

The Impact of Social Factors on e-WOM Behavior: Evidence from Five Asian Countries

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social factors embedded in online communities shape electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) behavior across national contexts. Extending prior research on Japan and China, the study analyzes survey data from 278 online community users in five Asian countries: Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. The research model links five social factors (bridging and bonding social capital, customer brand identification, normative and informational social influence) to three e-WOM dimensions: opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing. Structural equation modeling indicates that the effects of these social factors differ significantly across countries and e-WOM dimensions. The findings suggest that online community engagement is driven by both universal consumer motivations and country-specific socio-cultural conditions. This cross-national comparison contributes to e-WOM literature and offers practical insights for multinational enterprises developing e-commerce strategies in Asian markets.

Keywords: *electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), online community, cross-national comparison.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Kumamoto and Yin (2023) examined the influence of social factors within online communities on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) behavior among young consumers in Japan and China. Although the analysis was based on a relatively small sample, the findings suggested that customer brand identification, conceptualized as a form of social identity, was positively associated with all e-WOM behavior constructs. The study concluded that understanding customers' sense of belonging to a particular brand or company group provides an important basis for explaining strong customer relationships and purchasing behavior. At the same time, however, the generalizability of this relationship across different samples and national or cultural contexts remained open to further examination.

Accordingly, this study investigates whether the degree to which such social factors influence e-WOM behavior differs across countries and cultures. To address this issue, a survey similar to that employed in the previous study was conducted among online community users in five Asian countries: Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. Although this study builds on Kumamoto and Yin (2023), the Japan and China samples used here were newly collected and are not identical to those used in the previous study. By analyzing this newly constructed five-country dataset, this study aims to present a comparative analysis of how social factors influence e-WOM behavior across different national and cultural contexts.

2. THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)

E-WOM refers to any positive or negative statement about a product or company made by potential, actual, or former customers and disseminated to many people and institutions via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Prior research has conceptualized e-WOM through three behavioral dimensions (Chu and Kim, 2011). Opinion-seeking behavior (OPS) refers to consumers' tendency to search for information and advice from others when making purchase decisions (Flynn et al., 1996). Opinion-giving behavior (OPG), by contrast, refers to consumers' tendency to influence the attitudes and behaviors of others through their evaluations and recommendations (Feick and Price, 1987). Opinion-passing behavior (OPP) refers to consumers' electronic forwarding or sharing of product-related information and opinions with others, often across broad online networks (Sun et al., 2006).

2.2 Social Capital

Social capital refers to the benefits that individuals obtain through networks of social relationships. In online and organizational contexts, social capital is often distinguished into bridging social capital (BRSC) and bonding social capital (BOSC). BRSC refers to weak-tie connections among individuals from diverse backgrounds; such ties provide access to heterogeneous information, perspectives, and opportunities. BOSC, by contrast, refers to close and emotionally strong relationships through which members provide substantive support to one another (Williams, 2006).

2.3 Social Identity

Social identity theory argues that individuals derive emotional and value significance from their membership in social groups (Tajfel, 1982). In marketing context, this perspective explains how consumers form strong relationships with brands through self-identification and the enhancement of self-esteem (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Accordingly, understanding consumer behavior requires attention to consumers' perceived sense of belonging to brand-related social groups (Rather, 2018). In this study, customer brand identification (CBI) is used as a latent variable representing social identity because it captures the psychological basis through which individuals connect themselves to companies and brands (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

2.4 Social Influence

Social influence refers to changes in individuals' thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors that occur through social interaction (Rashotte, 2007). In online shopping contexts, consumers often reduce perceived purchase risk by relying on two forms of social influence: normative social influence (NSI) and informational social influence (ISI). NSI reflects social pressure to conform to the expectations of others, regardless of one's personal preferences. ISI, by contrast, operates as a learning process in which consumers observe the experiences of early adopters and other users to guide their own purchase decisions (Kim and Srivastava, 2007).

2.5 Hypothesis Development

Consistent with Kumamoto and Yin (2023), this study uses opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing as dependent variables representing e-WOM behavior. Social capital, social identity, and social influence are treated as social factor constructs and used as independent variables. Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: BRSC is positively related to users' e-WOM behavior.
- H2: BOSC is positively related to users' e-WOM behavior.
- H3: CBI is positively related to users' e-WOM behavior.
- H4: NSI is positively related to users' e-WOM behavior.
- H5: ISI is positively related to users' e-WOM behavior.

