A Review Study of Antecedents of Electronic Word-of-Mouth: The Case of Transition Economy – Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Antecedents of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social media have not been analyzed in the case of transition economies. The Commonwealth of independent states (CIS) is interesting case, where countries lived with the ideology of communism for a long time and now they need to adapt to a new set of rules. First of all, the current study analyzes the cultural aspects of Uzbekistan to understand them in the perspective of Hofstede’s classification. Secondly, it reviews previous literature and finds what kind of effects tie strength, homophily, interpersonal influence, trust, self-presentation, and self-disclosure can have on engagement in eWOM in individualistic and collectivistic communities. Finally, it suggests why future research involving the CIS sample is important.

Keywords: Electronic word-of-mouth, Social networking sites, Social media, Post-communist country

1. Introduction

The scholars of marketing have been studying antecedents of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on social media in Western and Asian societies. For example, the conceptual framework developed by Chu and Kim (2011), which explains how the US students get involved in eWOM and what factors determine their eWOM behavior. Similar studies have been studied both in China (Chu and Choi, 2011; Lien and Cao, 2014) and Latin America (Farias, 2017). However, the scholars have not tested these antecedents on post-communist countries that have relatively a new history as independent countries and are transitioning to a capitalistic democracy. The question that arises at this point is how well the antecedents can explain engagement in eWOM among netizens of Uzbekistan.

As being a post-communist country, Uzbekistan continues its transition to a new regime. Companies have been exploiting old-school methods of advertisement through TV, radio, billboards, and posters. Owing to the development of the internet, especially mobile applications and social networking sites (SNS), both companies and consumers are now online 24/7. The internet society of Uzbekistan is developing, and the number of active users has started to increase significantly in just recent years. According to Bondarchuk (2018), 5.3 million new users joined the internet within 2017, which made up the overall number of 20 million users in that period. It means about 61% of the population had access to the internet. Therefore, entities are now able to track whether their customers are discussing their products and services and if yes, whether it is positive or negative comments. Also, they could use this powerful tool in their advantage to promote product and services.

It is also worth mentioning that SNS users of Uzbekistan are quite active on both SNSs developed by the USA and Russia. However, a recent instant text messaging application called Telegram has become the most popular service among the users. Statistics show that about 18 million registered users are from Uzbekistan (Solod, 2018). It is because the majority of citizens have access to mobile internet, as 80% of connection is made via mobile devices (Ibid.). The establishment of programmable “bots” within the application, allow entities to process customer orders more efficiently. Food delivery services, independent restaurants and cafes use this feature widely. Other entities post their products on their “channels”, where subscribers can observe the products and contact the seller. As the messenger include users’ contacts and commercial entities’ “channels” in one place, it has become a perfect place for the eWOM process, because one can...
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easily share information from one “channel” to a friend directly. Another advantage of this messenger is users keep more close contacts in the messenger, whereas “friends” from Facebook are not necessarily to be close.

Henceforth, it is vital to understand what make Uzbekistani netizens engage in eWOM. The purpose of the current article is to find out what kind of antecedents prior online marketing literature have studied and if we could test them in future studies.

2. Electronic Word-of-Mouth

eWOM became another branch of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) studies. Conventional word-of-mouth studied how interpersonal relationships influenced the behavior of consumer (Engel et al., 1969; Gilly et al., 1998). Advocates of WOM marketing claimed that this is the most effective tool as people tends to believe WOM messages rather than commercials (Feick and Price 1987). Electronic word-of-mouth is “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p 39). In other words, internet users use online platforms and mobile devices to inform about products and services among them (Chu and Kim, 2018). Recent studies show that this kind of platforms can be social networking websites, blogs, virtual consumer communities, discussion boards, review websites, and emails (Ibid.). However, Chu and Kim (2018) suggest that consumers find product messages from their “friends” in SNSs more credible than messages from review websites because they will doubt about information if sources are unknown.

eWOM might be a useful tool in the right hands. According to Phelps et al. (2004), advertising specialists are fond of using eWOM in their marketing campaigns because of its efficiency in products and services promotion and developing loyalty for the brand. As a result, advertising studies have focused on how eWOM (i.e., viral marketing) can be used successfully (Phelps et al., 2004; Porter and Golan, 2006).

