

WHAT MAKES OFFLINE WORD-OF-MOUTH MORE INFLUENTIAL THAN ONLINE WORD-OF-MOUTH?

Ahmet Bayraktar, Bozok University
Emine Erdogan, Rutgers University

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine online and offline WOM communication channels in terms of their effectiveness. We explore the factors that make offline WOM more influential than online WOM. Furthermore, we explore how personal characteristics, culture and product categories and features influence consumer preference of one channel to the other. In addition, we examine the channel characteristics that influence consumer preference of one to the other. This study suggests that the strength of ties and the quality of communication are the antecedents to the effectiveness of WOM communication channel. Moreover, it suggests that the value of information mediates the relationship between the strength of ties and the effectiveness of WOM. The study also argues that consumers trust offline WOM more when they seek information about services. On the other hand, they pay more attention to expertise when they seek information about products with high complexity. The study indicates that mindful consumers tend to engage in online WOM more than less mindful or mindless consumers. Besides, consumers in individualist culture use online communication channel more than those in collectivist culture do in order to obtain information about products.

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies have shown that word-of-mouth (WOM), one of the most influential channels of communication in the marketplace, has significant effects on consumer behavior (e.g. Allsop, Bassett and Hoskins, 2007; Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels, 2009; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, and Scott, 2007). This communication channel can be classified into two broad categories: online and offline WOM. Due to the new developments in technology, and the increase in the number and importance of online social networks, the internet has become a popular channel in facilitating and spreading WOM messages. Since it has become an important driver of consumer behavior, marketers are increasingly interested in managing and influencing online WOM (Ashley and Leonard, 2009; Chen and Lurie, 2013), which is a kind of non-commercial channel. As in the case of “stealth marketing,” sometimes without revealing the commercial intention behind the tactics, they attempt to create online WOM through a variety of means such as chat rooms, blogs, newsgroups and other online social networks. This attempt is so widespread among marketers that it comprises substantial amount of total promotion efforts of many firms and the companies’ marketing budget for this kind of non-traditional marketing tactics is increasing significantly (Sass, 2006).

Although online WOM has become a useful and a popular channel for the dissemination of marketing messages, very little is known about the effectiveness of this channel relative to offline WOM. Many studies (e.g. Kozinets et al., 2010; Prendergast and Ko, 2010; Chen and Kirmani, 2011) have been conducted to test the influence of either online or offline WOM communication channel. However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has compared the effect of online and offline WOM communications on consumer behavior, and explained the factors that influence the process. Intuitively, we can argue that

individuals are more influenced by offline communication than online communication. At this point, the following questions arise: what are the factors that make one channel superior to the other? What are the factors that explain the general process? Why do consumers prefer one channel to the other? What are the roles of personal characteristics, and product categories and features in these preferences? Do these preferences vary across different cultures? In this paper, we seek to answer these questions by utilizing exploratory research method. The organization of the rest of the article is as follows: in section two, we provide a brief review of the literature on online and offline WOM communications. In section three, we describe the methodology used in the study. In section four, we introduce the exploratory research findings along with the proposed mechanism that explains the relative effectiveness of online and offline WOM. Finally, we conclude with implications and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Word-of-mouth (WOM) involves informal communication about products and services (Liu, 2006). It describes “information seeking” and “information giving” among consumers. When consumers consider an advertisement a sales instrument instead of informative tool and guidance, they feel threatened (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006). Therefore, they reject the advertising claim or message and ultimately turn to WOM communication for guidance in their purchase decisions (Dichter, 1966). In other words, when consumers consider that an advertisement is biased due to its commercial nature, they resort to WOM communication through which they believe that they can obtain more credible and unbiased information regarding the products or services. Ryan and Gross’s (1943) diffusion study argue that informal communications among consumers are more important than marketing communications in influencing adoption.

This results from the commercial nature of the marketing communication techniques and the non-commercial nature of the WOM. The role of social networks in facilitating and spreading WOM messages is very important. A social network can be described as a social structure made up of individuals or organizations, which are called nodes (Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith, 2010) and which are tied or connected by one or more specific types of interdependency. In today’s world, social networks can be classified into two general groups: online and offline social networks. Offline social networks are the traditional networks such as clubs, unions, cultural centers, fellowships and associations. On the other hand, online social networks are the virtual networks created on the internet.

