



# The moderating effects of gender and number of friends on the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related word-of-mouth on Facebook



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of self-presentation on brand-related word-of-mouth (WOM) and the moderating roles of gender and number of Facebook friends on the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM. Data were collected from Facebook users ( $N = 400$ ) via an online survey. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that self-presentation is positively related to brand-related WOM. It was also found that gender moderates the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM. Results show that men are more likely than women to post brand-related content on Facebook when they actively engage in self-presentation. The article concludes with a discussion of how the number of Facebook friends negatively moderates the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are regarded as a powerful tool for word-of-mouth (WOM) because consumers freely create and spread brand-related information through family, friends, colleagues, and other acquaintances (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). Brand communities on SNSs such as Facebook encourage consumers to take part in social interactions by commenting, liking, or sharing content within their social networks. These interactions play a critical role in WOM because SNS users actively look for advertising content and often disseminate information about products and brands to their social networks (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011). Nielsen (2012) recently reported that people spend more time on SNSs than any other website and consumer attitudes toward advertisements on social media are gradually improving (e.g., 26% of people are more likely to pay attention to advertising content that has been posted by their social connections). These findings indicate that the importance of brand-related WOM will increase because not only are SNSs the most popular online activity, but they also provide consumers with an easy way to share

information about products and brands (Chu & Kim, 2011). Therefore, a large number of firms spend a high percentage of their marketing costs on social media to interact with customers in order to generate positive WOM (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). However, the effectiveness of SNS marketing remains unclear.

Despite the importance of WOM on SNS, there is relatively little research on brand-related WOM. In particular, it has not yet been confirmed what motivates SNS users who passionately generate WOM. To answer this question, our study considers various variables that are regarded as important factors in SNS usage. In many studies about Internet usage and SNS, self-presentation is a key motivation for hosting a personal homepage (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), and other research shows that there are gender differences in self-presentation on SNSs (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012). Moreover, prior studies indicate that the number of friends also has a strong influence on outcomes of SNS use, such as subjective-wellbeing (Kim & Lee, 2011) and user perceptions of the host (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). Based on these studies, we predict that self-presentation, gender, and number of friends are closely associated with brand-related WOM. Therefore, we examine how these variables affect brand-related WOM and identify what inspires WOM. Furthermore, this study proposes that self-presentation is positively related to users' WOM behavior, and the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM is moderated by gender and number of Facebook friends. The results of this study have implications for target marketing and content strategy on SNSs.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Self-presentation

Self-presentation, based on Goffman's (1959) theory of identity and social performance, is concerned with the process of impression management. Self-presentation theory accounts for the fact that people have a desire to express their identities to others in a social context (Goffman, 1959) and explores the concept of presenting an ideal self-image to others (Kim, Chan, & Knkanhalli, 2012). Also, Leary (1996) describes self-presentation as a major means of influencing others' perceptions of self-image. In order to project an ideal self-image, people embrace particular products, brands, and communication methods (Williams & Bendelow, 1998). For example, consumers choose everyday products such as food, clothing, cellular phones, and so on in order to express themselves to leave a good impression (Schau & Gilly, 2003). On the other hand, other study suggests that self-presentation may also be used to present the self as honestly and as authentically as possible (e.g., Baumeister, 1982).

Self-presentation applies to online as well as offline activities. Recently, Kim and colleagues (2012) defined online self-presentation as the extent to which people manage and present their image to a virtual community. In virtual communities, textual presentation such as message boards is one way of managing self-presentation (Lee, Noh, & Kim, 2013). Krämer and Winter (2008) suggest that self-expression and impression management are the most important motives for running a personal website. Just like personal websites, SNSs have become well-known as a means of self-presentation (Mehdizadeh, 2010). Boyd and Ellison (2007) describe SNSs as websites that share social connections with others as well as an opportunity to present oneself through posting content. In addition, SNS users have the power to control their personal webpages for self-presentation (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). SNSs such as Facebook provide all users with the opportunity to take part in self-presentation activity such as updating profile information, posting photographs and messages, taking surveys, and so forth (Strano, 2008).