Based on these hypotheses, a questionnaire was developed using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument consisted of fifteen items measuring social factors as observed variables and nine items measuring the three dimensions of e-WOM behavior.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample and Procedure

A total of 278 responses were collected from online community users in five countries: Japan (45), China (66), Vietnam (90), Indonesia (46), and Thailand (31). The questionnaire was administered in English in Indonesia and Thailand and in the respective local languages in the other three countries. Respondents were required to have prior experience using online communities. Data were collected between July 3 and October 4, 2023.

3.2 Measures

Descriptive statistical analyses, including means, standard deviations, correlations, variances, and co-variances, were first conducted. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then used to assess the reliability and validity of the

measurement model, including Cronbach's alpha coefficients. After the factor structure was examined, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to estimate the relationships among the latent constructs. The proposed path diagram is presented in Figure 1.

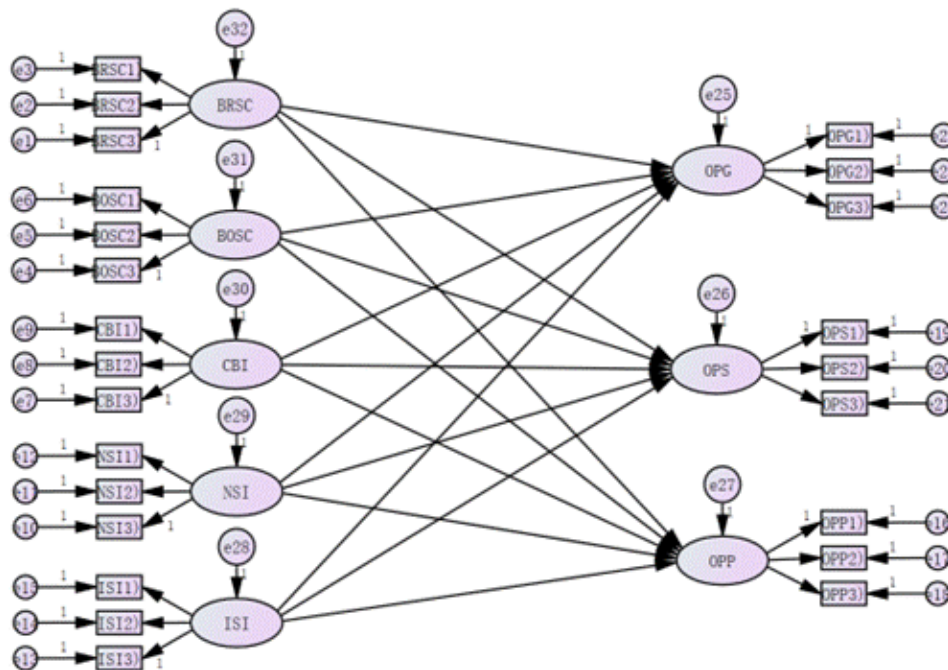


Figure 1. Path diagram of Structural Equation Modeling

Note: In this path diagram, e1 through e32 indicate error terms, rectangles denote observed variables (question items), and ellipses represent latent factors.

4. RESULTS

The confirmatory factor analysis indicated no serious concerns regarding the reliability or validity of the measurement model. This section reports the results of the structural equation modeling analysis. Table 1 summarizes the estimated path coefficients for each sample set.

First, regarding the effect of BRSC on e-WOM behavior, relatively strong positive effects were observed in the Japan-China and Indonesian samples. In particular, the effect of BRSC on OPG was high in Japan-China and Indonesia, respectively (0.88 and 0.54). This suggests that a loose sense of solidarity and belonging within an online community may encourage users to express their ideas, reflections, and opinions within that community. By contrast, negative coefficients for the BRSC-OPG path were observed in Vietnam and Thailand (-0.11 and -0.43), indicating that a sense of belonging to the community does not necessarily lead to opinion-giving behavior in these samples. The effects of BRSC on OPS and OPP were generally small, except for the BRSC-OPS path in Indonesia (0.30) and the BRSC-OPP path in Japan-China (0.29). Thus, BRSC alone does not appear to provide a comprehensive explanation of all three e-WOM dimensions.

