefs and attitudes that are important identity indicators. EWOM behavior may become a risk to people’s self-image when they disclose their stands (e.g. Kim et al., 2017), while may leave a positive impression if the messages bring social approval from their audience (Kairam et al., 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Considering the social risks and benefits of eWOM, sharers may carefully select the content to approach different audience groups. Hence, people usually use selective eWOM

as a “strategy” when dealing with multi-audience (Litt, 2012). For instance, Semaan et al. (2015) found that online users’ political engagement on Facebook was associated with how they perceive the needs or expectations of their audiences.

Some studies simply conceptualized audiences with different tie-strength. Strong-tie refers to people who are closely related such as friends, family, and coworkers; Weak-tie refers to people who are unrelated and loosely related such as distant acquaintances, random, and unknown (Kairam et al., 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, online users hardly group their audience by ties due to the social media affordance of how it allows users to select audience groups to share. When they choose to share a message on Facebook, they primarily have a few choices, namely public (anyone on or off Facebook), friends (all their friends on Facebook), and specific friends (choose specific friends to share). Considering selective eWOM, Facebook users may share to the public—people they know and strangers, which indicates the highest level of outspokenness; share to friends including audiences such as family, friends, professional ties, and users who share similar interests; and share to their specific friends including, primarily, close friends and family that they care about the most. Facebook sharers may also self-censor and choose not to share with any audience.

Issue Controversiality

Cause-related Marketing (CRM) is a marketing strategy in that organizations promote their image and enhance their reputation by bringing awareness of and taking a stand on a societal issue to contribute to a social cause such as environmental protection. CRM campaigns are effective because it shows the organization's corporate social responsibility (Mendini et al., 2018). CRM eWOM would increase the awareness and the impacts of the campaigns. However, issue controversiality matters in terms of sharing the brand messages to whom.

Issue controversiality refers to the degree to which an issue is prolonged public dispute or debate (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). A highly-controversial issue refers to one that causes or is likely to cause disagreements due to a difference of opinion and values (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Issue controversiality affects people's willingness to express their opinions to different audiences because they present themselves differently on their social media (Kim & Ihm, 2020). Previous studies revealed that people may tend to seek

social approval, maintain social relationships, seek self-status, and gain social influence when sharing information with their audience (Bobkowski, 2015; Lee & Ma, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2016; Kim et al., 2017; Tefertiller, 2018). To eWOM a brand's CRM message that features highly controversial issues may not be a safer choice when people face the general public, since the audience is "imagined"—they do not know who is on social media. According to the discussion early, sharing messages serves the function of maintaining positive impressions and presenting ideal self-images (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Highly controversial issues may threaten the sharer's self-image because they disclose their identity and stance when they share (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Kim et al., 2017). Moderately controversial issues may be a better choice to present themselves in public space.

People may self-censor and choose the "right" content to share. They are less likely to share the highly-controversial issues due to social risk and self-presentation concerns. Hence, they may be more likely to share moderately controversial issues with Facebook users who may or may not be their friends. Hence, the researchers hypothesized,

H1. People tend to share publicly when exposed to moderately controversial issues than highly controversial issues.

Issue Involvement

The effect of issue controversiality on eWOM is likely to be moderated by issue involvement, which refers to "the extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, p. 1915). This is because the level of issue involvement determines the extent to which people attend to the information that they encounter and their subsequent behaviors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Krosnick, 1990). Indeed, previous studies have indicated that issue involvement is likely to moderate the impact of social media messages on people's behavioral responses (Lu, 2019).

While individuals highly involved in a highly controversial issue are often more willing to express opinions than others (Chen, 2012; Krosnick, 1990), they are not necessarily more outspoken on social media due to the impact of hostile media effect and third-person perception (Chia & Tu, 2021). The hostile media effect refers to "the tendency for people who are highly involved in an issue to see news coverage of that issue as biased" (Gunther & Christen, 2002, p. 296). Along with this definition, previous studies have

consistently found that issue involvement leads individuals to rate the exposed information as untrustworthy and biased against their own opinions (Arlt et al., 2019; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Matthes & Beyer, 2017). As a result, those highly involved in a highly-controversial issue tend to believe that social media messages sway others to side with the opposite camp and thus refrain from discussing highly-controversial issues in public on SNSs (Chia & Tu, 2021).