There are several measures to explain how internet users get engaged in eWOM. Chu and Kim (2011) reveal that people are expected to behave in three ways interchangeably. They might motivate their contacts to buy particular services and products, look for an opinion from their acquaintances, and, finally, share product-related messages with their “friends” (Ibid.). In the first case, as users may have more knowledge or experience in a product or service, they can state their opinion on this regard (King and Summers, 1970; Venkatraman, 1990; Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1998). In the second case, people will tend to be influenced by the opinion of another source, if they believe he/she is trustworthy (Chu and Kim, 2011). According to Belch and Belch, the influenced trusts the influencer, if the influencer seems to have a knowledge or expertise on the product and advises credible information (2001). Finally, passing along information is also inevitable part of eWOM, as a “share” button empowers information flow among users, which results to spread of information globally (Dellarocas, 2003; Sun et al., 2006; Norman and Russell, 2006).

3. Cultural dimensions and eWOM

A large number of papers have focused on cross-cultural characteristics of the society to shed light on eWOM behavior across a variety of countries (Fong and Burton, 2008; Chu and Choi, 2011; Goodrich and de Mooij, 2014; Dahl, 2015; Park et al., 2015; Farias, 2017). The theory of individualism (I) and collectivism (C) has been popular dimension, and it showed different results among different cultures. Chu and Choi (2011) compared the US and Chinese societies under this dimension, however implementing HVIC dimension which Triandis (1995) and Triandis and Gelfand (1998) developed. Their main difference between two societies is the members of individualistic society praise individualistic goals over the group they belong to, whereas the members of collectivistic one put group interest first over individual interests (Singelis, 1994).

The new dimension of individualism and collectivism has two types (horizontal and vertical). Therefore, there are four types of society: “horizontal individualism (HI), vertical individualism (VI), horizontal collectivism (HC), and vertical collectivism (VC)” (Singelis et al., 1995, p. 248). According to Singelis et al. (1995), the members of the VI society position themselves as an autonomous individual within the group. They accept that the individuals of their group (i.e. society) differ from them and inequality exists in their group. Furthermore, competition is welcomed in this group. This description more or less explain the Americans. The prior research suggested that the US society might be explained by VI dimension and China can be explained by HC (Shavitt et al., 2006; Sivadas, 2008). However, the horizontal
collectivistic nature of Chinese culture might be easily questioned, as Triandis (1995) states that the extreme HC can occur in religious communities or in hypothetical communist culture, where members are extremely similar. By definition horizontal collectivism postulates values, where people are equal and part of the group. Although the interest of the group is more important for the Chinese, even if it may detract their personal goals (Sheer and Chen, 2003), personal interest will be met if the group prosper (Ho, 1979). In this case, VC better explains Chinese culture (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006). In this cultural pattern, people position themselves as the group’s member, despite they accept inequality within the group (Singelis et al., 1995). The main characteristic of this pattern is “serving and sacrificing for the in-group” (Singelis et al., 1995, p. 244). Chen et al., (1997) propose that in Chinese culture social relationships must be equal and peer bonding. This difference in culture might drive Americans to engage in eWOM to demonstrate their individuality, whereas the Chinese might try to build strong relationships with their contacts (Chu and Choi, 2011). Finally, Singelis et al., (1995) define HI as a pattern, where people have some equal status, despite they have independent selves.

Triandis (1995) states this classification must be used with caution, as there is no such thing as pure VI (or any other ones). Therefore, it is worth to note that usually, a particular culture might consist of individuals with different characteristics. For example, although Japan may be more vertical collectivistic country rather than horizontal collectivistic, Hayashi (1992) and Iwao (1990) state individualism also became prevalent in this country between 1950-1990. Thus Triandis (1995) conclude that cultural characteristics might have distributed as “V-C 40%, H-C 20%, V-I 25%, H-I 15%” (cited in Singelis et al., 1995, p. 246).

Alongside with Asian countries like China and Taiwan, Chileans (as well as other Latin Americans) are also collectivistic (with Hofstede’s low individualism score of 20, 17, and 23, respectively) (Hofstede, 2001). Although Hofstede’s dimensions of culture classify cultures as collectivistic and individualistic, and does not classify them horizontally nor vertically. A study by Farias (2017) shows because of differences in cultural aspects Chileans and the US behave in eWOM variously. Although no research has been conducted to validate the cultural characteristics of the Central Asian countries, we can make some approximations. Borker (2014) uses Hofstede’s (2001) cultural scores for Russia (see Table 1) as an approximation for other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) to calculate composite and expanded IFRS indices.