Table 1. Comparison of Path Coefficients in Structural Equation Modeling Analysis

Hyp.	Comparison of Path Coefficients within the Structural Model	Standardized path coefficients (β)			
		Japan-China	Vietnam	Indonesia	Thailand
H1	BRSC $\rightarrow$ OPS	0.23	0.03	0.30	0.07
	BRSC $\rightarrow$ OPG	0.88	-0.11	0.54	-0.43
	BRSC $\rightarrow$ OPP	0.29	0.09	0.25	-0.23
H2	BOSC $\rightarrow$ OPS	1.52	-0.18	0.05	0.57
	BOSC $\rightarrow$ OPG	0.04	0.22	-0.06	0.56
	BOSC $\rightarrow$ OPP	-0.62	-0.02	0.15	0.84
H3	CBI $\rightarrow$ OPS	0.04	0.44	0.38	0.00
	CBI $\rightarrow$ OPG	-0.25	0.32	0.42	0.38
	CBI $\rightarrow$ OPP	0.15	0.55	0.38	0.07
H4	NSI $\rightarrow$ OPS	-0.49	-0.05	0.57	0.38
	NSI $\rightarrow$ OPG	0.55	0.41	0.34	0.94
	NSI $\rightarrow$ OPP	0.56	0.29	0.45	0.96
H5	ISI $\rightarrow$ OPS	0.67	0.85	-0.02	0.49
	ISI $\rightarrow$ OPG	-0.32	0.36	0.05	0.13
	ISI $\rightarrow$ OPP	1.18	0.43	0.27	0.34

Note: Beta coefficients of 0.5 or higher are shaded in the table.

Second, regarding the effect of BOSC on e-WOM behavior, only the Thai sample showed consistently strong positive effects across the three dimensions of e-WOM behavior: OPS (0.57), OPG (0.56), and OPP (0.84). Given that the effect of BRSC was small or negative in Thailand, this result suggests that e-WOM behavior in this sample may become more active when the strength of ties within the online community increases. In Vietnam and Indonesia, by contrast, the coefficients for BOSC were small or negative (Vietnam: -0.18, 0.22, and -0.02; Indonesia: 0.05, -0.06, and 0.15), suggesting that bonding social capital did not consistently stimulate e-WOM behavior in these samples. One exception was observed in the Japan-China sample, where the BOSC-OPS path showed an exceptionally high coefficient (1.52). This result suggests a strong association between bonding social capital and opinion-seeking behavior, although the magnitude of the coefficient should be interpreted with caution and examined further in future model refinement. In contrast, the coefficients for OPG and OPP in the Japan-China sample were weak or negative (0.04 and -0.62), indicating that the effect of BOSC was not consistent across all e-WOM dimensions. These findings suggest that the role of bonding social capital may differ substantially across national samples and across specific dimensions of e-WOM behavior. However, because the Thai sample consisted of thirty-one female university students, the possibility that the Thai result was influenced by sample bias cannot be ruled out.

Third, the effect of CBI on e-WOM behavior, as examined in Hypothesis 3, was relatively strong in the Vietnamese and Indonesian samples compared with the other sample sets. Vietnam showed a high coefficient for OPP (0.55), while Indonesia showed moderate positive coefficients across OPS, OPG, and OPP (0.38, 0.42, and 0.38). These results suggest that consumers in these countries may use preferred brands as a means of expressing their own identity, reflecting a process of self-branding. Consequently, they may be more likely to engage actively in brand-related e-WOM behavior within online communities. In contrast, the Japan-China sample showed weak or negative coefficients for OPS, OPG, and OPP (0.04, -0.25, and 0.15), while the Thai sample also showed weak coefficients except for OPG (0.00, 0.38, and 0.07). One possible interpretation is that respondents in these samples may not have had a clearly recognized brand on which they project their self-identity. In addition, Vietnam and Indonesia have relatively lower levels of economic development and per-capita income than Japan, China, and Thailand. Therefore, the value consumers seek in brands and the degree to which they project their identities onto brands may differ across countries.