Also, the level of issue involvement is strongly associated with the third-person perception of the media content about highly-controversial issues (Lo et al., 2015). That is, the more a person is involved in a controversial issue, the more he or she believes others will be affected by the biased content (Mutz, 1989). In this case, the negative effect of issue controversiality on eWOM may be further dampened by issue involvement, because the higher perceived impact on others has been found to discourage online expression (Bi et al., 2019; Guo et al., 2019; Lo et al., 2017). Given the aforementioned theories and evidence, we propose the following hypothesis,

H2. Issue involvement moderates the association between issue controversiality and selective eWOM on social media.

Source Cues

Scholars have examined the source effects during information processing (Ismagilova et al., 2019; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Who carries the message is important in influencing the evaluation of the credibility and persuasiveness of the content (Das et al. 2016; Henderson, 2015; Lin et al., 2021; Samu & Wymer, 2009). When issue controversiality is considered, the source cue would have a greater impact on eWOM.

Both non-profit and for-profit organizations have used cause-related marketing (CRM) strategies to gain more attention from the public. However, the public responds to the two sources differently. Individuals often perceive a non-profit organization as highly credible since they usually do not question the intention of its communication and often give them applause for the public good. Nonprofits usually design messages to increase awareness of a social problem and to encourage the audience to take action to make social changes (Anheier, 2013). The audience usually found nonprofits warmer and more caring than for-profits (Aaker et al., 2010). On the contrary, for-profits show a tendency to persuade their audience to purchase their products and services, as many hope to take

corporate responsibility by advocating a social cause. A Harris Poll report (2006) found that only about 15% of individuals said that a company's advertising and public relations activities such as social media campaigns were credible. The reports said that people grant higher "brand equity" to nonprofits, suggesting that they have more engaged consideration of them and perceive the organizations as highly credible sources for a social cause.

Furthermore, CRM research revealed that perceived congruence between the source and the cause influences the persuasiveness of the messages (Das et al., 2016; Samu & Wymer, 2009). A non-profit that posts a social issue should generate more congruence than a profit that posts the same issue via social media because of the link between the cause and the organization. The public would question the for-profit's posting intention and consider it as an advertisement to sell its products (Aaker et al., 2010), which considers a for-profit as a low credible source in terms of social cause. The stereotype of two different sources might influence the effects of CRM eWOM. Based on the above discussion, the source might moderate the effects of issue types on selective eWOM. Source cues might moderate the association between issue controversiality and the likelihood of sharing. Therefore, the researchers hypothesized,

H3. The likelihood of sharing publicly is higher after the exposure to the moderately-controversial issue carried by a non-profit source than by a for-profit source.

METHODS

Sampling Method and Procedures

The researcher used a pretest-posttest two-wave experimental design to examine selective eWOM after exposure to highly controversial issues and moderately controversial issues, and the moderation effects of issue involvement and source cue in the association between issue controversiality and selective eWOM. The Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) sampling pool was used to recruit subjects for the current study. MTurk is an online platform for recruiting subjects to perform tasks and is widely considered a cost-effective and efficient tool for survey experiments (Berinsky et al., 2012). The sample is more representative and diverse than other convenience samples, such as college students who share a similar age, location, and income (Berinsky et al., 2012), which improves the external validity of the study. To improve the quality of the dataset, the researchers

