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Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Social Networking Sites

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Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Social Networking Sites

by

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Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Social Networking Sites

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In recent years, social networking sites have become a prevailing communication technology in the evolution of the digital era for today's Internet users (Ipsos Insight 2007). As more and more marketers attempt to harness the power of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites (Williamson 2006), rigorous investigation of determinants that lead to consumers' engagement in eWOM via the social networks is becoming critical. A central question to answer is what factors influence eWOM behavior in social networking sites and what are the underlying processes of eWOM communications in this new social medium. This study focuses on five social relationship variables: social capital, tie strength, homophily, trust, and consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence that are all related to eWOM behavior in social networking sites. An online survey with a sample drawn from a large southwestern university was conducted to examine predictors of eWOM in social networking sites. Results from a series of multiple regression analyses indicate that certain social relationship variables are significant predictors that relate to social networking site users' eWOM behavior. Out of the five relationship variables, social capital, homophily, trust, and interpersonal influence were found to significantly relate to users' engagement in eWOM communications,

whereas no effect was found with regard to tie strength. My dissertation research provides a theoretical understanding of consumers' use of social networking sites as a vehicle for eWOM and contributes to the literature on computer-mediated communication with specific emphasis on online social media. Managerially, findings from this research could provide marketers with valuable information to establish their long-term relationships with consumers and use beneficial eWOM to promote selected brands. In conclusion, examining social relationships in social networking sites could contribute to our understanding of the determinants of consumer engagement in eWOM, which in turn influences the extent and pattern of eWOM and enables companies to deliberate their product diffusion strategies.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The significance of information consumers obtain from interpersonal sources in influencing consumer decision making has been well recognized in marketing and consumer behavior literature (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Gilly et al. 1998; Goldsmith and Clark 2008; Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Langner 2007). Although non-personal or commercial messages such as advertising may be important in developing consumer awareness of and initial interest in products or services, word-of-mouth (WOM hereafter), defined as the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers, has been found to play a more essential role in changing consumer attitude and behavior related to products and services (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Gilly et al. 1998; Grewal, Cline, and Davies 2003; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Rogers 1995). For example, studies suggest that WOM influences the speed and rate of innovation diffusion (Mahajan, Muller, and Srivastava 1990; Rogers 1995) and is imperative to the flow of information in social networks for product adoption (Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993). In addition, because interpersonal sources in general are seen as more credible than non-personal or commercial sources (Feick and Price 1987), consumers often rely on informal WOM when they seek information for their purchases (Goldsmith and Clark 2008). As a result, generating positive WOM in consumers' social networks has become a crucial technique for marketers to build and maintain strong brand relationships with highly engaged consumers (Smith et al. 2007).

In recent years, the advance and evolution of new media technologies such as the Internet has increased consumer opportunities to not only interact with members of their pre-existing social network but also make and communicate with new friends

online (Hung and Li 2007; Niederhoffer et al. 2007). With the rapid development of the Internet, WOM has taken a significant turn and evolved to electronic word-of-mouth. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM hereafter) refers to a particular type of WOM which occurs in the online setting (Dwyer 2007) and can be observed in many different online channels, such as discussion forums, product reviews, and emails. Several researchers have examined the influence of Internet-based eWOM on product success (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006), virtual consumer community (Hung and Li 2007), and explored how the eWOM process influences consumers online behaviors (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). While current research has focused on the outcomes of eWOM (e.g., sales), little is known about the drivers of eWOM or factors influencing consumers' WOM behavior in computer-mediated environments, particularly in social networking sites, an emerging user-generated social medium.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have been paid mounting attention from scholars and marketers. Social networking sites attract a fast-growing number of consumers by enabling them to visualize and articulate their social network and engage in social interactions in a dynamic, interactive, multi-modal form over the Internet (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Social networking sites are of paramount importance to eWOM as consumers freely share their experience and opinions and rapidly spread information and opinions regarding products and services in their social networks comprised of friends, personal contacts, and other acquaintances (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008). No wonder marketers currently invest considerable resources in encouraging positive eWOM in the social venue by setting up their brand profile pages (i.e., brand communities) and engaging consumers to *make friends* with the brand (Morrissey 2007). Despite the huge potential of social

networking sites for engendering and facilitating eWOM, research on why and how eWOM emerges in the emerging online social environment remains scant.

Given that relationship building is the primary objective of social networking site users, a question arises as to what social factors influence consumers' engagement in eWOM in this online hangout place. Although a few studies provide initial insights into the drivers of consumer eWOM behavior in computer-mediated environments (Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), our theoretical knowledge of consumer behavior in the emerging social media, social networking sites is limited. Empirical investigation is timely and necessary to enhance our understanding of the determinants of eWOM in social networking sites, the seemingly universal phenomenon.

In the following sections, I present a brief discussion on the influence of social relationship factors on WOM, the focal dimensions of my dissertation. Next, an overview of the proposed study as well as this dissertation is provided.

Social Relationships and Word-of-Mouth (WOM)

Given the unique social nature of communications in social networking sites, understanding the potential influence of social relationships developed in these sites on brand communications could advance our knowledge of the underlying process of eWOM. Indeed, a few studies have applied concepts pertaining to social relationships to understand traditional WOM referral behavior in offline environments (Brown and Reingen 1987; Gilly et al. 1998; Reingen and Kernan 1986). Social capital is one of the concepts that have been frequently discussed in the WOM literature. For example, Stephen and Lehmann (2008) suggest that *social capital* plays an important role in the process of WOM transmission. They found that WOM transmission fulfills various

needs (i.e., validating information, maintaining existing relationships and building new relationships) through transmitters' use of existing social capital or attempt to build new social capital. Tie strength is another related but conceptually distinct construct. Brown and Reingen (1987) examined the effect of *tie strength* on the referral flows. Overall, they found that weak ties displayed an important bridging function in facilitating WOM referral flows whereas strong ties were perceived as influential in consumers' decision making. Similarly, Rogers' (1995) study on innovation communications supports that weak ties play a crucial role in disseminating WOM information on the aggregate level.

Another dimension of social relationships that is directly relevant to WOM is *homophily*. Studies found that information exchange most frequently occurs between a source and a receiver who are alike, that is, homophilous (Gilly et al. 1998; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). In the WOM context, consumers with a higher level of perceived homophily may be more likely to exchange marketing information when making product choices. Along a similar line, *trust*, another important factor of social relationships (Chow and Chan 2008; Fukuyama 1995), has been found to facilitate the exchange and use of information due to the increased perceived credibility of information when the partner as an information source is trusted in a social relationship (Robert, Dennis, and Ahuja 2008). As a result, it is reasonable to believe that trust in personal source could also affect the nature and pattern of WOM behavior.

Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel's (1989) *consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence* is another variable that is useful to explain the effect of social relationships on consumer reliance on social networking sites as a source of

product-focused information. The body of literature on interpersonal communication and WOM suggests that consumers with certain personal and personality traits are more likely to disseminate WOM to fellow consumers (Feick and Price 1987; Gilly et al. 1998; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Consumers with different levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence might display different patterns of eWOM communications in social networking sites. For example, consumers with a higher level of susceptibility to interpersonal influence are more likely to engage in peer recommendations than those who are less subject to interpersonal influence. Such behaviors may be reflected in eWOM behaviors in online social networking sites where information exchange is largely influenced by individual's perceptions of other people. Therefore, a careful investigation of how interpersonal influence lead to eWOM is deemed as timely for our understanding of the prevailing phenomenon, product-focused eWOM in social networking sites and the roles of social relationships in communications online. Collectively, given that social connectivity and relationships are at the core of social networking sites (Choi et al. 2008), these social relationship related factors including *social capital*, *tie strength*, *homophily*, *trust*, and *interpersonal influence* serve as the main variables in examining drivers of consumer product-related eWOM behaviors in social networking sites.

Study Overview

As more and more marketers attempt to harness the power of eWOM in social networking sites (Williamson 2006), rigorous investigation of determinants that lead to consumers' engagement in eWOM via the social networks is becoming critical. A central question to answer is what factors influence eWOM behavior in social networking sites and what are the underlying processes of eWOM communications in

this new social medium. This study focuses on five social relationship variables: *social capital*, *tie strength*, *homophily*, *trust*, and *interpersonal influence* that are all related to eWOM behavior in social networking sites. Despite the highly social nature of social networking sites, little is known about the potential drivers that lead to consumers' reliance on eWOM occurring via these sites.

My dissertation research, therefore, aims to provide a theoretical understanding of consumers' use of social networking sites as a vehicle for eWOM. Specifically, the current study attempts to empirically examine potential roles of social factors in eWOM via social networking sites. This study examines whether existing research on WOM developed in the traditional marketplace can be applied to the new medium, social networking sites, and contributes to the literature on computer-mediated communication with specific emphasis on online social media. Managerially, understanding social relationship variables that affect consumers' eWOM behaviors could help marketers to identify influential individuals in personal networks and to effectively generate and manage positive eWOM communications. At the same time, findings from this research could provide marketers with valuable information to establish their long-term relationships with consumers in social networking sites and use beneficial eWOM to promote selected brands.

Dissertation Outline

In my dissertation, Chapter 1 has introduced the topic of my dissertation study. Chapter 2 offers background information pertaining to WOM, eWOM, and social networking sites. In Chapter 3, a conceptual framework and detailed discussion on each of the variables of interest is provided. The hypotheses guiding the dissertation research and theoretical discussion of the rationale for them are outlined in Chapter 4,

followed by Chapter 5 which describes the method for the empirical investigation. Next, Chapter 6 delineates data analysis used and results. Lastly, discussion and conclusion are addressed in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

Word-of-Mouth (WOM)

Definition of WOM

Word-of-mouth refers to the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers (Grewal, Cline, and Davies 2003). WOM is typically characterized as oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator in which the communicator delivers a non-commercial message (Arndt 1967; Rogers 1995). As consumers frequently use WOM when they seek information about brands, products, services, and organizations (Buttle 1998; East, Hammond, and Lomax 2008), WOM is steadily acknowledged as an important source of information that influences consumer product choices (e.g. Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1966; Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell 1968; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Smith, Menon, and Sivakumar 2005; Witt and Bruce 1972). Although marketer-generated information and business sources play a significant role in developing consumer interest in commercial products, WOM is the most powerful source of information impacting consumers' actual adoption of innovations and new products (Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1966; Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Gilly et al. 1998; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). Because personal sources are generally perceived as more credible than marketers or commercial sources, WOM is often more effective than traditional mass media or advertising in changing consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Brooks 1957; East, Hammond, and Lomax 2008). For example, early studies found that the influence of WOM on consumer choice is greater than print ads, personal selling, and radio advertising (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). In other words, consumer-initiated WOM is seen as more objective

and reliable than marketer-generated information and is able to confirm and/or strengthen opinions stimulated through various communications (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969).

Of more importance is that WOM communication is bidirectional and interactive and is generally operated by two parties: opinion leaders and opinion seekers (Gilly et al. 1998). Conceptually, opinion leaders are the information generators or providers in WOM communications. Opinion leaders act as information transmitters who pass information from mass media on their peers and influence their opinions and choices often related to products or services (Burt 1999; Feick and Price 1987; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Watts and Dodds 2007). In contrast, opinion seekers are those who desire to obtain information or opinions from others that help them evaluate products and services for their purchases (Feick, Price, and Higie 1986; Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996). An individual's tendency to influence attitude and overt behavior of others is typically termed as opinion leadership and is related to the individual's ability and motivation to share information (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996; King and Summers 1970; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970; Shoham and Ruvio 2008). Opinion seeking, on the other hand, is the behavioral counterpart to opinion leadership and occurs when an individual seeks advice and information from a friend, family member, or colleague who is often considered an opinion leader on the subject of interest (Goldsmith and Clark 2008; Shoham and Ruvio 2008). In essence, opinion leadership and opinion seeking are two important aspects of information exchange which drive WOM communication in the domain of consumer behavior.

Effects of WOM

Previous research has established that personal sources play a significant influential role not only in affecting consumers' product choices and purchase decisions (Price and Feick 1984; Whyte 1954), and influencing the new product diffusion processes (e.g., Arndt 1967; Brooks 1957; Engel, Kegerreis, and Blackwel 1969; Feldman and Spencer 1965; Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001), but also in shaping consumers' pre-usage attitudes (Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991) and post-usage evaluations of a product or service (Bone 1995). For example, Whyte (1954) found an extensive and powerful social network of neighbors exchange product information in contexts such as "the clothesline" and "backyard fences." Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) seminal work presented evidence that WOM is the most important factor influencing the purchase of household goods and food products. Subsequent investigations of the WOM phenomenon revealed that consumers rely on WOM to select physicians (Feldman and Spencer 1965), automotive diagnostic centers (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969), and services (Mangold, Miller, and Brockway 1999). Further, Arndt (1967) presented that consumers who received positive WOM about a new food product are more likely to purchase it compared to those who received negative WOM. This finding is consistent with Rogers' (1995) study indicating that WOM is a major determinant of the adoption of new products or services and as the main factor influencing the speed of innovation diffusion (Mahajan, Muller, and Srivastava 1990; Rogers 1995).