| Country     | PDI | IDV | MAS | UAI | LTO | IVR |
|-------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| China       | 80  | 20  | 66  | 40  | 118 | 24  |
| Russia      | 93  | 39  | 36  | 95  | 81  | 20  |
| Kazakhstan  | 93  | 39  | 36  | 95  | 81  | 20  |
| Kyrgyzstan  | 93  | 39  | 36  | 95  | 81  | 20  |
| Tajikistan  | 93  | 39  | 36  | 95  | 81  | 20  |
| Uzbekistan  | 93  | 39  | 36  | 95  | 81  | 20  |

“Power Index (PDI), Individualism (IDV), Masculinity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) ... Long-Term Orientation (LTO) and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR)” (cited in Borker, 2014, p.94).

This logic might seem legitimate as the CIS countries have used to be one state for almost 70 years and still might share the same way of thinking. Nevertheless, the Central Asian culture had always differed from European parts of the USSR. In general, the Uzbekistani people usually care about what “public” might think about them. Public opinion usually directs what an individual can or cannot do. Therefore, people avoid losing “face” in front of relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and other people around. It is also common practice that people avoid confrontation within group members and try to maintain good relationships. According to Ohbuchi et al. (1999), this is one of the prerequisites of collectivistic society. Meanwhile, in individualistic societies members are concerned with justice (Ibid.) and are ready to resolve their disputes in courts, whereas collectivistic ones choose to save their relationships while solving their conflicts (Leung, 1997). Henceforth, the actual Hofstede’s score of individualism might be even lower than Russia’s, indicating a more collectivistic nature of the Uzbekistani culture.

Regarding further cultural dimension of the Uzbekistani people, we can propose that the current culture has vertical collectivistic nature. It is because the central Asian countries had shared common heritage until the invasion of the Russian Empire. The Soviet government formulated the modern territory of Uzbekistan in 1936. Korostelina (2007)
states that Tajikistan’s culture is vertical collectivistic. Therefore, we can conclude that individuals with vertical collectivistic culture also dominate in neighboring Uzbekistan.

4. Antecedents of eWOM

In this section, we mention what antecedents previous literature documented. A work by Chu and Kim (2011, p.51) formulated what factors (i.e., “tie strength, homophily, trust, interpersonal influence”) might influence on users’ eWOM engagement. Self-presentation and voluntary self-disclosure are also found to be as vital as those proposed by Chu and Kim (2011) (Farias, 2017). However, the impact of these factors may vary in different cultures (Ibid.).

4.1 Tie Strength

Brown and Reingen (1987) studied the original tie strength in traditional WOM activity. According to their result, the strength of tie showed substantial impact in network analysis framework. Mittal et al., (2008, p.195) state “tie strength is the potency of the bond” among communication network participants. Granovetter (1973) separates it into two types: weak and strong. Intuitively one can understand that we have stronger relationships with our family members and close friends, as they are highly supportive emotionally, whereas anyone else, whom we contact with, can represent weak ties (Pigg and Crank, 2004). Although the USA has an individualistic society (91 of individualism score), Chu and Kim (2011) find positive influence of tie strength on eWOM engagement in the American sample.

On the other hand, China’s collectivistic society showed that the Chinese sample showed that members had more strong ties than their American counterparts (Chu and Choi, 2011). Farias (2017) analyzes individualism scores of all Latin American societies and finds that they are more or less similar to China’s index (i.e. 20). As it was mentioned above, social interdependence is high in collectivistic countries (Triandis, 1995). Henceforth it can be concluded that collectivistic cultures keep their ties strong online and offline (Farias, 2017). In the case of Uzbekistan, because of its collectivistic nature, this also might be true.

4.2 Interpersonal Influence

Interpersonal influence is one of the main determinants of decision making of customers (Park and Lessig 1977; D’Rozario and Choudhury 2000). There are two types of influences: normative and informationial (Bearden et al., 1989). People might want to be accepted by society and, therefore try to match to beliefs and norms of this society (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975). It is called normative influence. Informationial influence means if people are influenced by someone who has expert knowledge about a product (Bearden et al., 1989; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Recent studies show that in the USA interpersonal influence have a positive impact (Chu and Kim, 2011), the influence is higher in China in comparison to the USA (Chu and Choi, 2011). Furthermore, it shows a positive impact in Taiwanese (Fu et al., 2015) and Chilean societies (Farias, 2017). As social norms primarily determine the behavior of collectivistic people (Hofstede, 2001), interpersonal influence impacts collectivistic culture with more probability rather than individualistic one (Lee and Kacen, 2008). Henceforth, we can conclude social norms dictate how members should behave within society, and, thus, the role of interpersonal influence may be significant in engagement in eWOM in the collectivistic culture of Uzbekistan.