Fourth, regarding the effect of NSI on e-WOM behavior, a strong positive effect on OPS was observed in Indonesia (0.57). Positive effects on OPG and OPP were observed in all country samples, with particularly strong coefficients in

Japan-China (0.55 and 0.56) and Thailand (0.94 and 0.96). NSI indicates that product purchases and brand choices are influenced by criteria located outside the individual's own value system, such as social or community expectations. Individuals with a stronger tendency to conform to such expectations may therefore be more susceptible to this influence. This may motivate them to seek approval from others by asking for opinions or to express and share their own opinions within the community. Although it is unclear whether each country sample included many respondents with prominent levels of conformity, the fact that the main respondent segment consisted of teenagers and consumers in their twenties suggests that this effect may be particularly relevant to younger consumers, including Generation Z. Moreover, the high coefficients observed in the Thai sample suggest that strong solidarity within the community may reinforce internal conformity and thereby activate e-WOM behavior within that community.

Finally, regarding the effect of ISI on e-WOM behavior, the Vietnamese sample showed the strongest effect on OPS (0.85). This strong relationship indicates that consumers tend to collect information about product purchase experiences from early buyers and other users within online communities before considering a purchase. The Japan-China and Thai samples also showed relatively strong coefficients for OPS (0.67 and 0.49), suggesting that online communities play a vital role as spaces for information gathering. In addition, the Japan-China sample showed a particularly strong effect of ISI on OPP (1.18), indicating that informational social influence may also encourage users to share or pass along information to others in that context.

Overall, although the samples differed in age distribution, gender composition, and sample size, the collection and analysis of data from five countries with distinct socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds enhanced the comparative scope of the re-search model. Further refinement of the model and follow-up surveys with more balanced sample sizes would enable a more precise cross-national analysis of differences in e-WOM behavior within online communities.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to e-WOM research by examining whether social factors can explain consumer engagement in online communities across national contexts. Whereas many previous studies have examined e-WOM behavior through multidimensional models incorporating psychological, cognitive, and social variables, this study focuses specifically on social factors as explanatory variables.

More specifically, the study conceptualizes e-WOM behavior through three dependent variables (opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing) and examines the individual effects of five social-factor variables on these dimensions. This approach clarifies how different forms of social capital, social identity, and social influence are associated with distinct e-WOM behaviors.

A further contribution lies in cross-national design. The study analyzes consumer samples from five Asian countries: Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. Since many prior studies have relied on samples from a single country or region, the present study contributes to literature by comparing multiple national samples and interpreting the findings in relation to differences in social and cultural contexts.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings also provide strategic implications for firms and other organizations that operate online community services. By monitoring the relative influence of social factors (including community norms, the strength of interpersonal ties, and consumers' self-identification with brands) firms may be better able to understand and manage e-WOM behavior within online communities.

Because the study draws on samples from five countries, the findings are particularly relevant for multinational enterprises operating in Asian markets. The results can provide insights into designing e-commerce platforms and online community services that reflect the characteristics of each local market.

Although the motivations underlying e-WOM behavior may be rooted in general human tendencies, the social factors that activate such behavior appear to differ across countries and regions. International marketing strategies for online platforms should therefore incorporate not only technological and commercial considerations but also the social and cultural conditions that shape online consumer interaction.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study examined e-WOM behavior on online community websites in Japan, China, and selected Southeast Asian countries. Owing to the geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity of Southeast Asia, considerable variation was observed in e-WOM behavior among the countries examined. Further research is needed to clarify the mechanisms underlying these differences. Specifically, comparative cultural perspectives, and where appropriate, qualitative methods or anthropological approaches, may help explain why specific social factors activate e-WOM behavior differently across national contexts. In addition, future research should expand the analysis to countries outside Asia and use more balanced sample sizes to improve the robustness and generalizability of the findings.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how social factors influence e-WOM behavior within online communities across five Asian countries: Japan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand. By analyzing a newly constructed cross-national dataset, the study demonstrated that the effects of bridging social capital, bonding social capital, customer brand identification, normative social influence, and informational social influence vary across national contexts and across different dimensions of e-WOM behavior. These findings suggest that e-WOM engagement cannot be fully explained by a universal model of online consumer behavior. Rather, it should be understood in relation to the social and cultural characteristics of each market. The study contributes to the literature by extending e-WOM research through a multi-country comparative perspective and provides practical implications for multinational enterprises seeking to design online communities and e-commerce platforms in culturally diverse markets.

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