Contents lists available at Science-Gate

International Journal of Advanced and Applied Sciences

Journal homepage: http://www.science-gate.com/IJAAS.html

The effect of brand image on electronic word-of-mouth: an empirical study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 February 2016
Received in revised form
20 April 2016
Accepted 20 April 2016

Keywords:
Brand image
Electronic Word-of-Mouth

ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is studying the effect of electronic word-of -mouth (E-WOM) on brand image through exploring the moderating role of product type. The results from a 2 (Positive WOM vs. Negative WOM)*2(Search goods vs. Experience goods) experiment design show that WOM valence has significant effect on brand image; In addition, positive WOMs have greater effect on search goods than experience goods and they have significant difference while negative WOMs do not. The findings express that E-WOM has an impact on brand image and the moderating role of the product type. Finally, the article presented some applied suggestions.

1. Introduction

Many marketers consider word of mouth as one of the most powerful marketing communications, especially when expressed by a familiar and trusted person. Since the perceived risk related to buying services is greater than when we buy a good, customer are more likely eager to trust more on word of mouth in their buying behavior (Ghafari and Iranmanesh, 2012). Arasli et al. (2005) believe that positive word of mouth about banks is customer recommendation of the bank to others. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, greater emphasis is being placed on brand image development as the basis for consumer discrimination. Brand image is of vital importance to the success of a product or service (Anca and Roderick, 2007). A good brand image could reduce consumers' perceived risk and maintain customers' trust of good quality, thereby affect customers' intention and behavior, such as their loyal relations to business (Nguyen and Leblanc, 2001). Companies employ a variety of ways to establish their brand image, such as advertisement, sponsorship event, charitable donations, and celebrity endorsement and so on. These methods play important roles in developing brand image. But they are dominated by companies so consumers doubt their credibility. While Word-of-Mouth (WOM) involves informal communication among consumers about products and services, two important features distinguish WOM from other information sources: WOM is usually perceived as more credible and trustworthy (Banerjee, 1992; Murray, 1991; Liu, 2006). As to consumers, WOM has always been one of the most important factors influencing their attitudes. Moreover, with the advancement of the Internet technology, spread of WOM is no longer confined to face-to-face communication. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (E-WOM) is becoming more and more popular. Many previous studies indicated that brand image and E-WOM are influential to the perceived risk and perceived quality of a product, which further affect consumers' purchase intention (Kuo et al., 2009). However, the effect of E-WOMs on brand image has seldom been explored and discussed.

Moreover, brand image is largely product category specific, which means that brand image is associated with product type (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). Furthermore, existing literature (Bei, 2003; Chiang and Dholakia, 2003; Girard et al., 2002) has found significant difference in information search, e-commerce adoption and consumer purchase behavior across different product type. So we suppose that the effect of E-WOM on brand image may also be influenced by product type. To shed further light on the correlation between E-WOMs and brand image, we examined such correlation by treating product type as moderating variable. As stated above, this paper aims to test the effect of E-WOMs on brand image and the moderating role of the product type. In subsequent sections of this paper we explain the theoretical background of our research, describe the experiments we conducted, demonstrate the results of data analysis and discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the results. This research is going to present an answer to this question "How is the effect of brand image on

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electronic word-of-mouth?" The following sections will study this idea.

2. Theory background

2.1. Brand image

In existing studies, there are numerous definitions of brand image. Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) defined brand image as the reasoned or emotional perceptions consumers attach to specific brands. Brand image is variously defined as "the set of beliefs held about a particular brand" (Meenaghan and Tony, 1995). Brand image, defined as the level of customers' familiarity and trust with the company's products and services. In this paper, we explore this idea: "brand image is the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory". These associations include perceptions of brand quality and attitudes toward the brand. Diverse definition of brand image may cause confusion about what is the best scale to use. However, because brand image is largely product category specific (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990), it is suggested that the choice of scale should be dictated by the research problem and its feasibility. (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001; Lemmink et al., 2003) Thus the scales used in this study are scales developed for handheld calculator and moisturizer by Chan-Wook Park and Moon (2003). The following five items were used to measure the handheld calculator: "accurate", "useful", "attractive", "exciting", and "handy". While the brand image of moisturizer is measured by six items: "friendly", "modern", "useful", "popular", "gentle" and "natural". Moreover, to heighten experimental control and avoid the effect of pre-existing brand recognition, we adopt fictitious brand names (Boush and Loken, 1991) for both handheld calculator and moisturizer.