4.3 Self-Presentation

Self-presentation means when people try to control others’ perception about themselves and, thus, selectively present their information (Wright and Webb, 2011). In other words, the theory of self-presentation states an individual has need of presenting their perfect image to the society (Kim et al., 2012). As a result, people limit or boost their eWOM activity in social media (Farias, 2017). Collectivistic individuals want to feel that they are part of the group (Hofstede, 2001) and this feeling drives them to exchange information in social media (Farias, 2017). Previous findings show that self-presentation has a positive relationship with eWOM (Choi and Kim, 2014; Farias, 2017). Therefore, self-presentation might be a factor that influences eWOM positively in the case of Uzbekistan.

4.4 Self-Disclosure

As the name suggests, self-disclosure means disclosing personal information that no third parties are aware of (Wright and Webb, 2011). Berger and Bradac (1982) define that self-disclosure helps to reduce uncertainty between two communicating parties. It is also can be explained through uncertainty reduction theory, which states that by revealing personal information “we obtain predictive and explanatory knowledge about another” (Farias, 2017, p. 6). As a result,
reduced uncertainty guarantees a well-established relationship between parties (Lee et al., 2008). Since parties have built a good relationship, it might increase the exchange of information, which leads to engagement in eWOM (Farias, 2017). This positive relationship was found in the Netherlands (van Noort et al., 2014) and Chile (Farias, 2017). According to Hofstede (2001), both countries have a relatively high UAI index (86 in Chile and 53 in the Netherlands). Alongside with the previous conclusion, a positive relationship between voluntary self-disclosure and we can assume eWOM engagement in a culture with high uncertainty avoidance index (e.g., Uzbekistan).

4.5 Homophily: the Direct and Indirect Effect
Rogers and Bwomwik (1970) built the concept of homophily on the bases of the idea of the degree of homogeneity of our contacts, whom we communicate with. Mouw (2006) states that our social circle mainly consists of people who are alike with us. These similarities might be socio-demographic (e.g., sex, race, age, etc.) and perceptual attributes (e.g., attitudes and belief) (Festinger, 1957; Gily et al., 1998). Consequently, individuals with common characteristics are more likely to engage in information exchange (Rogers, 1995; Rogers and Bwomwik 1970). Chu and Kim (2011) hypothesize that the relationship between homophily and eWOM is positive. However, they fail to prove it, as it shows a negative relationship. Granovetter (1973) supports it by stating weak ties with heterophilous contacts can increase the exchange of information among members of the network, whereas acquaintances with similar characteristics can isolate themselves from diverse information and ideas, which does not encourage eWOM. On the same token, a diverse range of contacts (i.e., heterophily) boost information sharing between netizens leading to greater facilitation of eWOM (Chu and Kim, 2011).

Farias (2017) explains this discrepancy by power distance index (PDI), which means “the extent to which members of a society accept and expect unequal power distribution” (p. 5). According to Hofstede (2001), cultures such as the USA, which has low PDI index, value diversity, and heterogeneity, whereas high PDI index represents that there is a rightful place for every member in the hierarchy of society. By this conclusion, Farias (2017) assumes that collectivistic society embraces homophily and expects a direct positive relationship, but fails to accept the hypothesis. However, he finds out that the role of homophily is indirect. The indirect effect of homophily can influence on eWOM behaviors through the aforementioned constructs (Farias, 2017). The previous literature finds that gender-related homophily strengthens friendship relationships (Markiewicz et al., 2000). In other words, social ties between same-gender individuals are stronger than bonds between opposite-gender individuals (Ibid.). In this case, Farias (2017) proposes that homophily is one of the prerequisites for stronger ties and interpersonal influence. Similarly, individuals reveal private information within homophilous groups more in social media (Hancock et al., 2008). Thus, Farias finds that homophily influences the engagement in eWOM positively through tie strength, interpersonal influence, and self-presentation, but cannot prove any mediating role of self-disclosure in this framework.