Due to the new developments in technology and the widespread use of the internet, online WOM has become a common phenomenon. Because of its potential effects on consumer behavior, marketers have been increasingly interested in influencing online WOM communications by utilizing various marketing strategies such as viral marketing, guerilla marketing and stealth marketing. Many well-known brands try to manage this informal communication, and stimulate individuals to talk about their products positively on web-based opinion platforms (Petty and Andrews, 2008). Furthermore, research on online WOM communications has been gradually increasing. One of the most important features of the Internet relative to other mass communication devices is its bidirectional property.

Thanks to the internet, individuals can make their personal thoughts, reactions and opinions easily accessible to the global community (Dellarocas, 2003; Liu, 2006). Since the internet is becoming more and more integrated in individuals’ everyday life, including the formation and maintenance of intimate and non-intimate social relationships (Mesch and Talmud, 2006), the importance and the popularity of online WOM communications are gradually increasing. Email referrals, online forums of users and newsgroups, as well as customer product reviews encouraged by merchant websites enable consumers to give and obtain information far more easily than ever before (Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Although online WOM communications have become a useful and a popular channel for the dissemination of WOM messages, very little is known about the effectiveness of this channel relative to offline WOM communication, which

is the traditional channel of information giving and information seeking among consumers. Eventually, very little is known about the factors that make one channel superior to the other.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted exploratory research method in order to obtain in-depth understanding of the relative effectiveness of online and offline WOM and the mechanism that explains the process. It utilized interviews with 40 individuals from Turkey and the US. While 20 of the interviews were conducted in Turkey, 20 of them were conducted in the US. Twenty-seven of the participants were female and 13 of them were male. The median age category for the participants was 30-35. The median education level was a bachelor's degree (35%). The occupations of the participants varied. Most of the participants (37.5%) were in business sector. Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the sample. A semi-structured survey questionnaire was utilized during the interviews. The interviews were conducted in summer 2012 during home and workplace visits. All the interviews were tape-recorded.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Sample

	Female	Male	Total
USA	14	6	20 (50%)
Turkey	13	7	20 (50%)
Total	27 (67.5%)	13 (32.5%)	

Age	Frequency	Percentage
15-20	1	2.5
21-25	4	10
26-30	12	30
31-35	13	32.5
36-40	6	15
41-45	1	2.5
46<	3	7.5

Nationality	Frequency	Percentage
American	12	30
Turkish	23	57.5
Chinese	1	2.5
Pakistani	2	5
African	1	2.5
Brazilian	1	2.5

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Business	15	37.5
Teacher	4	10
Academician	8	20
PhD Student	4	10
MBA Student	3	7.5
Undergrad	1	2.5
Health Worker	3	7.5
Geologist	1	2.5
Lawyer	1	2.5

For the verbal analysis, the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed. In the analysis process, the verbal analysis techniques developed by Chi (1997) were used. For practical reasons, some steps were omitted. In this context, after reading a transcribed interview, we divided it into meaningful analytical units. After locating meaningful segments, we assigned codes for each of them. The selection of codes was based entirely on the research questions and the content domain. During the analysis process, we focused on the mechanism that explained the effectiveness of online and offline WOM and the reasons why the participants

preferred one to the other. Furthermore, we focused on whether there was a specific WOM channel preferred by the interviewees for certain product categories. Finally, we focused on whether there were significant differences between Turkish and American participants' responses. After the whole coding process, we sought a pattern or a mechanism in the data. After we revealed the pattern, we interpreted it. During the interpretation of the perceived pattern, the research questions were taken into account. The pattern was interpreted in terms of the processes and the content of the knowledge base.

Findings

Based on the verbal analyses, we suggest that offline WOM is more effective than online WOM. Admittedly, this argument is rather intuitive. During the analysis process, we focused on the potential factors that make offline WOM more effective than online WOM. Furthermore, we attempted to explore how individuals' preferences of offline WOM to online WOM are influenced by their personal characteristics, cultural factors and product categories.