In sum, an interactive, dynamic WOM communication is a powerful force in influencing consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Brown and Reingen 1987). However, the unique properties of information technologies and the advent of the Internet have jointly brought about a WOM revolution (Dellarocas 2003; Thorson and Rodgers

2006). As more consumers use online communications as a channel for interpersonal communications and new media technologies continue to evolve, the nature and effect of WOM taking place within online environments has gained rising attention from researchers in recent years. The next section discusses the definition of eWOM and research investigating how the Internet affects WOM behavior.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Definition of eWOM

The emergence of the Internet has enabled consumers to interact with one another quickly and conveniently and has established the phenomenon known as online interpersonal influence or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; Dellarocas 2003; Dwyer2007; Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001; Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p. 39). In this study, eWOM is defined as "the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers online." eWOM can take place via many different online channels, such as e-mails, discussion forums, instant messaging (IM), homepages, blogs (e.g., Blogger), product review sites (e.g., Amazon.com and Epinions.com), online communities, newsgroups, chat rooms, and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and MySpace) (Goldsmith 2006; Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006; Vilpponen, Winter, and Sundqvist 2006). The anonymous and interactive nature of cyberspace enables consumers to freely give and seek opinions about the product experiences of peer consumers who are unknown to them, thereby affecting consumers' brand choices and sales of many goods and services (Goldsmith

and Horowitz 2006; Schlosser 2005). Moreover, the transmission of information on the Internet gives consumers unlimited access to a great amount of information and a variety of product and brand choices (Negroponte and Maes 1996). In the online world, consumers have the ability to make comparisons on price and quality of brands or services, and posses the opportunity to communicate with marketers as well as with other consumers (Negroponte and Maes 1996). As a result, it has become apparent that consumers use the Internet to exchange product-related information and share brand experience in the same way they do offline (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006).

From a managerial standpoint, eWOM is recognized as an important marketing technique in brand communications. According to Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006), online interpersonal influence or eWOM plays an important role in today's e-commerce. Marketers become more interested in emanating the power of eWOM in building brands and developing brand loyalty programs. The personalization features such as customized information of the Internet also provide opportunities for marketers to implement eWOM as their communication strategies to establish and manage customer relationships (Dellarocas 2003). Viral marketing, which relies on provocative messages to stimulate unpaid peer-to-peer communication of marketing information from identified sponsors, evidently illustrates marketers' attempt to actively capitalize on eWOM as a marketing tool (Porter and Golan 2006). Thus, many companies now invest substantial efforts to encourage positive eWOM communications and accelerate its distribution (Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001; Schwartz 1998), and ultimately incorporate eWOM-based "viral marketing" or "buzz marketing" as part of integrated marketing communications strategies (Godes and Mayzlin 2004a; Stephen and Lehmann 2008).

Effects of eWOM

With the growth and development of information and communication technologies, research on eWOM has emerged in recent years. For example, Dellarocas (2003) examined online feedback mechanisms (i.e., eBay) and found that such an online medium where buyers and sellers can meet is an important communication channel for building consumer trust and cooperation in these virtual communities (Fong and Burton 2006). Dellarocas' (2003) study indicates that the growingly prevalent eWOM within online feedback mechanisms has valuable implications for brand building, customer relationship management, and product development. As virtual communities provide consumers with a convenient channel to establish relationships, exchange product information, and develop e-commerce, these communities have become a good source of eWOM for both consumers and marketers (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). Similarly, Senecal and Nantel (2004) examined the influence of online product recommendations on consumers' product choice. Findings from their experiments showed that subjects who consulted product recommendations selected the recommended products twice as often as subjects who did not consult any recommendations, which again indicates the influential power of eWOM and online product recommendations on consumers' product-related decisions.

Other studies have contributed to the understanding of eWOM by examining the effects of eWOM on product success (e.g., sales) (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Godes and Mayzlin 2004b), factors that motivate consumers to articulate themselves via consumer-opinion platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), consumer responses and motivation to pass-along emails (Phelps et al. 2004), the effect of eWOM on online

survey procedures (Norman and Russell 2006) and on virtual consumer communities (Hung and Li 2007), and the effects of a political candidate's blog on attitudes toward the website, attitudes toward the political candidate, and intentions to vote (Thorson and Rodgers 2006). Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), for example, examined the effect of WOM regarding consumer reviews on sales patterns at Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com. The authors found that positive reviews about books lead to an increase in relative sales at that site. Moreover, a recent study has examined the influence of electronic referrals at different stages of the viral marketing recipients' decision-making processes (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). Specifically, De Bruyn and Lilien's (2008) investigated how the WOM communication process influences consumers' purchase behaviors in an online environment. They developed a model to identify the different roles WOM plays at each stage of the decision-making process. De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) found that characteristics of the social tie, tie strength, and perceptual affinity had positive influences on recipients' WOM behaviors, awareness and interest, whereas demographic similarity had a negative influence on such behavior at each stage of the decision-making process.

As academic interest in online interpersonal communications or eWOM increases, an interesting question arises: is computer-mediated WOM different from traditional face-to-face WOM? Understanding differences between traditional WOM and emerging eWOM in a cluttered cyberspace could help researchers explicitly conceptualize and measure online interpersonal communication developed within the new medium.

Traditional WOM versus eWOM

The advancement and development of the Internet allows consumers to

perform pre-purchase information searches with a relative low cost, provides an almost limitless amount of information, and accelerates the processing of this immense amount of information available to consumers (Lyons and Henderson 2005). As discussed earlier, WOM is often considered to include spoken, person-to-person interpersonal communication (Arndt 1967; Rogers 1995), whereas eWOM is made available to simultaneously reach many other consumers and institutions via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Accordingly, Internet-based eWOM communication differs from traditional offline WOM in several ways. First, eWOM can take place through a variety of forms and means like blogs, review sites, and emails, by which consumers can exchange information either publicly (blogs and review sites) or privately (emails). Second, the Internet's freedom from geographic and time constraints allows eWOM communication to spread globally and quickly, and enables consumers to reach large audiences simultaneously (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Third, consumers have higher control over their eWOM behavior because of new media technologies, which allow consumers to choose when, where and how to consume media content such as eWOM communication in user-generated media (Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright 2008; Riegner 2007). Last but not least, given the anonymity and confidentiality features of cyberspace (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006), unlike traditional WOM, both identified and unidentified sources may coexist when consumers use product-focused eWOM as a source of marketing information online, which may thus affect the perceived credibility of eWOM information (Flanagin and Metzger 2007; Johnson and Kaye 1998).

In addition to understanding the differences between traditional WOM and eWOM, discussions on factors and motives contributing to WOM occurring via

offline and online channels are needed to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of research on eWOM. Past research on traditional WOM has identified factors affecting consumers' WOM referral behavior (Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Langner 2007). For example, consumers are more likely to engage in WOM referral behavior when they have extreme satisfaction or dissatisfaction about a product or service (Richins 1983), maintain higher commitment to the firm (Dick and Basu 1994), or perceive the product is innovative (Bone 1992). Additionally, WOM communication is viewed as the most effective information by consumers when consumers have little expertise or knowledge in a product category (Gilly et al. 1998), perceive a high risk in product choice (e.g., Bansal and Voyer 2000; Lutz and Reilly 1973), or when consumers are highly involved in the decision-making process (Beatty and Smith 1987), and are generally susceptible to interpersonal influence (i.e., reference groups) (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). As for research on eWOM on the Internet, only a few studies have examined consumer motives of eWOM behavior (Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), for instance, identified factors affecting consumers' articulation via consumer-opinion platforms. Similar to Balasubramanian and Mahajan's (2001) findings, they found that consumers' desire for economic incentives, desire for social interaction, concern for other consumers, and the potential approval utility are the primary factors leading to eWOM behavior. Given that the various forms of eWOM can take place via the Internet, whether or not findings from the existing WOM research can be applied to eWOM communication within different online venues is unclear. As a result, further investigations on drivers of eWOM behavior which focus on the specific online mechanism of social networking sites are

needed in order to better capture the role of social relationship factors in eWOM in the realm of Internet. Table 1 summarizes the similarities and differences between WOM and eWOM.

Table 1
Similarities and Differences between WOM and eWOM

		WOM	eWOM
Similarities		• Interpersonal communication • Influence decision-making • Bidirectional and interactive	
Differences	**Mode**	• Usually spoken, person-to-person • Usually identified sources • Consumers have lower control over WOM	• Through various online forms • Both identified and unidentified sources • Consumers have higher control over eWOM
	Scope	• With geographic and time constraints • One to one or in small groups	• Without geographic and time constraints • One to one or one to many
	Speed	Slow	Fast

Social Networking Sites

The emergence of user-generated content (such as blogs, social networking sites, and Wikipedia) leads consumers to enjoy greater control over their media behavior and take more active roles in their product decision-making process (Riegner 2007). Among the many new media, social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and CyWorld have recently become one of the most popular online communication channels (comScore 2007) and have attracted millions of Internet users across the globe (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Lenhart and Madden 2007; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008). As Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined, social

networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public profile and articulate a list of their contacts with whom they share a social network. Social networking sites provide an effective, powerful channel for consumers to create a visible personal profile, build a personal network, and display interpersonal commentaries publicly (Lenhart and Madden 2007). Without geographic and time constraints, consumers can easily and quickly exchange product-related information and opinions with their personal contacts (Graham and Havlena 2007) and have the potential to reach global audiences who share common interests in a product or brand.

With the new applications on social networking sites, the way consumers make purchase decisions and interact with members of their social network has fundamentally changed (Hung and Li 2007; Niederhoffer et al. 2007). Social networking sites not only enhance consumers' online experiences, but also change their online expectations (e.g., social and information outcomes). For example, activities occurring in social networking sites range from socializing with existing friends or making new ones to exchanging information and experiences regarding products or services. All of these online communications have potentially led consumers to change their approach to searching for product information and making purchase decisions. The next section provides an overview of the prevalence of social networking sites as well as the current brand activities on these sites.

Prevalence of Social Networking Sites

Originating in the U.S., using social networking sites has become one of the most popular activities among American Internet users (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Williamson 2006). In the U.S., approximate 20 percent of Internet users have reported regularly logging on to social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Bebo

(Fallows 2007). With 220 million Internet users, the U.S. ranked second worldwide in the size of the online population, falling only behind the 250 million users in China (Chiu 2009). Users of social networking sites rely on these sites as a new venue of interpersonal communication to connect with their family and friends, while making new contacts. According to Hitwise.com (2008), MySpace received 67.54 percent of the U.S. market share of social networking site visits. Among the top 5 social networking sites, the college student-dominant Facebook ranked second with 20.56 percent visits, followed by myYearbook, which attracted 1.65 percent of the market share, Tagged, and Bebo, with 1.53 percent and 0.94 percent, respectively (Hitwise.com 2008). In addition, the average time spent on social networking sites was approximately 20 minutes, whereas the leading MySpace was at the top of the list, with users spending an average of 30 minutes on its site (Hitwise.com 2008).

Brand Activities on Social Networking Sites

As social networking sites have become a prevailing communication technology in the evolution of the digital era for today's Internet users (Ipsos Insight 2007), marketers strive to use this online social medium to gain competitive advantage, increase brand awareness, create brand loyalty, and establish long-term relationships with their potential consumers. To help marketers target their consumers more effectively, different advertising formats have been developed by leading social networking sites (Strategic Direction 2008). For example, Facebook advertisements consist of three dimensions, including branded profile pages (i.e., virtual communities), social advertisements, and beacons. First, branded profile pages, like online brand communities, allow marketers to create specific pages where consumers can register as members and show their commitment to the brand (Morrissey 2007;

Strategic Direction 2008). Second, social advertisements enhance consumer involvement by encouraging them to participate in activities such as passing along promotional messages to their friends, similar to eWOM-based viral marketing (Strategic Direction 2008). Lastly, drawing from the concept of customer-relationships management (CRM), by using beacons, Facebook tracks consumer purchase behavior, utilizes the information to identify valuable customers, and delivers relevant messages to them (Strategic Direction 2008). These advertising mechanisms in networking platforms facilitate marketers' implementation of advertising campaigns in social networking sites. As a result, a growing number of marketers are turning to online social medium to promote their brands to the highly-engaged consumers.

Due to the potential of social networking sites for brand communications among consumers and consumer-brand relationships, advertising spending on social networking sites has undergone tremendous growth (eMarketer 2007). According to eMarketer (2007), advertising spending on social networking sites is expected to reach $2.8 billion worldwide by 2010. With the rapid growth in the popularity of social networking sites, academic research has examined users' usage patterns, self-presentation strategies, motivations, and social relationships associated with this relatively new online communication medium and provided an initial understanding of the phenomenon (e.g., Choi et al 2008; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Jung, Youn, and Mcclung 2007). More important to marketers is the huge potential of social networking sites to connect a vast number of prospective consumers around the world. The extensive social interactions among many consumers through their public personal networks have created an information-intensive environment of social

networking sites where consumers can easily and quickly disseminate their thoughts and opinions. For this reason, social networking sites can play a significant role in sharing and distributing product-related information, and can serve as an influential vehicle for eWOM.