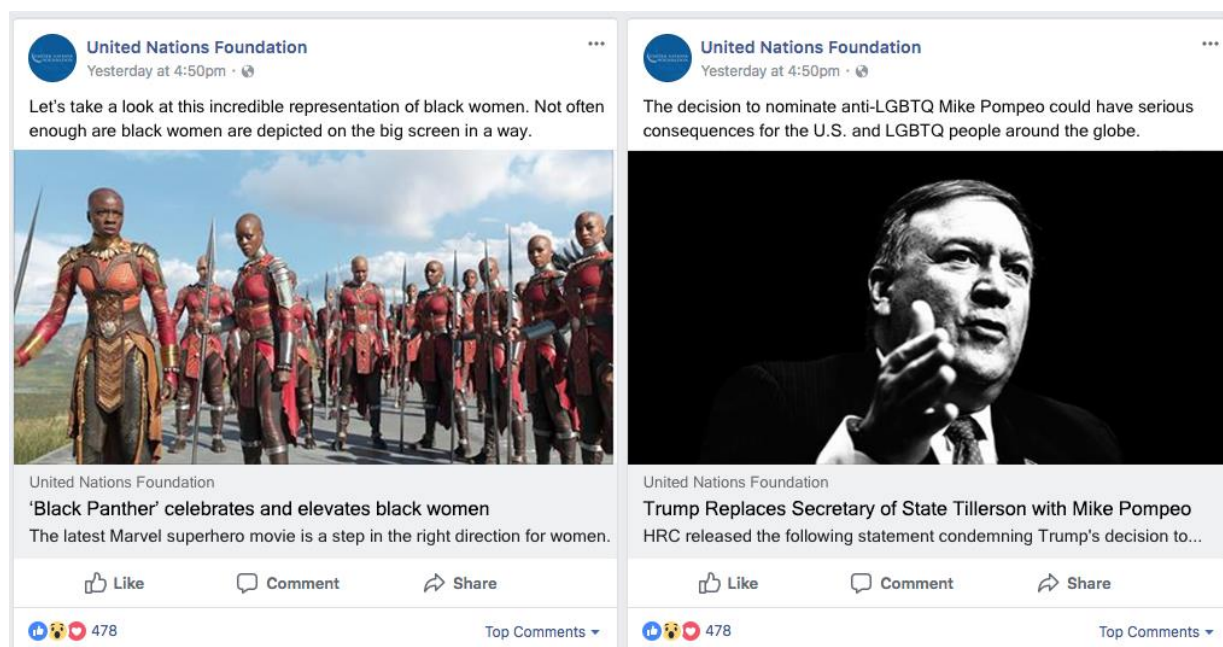
checked the duration of time for survey completion and set participants' criteria, including their survey approval rate and the number of completed surveys on Mturk, to avoid automated behaviors after being exposed to a condition.

The researcher received the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and collected the first-wave (pretest) data. A pre-test was used to examine the subjects' social media use, issue involvement, source credibility, familiarity and likeability of sources, and demographics. Twenty-four hours after the subjects completed the first-wave questionnaire, the researcher sent emails to invite subjects to participate in the second-wave questionnaire (posttest) with a post-pay method—the participants got paid after completing the survey. Email addresses were collected in the first wave for the second-wave questionnaire distribution and dataset matching. The response rate was 59.64%.

The researcher used both the between- and within-subject design in the study. The subjects were exposed to four CRM messages (within-subject) carried by either a non-profit or a for-profit source (between-subject), which tend to replicate the results through separate tests (Slater & Rouner, 1996). The study did not aim to examine a particular issue. The design successfully expanded the subject number from 182 to 364 because every participant was exposed to both the highly controversial and moderately controversial issue conditions. The design would also increase the experiment's external validity, because people tend to be exposed to messages in clusters in social media settings. It could ensure that the effects of issue controversiality on selective eWOM can be replicable for different issues and in various source settings. The non-profit and for-profit were selected through a pilot study to ensure they have a similar level of familiarity among the subjects.

In the within-subject design, each participant was randomly exposed to four stimuli Facebook posts featuring different issues (two highly controversial and two moderately controversial issues). The four issues were randomly and evenly presented to the subjects to avoid the order effects. By reviewing recently successful social media marketing campaigns (Gulati, 2018; Lee, 2018), Facebook's review of 2017 (Gleit, 2017), and Google Trends (Google, 2021), four issues that people frequently discussed were selected, including feminism, LGBTQ rights (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer), animal welfare, and children welfare. Furthermore, these issues were chosen because they are global issues that are not limited to a specific nation or region. Animal welfare and

children's welfare were identified as moderately controversial issues, while feminism and LGBTQ rights were identified as highly controversial issues, see Figure 1. Although LGBTQ rights have made stunning progress these past years, a report from the World Economic Forum revealed that many non-LGBTQ Americans still felt uncomfortable with their LGBTQ neighbors (Rosenberg, 2018). As for feminism, the issue itself is not controversial. However, people usually misunderstand it as the movement raises the problem of gender inequality. “Feminism” was often misinterpreted as the opposite of “masculism” and that feminists want to take power away from men, which makes it controversial (British Library, 2013). Camicia (2008) stated that the categorization of a controversial issue should follow the ideologies and power relations in the historical and contemporary context. Scholars and theorists have studied the promotion of social values like race (e.g. Foster, 2006) and gender (e.g. Tetreault, 1986). How to decide if an issue is controversial is also influenced by the power relations that the ideology of the majority is dominant which makes it hard to challenge the "taken-for-granted" (Camicia, 2008, p.300). From the historical and temporary context of race and LGBTQ, the promotion of gender equality and LGBTQ rights have allowed advocating ideology and power.