2.2. E-WOM

Westbrook (1987) defined WOM as the informal communication among consumers about the characteristics of a business or products, emphasizing its non-commercial and unofficial, suggesting that WOM can conduct in any way without limitation to verbal exchanges. In the arena of new product development, WOM may play particularly important roles because awareness must be built, and consumers need information when deciding whether to purchase a product they do not know well (Mahajan et al., 1984; liu, 2006). The popularity of the Internet created a favorable condition for E-WOM (Li Ye and Zhang, 2010; Gupta and Harris, 2010). E-WOM is a real-time or non real-time two-way interactive communication process in which any individual or organization transfer all kind of subjective or objective points of view, discuss about the product, or other brand-related information through the forum, blog, instant messaging and other channels of transmission. Existing studies have found that the valence (positive and negative) of WOM correlates significantly with consumer behavior and market outcome (Anderson, 2003; Bowman and Narayandas, 2001). Based on the definitions of positive and negative WOM proposed by previous researchers, we define positive WOM as "positive information which is actively and proactively spread on online forums or message boards by customers having positive feedbacks on the product and service of a company." Negative WOM is defined as "negative information which is actively and proactively spread on online forums or message boards by customers having negative feedbacks on the product or service of a company" (Arndt, 1967; Robert and Wendy, 2008). The reason valence matters is relatively straightforward; positive WOM enhances expected quality (and, thus, consumers' attitudes toward a product), while negative WOM reduces it. In this article, the effect of WOM is referred to the WOM valence effect on brand image (Liu, 2006).

2.3. Product type

Some researchers empirically show that products can be classified into two product types: Utilitarian product and hedonic product (Vaughn, 1986). A high utilitarian value of a product means that the product is useful to solve a specific problem while the hedonic value of a product is decided based on the ability to provide feeling or hedonic pleasure rather than to solve a problem. Whether a particular product is utilitarian or hedonic is decidedly based upon a consumer's subjective judgment about the product's value. Accordingly, the direction of importance given to a product may be different depending on consumers. Thus, a product may have utilitarian and hedonic characteristics simultaneously Chan-Wook Park and Moon, 2003). While at present, the product taxonomy commonly adopted in e-commerce marketing research is the one proposed by Nelson (1974), which classified products into search goods and experience goods. According to Nelson's definition, search goods are those, whose main features can be objectively evaluated from information that is readily available. In the contrast, experience goods are characterized by attributes that cannot be known until the purchase and after use of the product. Existing literature (Bei, 2003; Chiang and Dholakia, 2003; Girard et al., 2002) has found the significant difference in information search, e-commerce adoption and consumer purchase behavior across search goods and experience goods. Moreover, the e-WOM effect is different between search goods and experience goods (park and lee, 2009). Therefore, in our study, we also adopt this product taxonomy framework.

3. Research method and design

This study tests the relationship between the E-WOM and brand image and the moderating role of