The next chapter will present the development of the conceptual framework, followed by a discussion of how eWOM in social networking sites is different from eWOM in other online channels.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The interconnectivity of the Internet has undergone remarkable growth in recent years and has increased opportunities for consumers to connect with each other (e.g., through online chat rooms and IM) in new and flexible ways (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006). While traditional media have fragmented into targeting specific demographic segments, the Internet, with its freedom from censorship, low distribution costs, global reach and coverage, and interactivity, enjoys growing popularity. While previous research on Internet-based eWOM has examined consumer-opinion platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), emails (Phelps et al. 2004), and blogs (Thorson and Rodgers 2006), empirical research on the eWOM phenomenon in social networking sites is scarce. Online communication via eWOM may be most likely to occur extensively and regularly in this emerging social medium. As consumers post their recommendations and opinions about a product or service in their profile pages in social networking sites, they attempt to persuade their friends, acquaintances, or potential consumers to see their point of view and, thus, influence their decision-making.

Given the unique social nature of social networking sites, online social networking sites present an interesting and proper context for examining eWOM behaviors in computer-mediated environments. In the following section, key, relevant constructs are reviewed to develop the conceptual framework for the present study.

Social Relationships in Social Networking Sites

Social relationship is defined as social interactions between two or more individuals. In the context of social networking sites, social relationship variables are particularly important for enhancing the understanding of the underlying eWOM

process as these concepts provide insights into the properties of social relations from which eWOM behavior arises. Thus, it is imperative to examine whether the influence of social relationships on traditional WOM may be applicable to online social networking sites, where social interactions are the major part of users. The following section discusses the meanings and definitions of five social relationship variables that are concerned in this study.

Social Capital

Social capital is especially applicable to discussing the meanings of social relationships developed and sustained via social networking sites (Choi et al. 2008). Scholars have defined social capital as the set of resources embedded within social networks accessed and used by actors within a network (Coleman 1988, 1990; Lin 2001; Putnam 1993; Robert, Jr., Dennis, and Ahuja 2008; Scott and Johnson 2005; Woolcock and Nayaran 2000). Social capital is not an individual characteristic or a personality trait (Mouw 2006); instead, it exists in the relationships among people within networks and resources that reside in the networks which are not owned by a single person (Baker 2000; Chow and Chan 2008; Mouw 2006). Accordingly, social capital is essential to community life (Putnam 1993), personal and business success, and even a satisfying life (Baker 2000). The resources of information and ideas from members inherent in networks may affect individual outcomes (Coleman 1990). As Coleman suggested (1990), social capital is intangible and is comprised of obligations, shared norms, and expectations that can affect individual behavior and information channels. From a consumer behavior perspective, consumers' reliance on product recommendations and opinions from friends in their personal networks (i.e., reference groups) (Bearden and Etzel 1982) can be interpreted as evidence of the effect of social

capital. Accordingly, social capital may serve as an influential driver that affects consumers' use of social networking sites as a vehicle for eWOM.

Tie Strength

Drawing on Onyx and Bullen's (2000) discussion of social capital, a social network is one of the important dimensions of social capital and is defined as "a set of individuals ("nodes") and the relationships between them ("ties")" (p.8, Stephen and Lehmann 2008). The resources of social capital such as information can be shared or exchanged through social ties, which vary in terms of their strength (Stephen and Lehmann 2008). According to Granovetter (1973), tie strength is defined as "the potency of the bond between members of a network" (p. 196, Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008). Strong ties such as family and friends form stronger and closer relationships that are within an individual's personal network and are able to provide material and emotional support (Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001; Pigg and Crank 2004). Weak ties, on the other hand, are often among weaker and less personal social relationships that are composed of a wide set of acquaintances and colleagues with different cultural and social backgrounds (Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001; Pigg and Crank 2004). Recently, a few studies have found that two types of social capital, bridging and bonding social capital, are both sustained on or via social networking sites (Choi et al. 2008; Donath 2007). While bridging social capital focuses on the values created by heterogeneous groups and is related to "weak ties," bonding social capital is formed through socially homogeneous groups and is closely associated with "strong ties" (e.g., Granovetter 1982; Haythornthwaite 2000, 2005). In other words, social networking sites allow consumers to connect with both closer personal contacts such as family members and close friends (strong ties) and less personal contacts that

include acquaintances and colleagues (weak ties). Theses two types of personal contacts may both lead to consumers' eWOM behavior in social networking sites.

Homophily

Another variable important in the influence of eWOM communication in social networking sites is homophily. Homophily refers to the degree to which individuals who interact are congruent or similar on certain attributes, such as demographic variables (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970), and perceptual similarity of beliefs, values, experience, and lifestyle (Gilly et al. 1998). With frequent and stable interactions, similar individuals have greater access to each other due to propinquity and convenience (Gilly et al. 1998). Because individuals tend to socialize with those who share similar characteristics, often termed social homophily (Mouw 2006), interpersonal communications are more likely to occur between two individuals who are alike, that is, homophilous (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954). As a result, the exchange of information most frequently occurs between a communicator and a receiver who are similar with respect to certain attributes (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). In the communication process, both sources and receivers behave based on their perceived characteristics of each other and the message being delivered (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). A receiver's perception of the communication situation, including the degree of similarity, influences the persuasive effect of a message on a receiver's attitude and behavior (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). As a homophilous source is more likely to be perceived as credible, trustworthy, and reliable, the effectiveness of communication from a homophilous source may be greater (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). For example, although opinion leaders tend to be more competent on the issue being communicated than their followers, opinion leaders

often share similar beliefs, norms, and social characteristics with their average follower (Dichter 1966; Dorothy 1985; Rogers 1995; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). Thus, opinion leaders are usually viewed as influential members of groups who can exert influence on others' thoughts by swaying opinions with either positive or negative comments (Dorothy 1985). In the case of social networking sites, consumers may interact with others who are demographically similar or with those quite different, which could influence the nature and extent of eWOM communications.

Trust in Social Networking Site Users

Trust in social networking site users is another social relationship variable that is conceptualized as an important factor influencing consumers' willingness to engage in eWOM in social networking sites. Trust has long been recognized as an important construct in communication and social relationships and has been defined and conceptualized in many different ways in existing literature (Couch and Jones 1997; Gabarro 1978). In general, trust can be viewed as an enduring attitude or trait (Deutsch 1958; Rotter 1967), a behavioral intention or behavior which involves vulnerability and uncertainty of the trustor (Chow and Chan 2008; Coleman 1990; Deutsch 1958; Giffin 1967; Schlenker, Helm, and Tedeschi 1973), or a transitory situational variable (Driscoll 1978; Kee and Knox 1970). Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman (1993), for example, define trust as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence (p. 82)." This confidence comes from the partner's expertise, reliability, and trustworthiness (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993). In other words, trust focuses on confidence in the behavior of the partner or an ability to predict his or her behavior (Carroll et al. 2007; Gundlach and Murphy 1993). From this perspective, trust or interpersonal trust is viewed as an

enduring and generalized attitude, belief, or expectancy possessed by an individual or a group in interpersonal relations that the statement or promise of another individual or group can be relied upon (Blau 1964; Carroll et al. 2007; Giffin 1967; Rotter 1967; Schurr and Ozanne 1985). Along the same line of thinking, compared to anonymously reading comments via other eWOM formats (e.g., product review sites and forums); connections through social networking sites are embedded in consumers' own networks and may therefore be perceived as more credible and trustworthy than anonymous sources or marketers. Therefore, perceived trust in social networking site users is predicted to influence consumers' willingness to engage in eWOM via these sites.

Interpersonal Influence

The next dimension that plays a significant role in determining consumers' engagement in eWOM in social networking sites is consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). Previous studies on WOM suggest that certain individual difference factors may be associated with WOM referral behavior in the traditional marketplace. For instance, individuals who value the interdependent self and focus on the importance of the social context may be more subject to the influence of WOM (Briley, Morris, and Simonson 2000). Similarly, WOM may become the most powerful source of information when consumers are susceptible to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) argue that consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence plays an important role in influencing consumer purchase decisions. Originating from McGuire's (1968) early work pertaining to personality and susceptibility to social influence, Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) defined

consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence as "the need to identify with or enhance one's image in the opinion of significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and/or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others or seeking information from others (p. 473)." Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence has been proposed as a general trait that differs across individuals and is viewed as a two-dimensional construct-*normative influences* and *informational influences* (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). Normative influences refer to the tendency to conform to the expectations of others and can affect attitudes, norms, and values (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975). Informational influences refer to the tendency to accept information from knowledgeable others and can help to guide consumers in product, brand, and store search (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Deutsch and Gerard 1955). While all consumers show some susceptibility to interpersonal influence, they vary in the degree of their susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Hence, interpersonal influence is also discussed as a potential social factor that relates to one's relations with others and influences eWOM behavior.

Given the above review of social relationship variables, it is apparent that individuals' relations with others may exert great impact on information sharing and exchange among consumers. Therefore, it is argued that social relationships of social networking site users may contribute to the nature of eWOM communications occurring on these sites. Because social networking sites can facilitate the establishment and maintenance of social relationships and thereby influence information giving and seeking behaviors online, this study describes social factors as

fundamental dimensions in examining eWOM behavior in the highly social and collective social networking sites. In summary, social relationship variables, including *social capital*, *tie strength*, *homophily*, *trust*, and *interpersonal influence* are conceptualized as important drivers that affect consumers' reliance on social networking sites as a vehicle for eWOM. By examining the impact of social relationship variables on eWOM in social networking sites, the nature of interpersonal communication in computer-mediated environments can be thoroughly understood. Given the influence of social networks in the diffusion of products and services (Brown and Reingen 1987), social relationship variables may serve as important antecedents of eWOM in online social networking sites.

eWOM in Social Networking Sites

The mounting use of social networking sites provides consumers with another social venue to search for unbiased product information and at the same time allows consumers to give their own consumption-related advice by engaging in eWOM. In particular, social networking sites enable consumers to share their experiences with products and brands with members in their social networks, either close friends or remote acquaintances. eWOM in social networking sites occurs when consumers provide or search for informal product-related advice through the unique applications of social networking sites. Through extensively social interactions on social networking sites, eWOM communicated via these sites may be especially effective given that these sites have provided an easy way for consumers to build and maintain robust social relationships online. Moreover, consumer-generated product-focused comments on social networking sites are available to Internet users around the world, which potentially exerts influence on consumers on a global scale. Consequently,

social networking sites have become one of the most widely used online media of the existing eWOM formats. Regardless of the potential powerful influence of eWOM in social networking sites on brand communications, consumer behavior research has not examined the product-related eWOM behavior among social networking site users nor the resulting implications for advertising strategies.

Consumer eWOM behavior in Social Networking Sites

In social networking sites, consumers may engage in eWOM behavior through a variety of ways, such as posting their thoughts and opinions about a product or service on their personal profiles, sending product or promotional information through an inbox message (similar to email) within the sites, and adding applications like "Send McDonalds" or "Send Krispy Kreme" so that consumers can easily and quickly send free virtual gifts to their contacts. More importantly, consumers can become part of a virtual brand community on social networking sites like "Addicted to Starbucks" by joining the groups they selected. Participation in a virtual community can create a social benefit to a consumer for self-identification and social interaction, which may motivate consumers' engagement in eWOM communication to affiliate with and belong to online communities (Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). In the case of social networking sites, consumers may write opinions on branded profile pages as such behavior signifies their presence with the virtual community of social networking site users and commit them to the brand. Through participation in these communities, social benefits such as information exchange or emotional support from this community membership can be obtained (Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

One of the notable differences between WOM and eWOM is that there is no

differentiation between opinion leaders and opinion seekers for eWOM. The interactive nature of the Internet enables consumers to easily engage in eWOM and perform multiple roles, including opinion leaders, seekers, and forwarder. In online social networking sites, consumers may not only give product-related information and pass it on to others, but also obtain and seek advice from others for their purchase. In summary, eWOM behavior within social networking sites may be initiated because of a desire to establish and maintain social relationships within consumers' personal networks. By passing along useful product information or sharing negative experiences with a product or company, social networking site users could help their contacts in their purchase decision-making. Likewise, by searching out advice and opinions from others, eWOM generated from social networking sites could exert impacts on users' product choices.

Characteristics of eWOM behavior in Social Networking Sites

One important characteristic of eWOM communication within social networking sites is that the personal networks are readily available, which leads social networking sites to become an important source of product information for consumers, especially college students, who comprise the largest segment of the social networking site population (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007). As social networking sites provide consumers with opportunities to efficiently create and maintain their personal networks, information sharing among consumers is rapidly becoming much easier and faster. Consumers who share consumption-related information on social networking sites may expect to gain immediate feedback from a specific contact in their personal network. Unlike communicating with anonymous fellow consumers through other eWOM formats such as product forums, social

networking site contacts are members in consumers' personal networks and are perceived as more trustworthy than unknown strangers. In sum, as soon as the new communication technologies make it possible for consumers to use social networking sites to connect with one another online, social networking sites may become an effective vehicle for eWOM among consumers and serve as an important source of product-related information and opinions. Given that many companies now employ eWOM-based "social network marketing" as part of brand communication strategies (Godes and Mayzlin 2004a; Strategic Direction 2008), the potential impact of eWOM communication on consumer marketplace decision-making cannot be ignored. More importantly, examining the influences of social relationship factors on consumers' eWOM behavior in social networking sites is imperative for a theoretical understanding of the underlying process of online communications in social environments.