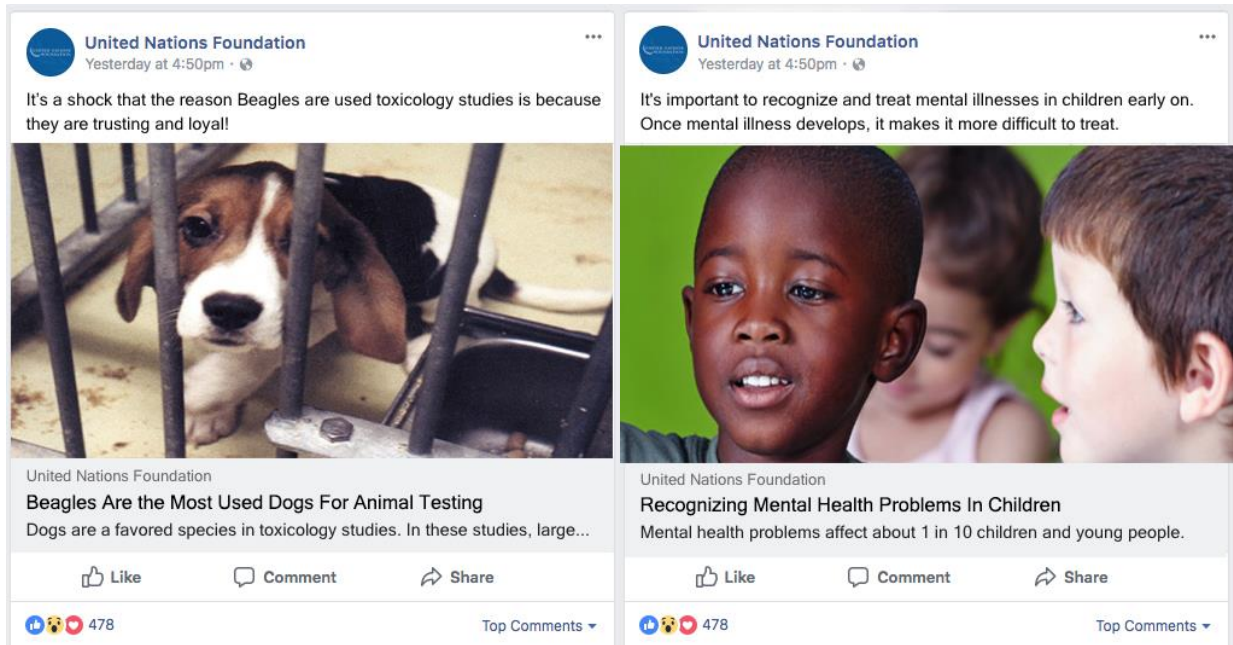


Figure 1. Experiment Stimuli: High-controversial Issues (upper) and Moderate-controversial Issues (lower)

In the between-subject design, the participants were exposed to for-profit and non-profit source cue conditions. The design ruled out the testing effects that participants might have if they were exposed to different issues carried out by both for-profit and non-profit sources. The likeability and familiarity of the sources were examined in the pre-test and were controlled in the data analysis. Thirty-three subjects who did not identify the sources were screened out from the dataset through a manipulation check.

Measurement

Selective eWOM. To increase external validity, the measure simulated the real experience of Facebook. Subjects were exposed to a question asking about their intention to share Facebook posts and whom to share. The audience choices simulated the real experience of sharing a Facebook post. If the online users chose not to share any posts, they did not want to eWOM to anyone. The researcher thus categorized eWOM as none (0). When Facebook users chose to share a Facebook post, the researcher then categorized the audience choice public as the highest level of eWOM (3), Facebook friends as 2, and specific friends (subjects were only willing to share the issue with their close friends or the friends involved with the issue) as 1.

Issue involvement. The item was measured by the subjects' perceived importance of the issue information with three items, which were adapted from previous literature (Matthes & Beyer, 2017; McKeever et al., 2016). The researcher used a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) to measure subjects' feelings about a total of four issues, including It is important to me to know as much as possible about; The more information I get regarding; and I am interested in specific information regarding children welfare / animal welfare / feminism / LGBTQ rights. The four Cronbach alpha $\alpha = .90, .90, .97,$ and $.96$.