The Strength of Ties and the Value of Information

Attributes of an information source have powerful influences on the way individuals respond to messages in a communication (Forman, Anindya, and Batia, 2008). They often directly influence the recipients' attitudes and behaviors, independent of the message or information content. A highly credible source is more persuasive than a less credible one (Trusov et al., 2009; Kozinets, Valck, Wojnicki, and Wilner, 2010). Additionally, the strength of ties between listener and speaker in WOM communication is one of the most important factors that influence the value of information (Cialdini, 2009; Gatignon and Robertson, 1986; Mesch and Talmud, 2006; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Trusov et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2007). Individuals are easily persuaded by the people that they like (Cialdini, 2009). The stronger the tie, the greater the emotional intensity and intimacy between two individuals, and thus, the greater the credibility of each of these individuals to the other (Gatignon and Robertson, 1986). In other words, strong-tie information sources are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than weak-tie information sources. Therefore, if the ties are strong between listener and speaker, the level of influence in WOM communication will be high. Based on our analyses, we argue that individuals develop stronger ties in offline environment than online. Therefore, we argue that the value of information obtained through offline WOM will be higher than the value of information obtained through online WOM.

The strength of ties between individuals is usually measured by means of a combination of factors such as perceived closeness and trust (Mesch and Talmud, 2006), the amount of time spent together, emotional intensity, reciprocity (Dahlstrom and Ingram, 2003), intimacy (Dahlstrom and Ingram, 2003; Mesch and Talmud, 2006) and multiplexity (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982; Dahlstrom and Ingram, 2003) associated with a relationship. Strong ties are positively related to a high level of intimacy, involving more self-disclosure, shared activities, emotional as well as instrumental exchanges and long-term interactions (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Most of the informants believe that online communication restricts emotional exchanges and prevents to develop a high level of intimacy.

Face-to-face is a richer, a genuine way to communicate. It is a richer way to interact. You could see or cry or hug or laugh with the person. It just fills you up. It rejuvenates your soul. It is the highest quality. It is the best. Online is so-so. It helps to see the person that you are talking to online, not just reading what they write. (American female)

Most of the interviewees mentioned that the people with whom they had a high level of intimacy mostly affected them.

The people around me influence me the most. They are usually not experts but they are close to me. I guess you could say that they are influencer. I ask them for their opinions because what I buy usually concerns them or have to do with them. (Kenyan male)

The person who is the most close to me influences me more. When I worked, I would ask my colleagues, now I am a student, so I will take my roommate's advices. And I still remember when I was a little girl I shall ask my mom for everything. (Chinese female)

However, informants tend to ask people who are expert for the purchase decision of products or services with high complexity (e.g. cars, computers, cell phones and insurance). In other words, expertise might be more important than intimacy for individuals that are seeking information about complex products or services. In addition, individuals might use online reviews more for products or services with high complexity.

My product preferences are affected by other people a lot. I would like to talk to people who are experts in certain areas to find out what they think is the best. I look to friends who are more expert in particular areas while making decisions. (American male) My parent's suggestions or my friends' opinion are important; however, if I want to buy a computer, for example, I ask advice from people who are more knowledgeable and experienced than me. Eventually, the computers are complex products and include technical features. I need support from people who have strong knowledge and who are expert on this area. (Turkish female) When I bought my car, I asked my dad for his help and opinion. When I bought my dog, I asked my grandma for her help and opinion. When I bought my townhouse, I asked my parents for their opinion. I know they are an expert and give me an honest opinion. (American female) I would like to talk to people that I know about products. I really do not like the people that give their opinions but are not experts. I pay attention to online reviews for only electronic products. (Turkish female)

The concept "social similarity" merits attention in the discussion of communication and the strength of ties. Social similarity is of vital importance in the formation, development, maintenance, and dissolution of close social relationships. It is "the result of opportunities for interaction emerging from the social structuring of activities that expose individuals to each other" (Mesch and Talmud, 2006, p. 139). Individuals are likely to participate in enjoyable joint activities with those who have similar interests (Aboud and Mendelson, 1996). Participation in the same activities increases the frequency and the duration of social interaction. All of these will lead individuals to develop stronger ties with those who are socially similar to themselves. Therefore, they will be mostly influenced by the people with whom they have a high level of social similarity.