Conceptualization of eWOM in Social Networking Sites

In the literature of marketing and communication, two important dimensions that affect the adoption and diffusion of new products have been identified- *opinion leadership* and *opinion seeking* (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996; Shoham and Ruvio 2008). As previously mentioned, opinion leadership and opinion seeking have been conceptually understood as two important components of social influences and WOM behavior (Goldsmith and Clark 2008; Sun et al. 2006). Opinion leadership, specifically, has been frequently viewed as an important personality trait that affects the process of WOM communication (Feick and Price 1987; Gilly et al. 1998; Rogers 1995). Individuals with high levels of opinion leadership, also termed opinion leaders, may exert great impact on others' attitudes and behaviors (Feick and Price 1987).

Lyons and Henderson (2005) examined opinion leadership in a computer-mediated environment and found that online opinion leaders display higher levels of "enduring involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behavior, and self-perceived knowledge" than non-leaders (p. 319). In the case of social networking sites, a socially extensive environment provides opinion leaders with greater opportunities to give product-related thoughts and opinions to other consumers. Opinion leaders may also use social networking sites as a tool for self-expression through associations with desired products and services (e.g., recommending a product). Altogether, the exceptional growth of social networking sites offers opinion leaders a unique channel to strengthen their personal characteristics and enhance their ability and motivation for giving advice and recommendations to their fellows, which encourages the development of eWOM in social networking sites.

On the other hand, opinion seeking is the other related concept that plays a significant role in determining consumers' engagement in eWOM in social networking sites. In the traditional marketplace, opinion seeking is an important component of WOM communication because it can also facilitate the flow of information in the product diffusion process (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996; Goldsmith and Clark 2008; Shoham and Ruvio 2008). Consumers with high levels of opinion seeking behavior, known as opinion seekers, tend to search for information and advice from others when making a purchase decision (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996). Compared to opinion leaders, opinion seekers possess relatively lower product involvement and product class knowledge in a given product category, and therefore, opinion seekers actively look for information and advice from opinion leaders when they perceive the information to be useful (Goldsmith and Clark 2008).

In computer-mediated communication research, Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) measured motivations for consumer online opinion seeking. They found that opinion seekers seek opinions and advice online because it is easy to attain pre-purchase information and could reduce their perceived risk and secure lower prices (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006). In social networking sites, opinion seekers may regard the eWOM recommendations of friends or classmates as credible and reliable, and thereby rely on social networking sites as a source for their purchases.

Another important yet overlooked dimension of Internet-based eWOM is online *pass-along behavior* (Norman and Russell 2006; Sun et al. 2006). While Sun et al. (2006) viewed behavioral consequences such as online forwarding and chatting as an outcome of online WOM, pass-along behavior is conceptualized as one of the dimensions of eWOM in this study. Because eWOM is defined as the behavior of exchanging product-focused information among peer consumers on the Internet, pass-along behavior that can affect the flow of information should be considered as a component of such eWOM behavior. Furthermore, pass-along behavior is more likely to occur in an online context, as the unique characteristics of the Internet can facilitate information dissemination (Norman and Russell 2006). By the same token, pass-along behavior is the natural component of eWOM occurring in social networking sites. In addition to giving or seeking information from friends or other contacts, pass-along behavior is a useful tool for social networking site users to exchange information about a product or brand.

In summary, *opinion leadership*, *opinion seeking*, and *pass-along behavior* are significant dimensions of eWOM in social networking sites. Opinion leadership is related to consumers' information giving behavior, whereas opinion seeking is

associated with information seeking. It is vital to note that many opinion leaders may also be opinion seekers because of their desire for knowledge in a specific product class (Feick and Price 1987; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Likewise, opinion seekers may also be opinion leaders when they posses high knowledge in a different product category. As consumers become more connectedly linked by advancing technology of social networking sites, marketers must learn more about information exchange patterns of their target consumers in order to communicate effectively. By examining potential social factors that could drive the flow of information exchange, the process of eWOM occurring via social networking sites can be understood. Based on the above discussion on social relationship variables and eWOM, a general conceptual framework examining the relationships among these dimensions is developed.

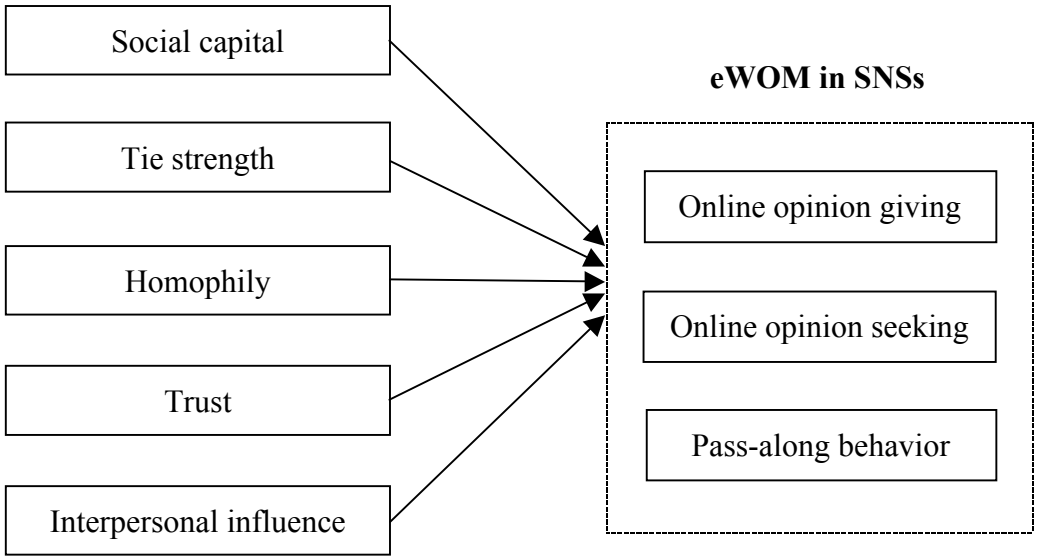
Summary

Consistent with the ongoing argument, understanding the drivers of eWOM will not only contribute to the theoretical knowledge of interpersonal communication, but also help marketers in the development of promising brand communication strategies. Even though the findings of past research suggest the important role of social relationship factors in WOM in both the real and online worlds, it is unclear whether such antecedent factors affecting WOM communications may extend to eWOM in social networking sites. As social relationships are articulated and displayed in the form of contact lists or personal networks, consumers with highly connected social relationships are more likely to rely on information obtained from their contacts via social networking sites than consumers with their autonomous relations with others. Along this logic, differences in social relationships are predicted

to lead to distinct eWOM behavior in social networking sites. Accordingly, this study focuses on social relationship dimensions that are frequently addressed in research on WOM to influence WOM behaviors. By linking social variables and eWOM, this study aims to develop a theoretically and empirically based framework of determinants of consumer engagement in eWOM in social networking sites.

Drawing from literature on social networks and traditional WOM research, a conceptual framework for social relationships and eWOM in social networking sites is developed. Specifically, social relationships among social networking site users are proposed as influential factors that drive consumers' engagement in eWOM in the importantly new social venue, social networking sites. As more consumers around the world rely on social networking sites as a source of product information, this investigation could contribute to literature on eWOM within the social media context and provide managerial implications for companies wanting to tap the power of social networks by incorporating eWOM programs in their marketing campaigns.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



CHAPTER 4: HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The revolutionary development of social networking sites has provided marketers a new marketing and communications channel, which again indicates that a substantial potential exists for eWOM research. Several questions are significant in the understanding of eWOM behavior in social networking sites. For example, do social relationships created and maintained via social networking sites contribute to eWOM behaviors on these sites? Do individuals with different relations with others exhibit varying levels of engagement for eWOM in social networking sites? From a consumer behavior perspective, prior research on eWOM has failed to consider the influence of social factors on eWOM communications. Past studies on eWOM behaviors in marketing and communication research has mainly focused on consequences and outcomes. However, little is known about the potential determinants of consumers' eWOM behavior in social networking sites. This is particularly crucial in the understanding of eWOM in social networking sites, as consumers have the potential to reach a large audience rather than merely members in their personal network. All together, this study presents the first investigation of eWOM in social networking sites by examining the role of social relationship factors in such a phenomenon.

Online social websites have generated a tremendous amount of product-related eWOM. As such, social networking sites have considerably changed the way that consumers make purchase decisions by allowing consumers to freely interact with other consumers, marketers, and members of their personal networks (Hung and Li 2007; Niederhoffer et al. 2007). As consumers now have increased opportunities to communicate with each other, understanding social relationships established and

maintained on social networking sites is particularly critical to identify potential market influencers and use them for accelerating positive eWOM. Current research concerning social relationship factors as antecedents of WOM influence (e.g., Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Langner 2007) has suggested that variables such as social capital (Stephen and Lehmann 2008), tie strength (Brown and Reingen 1987), demographic similarity and perceptual affinity (Brown and Reingen 1987; Gilly et al. 1998), trust (Nisbet 2006), and interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989) are important drivers that lead to the effectiveness of WOM communication. It is argued that these social relationship variables may be applied to influence eWOM communication in social networking sites.

In this chapter, hypotheses are developed based on a review of relevant literature on social relationship variables. Five hypotheses are proposed to examine the relationships between social relationships and eWOM communications among social networking site users.

Social Capital

The first social relationship variable that is of concern in this study is social capital. Substantial research has provided evidence that personal communication leads to actual decisions to purchase products and services, whereas advertising increases awareness of them (Coleman, Katz, and Menzel 1966; Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Price and Feick 1984). These empirical studies demonstrate the imperative role of social networks in the diffusion or distribution of products and services among consumers. Through social interactions in these personal networks, resources such as information, ideas, norms, emotional support, interpersonal trust, and cooperation, jointly known as

social capital, are available to consumers (Baker 2000; Coleman 1988).

According to Putnam's (1993) influential work concerning Italian democracy, network qualities, norms of reciprocity, and trust are three elements that compose the basic dimensions of social capital in Italian society. These dimensions have been applied in the later analysis of American society. Other studies have also identified main clusters of social capital based upon its many attributes (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Onyx and Bullen 2000). For example, Onyx and Bullen (2000) suggest that networks, reciprocity, trust, shared norms, and social agency are five main themes that comprise social capital.

Another important classification developed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggests that social capital contains three dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive, and each dimension facilitates the creation and share of knowledge. First, the structural dimension associates with social and network relationships, reflecting the potential resource available to an actor and relates to factors that measure the network pattern and density (i.e., tie strength) (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). Secondly, the relational dimension involves the nature of social relations, such as the level of trust, developed through an interaction among the group members (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). Lastly, the cognitive dimension refers to shared understanding and interpretations increased through resources. Wasko and Faraj (2005), for instance, suggest that shared culture and goals are important factors. In conclusion, Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) multi-dimensional view of social capital provides valuable implications for examining information management and knowledge integration within social networks (Okoli and Oh 2007; Robert, Jr., Dennis, and Ahuja 2008).

In addition to the discussion of dimensions of social capital, two types of

social capital have been conceptualized in Putnam's (2000) later study, namely bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital is associated with large, loose networks with fewer "multiplex" relationships, or weak ties that facilitate a wide range of information exchange and resources sharing (Granovetter 1982; Haythornthwaite 2000, 2005; Leonard and Onyx 2003; Naranyan 1999). Bridging social capital focuses on the capacity to access resources such as information and knowledge from external sources to the community or network (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). In contrast, bonding social capital involves dense networks or strong ties (Leonard and Onyx 2003) and is usually derived from kinship networks that provide emotional support or reinforce shared social norms (Naranyan 1999). Bridging social capital builds upon reciprocity exchanges created by heterogeneous groups and requires diverse assets and access to information (Pigg and Crank 2004), whereas bonding social capital is formed through socially homogeneous groups with similar backgrounds, such as similar cultural groups or social characteristics (Flora and Flora 2004). Further, bridging social capital is associated with a thinner or different sort of trust and is usually purpose-oriented, whereas bonding social capital is related to thick and localized trust that emphasizes emotional charge (Briggs 2003; Pigg and Crank 2004).

With the development of new communication technologies, researchers in recent years have focused on the likely impact of the Internet on social capital (Best and Krueger 2006; Kraut et al. 1998; Wellman et al. 1996). Because the development of social capital relies on interactions among people within a network, a question concerning that whether the Internet promotes or impedes offline interpersonal relationships or social interactions has been debated (Best and Krueger 2006; Kraut et al. 1998). Several researchers argue that the Internet enables the expansion of social

networks and increases community social capital by allowing users to join virtual communities and access limitless information (Pigg and Crank 2004). The relatively lower entry costs of communication increase the capacity to coordinate online and facilitate interpersonal engagement. Thus, the use of the Internet encourages community involvement and civic participation (e.g., Jennings and Zeitner 2003; Neustadt and Robinson 2002).

In particular, Williams (2007) found that bridging social capital is more likely to occur than bonding in an online environment due to the easier and faster accessibility (Williams 2007). The Internet provides freedom from time and space constraints, connecting diverse people from a variety of personal backgrounds, which aids to the formation of bridging social capital. In an online setting, individuals interact with others both within and outside their existing networks easily, allowing them to establish new relationships without emotional support and thereby enhancing bridging social capital while decreasing bonding (Wellman et al. 1996; Williams 2007).