Control Variables

The researcher collected information regarding the demographic, general social media use, Facebook use, previous sharing experience, and the familiarity and likeability of the sources as control variables.

Demographics. Demographic information of the subjects included gender, age, education, race, and income. Among the total of 182 participants (364 subjects), 76 (42.5%) were male and 103 (57.5%) were female. The age ranges from 18 to 24 was $N = 32$ (17.6%); 25 to 35 ($N=92$, 50.5%) was the largest age group; 36 to 50 was $N = 45$ (24.8%); only 13 (7.1%) of the subjects were 51 years or older. In terms of ethnicity, 133 (77.2%) were white, and 37 (21.8%) were minority groups including black or African American (24), Asian (5), Hispanic (5), and others. More than half of the subjects ($N = 98$; 54.7%) had a bachelor's degree or higher. Almost every respondent had at least a high school diploma. Regarding household income, 38 (21.2%) said their annual income was between \$50,000 and \$74,999, which was the largest group. More than half of the subjects' income was over \$40,000. General social media use. the researcher asked the subjects to indicate how frequently they used a set of online platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit, LinkedIn, and YouTube. The researcher used a seven-point scale that includes "never (1)," "less than once a month (2)," "several times a month (3)," "once a week (4)," "several times a week (5)," "daily (6)," and "several times a day (7)." The average of frequency was used (Mean = 3.38; SD = .84).

Facebook use. The frequency of Facebook use was measured by a seven-point frequency scale from "never" (1) to "always" (5). The scales are adapted from Choi's (2016) sharing dimensions theory. The subjects indicated how frequently they did the following

activities via Facebook, including 1) click on links to articles that other users have posted, 2) post my own articles or thoughts, 3) share links (including stories, pictures, or video clips) from other online sources, 4) share links (including stories, pictures, or video clips) together with my comments about the content, 5) repost what other users have posted, 6) repost what other users have posted together with my comments about the content, 7) post comments, questions, or information in response to the article that I read, 8) use “like” button to express approval of other users’ posts. The average of the frequency was calculated (Mean = 3.70; SD = 1.55).

Previous sharing behavior. The researchers asked the subjects to indicate how often they share any online content such as links and articles to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit, LinkedIn, and YouTube. The researcher used a seven-point scale ranging from “Never (1),” “Less than once a month (2),” “Several times a month (3),” “Once a week (4),” “Several times a week (5),” “Daily (6),” “Several times a day (7).” Again, the average of sharing frequency was calculated (Mean = 1.76; SD = .82).

Source Familiarity. The researcher used the familiarity of the non-profit and profit organizations that carried the social issues. The scales range from 0 to 100. “0” indicated that the subjects did not know the organization at all, while “100” indicated significant familiarity with the organization. The mean, median, and standard deviation (SD) of familiarity were reported, see Table 1.

Source Likeability. The researcher used the likability of the two organizations as the control variable. The scales range from 0 to 100. “0” indicated that the subjects did not like the organization at all, while “100” indicates that the subjects quite liked the organization. The mean, median, and standard were reported, see Table 1.

Table 1
The Mean, Median, and SD of Familiarity and Likeability

	N = 271					
	Familiarity (0-100)			Likeability (0-100)		
	Mean	Median	SD	Mean	Median	SD
Non-profit source	33.63	25	31.64	42.38	50	32.18
For-profit source	37.95	30	33.85	35.02	37.5	27.95

RESULTS

Issue Controversiality and Selective eWOM

The researchers used an Analysis of Covariances (ANCOVA) to test H1 that explores elective eWOM in terms of issue controversiality by controlling demographics, social media use, Facebook use, and previous sharing frequency on social media, $R^2 = .09$, $F(9, 624) = 6.47$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). The results suggested that the issue controversiality difference predicts selective eWOM, $F(1, 624) = 12.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .020$. More specifically, exposure to moderately controversial issues ($M = .82$, $SD = 1.21$) predicts a higher likelihood of sharing with a wider audience, compared to exposure to highly controversial issues ($M = .51$, $SD = 1.01$). Additionally, race and Facebook use significantly predict selective eWOM. Non-White is more likely to share messages with a larger audience group compared to White Americans, $F(1, 624) = 7.49$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .012$. People who frequently use Facebook for diverse activities such as posting and sharing links tend to share those social issues publicly, $F(1, 624) = 27.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .044$. Overall, H1 that people tend to share with a wider audience when exposed to moderately controversial issues was supported.