People can present their desired image not only by offering useful information to others, but also by exposing products or brands with which they want to connect themselves. By offering helpful and useful information on SNSs, people can improve their image (Eric, 1988). Hirschman (1980) suggests that people who have a desire for self-presentation drive themselves to show their innovativeness in accepting and using items like novel products or services. Taken together, these studies suggest that people can manage their image by disseminating information, opinions, and experience about products or brands (i.e., WOM). Another study showed that in an open-market context, the desire for self-presentation is one of the antecedents that has positive effect on electronic WOM (Lee et al., 2013).

We anticipated that Facebook users who frequently post content about self-presentation would be more likely to generate brand-related WOM as a means of self-presentation. Conversely, users who do not post content about self-presentation frequently would be less likely to generate brand-related WOM. Therefore, our hypothesis is as follows:

**H1.** Self-presentation is positively related to brand-related WOM on Facebook.

### 2.2. The role of gender in WOM

There has been a general recognition of gender differences in motivation to use the Internet. Although the main motivation for Internet usage is communication and information gathering, men and women differ significantly on several dimensions. Men tend to use the Internet primarily for entertainment, leisure, and func-

tional purposes, while women tend to use it mainly for interpersonal communication (Weiser, 2000). Another study showed that men were more likely to search for information, whereas women were more likely to exchange digital messages via e-mail (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2001). Also, other studies suggest that women tend to use SNSs as a means to communicate with friends they already know, while men tend to use it as a means to discover new friends (Tufekci, 2008). Haferkamp et al. (2012) found that women are more likely to use SNSs to compare themselves with other people.

With regard to gender differences and online advertisements, men tend to have more positive attitudes toward online advertisements than women (Wolin & Korgaonkar, 2005). Also, Taylor et al. (2011) suggest that compared to women, men tend to perceive social networking advertising as useful information because men have a more information-oriented motivation for Internet use than women. These findings suggest that there may also be differences in brand-related WOM behavior on Facebook between men and women. Compared to women, men are more likely to perceive brand-related WOM as a useful means of self-presentation because men tend to be more information-oriented and have a more positive attitude toward commercial messages than women. However, the effect of gender on brand-related WOM is more likely to manifest among users who actively engage in self-presentation. Therefore, our second hypothesis is as follows:

**H2.** Gender moderates the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM on Facebook. The relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM is stronger for men than for women.

### 2.3. WOM and the role of the number of Facebook friends

Prior research has shown that the number of Facebook friends has a positive relationship with one's subjective well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011). However, other studies have shown the number of friends also can have negative effects on privacy issues. For example, Brandtzæg, Luders, and Skjetne (2010) argue that users who have many friends may become exasperated due to the need to process too much information. This kind of experience (i.e., having too much unrelated content to sift through) makes users less interested in using Facebook (Brandtzæg et al., 2010). It follows then that users with a large number of friends might have negative attitudes toward commercial messages if the content is not related to their interests.

Avoidance of advertising is defined as an intentional action to decrease exposure to certain media (Speck & Elliott, 1997). Previous research suggests that "perceived ad clutter" leads to Internet advertising avoidance (Cho & Cheon, 2004). Perceived ad clutter occurs when users feel that there is an inordinate amount of advertising in a medium (Elliott & Speck, 1998). Such avoidance, which is equivalent to negative attitudes toward advertising, makes people less likely to respond to or share commercial content. In addition, users who have negative attitudes toward advertising might be concerned that their image could be damaged if their posting is associated with advertising on a SNS. Such a concern could be stronger for users who actively engage in self-presentation on Facebook versus users who inactively engage in self-presentation. Accordingly, despite an active self-presentation on Facebook, users with more friends are less likely to engage in brand-related WOM.

**H3.** The number of Facebook friends negatively moderates the relationship between self-presentation and brand-related WOM. Among users who actively engage in self-presentation, users with many Facebook friends are less likely to generate brand-related WOM than users with fewer Facebook friends.

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