Definitely, I trust comments and suggestions that I receive from my offline friends. There are bunch of reviews on the internet. Most of them write their opinions based on their thoughts and lifestyle. However, I always seek information from my friends and family members who are similar to me, who have similar lifestyle, who have similar worldview, and whose opinions I can trust. That means I will receive information from someone who interprets the incidents from my point of view. Being expert is important, however, being socially similar and having the same frame of mind is more important. (Turkish male)

The above discussion also highlights the importance of multiplexity, which is another important factor that increases the strength of ties (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982; Dahlstrom and Ingram, 2003). Multiplexity, which is an indicator of trust and intimacy (Wasserman and Faust, 1995), is used to describe the different dimensions in a relationship. It refers to the kinds of relationships established among individuals in a network. It is present when two individuals have relationships that operate in more than one dimension (Dahlstrom and Ingram, 2003). In other words, "multiplexity exists when a tie between two or more people encompasses multiple activities or topics of conversation rather than a single activity or shared topic" (Mesch and Talmud, 2006, p. 139). It is considered high when individuals are connected in multiple

activities and discussions. In addition, research argues that multiplexity is positively related to social similarity (Stoller, Miller, and Guo, 2001). We argue that individuals will be mostly influenced by the people with whom they have a high level of multiplexity.

For example, I bought an Ipad Retina Display three days ago, based on my two friends' suggestion. I did not check the online reviews. We are very close friends. We have been friends for 4 years. We come together 3-4 times a week. I trust them. (Turkish male)

Considering the discussion about intimacy, social similarity and multiplexity, we can argue that since a wide range of activities such as gatherings, festivals, cultural activities and trips occur in offline social networks, the levels of intimacy, social similarity and multiplexity in offline social networks are higher than those in online social networks. Therefore, the strength of ties and the level of interactions in offline social networks are higher than those in online social networks are. This means that the value of information in offline social networks is higher than the value of information in online social networks. Furthermore, since strong social ties provide maintenance of relationships, we can argue that the relationships among members of offline social networks are longer than the relationships among members of online social networks.

Bias Towards Online Reviews

Findings suggest that individuals develop bias towards online reviews, which, in turn, negatively influences the value of information obtained through online WOM. Due to the commercial nature of the marketing communication and the non-commercial nature of WOM, the latter is more credible for consumers (Ryan and Gross's, 1943). However, when it comes to online reviews, which is considered online WOM, the credibility is questionable. As noted before, a highly credible source is more persuasive than a less credible one (Trusov et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2010). On the other hand, individuals tend to believe that negative online reviews are more credible than positive ones.

I am just alert that some of the reviewers are paid to write such reviews. I pay attention to the negative reviews. I consider them unbiased. (American female) In general, I do read a lot online reviews before buying anything. They affect my preferences, especially if I am buying online. Negative reviews affect me the most. If I would like to buy something and I see five positive comments and one negative comment, that one negative comment will make me not to buy that product. (Pakistani female) My parent, my wife, my friends, people that I like ... they influence my preferences. Unfortunately, I cannot trust the comments on the internet. Some marketers, or even their friends, might positively rate the products using fake usernames or they might make negative comments on the competitors' products. Since these kinds of behaviors are very common, I do not trust the comments on the internet. I rarely trust them. (Turkish female)

On the other hand, some participants trust online reviews and comments, and thus engage in information seeking on the internet before shopping. Especially, participants in the US tend to believe in the objectivity of online comments more than participants in Turkey tend to do.