Table 2
ANCOVA of the Difference between Issues in Outspokeness

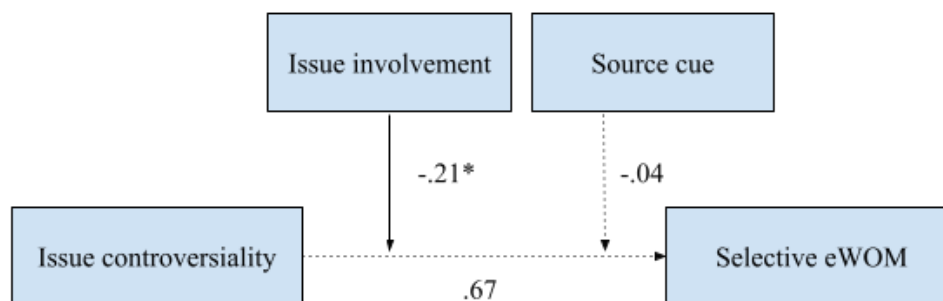
	d.f.	Mean of Squares	F-value	Eta Squared (η^2)
Model	9	7.58	6.47***	.087
Issue Controversy (0=moderate-controversial issue; 1=high-controversial issue)	1	14.77	12.61***	.020
Gender (0=male; 1=female)	1	2.48	2.12	.003
Age	1	.30	.26	.000
Race (0=non-white; 1=white)	1	8.77	7.49**	.012
Education	1	.34	.29	.000
Income	1	.30	.25	.000
Social Media Use	1	.20	.17	.000
Sharing via Social Media	1	9.05	.00	.000
Facebook Use	1	32.74	27.95***	.044
R ² for overall effect = .087				

Note: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The Moderation Roles of Issue Involvement and Message Source

The moderation model using PROCESS Model 2 (Hayes, 2013) was adopted to test H2 and H3 that the moderation effects of issue involvement and source cue on the association between issue controversiality and selective eWOM by controlling the familiarity and likeability of the sources. As shown in Figure 2, the results did not reveal a direct effect (Bootstrap confidence interval = [-.0873, 1.4298]) of issue controversiality on selective eWOM, but revealed a moderation effect of issue involvement on the association between issue controversiality and selective eWOM (Bootstrap confidence interval = [-.3688, -.0535]). Issue involvement alone predicted selective eWOM (Bootstrap confidence interval = [.2117, .4655]). H2 was supported. More specifically, issue involvement decreases the likelihood of sharing highly controversial issue-related Facebook posts with a wider audience. However, the results did not show a moderation effect of source cue on

the association between issue controversiality and selective eWOM (Bootstrap confidence interval = [-.3591, .2744]). The source cue alone did also predict selective eWOM (Bootstrap confidence interval = [-.4325, -.0990]). Interestingly, familiarity with the non-profit source is positively correlated to selective eWOM. But overall, H3 was rejected that the exposure to a non-profit source did not increase the intention of sharing highly controversial issues to a larger audience via social media.



Note: * $p < .05$

Figure 2. The Moderation of Issue Involvement and Source Cue

DISCUSSION

This study investigates the effects of issue controversiality on selective eWOM and examines the moderating roles of issue involvement and source cue. The results indicate that social media users are less likely to share CRM featuring highly-controversial issues publicly than moderately-controversial issues. Indeed, most people use social media platforms for social networking and self-presentation (Kim et al., 2017). In this case, they tend to avoid interpersonal disagreement and debates by not disclosing their opinions on highly-controversial issues to the public. It also reveals that the technology affordances of Facebook could shape online discussion facilitate users' online behavior and satisfy their motivations and needs of self-presentation by choosing specific media content to share with different groups.

In addition, the moderating effect of issue involvement suggests that social media users are particularly unlikely to share highly-controversial CRM in public when they are highly involved in the covered issues. In other words, although issue involvement is found to encourage opinion expression in the literature (Chen, 2012; Krosnick, 1990), individuals

personally involved in controversial issues feel uncomfortable speaking out in public on social media. It is possible that they tend to share and discuss the encountered CRM messages with specific social media friends who are also highly involved in the issues and share similar opinions with themselves (Sunstein, 2007; Heatherly et al., 2017). These findings suggest that social media might be more effective for activists in communicating and organizing among themselves than raising public awareness of controversial issues.