4.6 Trust: Direct and Indirect Effect
According to Chu and Kim (2011), trust also must be considered as a significant construct in the eWOM studies. Moorman et al. (1993, p. 82) state that people will be willing “to rely on an exchange partner”, if they are confident about that partner. Previous findings suggest that people’s willingness to exchange messages in social media highly depends on trust (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Ridings et al., 2002). Similarly, SNSs’ user finds advertising material less trustworthy than social networking websites (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). The findings from the study of Chu and Kim (2011) support this phenomenon. The US sample shows there is a positive connection between trust and eWOM behavior. Contrarily Farias (2017) finds the opposite relationship in the Chilean sample (collectivistic society). He hypothesizes that in societies with high uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) trust everyday contacts less rather than official experts and internet websites. According to Hofstede (2001), high UAI index means that this culture is more suspicious about uncertain events and tries to avoid undesirable outcomes. If UAI index is low, people will find other people more trustworthy, whereas high rank means people find professionals and websites more credible rather than their social media contacts (Goodrich and de Mooij, 2014). Therefore, from our approximated index (see Table 1), it can be deduced that the Uzbekistani culture might also show a similar situation with the Chilean sample. In this case, the relationship between trust and eWOM might be negative.

It is also worth to take into account the indirect role of trust. Morgan and Hunt (1994) state that trust among communicating parties will exist, if they are confident that another party is honest and reliable. In this case, party A expects that he/she can rely on information that comes from, presumably trusted, party B (Ibid.). Therefore, besides homophily trust might be a prerequisite for stronger ties and interpersonal influence. In the case of self-presentation and
Disclosing private information may need to develop trust first to get involved in sharing private information. Dwyer et al., (2007) claim that trust influences people’s willingness to reveal information. Bazarova and Choi propose a strategy to overcome the undesirable outcomes of sharing personal information, which involves a recipient being trusted enough (2014). Consequently, a well-established trust decreases risks associated with disclosing information (Hancock et al., 2008). The results of Farias (2017, p.12) show that a positive indirect relationship between trust and engagement in eWOM happens through “tie strength, normative influence, and voluntary self-disclosure”, and does not happen through informational influence and self-presentation.

5. The Conceptual Framework

Chu and Kim (2011) develop the model for the first time, but they do not take into account effects of self-presentation and self-disclosure, the indirect effects of homophily and trust in the framework (Figure 1). Farias (2017) develops this framework further and fills the gap above (Figure 2).

![Figure 1: The framework proposed by Chu and Kim (2011)](image1)

![Figure 2: The conceptual framework improved by Farias (2017)](image2)
6. Conclusion and future research suggestions
The antecedents of eWOM have been the center of many discussions of scholars. The reason why we have arisen this question again is that we have little understanding how well tie strength, homophily, trust, interpersonal influence (e.g., normative and informational), self-presentation, self-disclosure explain engagement in eWOM in transition economies (e.g., Uzbekistan), where communism was a leading ideology of the nation. The collapse of USSR resulted in the creation of 15 independent states, which chose to build democratic countries. Consequently, firms must adapt to new rules of the market. Business entities have to compete with their rivals and develop better advertising campaigns, which are capable of attracting more customers. The recent development of the internet has shown that it has so much potential in a wide range of areas. Some companies are implementing techniques of eWOM on SNSs (e.g., Facebook) to promote their page by promising prizes if an audience subscribes to the page and shares the company’s post with their friends. To some extent, it may be an effective marketing tactic to maintain a dialogue with potential customers. However, I feel the companies from Uzbekistan must gain more profound knowledge about drivers that influence on the Uzbekistani customers.

From the reviewed literature, we know that in collectivistic nation (e.g., Chile and, probably, Uzbekistan) tie strength, interpersonal influence, self-presentation, and self-disclosure might impact on eWOM behavior positively (Farias, 2017). The case of homophily shows that it has a negative direct effect in the sample of the USA and positive indirect influence in Chilean collectivistic culture (Farias, 2017). Similarly, the case of trust indicates a positive direct relationship in the US sample (Chu and Kim, 2011) and positive indirect relationship in Chilean sample (Farias, 2017). As trust is the basis of any communication (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and thus it might also be a precondition for the aforementioned antecedents (Farias, 2017). As it can be seen results are contradictory in different cases. Therefore, future research should test what effect these antecedents may have in the sample of Uzbekistan’s population.

Acknowledgment
The paper was partly supported by Humanities and Social Sciences Key Research Program of Department of Education, Zhejiang Province (2018GH016).

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