I think online reviews or product reviews have influenced me more. If someone is willing to spend time to make a review, since they are not paid, then it is worth reading. Their opinion is really valuable because they spend time to make review. I realize that people are paid to that now, but I can tell that which ones are real and fake. I usually shop online and offline. I share websites, or share what I am going to buy. (American female) Online reviewers influence me the most in my product preferences because I know that they bought it and it is their opinions on the object. I feel like friends try to be nice when they give an opinion about something. Like they would say to buy an item which they have not used before. (Brazilian female)

The Quality of Communication

Research suggests that offline communication has higher quality than online communication (Mesch and Talmud, 2006). In other words, the quality of offline social interactions and relationships is higher than the quality of online interactions and relationships (Haythornthwaite, 2002). In their study, Cummings, Butler and Kraut (2002) suggest that e-mail communication is less reliable than face-to-face communication. They also claim that e-mail communication is considered inferior to communication in person for maintaining personal relationships. Greenshields (2010) argues that employing all the senses in a communication makes one's message more effective. That is, using all the senses can increase the persuasiveness of the message, and thus, the quality of the message. Considering the fact that the senses that one can use in online communication are limited, we can argue that one can convey his/her message in offline social networks in a more effective way than that in online social networks. In other words, WOM messages in offline social networks can be more persuasive than WOM messages in online social networks due to the quality of these messages. Most of the participants prefer offline communication to online communication, which, in turn, influences their preference of offline WOM to online WOM.

In online communication, you share %30 of that you can. This is what makes online interaction poor. The communication can be broken down. It can be interrupted at any time. I believe that you cannot explain what you want as much as you can do offline. (Turkish female) When you are talking to people face to face, it is a lot easier to see people being genuine in what they are talking about than online. It is easier to sound smart online and they could be doing a number of stuff while talking to you. (American male)

Individual Mindfulness and the Effect of Word-of-Mouth

The analyses suggest that mindful individuals tend to engage in online WOM as both a listener and a speaker more than less mindful or mindless individuals do. Mindfulness in business context has been discussed at the individual and organizational levels (Bayraktar and Ndubisi, 2014; Uslay and Erdogan, 2014). At the individual level, it is defined as “a receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience” (Brown, Ryan, and Creswell, 2007, p. 212). It includes efforts “to focus one's attention on the concrete aspects of one's behavior, thereby eliminating the abstract, deliberative, high-level self-thoughts that can interfere with enacting automatic and complex behaviors” (Leary, Adams, and Tate, 2006, p. 1827).

The literature on mindfulness suggests that mindful individuals pay greater attention to details, and are more open to new information (Langer, 1989). In addition, they have greater attention to the participation in the ongoing process of living (Gunaratana, 2002) and a more receptive attention to and awareness of current events, realities and experiences (Brown et al., 2007). Furthermore, they have greater sensitivity to their environment, greater skills in cognitive categorization, and advanced awareness of multiple perspectives in problem solving (Langer, 1989). Therefore, mindful consumers are expected to engage in time-consuming mental efforts and information seeking during their decision making process, and thus seek to understand critical intrinsic and extrinsic product cues, including online reviews (Bayraktar and Uslay, 2013). That is, mindful consumers will engage in online WOM as a listener more than mindless or less mindful consumers do. Besides, mindful individuals have greater interest and concern for life (Neff, 2003), and empathy for others (Beitel, Ferrer, and Cecero, 2005), and better skills at interpersonal communication (Bayraktar and Uslay, 2013). Hence, we suggest that they are likely to generate more online WOM to inform other people. In other words, we assume that they will engage in online WOM as a speaker more than mindless or less mindful consumers do.