In regards to social networking sites, current research has found that both bridging and bonding social capital are observed in social networking sites (Choi et al. 2008; Donath 2007). The unique applications of social networking sites provide consumers with various opportunities to maintain existing personal networks or to expand them, which simultaneously promote bridging and bonding social capital on these sites (Lenhart and Madden 2007). That is, consumers may not only use social networking sites to maintain close relationships with strong ties (e.g., family and close friends), but also interact with weak ties (e.g., acquaintances and classmates) by engaging in eWOM communication. In an effort to investigate the influence of social

capital on eWOM communication via social networking sites, the first hypothesis is formulated to examine the role of social capital.

H1: The more (a) bridging and (b) bonding social capital social networking site users have, the greater the likelihood of engaging in (1) opinion giving, (2) opinion seeking, and (3) pass-along behavior on these sites.

Tie Strength

To further enhance the knowledge of the role of social relationships in influencing eWOM in social networking sites, exploring the relationships between tie strength and eWOM is needed. According to Granovetter (1973), social ties can be classified as strong and weak ties. Strong ties emphasize the reciprocity nature of social relationships whereas the values of weak ties lie in those loosely connected individuals who give a broader sense of perspectives to others (Pigg and Crank 2004). Granovetter's (1973) conceptualization of tie strength suggests that the more important, frequent, and durable the tie, the stronger it is. Operationally, tie strength has also been measured through a variety of variables, such as the importance an individual attaches to the ties, the frequency of social contacts, the intimacy and the reciprocal communications, and the emotional intensity of the ties (Granovetter 1973; Keister 1999; Nelson 1989; Weimann 1983). For example, in Weimann's (1983) study examining the role of conversational ties in the flow of information and influence, the importance attached to the social relation, the frequency of contacts, and the duration of the tie were used to characterize the strength of ties.

Prior research has focused on whether strong or weak ties are the proper structure of social networks for social capital (Burt 2001; Coleman 1990; Granovetter 1983; Li 2007), indicating that the strength of social ties has important implications

for the development of shared resources of social capital (Best and Krueger 2006). While some argue that strong ties connected in closely-knit personal networks provide the best structure for social capital (Bian 1997; Coleman 1990), others view loosely, diverse, generalized networks as preeminent (Burt 2001; Granovetter 1983). In Granovetter's (1973) seminal work, he proposed the theory of "The Strength of Weak Ties." This offers one of the most valuable theoretical explanations of the process by which face-to-face small group interactions affect inter-group communication phenomena and contribute to the understanding of micro-macro bridge in interpersonal networks. According to Granovetter (1973), tie strength impedes the expansion of the network because as ties strengthen, strongly tied individuals typically tend to possess less-independent social circles with increasing transitivity. Given this increasing transitivity, individuals are less likely to make new contacts and build new relationships, thereby suggesting that interacting with strong ties hinders the expansion of social capital (Best and Krueger 2006; Granovetter 1973).

Conversely, weakly connected pairs tend to possess disparate and wide friendship circles and thus enhance opportunities for individuals to interact at the macro-level and expand their networks (Granovetter 1973; 1983). With increasing generalized trust, individuals who spend more time with weak ties are more likely to possess greater levels of social capital than those with strong ties whose interactions are usually at the micro-level (Granovetter 1973, 1983). In sum, Granovetter's (1973) "The Strength of Weak Ties" theory suggests that weak ties serve as an important bridge between groups, thus providing opportunities for individuals to share information and ideas from micro-level behaviors into macro-level patterns (Weimann 1983).

In the consumer behavior and marketing literature, tie strength has been studied extensively in the research of WOM behavior (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008; Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993; Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001). These studies have found that both strong and weak ties are the key drivers of information dissemination and have established evidence on the impact of tie strength on WOM propagation (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987; Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001). Although advertising and publicity are effective in the early stage of innovations of a new product, strong and weak ties are the main forces propelling product adoption in the growth cycle (Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001). Consumers' decision-making is often influenced by others with whom they have either random, loose relationships, or by those with whom they have relatively more frequent and intimate interactions in their personal networks (Goldenberg, Libai, and Muller 2001).

Existing research has examined tie activation in social networks (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987; De Bruyn and Lilien 2008; Reingen and Kernan 1986; Weimann 1983). For instance, Brown and Reingen (1987) investigated the relationships between social ties and WOM referral behavior. Using a network analysis, results from their study suggest that at the macro level, weak ties demonstrated a crucial bridging function, allowing information to disseminate and spread among distinct groups. At the micro level, however, strong ties were more likely to be activated for the flow of referral behavior (Brown and Reingen 1987). Furthermore, Weimann (1983) found that weak and strong conversational ties play different roles in the flow of communication. While the spread of information within the group is more likely to occur through strong ties, weak ties are mostly utilized as the bridges between

individuals of different groups (Weimann 1983). Weimann (1983) further contends that the "influence" of information mainly arises from strong ties within the group, whereas the bridging function of weak ties is limited to the "flow" of information. In sum, strong ties are more likely to be used and perceived as more influential than weak ties, regardless of the essential role of weak ties in promoting the flow of information and bridging gaps in the broader social system (Brown and Reingen 1987; Friedkin 1980; Weimann 1983).

As more and more companies attempt to influence the spread of eWOM in social networking sites, marketers need to be aware of the distinctions between strong and weak ties, as both can contribute to eWOM communications. With readily available personal networks in social networking sites, consumers' product choices may be influenced by both stable and intimate "strong tie" interactions as well as randomly-connected "weak ties" (e.g., unfamiliar friends of friends). Although strong ties possess an impact on the individual and small group level, the asynchronous and connective characteristics of social networking sites allow weak ties to facilitate their potential influence by extending consumers' interpersonal networks to external organizations or groups. This accelerates eWOM communication throughout a large-scale network. Such strong and weak ties developed via social networking sites may stimulate the diffusion of news, rumors, fashions, and more importantly, product-related information, thereby encouraging consumers' engagement in eWOM behavior. Therefore, the second hypothesis is proposed to explore such phenomena.

H2: The stronger the tie strength social networking site users have, the greater the likelihood of engaging in (1) opinion giving, (2) opinion seeking, and (3) pass-along behavior on these sites.

Homophliy

Another social relationship variable that could yield valuable insights into the understanding of eWOM in social networking sites is homophily. In communication research, homophily concerns the degree of similarity between communicators and receivers (Gilly et al. 1998; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). In the context of consumer information exchange, as perceived ease of communication increases between similar source and receivers, homophily can facilitate the flow of information in consumers' external searches (Price and Feick 1984). For example, research has shown that homophilous consumers are more likely to provide personally relevant product information because individuals with similar lifestyles and social characteristics tend to have similar needs and wants in consumption (Feldman and Spencer 1965). Hence, consumers tend to feel comfortable when interacting with others who are alike in demographic characteristics, such as social status and educational backgrounds (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970).

Studies have also examined the relationships between homophily and the influence of sources (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987; Gilly et al. 1998). These investigations found that consumers are more likely to communicate with similar sources and that the influence of homophilous sources may be greater than heterophilous ones (e.g., expert sources) (Gilly et al. 1998). Feldman and Spencer (1965), for instance, found a positive relationship between homophily and selection of a personal source for consumer services (i.e., physicians). Brown and Reingen (1987) examined WOM referral behavior of piano teacher selection, and found that homophilous sources of information were more likely to be utilized, thus activating homophilous ties. They also suggest that homophilous sources will be perceived as

more credible than heterophilous ones and thus have greater influence on behavior (Brown and Reingen 1987).

McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly's (1975) development of a measure of perceived homophily in interpersonal communication provides a useful framework for understanding interpersonal similarity in human communication. They created a fourteen-item bipolar scale encompassing four dimensions of perceived homophily: Attitude, Background, Morality, and Appearance. In Gilly's et al. (1998) dyadic study of interpersonal information search, homophily was operationalized in terms of two categories: demographic homophily (gender, education, and age) and perceptual homophily (values and experiences) of seeker and source. Gilly et al. (1998) found a positive relationship between perceptual homophily and WOM influence. Demographic homophily, however, was found to be inversely related to the influence of WOM communication.

In the cyber world, information and discussions on a variety of topics are presented and available on the Internet. Despite the diversity of Internet users in general, consumers online are able to freely select their exposure to certain topics and participate in virtual communities, and thus control their social interactions with consumers who share common ideas and interests (Best and Krueger 2006). This perspective assumes that people tend to interact with similar individuals in an online setting. This control of social interactions increases homophily among consumers (Best and Krueger 2006). In addition, a recent study conducted by Wang et al. (2008) investigated whether users exhibit different evaluative mechanisms in utilizing health information presented in Web sites versus online discussion groups. The results of their study suggest that credibility and homophily are the two fundamental

mechanisms for the social influence of online health information (Wang et al. 2008). Specifically, homophily plays a significant role in determining credibility perceptions and influencing the persuasive process in both Web sites and online discussion groups. That is, higher levels of perceived homophily of an online health information stimulus lead to a higher acceptance of that particular information.

In the social networking site context, similar demographic characteristics, such as young and educated, characterize users on these sites (Solman 2007). To my knowledge, Thelwall (2009) recently published the first exploratory study pertaining to homophily in MySpace, one of the most popular social networking sites in the U.S. Thelwall (2009) examined whether social interactions on social networking sites inhibit or improve the offline phenomena that friendships tend to be formed between homophilious individuals. Findings from his study showed that although gender homophily does not exist, homophily for "ethnicity, religion, age, country, marital status, attitude towards children, and sexual orientation are reasons for joining MySpace (p. 219)." Although focusing on a single social networking site (MySpace), Thelwall's (2009) study provides an interesting observation with regard to homophily in social networking sites.

Based on the above discussion, social networking sites may excel in attracting homophilious consumers who have common product interests. This phenomenon increases their likelihood in using homophilious social contacts as a source of product information, and thereby engaging in eWOM behaviors. Yet different individuals may display distinct social relationships in the same online social venue. Social networking site users are likely to have different perceptions of being similar to or unique from other contacts, and subsequently, exhibit different levels of perceived homophily.

Thus, it is imperative to understand differences in levels of perceived homophily among social networking site users, so as to fully understand the characteristics of eWOM occurring on these sites. Accordingly, it is anticipated that social networking site users with a higher level of perceived homophily tend to participate in eWOM via these social venues to a greater extent compared to users with a relatively lower level of perceived homophily. Given the above argument, the third hypothesis is presented as follows.

H3: The more homophilious the contacts social networking site users perceive, the greater the likelihood of engaging in (1) opinion giving, (2) opinion seeking, and (3) pass-along behavior on these sites.

Trust in Social Networking Site Contacts

Trust is another social relationship variable that is incorporated in the conceptual discussion in my dissertation research to examine how social relationships in social networking sites affect consumers' decisions to participate in eWOM in these sites. Trust is frequently described as a crucial part of social capital (Adler and Kwon 2002; Bouma, Bulte, and van Soest 2008; Chow and Chan 2008; Fukuyama 1995; Onyx and Bullen 2000; Putnam 1993). For example, Fukuyama (1995) views trust as an important social value that is essential to social capital. According to Fukuyama (1995), trust is defined as ''the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and cooperative behavior based on commonly shared norms on the part of other members of that society (p. 26)." This definition is reflected in Li's (2007) recent work, suggesting that "trust is the expectation and demonstration of committed goodwill for social capital (p. 235)" and thus is a key for the creation of prosperity in society.

Several studies have contributed to the understanding of the role of trust in information exchange and knowledge integration (e.g., Pigg and Crank 2004). For example, Leonard and Onyx (2003) argue that the level of trust plays a vital role in determining an individual's decision to bridge other networks to exchange information or other resources existing in social capital. Similarly, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggest that trust facilitates the use of information because it increases the perceived credibility of information and thus leads to higher usage of that information. Results from Robert, Dennis, and Ahuja's (2008) study further confirmed this finding, suggesting a positive relationship between trust and knowledge integration in digitally enabled teams. Collectively, trust affects information exchange and sharing as it allows individuals to justify and evaluate their decision to provide or attain more useful information (Kramer, Brewer, and Hanna 1996). With a higher degree of trust, the amount and types of information exchanged increases (Andrews and Delahaye 2000; Dirks and Ferrin 2002). In the human communication context, trust between a source and a receiver is significant to the dissemination of information and knowledge, which could contribute to effective interpersonal communication in both offline and online environments.

As new communication technologies continue to develop, the Internet has become an important channel for consumers to share product-related information and experience with a brand. The anonymous feature of the Internet allows consumers to freely interact with other consumers online without revealing their true identity (Best and Krueger 2006). Recently, researchers have studied the social implications of the Internet and examined the relationship between Internet usage and interpersonal trust. Some suggest that the anonymity of the Internet may increase consumer information

accessibility by removing social barriers such as age and race, whereas consumers cannot develop interpersonal trust towards others because of unknown sources of information (Blanchard and Horan 1998; Shah, Kwak, and Holbert 2001). In addition, findings from Best and Krueger's (2006) study suggest that online social interaction is positively related to bridging social capital and thus enhances generalized trust, a relatively thinner trust compared to localized trust gained from bonding social capital. Because the Internet enables the geographic reach without boundary limitations, these online social interactions typically promote the development of weak ties but inhibit strong ties and thus increase generalized trust among Internet users from different groups or communities (Best and Krueger 2006; Williams 2007).

