The Impact of Culture on Word-of-Mouth Behavior of Consumers: Indulgence vs. Restraint Cultures

Selcen Anlaş

Abstract—Word of mouth (WOM) and culture are well-studied constructs in marketing literature, and prior studies have addressed how cultural values affect WOM. However, the Internet and its integration with mobile technology have caused radical changes in the consumer's communication patterns: WOM does not remain only within the consumer's limited social boundaries as the information technology advances. The interaction of these changes in technology and communication with consumers' cultural values needs to be explored. With this need in mind, the objective of this paper is to discuss the potential of recently introduced cultural dimension Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR) in explaining WOM behaviors of consumers across different contexts (online vs. offline).

Keywords—Consumer, Culture, Technology, Word of Mouth

I. Introduction

Culture is an essential factor in determining consumer behavior. The influence of culture on WOM behavior is extensively investigated across marketing literature. As the information technology advances, WOM does not remain only within the consumer's limited social boundaries, anymore. The global nature of the Internet has generated a platform for electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication between consumers who have never met face-to-face before [1]. There is an academic call on the need to study the interaction of culture with these changes in technology and communication [2].

Four independent universal dimensions of culture, namely individualism, power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance are found as the result of a study of more than 116,000 IBM employees in sixty-six countries [3], [4]. Later, Long-term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR) have been integrated into the model as two new dimensions [5]. Till now, the dimension IVR has not as yet been studied extensively across the marketing field although it may have important implications in explaining consumer behavior like engagement in WOM. Therefore, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to discuss the potential of cultural dimension IVR in explaining differences in WOM behavior of consumers across online vs. offline contexts.

Selcen Anlaş is with the Boğaziçi University, Department of Management, Istanbul, Turkey.

II. Literature Review

Earliest researchers studied the impact of WOM on consumer behavior, and defined WOM as a person (a receiver) to person (communicator) communication [6]. Therefore, WOM behavior excludes formal communications between companies and customers [7]. Over the past decades, WOM has been intensively examined across marketing literature. Researchers have studied WOM antecedents, such as customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction [8], [9], [10], [11], [12] and motivating factors leading individuals to engage in WOM [13]. Some have examined the consequences of WOM [14], [15]; the effects of positive versus negative WOM [12]; its link with the product category type involved [16], [17], [18]; and the psychological and social variables impacting it [19], [20], [21], [22]. The main focus of recent studies is the interaction between WOM and the use of the Internet [23], [24], [25].

The global nature of the Internet has generated a platform for e-WOM communication between consumers who have never met face-to-face before [1]. Individuals can now use multiple e-WOM channels for information sharing across the Internet. These multiple channels can be categorized as one-to-one (i.e., e-mail), one-to-many (i.e., input to websites) and many-to-many (i.e., blogs, open forums) [26]. E-WOM avails interaction availability between consumers and companies [27]. On top, with the increase in usage of social media, various contents produced by either companies or consumers can be easily and quickly diffused among users. Taking it a further step, it has also never been such easy and quick to form anti-brand communities for boycotting specific brands and taking collective actions [28]. Whereas consumers involving offline (traditional) WOM are likely to reach a limited number of friends or family, e-WOM can reach limitless individuals [29]. It takes just seconds for consumers to share their positive and negative experiences or emotions of specific products via social media platforms. Specifically, negative e-WOM about products or services may hamper the reputation of the companies in seconds and may evolve into crises. In summary, WOM is like a powerful weapon in the hands of consumers.

Per valence of WOM, a study has found that dissatisfied customers engage more in WOM behavior than satisfied customers [10]. The literature shows discrepancy about the strength of negative WOM and positive WOM impact on consumers: A study found out that negative WOM has a stronger impact compared to positive WOM [30], another

study commented this difference as to be exaggerated [10]. The dominance of positive appraisals for online evaluations of TV programs and books has been indicated across literature [12]. Another study found out, for sales of food products, negative WOM might decelerate the sales more than twice as strong as positive WOM may promote it [6]. In summary, although positive WOM can contribute to a company's marketing promotion, on the other hand, negative WOM may strongly put companies' products and services at risk [30], [31], [32].

Culture significantly impacts consumers' engagement with WOM. Culture is described as the sum of all collectively shared behavioral norms and patterns by a social group [33]. The core of culture is rooted in values and values are presumptions about "how things ought to be" in the group [3]. Cultural values include elements as shared values, beliefs, and norms that individuals are exposed in subtle ways from early ages [34] and collectively distinguish particular groups of people from others [35].

The literature indicates that customers' general willingness to engage in WOM shows cross-cultural differences [36]. Cultural values have an impact on the type, pattern and whom WOM activity is targeted [36]. In spite of the potential of other cultural dimensions to be important drivers of consumer behavior, cross-cultural consumer behavior research has studied extensively on individualism–collectivism dimension [37].