Individualism and Collectivism

The relationships between individuals and their groups differ across cultures. Such important cultural differences appear in a wide range of psychological domains, such as cognition, emotion, achievement, motivation, and psychological well-being (Chen and West, 2008). Researchers (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Ho and Chiu, 1994; Kim, 1994) use individualism and collectivism concepts to explain these cross-cultural differences. Individualism/collectivism expresses the distinction between prevalent cultural orientations that value the importance of an individual versus those that value group harmony (Sivadas, Bruvold and Nelson, 2008). While individualistic societies emphasize “me”, collectivistic societies emphasize “us” (Chen and West, 2008; Sivadas, Bruvold and Nelson, 2008). While individualists generally see themselves as independent of others, and behave according to personal attitudes and preferences, collectivists generally see themselves as interdependent with others, and behave according to social norms (Sivadas, Bruvold and Nelson, 2008). Individualistic societies are characterized by an expression of the self and comparison of others in relation to the self, whereas collectivistic societies are characterized by an expression of self within the framework of the peer group and comparison and definition of self in relation to others (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000). While individualistic culture highlights autonomy, emotional independence, individual initiative, right to privacy, pleasure seeking, financial security, need for specific friendship, and universalism, collectivistic culture accentuates collective identity, emotional dependence, group solidarity, sharing, duties and obligations, need for stable and predetermined friendship, group decision, and particularism (Chen and West, 2008, p. 261). Individualistic societies are primarily Western European countries and the United States, whereas collectivistic cultures are primarily Asian and Middle Eastern countries (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000). The analyses indicate that collectivistic people tend to be influenced by offline WOM more than individualistic people. Since collectivists see themselves as interdependent with others and behave according to social norms (Sivadas, Bruvold and Nelson, 2008), they will pay greater attention to peer groups’ opinion, and thus engage in information seeking through offline WOM. The analyses also indicate that individualists tend to engage in online information seeking more than collectivists do.

I am not concerned about what others are going to think about my product preferences. I get what I like. I guess I would ask them, if the product involves other people. If it is personal, I know my taste so I would not care. (American female) If it is a product that I am not familiar with it, I ask a friend or someone that has the same product and ask for their opinion on it. Generally, I buy what I want, but I am affected by what other people say. In general, I choose what I want. I would say that I am in the middle. (American female) I definitely take into account others’ potential criticisms and comments when purchasing something. For example, color... my mom like certain colors and I consider them. I do not like a dress, if I believe that my mom will not like it. For example, if one of my friends says “this color does not befit... you look fat with this dress...” etc. I definitely pay attention to them and never buy it. (Turkish female)

Product Social Signaling Value and Individuals’ Susceptibility to Normative Influence

The analyses indicate that individuals tend to engage in offline WOM more for products that have high “social signaling value.” The social signaling value of a product is high when the product category is remarkable and its ownership or consumption is more publicly visible (Bayraktar, 2013). In this context, apparel, car and briefcase are the examples of product categories that have high social signaling value. The analyses also indicate that individuals who have high “susceptibility to normative influence” tend to engage in offline WOM communication more particularly for products that have high social signaling value. Susceptibility to normative influence refers to individuals’ inclination to reference group influence (Batra, Homer and Kahle, 2001).

I do sometimes concern about what others are going to think about my preferences such as clothing that I wear to work. You have to present yourself a certain way at work. Also leisure clothing... because I want

my friends to admire what I wear and not give me a criticism. (American female) Whether I will consider others' opinion before shopping depends on the product I am going to buy. For example, when it comes to clothing, I would not buy a pink jacket, because it could give a message about my personality. However, for products about which others are not concerned, I never consider their opinion. For clothing, it is important because you spend time with other people. It is important in terms of image and identity. (Turkish male) I pay attention to others' opinion when purchasing something. For example, I do not want to buy something that people will consider nasty. I do not want to buy something that will draw people's reaction. This is important particularly for clothing. (Turkish female)

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed at examining online and offline WOM communication channels in terms of their relative effectiveness. We attempted to explore the factors that made offline WOM more influential than online WOM. Furthermore, we explored how personal characteristics, culture and product categories and features influenced consumer preference of one channel to the other. In addition, we explored the channel characteristics that influenced consumer preference of one to the other. We utilized exploratory research method in order to obtain in-depth understanding of the relative effectiveness of online and offline WOM and the mechanism that explained the process. We conducted interviews with 40 individuals from Turkey and the US. During the analysis of the interviews, we focused on the mechanism that explained the effectiveness of online and offline WOM and the reasons why the participants preferred one to the other. Furthermore, we focused on whether the interviewees preferred a specific WOM channel for certain product categories. Finally, we focused on whether there were significant differences between Turkish and American participants' responses.