Given the increased popularity for participating in virtual communities in recent years, a few researchers have suggested that trust is essential for continuous participation in virtual communities (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 1998; Lin 2006; Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze 2002). Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002), for example, examined antecedents and effects of trust in virtual communities and measured two dimensions of trust -ability and benevolence/integrity. The results of their study showed that trust plays an underlying role in influencing members' intention to give and search information via virtual communities (Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze 2002). Additionally, Lin (2006) identified behavioral intention to participate in virtual communities and suggests that perceived trust is one of the components of attitudes towards participation in virtual communities.

In the case of social networking sites, consumers may evaluate the value of product information based on the perceived interpersonal factors, such as perceived integrity, expertise, honesty, sincerity, congeniality, and timeliness, all of which are

important predictors of trust (Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993). Because users tend to use their real identity in social networking sites, the unique social and interactive nature of this new medium makes offline contacts (e.g., friends and family) available for online information exchange, which increases perceived trust in social networking site contacts. That is, consumers tend to use information from their existing personal networks in social networking sites that they trust and share common interests and activities. Accordingly, if consumers have high levels of perceived trust with their contacts in social networking sites, this could transfer their decision to pass along or receive product information via the sites. As a result, such trust may facilitate the flow of information in social networking sites and thus increase the likelihood that consumers will consider using eWOM communication when making a purchase decision.

Along the same line of discussion, trust in social networking site contacts is conceptualized in the context of social relationships. While it is indisputable that trust is a key element in relationship buildings and eWOM behaviors in social networking sites, the degrees of trust in social networking site contacts may lead to varying extents of users' engagement in eWOM. Despite that our understanding of how trust influences eWOM is limited, degrees of perceived trust may play an essential contributing role in eWOM behaviors in social networking sites. That is, social networking site users with a higher level of perceived trust in their contacts may engage in eWOM in social networking sites to a greater extent than users with a lower level of perceived trust. Hence, the following hypothesis is outlined to gauge whether perceived trust in social networking site contacts affect eWOM communicated via these sites.

H4: The higher level of trust social networking site users perceive in their contacts, the greater the likelihood of engaging in (1) opinion giving, (2) opinion seeking, and (3) pass-along behavior on these sites.

Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989) is another construct that could be applicable to explain the role of social relationships in eWOM in social networking sites. Because eWOM focuses on online information exchange among consumers through social interactions, social norms and interpersonal influences are key determinants of such eWOM behavior. McGuire (1968) defined consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence as a general personal trait that varies across individuals. Based on this underlying concept, Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) later developed a scale to measure consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Researchers over the years have suggested that interpersonal influences play an important role in influencing consumer decision making (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; D'Rozario and Choudhury 2000; Park and Lessig 1977). Therefore, interpersonal influence is conceptualized and linked to the influence of social relationships on consumer reliance on social networking sites as a source of product-focused information.

Past studies have identified the dimensions of susceptibility to interpersonal influence and its impacts on consumer purchases. Deutsch and Gerard (1955), for instance, proposed that interpersonal influence could be manifested in two different forms, normative and informational. Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) further examined these two types of influences in a purchase decision context. In this regard, normative influence can be further classified into value expressive and utilitarian

influences (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Park and Lessig 1977). Value expressiveness is motivated by the need for psychological association with a person or group, which reflects the acceptance of positions expressed by others. The utilitarian aspect of normative influence, on the other hand, is associated with the attention to act in accordance with the wishes of pledges to achieve rewards or avoid punishments. Informational influence is related to the tendency to make informed decisions by accepting information from others (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). Informational influence may be manifested through either consumers directly requesting information from knowledgeable others or indirectly making observations of the behavior of others (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989; Park and Lessig 1977). Through the process of internalization, informational influence occurs when consumers perceive that information from others increases their own knowledge, and thus exert impacts on product evaluations and choices (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel 1989). In essence, normative influences play a determining role in directing and controlling "evaluations, choices, and loyalties," whereas informational influences play an influencing role in helping consumers in "product, brand, and store search" (Mascarenhas and Higby 1993, p. 54).

Although consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence has been conceptualized as a two dimensional construct, *normative* and *informational* influence, both influences may drive eWOM behaviors in social networking sites. However, differences in the degree and pattern of interpersonal influence among individuals may lead to social networking site users' divergent eWOM behaviors. For instance, individuals who are more susceptible to informational influence focus on the

information value of the message transmitted, whereas individual who are more amenable to normative influences emphasize the process of transmission and relationship buildings (Laroche, Kalamas, and Cleveland 2005). As a result, social networking site users who tend to be subject to informational influence are predicted to display a higher need to acquire valuable information from knowledgeable contacts in order to guide their purchases, thereby facilitating their engagement in eWOM in social networking sites. On the other hand, social networking site users who tend to be susceptible to normative influences are more likely to conform to the expectations of significant contacts and seek social approval through the acquisition and use of the same products and brands. Such behaviors are associated with the influence of eWOM, where users of social networking sites view their contacts as an important source of product information. Given this perspective, it is reasonable to argue that consumer susceptibility to both *normative* and *informational* influence will lead to their use of social networking sites as a vehicle for eWOM. Thus, the fifth hypothesis is put forth to test whether consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence contribute to eWOM in social networking sites.

H5: The more (a) normative and (b) informational influence social networking site users are susceptible to, the greater the likelihood of engaging in (1) opinion giving, (2) opinion seeking, and (3) pass-along behavior on these sites.

In summary, the hypotheses concerned the relationships between social-related variables and eWOM behavior in social networking sites. Table 2 summarizes Hypotheses 1-5.

Table 2
Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Social Relationship Variables	Independent Variables	Dependent Variables
H1	Social Capital	Bridging social capital Bonding social capital	Opinion giving Opinion seeking Pass-along behavior
H2	Tie Strength	Tie strength	Opinion giving Opinion seeking Pass-along behavior
H3	Homophily	Homophily	Opinion giving Opinion seeking Pass-along behavior
H4	Trust	Trust	Opinion giving Opinion seeking Pass-along behavior
H5	Interpersonal Influence	Normative influence Informational influence	Opinion giving Opinion seeking Pass-along behavior

Because social networking sites provide interactive and convenient applications (i.e., personal profiles) and established personal networks (i.e., friend lists) for information exchange and sharing, users who tend to have a high frequency of social interactions can easily and quickly disseminate product information and ideas, furthering the development of eWOM. As social networking sites have become an essential activity in Internet users' daily life, it is necessary to examine whether social relationships may affect the use of this rapid growth new social medium. Given that social networking site users may have different degrees of engagement in relationship building and brand activities in social networking sites, customized

adjustments are required for advertising strategies to make them effective. My dissertation research offers a new theoretical foundation for linking social relationships and eWOM in social networking sites. eWOM is an important online communication phenomenon that exerts a great impact on consumer purchase decisions. Given that relationship building and social engagement are major activities in online social channels, it is expected that social relationships of social networking site users could contribute to different degrees and patterns of eWOM behavior occurring via these sites.

CHAPTER 5: METHOD

An online survey approach was used to address the research objectives of my dissertation. In the U.S., the Internet population comprises approximately 220 million Internet users, with about one out of five logging onto their favorite social networking site regularly (Chiu 2009; Ipsos Insight 2007). Social networking site users are characterized as young, better-educated, and are disproportionately composed of college students (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Fallows 2007; Lenhart 2009). Thus, the use of a college student sample was deemed appropriate for the study.

Sampling

Four hundred undergraduate participants from a large southwestern university participated in the study. Prospective participants were recruited from the Advertising Participant Pool (http://adresearch.advertising.utexas.edu/Participant_Pool/) in the Department of Advertising at The University of Texas at Austin.

Data Collection Procedure

Students participating in the Advertising Participant Pool received an announcement in their classes regarding the study by way of the instructors. Students were directed to the Advertising Participant Pool site where prospective respondents could voluntarily take part the study. Students completed the study either for extra course credit or as a requirement of the class. All participants were also entered into a drawing for a $10 gift card towards purchases at The University Co-Op. Participants of the study were asked to fill out an online survey. The approximate time to complete the survey was 15 minutes. The entire data collection period was about two weeks, from April 25 to May 8, 2009.

Measures

The self-administered online survey comprised questions assessing key constructs that investigate eWOM and social relationship variables on social networking sites. Items were adopted from prior research and were modified when necessary to fit the context of the present study.

The online questionnaire consisted of five sections. In the first section of the questionnaire, use of social networking sites in general was explored to enhance the overall understanding of behaviors on social networking sites. At the beginning of the first section, respondents were asked to indicate the social networking site that they visit most frequently from a top social networking site list (Nielsen Online 2009). Next, the questions also included measures of the duration, frequency, and amount of use of the site that the respondents undertook on an average day. Third, activities conducted and topics talked about on the site were asked. A seven-point, Likert scale ranging from "very infrequently" to "very frequently" was used to examine the activities that respondents undertake on the site of their choice. Respondents were asked to indicate the topics that they usually talk about on their favorite site from the following list: music, fashion, news, rumors and gossip, products or brands, political issues, school stuff, social events, and other. Lastly, *tie strength*, one of the concerned five social relationship variables, was gauged by asking respondents to indicate the numbers of contacts they have on their "friends" list in different categories, the frequency of their communications, and perceived importance and closeness about their contacts.

The second section of the questionnaire was designed to understand social relationships on social networking sites. The section included measures of three social

relationship related variables- *social capital*, *homophily*, and *trust*. Social capital was measured by assessing bridging and bonding social capital that users have on social networking sites. Four dimensions of perceived homophily: attitude homophily, background homophily, morality homophily, and appearance homophily, were used to examine the degree of perceived similarity among social networking site users and their contacts. Trust was measured through a uni-dimensional scale.

In the third section, social networking site users' engagement in eWOM was examined by assessing opinion leadership, opinion seeking, and pass-along behaviors on social networking sites. Next, another social relationship variable- *interpersonal influence* was measured in the fourth section to measure the effect of perception of other people among social networking site users. Interpersonal influence was gauged by assessing two dimensions: normative and informational interpersonal influence. In the last section of the questionnaire, demographic characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, major, and school classification were also examined. The specific measures are discussed as follows:

Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Opinion leadership, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior were assessed to measure respondents' engagement in eWOM in their favorite social networking sites. Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman's (1996) opinion leadership and opinion seeking scales were adopted. This measure consists of six items of an opinion leadership scale and six items of an opinion seeking scale. Pass-along behavior was measured by adopting Sun et al.'s (2006) six-item online forwarding scale. These items were modified to examine pass-along behavior on social networking sites. Thus, a total of eighteen items of opinion leadership, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior scales

were used to examine eWOM in social networking sites. Note that these measures were intended to gauge respondents' actual behavior with respect to eWOM. All of these items were measured by utilizing a seven-point, Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Respondents were asked questions regarding whether they provide, pass-along product-related information to others on the social networking site or they tend to seek advice from others.

Social Capital

Social capital was measured using scales developed by Choi et al. (2008). Ten items were used for each to access bridging and bonding social capital. As a result, a twenty-item, seven-point, Likert scale, with anchors of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" assessed social capital on social networking sites. To assess bridging social capital, statements such as "Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me want to try new things" were used. Sample statements like "When I feel lonely, there are members of the social networking site I can talk to" were employed to examine different levels of bonding social capital on social networking sites.

Tie Strength

The measures of tie strength were adopted from previous studies and included five questions about the respondents' social relation with contacts, frequency of communication, duration, the importance and closeness attached to the social relation (Brown and Reingen 1987; Norman and Russell 2006; Reingen and Kernan 1986). Social relations with contacts were assessed by asking respondents the number of contacts they have on their "friends" list for the following categories: family, relatives, close friends, acquaintances, classmates, neighbors, and others (specify) (Brown and

Reingen 1987). Frequency of communication was measured using a seven-point, Likert scale, with 1 being "never" and 7 being "very frequently." Perceived importance and closeness were also measured on two seven-point scales, with the endpoints of "not at all important" and "very important" and "not at all close" and "very close" respectively (Brown and Reingen 1987; Norman and Russell 2006).

Given that potential response bias may exist in the resulting data, two steps were taken to enhance the reliability and validity of the self-report data on the numbers of ties and duration of the use (Walker, Schmitt, and Miller 2006). In the first step, respondents' responses to the average number of ties that they have in each category and the average duration of the use of the site were recorded. In the second step, case studies were conducted by interviewing five respondents and accessing their personal profiles on the social networking site to obtain the more accurate numbers of ties and the duration of use. Thus, the data from the second step were compared to data obtained from the first step for the same five respondents to validate the self-report response.

Homophily

McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly's (1975) measure of perceived homophily in interpersonal communication was adapted to access perceived homophily of contacts on the social networking site. Their scale included four relatively uncorrelated dimensions, each of which was composed of four semantic differential items except the morality dimension, which was assessed by a two-item scale: (1) attitude homophily, (2) background homophily, (3) morality homophily, and (4) appearance homophily. McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly's (1975) scale has been widely used in previous studies and has been found to be valid and reliable in different contexts

(Wang et al. 2008). Their scale is based on subjects' perceptions without the imposition of investigator interpretation and thus is considered to be objective. As a result, a fourteen-item, seven-point semantic differential scale assessed this construct. Respondents were asked "In general, the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site…." The fourteen point scale measuring perceived homophily included items such as "Don't think like me/Think like me (Attitude)," "Background different from mine/Background similar to mine (Background)," and "Look different from me/Look similar to me (Appearance)."