Furthermore, the moderating effect of the source cue is found insignificant in this study. In other words, whether the social media message is from for-profit or non-profit organizations does not affect social media users' eWOM intentions on different issues. This finding is contrary to the expectation and might be attributed to the fact that many participants in the study were not very familiar with or even did not recognize the non-profit sources. However, scholars like Appelman and Sundar (2016) have discussed the limited effects of source attributes since individuals may not recognize the sources or always know the source of the message. Indeed, our study indicates that familiarity with non-profit sources is positively associated with selective eWOM. That is, social media users are willing to share CRM messages with the public if they are familiar with the non-profit sources.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The study contributes to the conceptualization of selective eWOM which previously refers to sharing and endorsing brand information selectively to different audience groups in the context of social media. The study extends the definition of eWOM and reveals that scholars should also consider which information and with whom to share rather than only examining whether to share. Social media users could choose to disclose their thoughts to a certain degree, which expands the traditional investigation of eWOM. It also explored the technology affordance of Facebook and how it shapes information transmission and dissemination online. It fosters the understanding of Facebook's affordance of privacy, self-presentation, and engagement. Non-profits and firms could consider these affordances to design messages to increase interaction with their audience.

In addition, the findings contribute to eWOM literature by evaluating the moderation role of personal issue involvement and source cues. It confirms the impact of third-person effects and hostile media effects that strong bias and perceived effects on

others would decrease the likelihood of sharing. The source cue does not generate heuristic effects on sharing messages to an "unconcerned" audience, which suggests the weak effect of the source in the current online environment. The persuasive effects of source cues should be given a second look. In the current media landscape, individual factors and differences play a more significant role than source attributes in information processing. Scholars should consider their psychological cognition and personal motivations when evaluating their responses and behaviors.

The study provides practical implications for marketers and strategic communicators on how to engage ordinary people in spreading CRM messages to a wider audience. The current study is important for developing social marketing strategies because it helps understand how to engage online users to spread the social cause to improve the welfare of society. The findings suggest that social media users tend to share CRM messages about moderately-controversial issues, regardless of whether the message is from for-profit or non-profit organizations. In this case, to encourage individuals to speak out for a social issue, organizations that care about corporate social responsibility (CSR) should consider posting about moderately-controversial social issues such as animal welfare and children's welfare, or moderately framing highly-controversial issues. Such posts are likely to inspire their followers to spread the messages to others because they also have the desire to present a positive image on social media.

Furthermore, individuals who feel they're personally evolved to a social issue are less likely to advocate the issue openly, whereas they are more likely to forward the social issue to their family and close friends. The non-profits and brands should consider their vulnerability and create a welcoming community where individuals could feel free to advocate their beliefs. However, it may be an advantage for social marketing because people trust their friends and people who are close to them. In other words, the marketing strategy would be more powerful when the word-of-mouth referrals are between family and friends, which effectively bring positive brand awareness, brand advocacy, and loyalty.

Brands should feel less worried about the suspicion from their consumers, although some individuals would challenge their intentions of posting social issues. Consumers would love to see brands advocate for social issues, of which 76 percent would trust the

company and 72 presents are more likely to be loyal to the company (Porter Novelli, 2021). While 89 present executives think that improving social welfare and committing to action will increase their competitive advantage in the current market (Porter Novelli, 2020), about half of the individuals do not believe companies have a positive impact on the society nowadays (Just Capital, 2021). It calls for more companies to speak up about issues and take the lead on social and environmental change.

FUTURE STUDIES AND CONCLUSION

Some limitations need to be noted in the interpretation of the findings. First, the study used Mturk's convenient sampling pool to recruit participants. The demographics of MTurk participants do not mirror the U.S. census data, leading to concerns about the generalizability of the results of this study. Nevertheless, some previous studies have suggested that MTurk samples provide reliable responses and are not radically different from the U.S. population (Berinsky et al., 2012; Kees et al., 2017). Second, the measurement of selective eWOM captures one's intentions to share, instead of actual behavior. Future research on eWOM could address this limitation by combining self-report surveys and behavioral data.

Despite such limitations, this study contributes to the literature by explicating the concept of selective eWOM based on CRM sharing to different audience groups. The findings have significant implications for understanding the predictors of eWOM and provide insights for marketers on the design of social media messages and campaigns.

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