According to the results of a study, preference for disseminating positive WOM to out-group is higher amongst participants from individualistic cultures [35]. Another study indicates that participants from high-uncertainty avoidance cultures are less likely to involve in negative WOM engagement [18]. In a cross-cultural study, the likelihood of passing a complaint to other travelers through WOM is explained by the masculinity dimension [38]. Also, cross-cultural differences have been found out across studies focusing on WOM impact on some pivotal marketing outcomes such as customer choice processes [39] and customer perception [40].

It can be summarized that, across literature, individualism is likely to increase the likelihood of positive WOM to out-groups; whereas masculinity, another culture dimension, increases the likelihood of WOM sharing within-groups. On the other hand, uncertainty avoidance is found to be negatively associated with within-group WOM.

III. NEW DIMENSION OF CULTURE: INDULGENCE VS. RESTRAINT

In a study of more than 116,000 IBM employees in sixty-six countries, it has been found four universal dimensions of cultural variation that are primarily independent to each other, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity [3], [4]. In 1991, the fifth dimension Long-Term Orientation was added. In 2010, based on Michael Minkov's analysis of the World Values Survey data for ninety-three countries, a sixth dimension has been added [41], called Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR). So, that is how the model stands today. Hofstede's cultural typology can be applied to the

individual level because a person's values are identified in terms of the selected dimensions of culture [42].

Cultures can be described as Indulgence or Restrained according to their control on their desires and impulses. Restraint cultures suppress the satisfaction of needs and regulate it via strict social norms whereas, in Indulgence societies, there is free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun (40). The IVR dimension can explain the paradox of the poor Filipinas who are happier than the prosperous citizens of Hong Kong [41]. Some of the key differences between Indulgent and Restrained societies are summarized in Table 1 [41].

TABLE I
KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INDULGENCE AND RESTRAINT CULTURES

Indulgence	Restraint
A higher percentage of very happy people	Lower percentages of very happy people
Perception of personal life control	A perception of helplessness
Higher importance of leisure	Lower importance of leisure
Loose society	Tight society
More likely to remember positive emotions	Less likely to remember positive emotions
Positive attitude	Cynicism
Higher optimism	More pessimism
Smiling as a norm	Smiling as a suspect
Freedom of speech is viewed as relatively important	Freedom of speech is not a primary concern
e-mail and the Internet are used for private contacts	Less use of e-mail and the Internet for private contacts
More e-mail and Internet contacts with foreigners	Fewer e-mail and Internet contacts with foreigners
Loosely prescribed gender roles	Strictly prescribed gender roles
Maintaining order in the nation is not given a high priority	Maintaining order in the nation is considered a high priority

There is no absolute standard to measure Indulgence versus Restraint degree. Instead, the differences between societies are measured. An IVR score- expressing the position of societies relative to each other- is plotted on a 0 to 100 scale. Scores close to 0 stands for more Restraint, whereas close to 100 for a more Indulgence society [41]. South& North America and Western Europe is the geography where Indulgence prevails whereas Asia, the Muslim world and Eastern Europe are for Restraint [5].

IVR is a new dimension and needs more academic study to be discovered in as many ways as possible. IVR dimension has a distinction resemblance to distinction between loose and tight societies. Deviant behavior is easily tolerated in loose societies; whereas group organization, formality, permanence and durability, values are strongly maintained in tight societies [43]. This kind of distinction can be easily noticed in IVR's key differences. The literature indicates there is a relationship between tightness and cultural homogeneity [44], [45], [46]. Where group members are more similar to each other (homogeneity), there is less tolerance for deviant behaviors. The norms, behavior standards and values are not common in heterogeneous cultures and by definition, what is uncommon cannot be banned [47]. On the other hand, if a culture has clear common norms and if it follows these norms strictly, it can be concluded as tight culture. Therefore, cultural homogeneity is synonymous with cultural tightness [47]. As stated in one

study [48], "Tightness requires agreement about norms" (p. 92). Although one cannot conclude that cultural tightness is sanctioning enjoying life, it shows that tightness is very much related to strong social norms. In conclusion, a culture can be called as tight to the degree restraint is common in that culture [47].

Per the relation of IVR with other Hofstede cultural dimensions, it shows significant negative correlation with Long-Term Orientation, a weak negative correlation with Power Distance and, no correlation with other dimensions [41].

A. IVR Impact on WOM

According to a study [49], there are three primary motives for consumers spreading the word on brands: 1. functional (to avail information to others), 2. social (to send signals to the environment and a desire for belonging or socializing) , and 3. emotional (to spread positive or negative feelings about brands). The same study [49] also points out to the contextual importance of WOM and found out that the main drivers of e-WOM are (in order) social, functional, and emotional, whereas emotional, functional and social (in order) for offline WOM.

A study with a sample of 9,300 individuals from forty-eight nations indicated that people from more Indulgence orientation are found more likely to recall positive emotions [50]. A similar large-scale study with 6,780 college students from forty countries produced similar results: respondents from more Indulgence societies stated they are more often experiencing positive emotions [51].

This paper proposes that IVR dimension may help to better understand the differences in consumer WOM behavior. Indulgence oriented cultures have more happy people, more likely to remember positive emotions, more optimist, showing a more positive attitude and use online tools for communication more, whereas Restraint cultures have a lower percentage of happy people, less likely to remember positive emotions, more pessimistic and less use of online tools for communication [41]. Freedom of speech and personal control are more important in Indulgence cultures whereas emphasis is on helplessness for personal destiny in Restraint cultures.