Trust

Trust was operationalized using seven Likert items reflecting respondents' perceived trust in social networking site contacts. Responses on the trust scale were made on a seven-point scale, with anchors of "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree." All of these items were adopted from previous studies and were modified for the purpose of the present study (Lin 2006; Mortenson 2009; Smith, Menon and Sivakumar 2005).

Interpersonal Influence

The final construct of interpersonal influence was assessed by adopting twelve items developed by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989). Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel's scale measures consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence. They identified two dimensions, normative and informational, with the former measuring the tendency to follow the expectations of others through purchasing a product (Burnkrant and Cousineau 1975) and the latter measuring the tendency to accept information from knowledgeable others (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). The normative subscale contained eight items, including statements such as "It is important that

others on the social networking site like the products and brands I buy." Four items were included in the informational subscale. For example, the statement "If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends on the social networking site about the product" was used to assess the informational influence of interpersonal contacts. Appendix 1 presents the specific items for each measure and Appendix 2 provides the questionnaire used in my dissertation.

CHAPTER 6: ANALYSES AND RESULTS

To test the hypotheses, the data were analyzed using SPSS 11.0. Descriptive analyses and multiple regressions were the major statistical techniques used. First, various descriptive analyses were performed to examine the characteristics of the sample as well as use of social networking sites in general. Second, a reliability analysis was conducted to ensure consistency of the measurement of an index. Means and standard deviations for all measures were also obtained. Lastly, a series of multiple regression models were developed to test the hypotheses as to what social relationship factors influence eWOM behaviors in social networking sites.

In this chapter, a sample description and respondents' general use of social networking sites were first presented. Next, scale reliability along with means and standard deviations for the key constructs were provided. Each hypothesis was then stated followed by detailed discussions of the findings.

Sample Description

Out of 400 voluntary participants, the final sample of 363 respondents was used for data analysis after eliminating incomplete responses and respondents who exhibited extreme and consistent rating patterns. As a result, the sample was comprised of 46.6% males and 53.4% females. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 46 with an average age of 21 years. According to the Pew Internet Project (Lenhart 2009), half of adult social networking site users age 18 and older are men and half are females, with 75% of online adults between the ages of 18 and 24 using social networking sites. Thus, the sample was deemed to be representative. The sample consisted of a variety of majors, ranging from Liberal Arts to Engineering and Natural Science. The majority of the participants were Caucasian (58.1%), followed by

Hispanic Americans (14.3%) and Asian Americans (12.1%). More than 32% of the participants were juniors, followed by 28.4% seniors, 25.9% sophomores, and 13.2% freshmen. Table 3 demonstrates sample distributions by gender, school classification, and ethnicity.

Table 3
Sample Demographic Information

Demographic Variables	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	169	46.6
Female	194	53.4
	363	100
School Classification		
Freshman	48	13.2
Sophomore	94	25.9
Junior	118	32.5
Senior	103	28.4
	363	100
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	211	58.1
Hispanic-American	52	14.3
Asian-American	44	12.1
African-American	19	5.2
Native American	1	0.3
Multiracial	12	3.3
Other	24	6.6
	363	100

Use of Social Networking Sites in General

Prior to testing the hypotheses, descriptive statistics were run to examine the general use of social networking sites among the college student participants. The percentage of the top five social networking sites respondents use, average scores for duration, frequency, amount of use, top five activities and topics, and numbers of contacts in the "friends" list were illustrated in Table 4. Overall, the descriptive results provided an overview of the usage patterns of social networking sites among college

students in the United States.

Consistent with the findings from a recent report (Kazeniac 2009), Facebook was the most popular online social networking site with about ninety-nine percent of participants (99.4%) having an account. Facebook was also used most frequently. MySpace (69.4%) ranked second, followed by LinkedIn (47.4%). About thirty-six percent of social networking site users had an account on AOL Hometown (36.6%) and Windows Live Spaces (36.1%) respectively. Participants had reported using their most frequently used site for an average of over three years and three months. As for the frequency of daily use among social networking site users, participants reported having used the site of their choice five times per day on average. In terms of the amount of use on an average day, participants used their selected social networking site for an average of more than one and a half hours (1.7 hours).

When examining the activities in which respondents usually participate while on their favorite social networking site, means and stand deviations for each item were calculated. The results showed that the top five activities include: reading news feeds and comments on the wall ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.66$), posting comments on the wall ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.61$), chatting ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.96$), searching existing friends ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.74$), and sending inbox messages ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.61$). Respondents were further asked to indicate the topics they usually talk about with their contacts on the social networking site of their choice. Among the college student participants, school stuff was the most frequently discussed topic on their social networking site (83.5%), followed by social events (82.4%), rumors/gossip (60.1%), news (51.0%), and music (47.9%).

Lastly, the total number of contacts respondents have in the "friends" list on

their social networking site was assessed. On average, participants maintained about 519 contacts on their site. The average numbers of connections participants had for each category were as follows: family (M = 5.16), relatives (M = 9.64), close friends (M = 50.74), acquaintances (M = 274.02), classmates (M = 166.83), neighbors (M = 9.42), and others such as professors (M = 3.68). The average number of strong ties (M = 65.54) was obtained by summing up the average numbers of contacts in the family, relatives, and close friends categories. On the other hand, the average numbers of connections in the acquaintances, classmates, neighbors, and others categories were subtotaled to gain the average number of weak ties (M = 453.95).

Table 4
General Use of Social Networking Sites

Top 5 social networking sites	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)***
Facebook	361	99.4
MySpace	252	69.4
LinkedIn	172	47.4
AOL Hometown	133	36.6
Windows Live Spaces	131	36.1
Duration of social networking site use	About 3 years and 3 months	
Frequency of use on an average day	5 times (per day)	
Amount of use on an average day	1.7 hours (per day)	
Top 5 activities on social networking sites	**Mean****	**Std. Deviation**
Reading news feeds, comments on the wall	5.12	1.66
Posting comments on the wall	4.77	1.61
Chatting (e.g., Facebook chat)	4.31	1.96
Searching existing friends	4.26	1.74
Sending inbox messages	4.07	1.61
Top 5 topics on social networking sites	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)***
School stuff	303	83.5
Social events	299	82.4
Rumors/Gossip	218	60.1
News	185	51.0
Music	174	47.9
Numbers of contacts in the "friends" list	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Family	5.16	9.39
Relatives	9.64	27.43
Close friends	50.74	97.43
Strong Ties	**65.54**	**104.05**
Acquaintances	274.02	330.41
Classmates	166.83	175.60
Neighbors	9.42	33.21
Others	3.68	29.44
Weak Ties	**453.95**	**438.26**
Total	519.49	485.87

* Respondents chose multiple social networking sites/topics ** 7-point scale

Scale Reliability

Reliability was assessed by calculating Cronbach's Alpha, a measure of internal consistency, for each measured scale. The internal reliability of these measures was proven to be acceptable.

It is important to note that tie strength was measured in two different ways: (1) the actual numbers of strong and weak ties (see p.72), and (2) the perception of tie strength. The mean score of the perception of "tie strength" was calculated by averaging the ratings of three measures: frequency of communication, perceived importance, and closeness, all of which were measured using a seven-point, Likert scale. In order to obtain the relative composition of the two types of ties in social networks among respondents, the average total number of strong ties was divided by the sum of the strong and weak ties to gain a more precise index called *ratio of strong ties*. As a result, the findings from this exercise indicated that participants have an average of sixteen percent strong ties (16%) on their social networking site.

In addition, a principle factor analysis was run on the perceived homophily items to determine if the four subscales identified in the literature would emerge. Factor analysis with varimax rotation suggested three factors: appearance, background, and attitude. The first factor, appearance, comprised of four items and explained 45.58% of the variance. Background, the second factor, with four items explained a total of 17.20% of the variance. The last factor, attitude, explained a total of 9.70% of the variance. The factor analysis results led to a decision to examine the three identified dimensions of perceived homophily: (1) attitude homophily, (2) background homophily, and (3) appearance homophily, excluding morality which was originally suggested in the literature. This is reasonable as morality homophily is not closely

related to the focus of this study, product-related eWOM. As the attitude, background, and appearance dimensions on this scale were uncorrelated with one another (McCroskey, Richmond, and Daly 1975), each was analyzed separately. Another principle components factor analysis was run on the perceived trust items to examine whether the scale was unidimensional. The results showed that the seven-item measure of trust did not yield a subscale. Thus, trust was analyzed using a single dimension. The mean scores, standard deviations along with the reliability coefficients are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Descriptive Information

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Reliability (α)
Social Capital			
Bridging social capital	4.32	.99	.87
Bonding social capital	4.25	1.07	.84
Tie Strength			
Perceived tie strength	4.77	1.14	.82
*Ratio of strong ties**	.16	.16	N/A
Homophily			
Attitude	4.78	.99	.85
Background	4.62	1.06	.86
Appearance	3.84	1.10	.89
Trust	4.26	1.06	.93
Interpersonal Influence			
Normative influence	3.33	1.29	.94
Informational influence	4.20	1.25	.84
Electronic Word-of-Mouth			
Opinion giving	3.49	.95	.68
Opinion seeking	3.28	1.21	.83
Pass-along behavior	3.34	1.36	.93

* *Ratio of strong ties*= the total number of strong ties/the sum of the strong and weak ties

Hypothesis Testing

One of the primary objectives of this study was to examine the potential determinants of eWOM communicated via social networking sites. It is proposed that five social relationship factors: social capital (H1), tie strength (H2), homophily (H3), trust (H4), and consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence (H5) will lead to consumers' engagement in eWOM communications in social networking sites. The summary of the five hypotheses were presented in Table 2 (p.56). In this section, the five hypotheses were tested. To test the hypotheses, a series of multiple regressions were performed to examine the predictors of eWOM in social networking sites.

Gender Differences

Before testing these hypotheses, independent sample t-tests were conducted to examine whether there are gender differences with regard to respondents' eWOM behaviors in social networking sites. The results showed no substantial gender differences in terms of three dimensions of eWOM, opinion giving, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior. When examined if there are gender differences in the social relationship variables of interest, the results showed that male respondents ($M = 76.81$) have more strong ties (family, close friends) in social networking sites than do female participants ($M = 55.72$) (t (1,361) = 1.93, $p < .005$). Male respondents ($M = .19$) also have a higher ratio of strong ties on these sites than do their female counterparts ($M = .14$) (t (1,355) = 2.79, $p < .001$). Since no notable gender differences in terms of dependent variables were found, gender was not considered as a contributing factor in further examinations of consumer engagement in eWOM in social networking sites.

To examine the relationships among the social relationship-related variables and social networking site users' engagement in opinion giving, opinion seeking, and

pass-along behavior, three separate regression analyses were conducted. Opinion giving, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior were regressed, respectively, on the average scores of the social relationship variables. To test the relationships between tie strength and eWOM, both the perception of tie strength and ratio of strong ties were used as independent variables. Thus, the index scores of (1) bridging social capital, (2) bonding social capital, (3) tie strength, (4) ratio of strong ties, (5) attitude homophily, (6) background homophily, (7) appearance homophily, (8) trust, (9) normative influence, and (10) informational influence were included as predictors in each of the regression equations.

Social Relationships and Opinion Giving in Social Networking Sites

The overall multiple regression model was found to be significant (R^2_{adj} = .08), F (10, 346) = 4.12, p < .001. Background homophily (β = -.14, t = -2.16, p < .05) and normative influence (β = .17, t = 2.50, p < .05) were found to be significant predictors of respondents' engagement in opinion giving in social networking sites. However, bridging social capital (β = .07, t = 1.13, p > .05), bonding social capital (β = .11, t = 1.95, p > .05), tie strength (β = .09, t = 1.45, p > .05), ratio of strong ties (β = .03, t = .53, p > .05), attitude homophily (β = .01, t = .08, p > .05), appearance homophily (β = .02, t = .39, p > .05), trust (β = .08, t = 1.16, p > .05), and informational influence (β = -.05, t = -.75, p > .05) did not produce a significant influence on such behaviors. The multiple regression results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6
Regression Analysis Results for Factors Influencing Opinion Giving

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients	Adjusted R2	F
		.08	4.12***
Bridging Social Capital	.07		
Bonding Social Capital	.11		
Tie Strength	.09		
Ratio of Strong Ties	.03		
Attitude Homophily	.01		
Background Homophily	-.14*		
Appearance Homophily	.02		
Trust	.08		
Normative Influence	.17*		
Informational Influence	-.05		

Note: *** Regression is significant at the .001 level
* Regression is significant at the .05 level

Social Relationships and Opinion Seeking in Social Networking Sites

The regression model for opinion seeking was found to be significant (R^2_{adj} = .14), F (10, 346) = 6.82, $p < .001$, with two significant predictors. As Table 7 indicates, bridging social capital (β = .20, t = 3.25, $p < .01$) and normative influence (β = .22, t = 3.35, $p < .01$) significantly predicted an increased engagement in opinion seeking behavior in social networking sites. Bonding social capital (β = .01, t = .12, $p > .05$), tie strength (β = .09, t = 1.40, $p > .05$), ratio of strong ties (β = .10, t = 1.86, $p > .05$), attitude homophily (β = -.06, t = -.88, $p > .05$), background homophily (β = -.07, t = -1.05, $p > .05$), appearance homophily (β = -.02, t = -.35, $p > .05$), trust (β = .07, t = 1.12, $p > .05$), and informational influence (β = -.02, t = -.36, $p > .05$) did not appear to significantly relate to users' opinion seeking behavior.