the product type through 2 (positive E-WOM vs. negative E-WOM)*2 (search good vs. experience goods). As stated in the measurement of brand image, we choose handheld calculator and moisturizer as our product category. According to existing literature, handheld calculator can be classified as search goods while moisturizer as experience goods. To validate the accuracy of the classification, in our experiments, we would ask the subjects to answer the questionnaires regarding product type using seven-point Likert scale (Vaughn, 1986). Specifically, we ask the subjects about how difficult to judge the quality of the products only through product description information on a 7-point rating of difficulty (1="very easy" and 7="very difficult"). According to the characteristics of search and experience goods, the score of this question should be low for search goods which represents it is simple to judge the product's quality based on its product description. We collected online product reviews from the website of Cloob (http://www.cloob.com) which serves as a good source of WOM. First, it has great popularity. Second, it requires no access fee for either browsing or posting a message. We choose abundant reviews about both the handheld calculator and moisturizer goods, then, we make some adjustment on the original reviews. In detail, firstly, we analyze the important product attributes frequently mentioned within these reviews, and integrate the chosen reviews to make them as comprehensive as possible. Secondly, three judges are asked to read each of the integrated reviews independently and assign them respectively to one of the five categories: positive, negative, mixed, neutral, and irrelevant. Positive or negative reviews show clear assessment or direct recommendation of the product. A review is classified as mixed if it has no clear overall assessment, which may express positive evaluations about some aspects of the product but negative evaluations about other aspects. A neutral review provides no positive or negative comments. Finally, a review is classified as irrelevant if it is not related to the product itself (Liu, 2006). In the process, we adopt the majority rule: If at least two judges assign the same category, that category is used for the message (Liu, 2006). Lastly, we choose the private and negative WOMs to form the final WOMs used in our experiment. We recruited 280 participants, all of whom were active in this web-site. Then the participants were randomly assigned to four experiment groups. Group one would read positive WOMs about handheld calculator which is categorized into searching product type. While the second group read negative ones. Group three read positive WOMs about moisturizer which is assigned to experiencing product category while the fourth group read negative ones (See Table 1).

Table 1: Grouping conditions

Product Type WOM Valance	Search Product	Experience Product
Positive WOMs	Group one	Group two
Negative WOMs	Group three	Group four

In each group, the participants were requested to read the survey guideline and the WOMs. After reading these reviews, they were asked to answer the following related questions measuring brand image and one question judging product type. We measure the brand image of handheld calculator by the validated five-item scale and six-item scale of the moisture from Vaughn (1986) on a 7-point rating of agreement (1 for strongly disagree; 7 for strongly agree).

4. Analysis and results

We collected 280 responses all together and after removing the invalidated ones, we got 220 validated samples for further analysis. The number of validated responses in each experimental group is basically balanced. The number of the first two groups is 50 for each while the validated responses are 60 for each of the last two groups. In the validated samples, 59.1% are male and 41.0% are female. One item is separately designed to check whether product type is manipulated successfully. T test of responses on the item checking the product type shows significant difference in the difficulty of product quality judgment between handheld calculator group and moisture group ($T(220)= -0.734$, $p=0.042<0.05$, mean (handheld calculator)=3.011,mean(moisture)=4.621)). Thus, product type has been manipulated as intended. The response on the five items measuring brand image of handheld calculator (Cronbach's Alpha=0.888) are averaged to indicate the overall brand image while the Cronbach's Alpha is 0.916 for the six items measuring brand image of moisture. Subsequently, we did factor analysis to get the weighting coefficient of each item, and then we could calculate the weighted mean of brand image for both product types. Afterwards, to demonstrate the effect of valence WOM on brand image, we compare the effect of positive and negative WOMs for the same product type. The comparison results through T test show that, the brand image has significant difference between Group one and Group two ($T(98) =16.264$, $P=0.000$, mean (positive) =5.655, mean (negative) =3.091). Meanwhile, the difference of brand image between Group three and Group four is also significant ($T(118) =16.843$, $P=0.000$, mean (positive) =5.430, mean (negative) =2.773) (See Table 2). So we could conclude that WOMs valence has great effect on brand image for both search and experience product type. We further compared the effect of WOMs for search goods and that for experience goods under the same WOM valence to

validate the moderating role of the product type. T test shows that the effect of positive WOMs on brand image has no significant difference between search and experience product type (T (108) =-0.208, P=0.835, mean (search) =5.655, mean (experience) =5.430). While the effect of negative WOMs for search and experience product types is different (T (108) =1.695, P=0.013, mean (search) =3.091, mean (experience) =2.773) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of WOM effect among the experimental groups

Product Type WOM Valance	Search Product	Experience Product	Total	T-value (P)
Positive WOMs	Mean= 5.655 (N=50)	Mean= 5.430 (N=60)	Mean= 5.441 (N=110)	Mean= -0.208 (p=0.835)
Negative WOMs	Mean= 3.091 (N=50)	Mean= 2.773 (N=60)	Mean= 2.918 (N=110)	1.695 (p=0.013)
Total	Mean= 4.273 (N=100)	Mean= 4.102 (N=120)		
T-Value (P)	16.264 (p=0.000)	16.843 (p=0.000)		