In the case of WOM, it is likely that this cultural dimension has an impact on consumers' willingness to voice out their opinions and give feedback to their intimate circle, companies or public in general.

Individuals with Indulgence culture will feel and remember more positive emotions and use online channels more for WOM than Restraint individuals. In cultures where consumers care about their happiness and freedom; it is believed that consumers may be more likely to share their positive experiences about products with others (within group and out-group) since they are more likely to remember positive emotions and they have positive attitude. On the other hand, they stop using that brand when they are not happy and voice out more. When they voice out, the motivation behind can be social (to send signals to the environment and a desire for belonging or socializing) or functional (to provide information to others), generally to out-group via online channels. Therefore, it is proposed that;

Proposition 1: The higher an individual's Indulgence orientation, the more likely he/she engages in positive/negative WOM to out-group via online channels

As mentioned previously, Long-term orientation has been added as a fifth dimension to Hofstede's original four dimensions and dimension IVR shows a significant negative correlation with it. Future rewards, persistence, thrift, a sense of shame and order of relation by status are important for Long-term oriented societies, whereas respect for tradition and fulfillment of social obligations are important for Short-term oriented societies [52]. Consumers in Long-term orientation are likely to sacrifice short-term gains or social success for the sake of future gains and have the tendency to order relationships according to status. However, consumers in Short-term orientation focus on present or past and they are likely to care about immediate results than future rewards. East Asian countries are located at the long-term oriented pole; while the United States, African, some Latin American and Muslim countries can be identified as short-term orientated societies [53]. It can be stated that cultures with Long-term orientation tend to be pragmatic, and value modesty and virtues whereas principles, consistency and truth are emphasized more for short-term oriented cultures.

By definition, individuals with Restraint culture will feel and remember less positive emotions. Therefore, it is expected that, Restraint oriented consumers are more likely to engage in negative WOM to out-group. However, it is proposed here that customers from Restraint cultures are less likely to do negative WOM than customers from Indulgent cultures. This can be explained as; customers in Restraint (Long-term oriented) cultures avoid giving harm to their future relationship with the company, of which they want it to be long-term [54].

Besides, Long-term oriented customers (more Restraint) are less likely to give recommendation, that's engagement in positive WOM, to their families and friends about a company or product due to the fact that they worry that any possible failure in recommended product could hurt their relationships with those people [55] and give harm to their in-group ties. On the other hand, they may have the tendency to share their bad experiences with products or services more negatively within group (with family and friends) to protect them from any possible risk related to product use and due to the fact that they are more likely to remember negative emotions. To support, tightness is significantly related to strictly adhered social norms and any deviant behavior is not tolerated within-group. As stated under previous section, tightness requires following the norms strictly. Similarly, consumers from Restrained cultures ("tight") will not tolerate any deviant behavior of companies. When they voice out, the motivation behind is expected to be emotional (to spread positive or negative feelings about brands), generally to in-group via offline channels. However, it is likely that they will less involve in negative e-WOM in order to protect the harmony of the group and relationship with the company. Thus;

Proposition 2: The higher an individual's Restraint orientation, the less (more) likely that he/she engages in

negative WOM to out-group (in-group) via online (offline) channels

In summary, this conceptual paper proposes that the motivation, target group, context and content of WOM behavior of consumers may differ across Indulgence and Restraint cultures as summarized in the Table 2 and there is merit in studying this dimension in depth to better understand its impact on consumers' WOM behaviors.

TABLE II
WOM BEHAVIOR OF INDULGENCE VS. RESTRAINT CULTURES

WOM's…	Indulgence	Restraint
Motivation	social and/or functional	emotional and/or social
Main target group	out-group	in-group
Main context used	online	offline
Content	Positive, negative	Mostly negative

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the above review, it may be concluded that the IVR dimension may have significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding WOM behavior of consumers. The results of such studies will be useful for marketing practitioners in order to design their WOM strategies across different customer segments and countries. For example, companies in Restraint cultures can design their WOM strategies to disseminate normative messages for purchasing their product or brand, whereas companies are likely to highlight the distinctiveness of their products or brands from others in Indulgence cultures. In addition, since consumers from Indulgence orientation are more likely to use online platforms, companies can create many online channels- that are accessible at any time- to avail consumers to generate and spread e-WOM about their products or brands. By this, companies can utilize consumers' sharing their positive e-WOM with others but also in case of negative e-WOM, can rapidly take action to prevent its expansion and solve the problem immediately. To do this, companies should actively manage their online channels with a clearly defined strategy and task force.

This paper presents two propositions and a future study is recommended to test those two and other propositions that may be generated on discussion presented here. Therefore, this paper is a call for future research to study the interaction of WOM behavior of consumers and IVR dimension of culture. In conclusion, it is proposed here that, the integration of IVR and consumer behavior research will bring new perspectives to marketing theory, research, and practice.

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