The findings suggest that the strength of ties and the quality of communication are the antecedents to the effectiveness of WOM communication channel. In addition, we argue that the value of information mediates the relationship between the strength of ties and the effectiveness of WOM. More specifically, we suggest that offline WOM is more influential than online WOM, since the quality of communication, the strength of ties, and thus the value of information are higher in offline WOM communication. Particularly, individuals tend to trust offline WOM more when they seek information about services. Therefore, marketers, especially those in the service industry, should pay more attention to influencing offline social networks. On the other hand, consumers pay more attention to expertise when they seek information about products with high complexity such as computers and cars.

For this reason, marketers of highly complex products should utilize experts to manage and influence online WOM communications. We suggest that consumers' suspicion about the possible commercial nature of online reviews and comments makes this channel less credible than offline WOM. Therefore, marketers who are interested in managing and influencing online WOM communications should attempt to change the acrimonious public perception of online reviews and comments. They should engage in efforts to persuade consumers that online reviews and comments are free from commercial nature. On the other hand, the findings suggest that participants in the US tend to believe in the objectivity of online comments more than participants in Turkey tend to do. This may result from the widespread use of the internet in the US compared to that in Turkey. Therefore, a relationship may exist between the extensivity of internet usage and the confidence in online comments. In addition, since the quality of communication and the strength of ties are significant antecedents to the effectiveness of WOM, the websites should allow information seekers to get in contact with the reviewers. We propose that mindful consumers tend to engage in online WOM more than less mindful or mindless consumers.

Therefore, if the mindfulness level in the target market is high, marketers should pay more attention to influencing online WOM communications. In addition, we argue that consumers in individualist culture use online communication channel more than those in collectivist culture do in order to obtain information

about products. For that reason, marketers in individualist cultures such as the Western European countries and the US should attempt to manage online WOM. On the other hand, marketers in collectivist cultures such as Japan and the Middle-Eastern countries should develop strategies to influence offline social networks. Marketers should focus on influencing offline WOM particularly when the product's social signaling value and individuals' susceptibility to normative influence are high.

Generalizability concern and researcher subjectivity are the main limitations of the study which lie within the nature of the qualitative research. Since the study relies only on qualitative data derived from a small sample and on subjective analyses of this data, the generalizability and objectivity of the research findings are limited. Future research should utilize quantitative data obtained from a large sample in order to test the structural soundness of the proposed relationships in this study. More specifically, future research should empirically examine the relative effectiveness of online and offline WOM communication. They should utilize online and offline social networks to study the relative effects of these two channels on consumer preferences and new product acquisition. Furthermore, they should empirically examine how personal characteristics, culture and product features influence the effectiveness of both channel. Researchers who study WOM generally use two methods: inference, survey, or both (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). We suggest that future researchers should utilize experimental method in addition to these two methods in order to obtain results that are more robust.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Ahmet Bayraktar is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Bozok University Department of Production Management and Marketing, Yozgat-Turkey. Dr. Bayraktar has a BS in Business Administration from Trakya University (2004), an MBA from Trakya University (2007) and a PhD in Marketing from Rutgers University (2013). He has taught Introduction to Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Marketing Communication and International Marketing, among others, at both graduate and undergraduate levels. His research interests include country branding, brand equity, marketing ethics, word-of-mouth communication and mindfulness. He has been an ad hoc reviewer for journals such as *International Business Review*, *Journal of Brand Management* and *Global Journal of Business Research*. He can be contacted at Bozok University Erdogan Akdag Kampusu IIBF Yozgat, Turkey 66200. Email: ahmet.bayraktar@bozok.edu.tr

Emine Erdogan is a Ph.D. candidate in Marketing Department at Rutgers Business School. She received her BS in Business Administration and MS in Economics from Selcuk University (Turkey). Her research interests include mindfulness, international marketing strategies, WOM and network-based innovations. She is a recipient of the full scholarship of Turkey Ministry of National Education for graduate studies in the U.S.A. and a fellowship from Kaufman Foundation in Global Research Symposium (2013). She taught Marketing Research at Rutgers University (2015) and served as an assistant editor in *Journal of Graduate School of Social Sciences* and as an assistant coordinator of Erasmus and Farabi Student Exchange Programs in Pamukkale University (Denizli/Turkey). She can be contacted at Rutgers Business School, 1 Washington Park, Newark, NJ 07102. Email: emine.erdogan@rutgers.edu