To compare the impact strength of WOM valence and product type, we did further manipulation to primary data. As we adopt the standard of 7-point rating, 4 should represent neutral. As a result, all primary data of Group one and Group three are subtracted from 4 and 4 minus the second and the fourth group data. The new date could indicate the effect strength of WOM. The comparison results through T test in Figure 1 show that, for search goods, the effect of negative WOMs is stronger than that of positive ones, this difference is not significant(mean(positive)=0.910 Mean (negative) =1.415 P=0.200). Meanwhile, for experience goods, effect of negative WOMs is significantly stronger than that of positive ones (mean (positive) =0.837 Mean (negative) =1.435 P=0.001). Moreover, the effect of positive WOMs for search goods is greater than that of experience goods, and the difference is significant (mean (search) =0.910 Mean (experience) =0.837 P=0.041). In contrast, the effect of negative WOMs for experience goods is greater than that for search goods, the difference is not significant (mean (search) =1.415 Mean (experience) =1.435 P=0.093) (See Fig. 1).

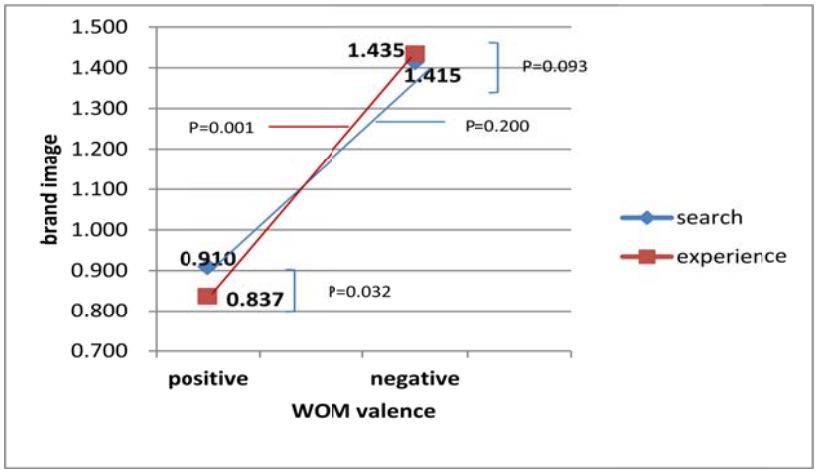

Fig. 1: The interaction effect between product type and WOM valence

5. General discussion, implications, and limitations

Our study explores the effect of WOM valence on brand image and the moderating role of product type. The dominating findings are as follows: WOM valence has significant effect on brand image; moreover, compared with positive WOMs, negative ones have stronger effect for both search and experience goods and especially for experience goods. In addition, the positive WOMs have greater effect on search goods than experience goods and they have significant difference; whereas, the effect of negative WOMs on the two types of product is not significantly different. From the view of theoretical contribution, this study confirms the effect of E-WOM valence on brand image. Many previous studies have focused on E-WOM, brand image and consumer behaviors. Della et al. (1981) indicated that brand image and E-WOM are influential to the perceived risk and perceived quality of a product, which further affect consumer's purchase intention. Arndt (1967) confirmed that E-WOM can stabilize the perceived quality of a product and positive WOM can still increase consumers' purchase intention. Liao et al. (2009) proofed that brand image has a positively significant impact on E-WOM. It can be mentioned that a good brand image can enhance consumer's brand loyalty, trust, and also purchase intention. However, the effect of E-WOM on brand image has seldom been explored and discussed. Firstly, WOM valence has significant effect on brand

image. Arndt (1967) pointed out that consumers exposed to positive WOMs are more likely to make a purchase decision; consumers exposed to negative WOMs are less likely to make a purchase decision. Park and Lee (2009) also reported that negative E-WOM had a greater effect than positive E-WOM. This view may be applied to illuminates the conclusions of this article: WOM valence has significant effect on brand image, which means consumers exposed to positive WOMs are more likely to form favorable brand image while consumers exposed to negative WOMs may form poor brand image. To be concrete, positive E-WOMs diminish it while negative ones may aggravate consumers' perceived risk.

Secondly, we have verified the moderating role of product type, which means that the effect of E-WOM on brand image could change under the moderation of product type. On one hand, positive WOMs have greater effect on search goods than experience goods and they have significant difference. This conclusion was supposed to be explained by attribution theory since consumers would like to attribute E-WOMs of search goods towards product while attribute E-WOMs of experience goods to reviewers. This explanation can be justified by availability theory which points that information diagnostic is situation dependent. Specifically, search goods are much easier to judge product quality with abundant and definite product information. On the other hand, the similarity of the effects of negative E-WOMs on search and experience goods may be demonstrated by the prospect theory which is an alternative account of individual decision making under risk. That is to say, consumers' attribution and attitude could be changed by other factors, such as perceived risk which has great importance in consumer decision (Juliant et al., 1999). Many previous studies indicated that E-WOMs are influential to the perceived risk of a product (Arndt, 1967). In detail, consumers attribute the negative E-WOMs of experience goods not only to reviews but also to the product itself due to the incremental perceived risk (Fiegenbaum and Thomas, 1988; Bettman, 1973). Based on attribution and prospect theory; we explained the moderating role of the product type. From the managerial perspective, the conclusions of this article have great practical significance. In today's product and service industry, how to make a good brand impression on customers (customers of web-site products and its viewers whom even do not purchase via cloob.com) has become more and more important. When deciding to choose or refuse a company brand, customers usually make a decision on the basis of the brand image and the importance of brand image is more and more obvious on which managers pay great emphasis on (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Furthermore, according to previous researches; WOM has great effect on consumers' attitude and decision making. Thus, it plays an important role in consumer behavior (Herr et al., 1991; Bone, 1995). Zhu and Zhang (2011) point out that how E-WOM affect consumers' purchase decisions is vitally important to firms that rely on E-WOM to disseminate information about their products. Bernard et al. (2009) demonstrated that micro-blog as a social communication channel can be useful for identifying consumer preference and finding out product defects then correcting inadvertent mistakes. Accordingly, many firms are taking advantage of E-WOM as a new marketing tool (Dellarocas, 2003). Therefore, how to guide and use E-WOM to establish good brand image and then influence consumers' purchase intension should be part of an overall proactive marketing strategy.

First of all, as consumers have been found to rely on WOM to reduce the level of perceived risk and the uncertainty that is often associated with product or service purchase decisions (Murray, 1991), companies should try to understand and manage these antecedents. On one hand, managers should pay more attention on negative E-WOMs for both search and experience goods. They have stronger power on brand image which could not be ignored. Managers should track the high-quality negative E-WOMs about the product on some popular websites. Then, they could improve the product quality according to the feedbacks and give reasonable explanations to seek for recovery (East et al., 2008). Further, efforts should be made to eradicate false allegations or rumors, so as to avoid negative WOM from doing deeper harms to brand image (Lee et al., 2008). On the other hand, companies should examine the characteristics of their brand and deliver an appropriate image to the customers through some positive WOMs. So it is suggested that companies could set up a service platform to facilitate the spread of positive WOM and clarify the truth when detrimental rumor appear on Internet to stop the adverse effect of negative WOMs.

Secondly, our findings indicate that the manipulation on positive WOMs could bring about more significant effect for search goods than for experience goods. Thus, managers could conduct positive E-WOM marketing for search goods firstly under the resources constraint. According to the different directions and strengths of E-WOM valence under different product types, marketers could correspondingly adjust the E-WOM marketing strategies more effectively and efficiently to form good brand image. This study has occurred a limitation, because brand image is largely product category specific (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990), we choose the scales used by Chan-Wook Park and Moon (2003) for handheld calculator and moisturizer to guarantee the reliability and validity of the scales. Therefore, the prevalence of the conclusions may be limited due to the specific products. Future research should develop new brand image scales for different products to verify the applicability of the conclusions.

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