Table 7
Regression Analysis Results for Factors Influencing Opinion Seeking

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients	Adjusted R2	F
		.14	6.82***
Bridging Social Capital	.20**		
Bonding Social Capital	.01		
Tie Strength	.09		
Ratio of Strong Ties	.10		
Attitude Homophily	-.06		
Background Homophily	-.07		
Appearance Homophily	-.02		
Trust	.07		
Normative Influence	.22**		
Informational Influence	-.02		

Note: *** Regression is significant at the .001 level
** Regression is significant at the .01 level

Social Relationships and Pass-Along Behavior in Social Networking Sites

As summarized in Table 8, the regression model for pass-along behavior was found to be significant, as well (R^2_{adj} = .23), F (10, 346) = 11.64, p < .001. Five social relationship variables significantly predicted social networking site users' engagement in pass-along behavior: bridging social capital (β = .23, t = 4.00, p < .001), bonding social capital (β = .12, t = 2.23, p < .05), attitude homophily (β = -.14, t = -2.35, p < .05), trust (β = .13, t = 2.15, p < .05), and normative influence (β = .13, t = 2.00, p < .05). Yet the other five variables, tie strength (β = .05, t = .78, p > .05), ratio of strong ties (β = .03, t = .55, p > .05), background homophily (β = -.06, t = -.98, p > .05), appearance homophily (β = .06, t = 1.14, p > .05), and informational influence (β = .12, t = 1.93, p > .05) were not found to be significant predictors.

Table 8

Regression Analysis Results for Factors Influencing Pass-Along Behavior

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients	Adjusted R2	F
		.23	11.64***
Bridging Social Capital	.23***		
Bonding Social Capital	.12*		
Tie Strength	.05		
Ratio of Strong Ties	.03		
Attitude Homophily	-.14*		
Background Homophily	-.06		
Appearance Homophily	.06		
Trust	.13*		
Normative Influence	.13*		
Informational Influence	.12		

Note: *** Regression is significant at the .001 level
* Regression is significant at the .05 level

In summary, bridging social capital was found to be a significant predictor of opinion seeking and pass-along behavior in social networking sites. Thus, H1a was partially supported. The results also showed that bonding social capital significantly related to social networking site users' pass-along behavior, which partially confirmed H1b. Tie strength and ratio of strong ties, however, did not yield a significant influence on eWOM in social networking sites. H2, therefore, was not supported. As for the relationships between perceived homophily and eWOM in social networking sites, background homophily appeared to significantly negatively relate to opinion giving whereas attitude homophily was found to inversely predict pass-along behavior. These regression analysis results disconfirmed H3. Trust, on the other hand, was found to be a significant predictor of pass-along behavior in social networking sites. Therefore, H4 was partially supported. The results of interpersonal influence variables

suggested that normative influence was a significant predictor of social networking site users' opinion giving, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior. Therefore, H5a was supported. Informational influence, however, was not significantly related to consumer engagement in eWOM in social networking sites, which disconfirmed H5b. Table 9 summarizes hypothesis testing results.

Table 9
Summary of Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	Relationship Variables	Independent Variables	Dependent Variables	Significance
H1a	Social Capital	Bridging social capital	Opinion giving	
			Opinion seeking	✔
			Pass-along behavior	✔
H1b	Social Capital	Bonding social capital	Opinion giving	
			Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	✔
H2	Tie Strength	Tie strength	Opinion giving	
		Ratio of strong ties	Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	
H3	Homophily	Attitude homophily	Opinion giving	
			Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	✔ (negative)
		Background homophily	Opinion giving	✔ (negative)
			Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	
		Appearance homophily	Opinion giving	
			Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	
H4	Trust	Trust	Opinion giving	
			Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	✔
H5a	Interpersonal Influence	Normative influence	Opinion giving	✔
			Opinion seeking	✔
			Pass-along behavior	✔
H5b	Interpersonal Influence	Informational influence	Opinion giving	
			Opinion seeking	
			Pass-along behavior	

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The evolution of social networking sites has brought to advertisers and media professionals the need to redesign their brand communication strategies via cyberspace. As social networking sites have become a popular phenomenon and enjoy great popularity worldwide (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 2008), online socializing and collaboration presents immense opportunities for consumers to actively engage in peer-to-peer product recommendations and community participation, which in turn increases eWOM behaviors. As a result, promoting beneficial product-related eWOM conversation in consumers' social networks has become an important technique for marketers to develop strong brand relationships and enhance consumer engagement (Smith et al. 2007). In a recent report released by Forrester Research, Owyang (2009) found that more than half of marketers (53%) indicated that they would increase their spending in social network marketing in 2009. Given the important implications of social networking sites for companies targeting young consumers, it is crucial to understand the determinants of consumer engagement in eWOM emerged via these sites.

My dissertation examined determinants of eWOM in an emerging online social channel, social networking sites. More precisely, five relationship variables- *social capital*, *tie strength*, *homophily*, *trust*, and *interpersonal influence*- were examined in terms of their relations with opinion giving, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior in respondents' most frequently used social networking sites. The literature review on eWOM indicated a lack of research that examined the fundamental factors that drive consumers' participation in information exchange in the highly social yet personalized online hangout place. An online survey with a sample drawn from a large

southwestern university was conducted to examine predictors of eWOM in social networking sites. Descriptive statistics were conducted to gain overall information on college students' use of social networking sites in general. A series of multiple regression analyses were performed to test the hypotheses.

This chapter provides a discussion and conclusion of my dissertation research. Descriptive results on general use of social networking sites are discussed, followed by the interpretation of hypothesis testing findings. Next, both theoretical and managerial implications are offered, followed by the limitations and directions for future research.

Discussion

Overall, findings of my dissertation suggest that social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have become an important part of Internet users' everyday lives. It is impressive that more than ninety-nine percent of participants (99.4%) have an account on Facebook, the most popular social networking site among college students in the United States. As stated on Facebook's home page (Facebook 2009), Facebook is a social utility "that helps you connect and share with the people in your life." The unique social and "fun" applications of Facebook attracts its young users to visit the site several times a day and stay on it for more than an hour to communicate and hangout with their friends.

Among the top five activities on social networking sites, reading and posting comments on the wall were found to be the most dominant activities in which users engage. These results indicate that reviewing and commenting publicly on profiles of users' personal contacts is an important aspect of social networking sites that enable users to exchange information and consequently influence others' attitudes and

behaviors. Another essential activity which users perform on social networking sites was searching for existing friends. Consistent with prior research (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), this result suggests that college students tend to use social networking sites to maintain existing social relationships and keep in touch with old friends such as high school friends and other offline connections. With regard to the most prevailing topics on social networking sites, it is not surprising that school stuff and social events ranked as the top two among college student participants.

Results from a series of multiple regression analyses indicate that certain social relationship factors are significant predictors that relate to social networking site users' eWOM behavior. Out of the five social relationship variables, social capital, homophily, trust, and interpersonal influence were found to significantly relate to users' engagement in eWOM communications, whereas no effect was found with regard to tie strength. Findings of the first set of hypotheses suggest that bridging social capital is positively related to opinion seeking and pass-along behavior, while bonding social capital positively influences pass-along behavior. Similar to the findings from previous studies, these results overall suggest both bridging and bonding social capital are developed and sustained via social networking sites (Choi et al. 2008; Donath 2007), and social capital serves as an important driver that affects consumers' use of social networking sites as a vehicle for eWOM. Through participation in social networking sites, consumers access and use resources embedded within social networks such as information and ideas, which facilitate social interactions and thus lead to the dissemination of product-related eWOM among contacts on these sites.

Consistent with the literature review, analysis suggests that bridging social

capital plays an essential role in a wide range of information exchange and idea sharing (Granovetter 1982). Because of the capacity of bridging social capital to access diverse information and knowledge from external groups to personal networks (Pigg and Crank 2004; Woolcock and Narayan 2000), social networking site users exhibiting a higher level of bridging social capital are more likely to seek advice from others, and they are more likely to forward useful information regarding a product or service to other contacts. Although bonding social capital focuses more on emotional support and shared social norms, the information intensive nature of social networking sites leads to a positive relation between bonding social capital and eWOM, especially pass-along behavior on these sites.

Another question that is of concern in the present study is whether or not tie strength influences consumers' engagement in eWOM behavior in social networking sites. The results showed that tie strength, which was measured by "perceived tie strength" and "ratio of strong ties," was not significantly related to eWOM in online social media. Because social networking sites allow users to exchange information easily and quickly without carefully thinking, perceived tie strength did not have significant influence on eWOM. Another possible explanation is that when considering multiple factors at the same time, other social factors like bridging social capital and normative influence explain better of consumer engagement in eWOM in social networking sites.

While no significant relationship was found between tie strength and eWOM, the descriptive analyses suggest that the majority of contacts on social networking sites are weak ties, whereas strong ties (16%) comprise a small portion of contacts on the 'friends" list. According to Granovetter's (1973) characterization of two types of

ties, strong ties such as friends and family are the trusted people in individual's personal network, whereas weak ties are merely acquaintances who provide access to novel information from external circles. Given the easy accessibility and low cost of social networking sites, participation in social networking sites allows users to connect to a variety of contacts with diverse backgrounds, which increases the formation of weak ties such as loose acquaintances and classmates. Despite many users using social networking sites to search for offline contacts as opposed to meeting unknown strangers (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), the social and connective characteristics of social networking sites enable users to interact with others easily and facilitate the development of new relationships throughout a large-scale network. Thus, weak ties are more easily maintained than strong ties in an online social environment.

With regard to how perceived homophily among social networking site users relates to eWOM in social networking sites, findings from regression analyses indicate that attitude homophily and background homophily were in a direction opposite to the hypotheses. That is, the less attitude homophilious the contacts are perceived to be, the greater the likelihood of engaging in pass-along behavior on these sites. Likewise, background homophily is negatively related to opinion giving behavior. These results are contrary to the general prediction that the sharing and exchanging of information in interpersonal communications occurs more frequently between two individuals who are similar (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970).

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that social networking site users who exhibit a lower level of attitude homophily in interpersonal communication

with personal contacts tend to use social networking sites to express their opinions and thoughts, and thus try to influence others' purchase behavior. Thus, attitude heterophilous users are more likely to engage in pass-along behavior on social networking sites to spread their opinions with respect to a product or brand. Along a similar logic, contacts with different backgrounds could lead to the increase of opinion giving may result from peoples' occasional preference to provide information to those coming from a different social class or status to help them resolve problems, or merely gain a different perspective. As Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) suggested, consumers' desire for social interaction, concern for other consumers, and the potential approval utility are the most important factors that lead to eWOM behavior. Therefore, social networking site users with different attitudes and backgrounds may engage in product-focused eWOM to help others in their purchase decision.

Trust is another social relationship variable found to be a significant predictor of eWOM in social networking sites. That is, the higher level of trust social networking site users perceive in their contacts, the greater the likelihood of engaging in pass-along behavior on these sites. The present results corroborate those of Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002), who also found an association between perceived trust with members' intention to exchange information via virtual communities. In recent years, eWOM has become a determining factor influencing product choices of online consumers because the information is communicated through trusted fellow consumers who are perceived as credible, personalized, and usually unbiased (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007). In the case of social networking sites, consumers tend to interact with social contacts existing within their personal network and thus may be

perceived as more credible and trustworthy than general consumers. As a result, when social networking site users trust their contacts in the "friends" list, their willingness to rely on their contacts is enhanced due to the perceived reliability and trustworthiness of their contacts, which thereby increases pass-along behavior via these sites. Taken collectively, the level of perceived trust plays a significant role in influencing social networking site users' decisions to forward useful product-related information to other networks in assisting their purchase decisions.

The next prediction is that consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence, another relational variable identified in this study, is related to social networking site users' engagement in eWOM on these sites. Overall, regression analyses suggest that interpersonal influence serves as a determining driver affecting eWOM behavior in online social websites. More precisely, when social networking site users are more susceptible to normative influence, they are more likely to engage in opinion giving, opinion seeking and pass-along behavior. Informational influence, surprisingly, was not found to significantly predict such behavior. While it is speculated that social networking site users who are subject to informational influence generally have a higher tendency to exchange and forward product-related information to contacts in their personal network, the results were not supported.

Previous research has suggested that individuals who are more susceptible to normative influences focus on the process of transmission and relationship buildings. On the other hand, individuals who are more amenable to informational influence emphasize the value of the information transmitted (Laroche, Kalamas, and Cleveland 2005). For social networking site users, the need for psychological association with significant contacts (e.g., close friends) leads to users' acquisition through seeking

and giving opinions, which in turn influences their use of products and brands. This information exchange process facilitates social networking site users' development of cohesive social relationships and increases their social interactions and engagement in eWOM. Nevertheless, social networking site users' tendency to gather valuable information about products and services from the knowledge of others may still not encourage their engagement in eWOM on these sites. This finding might be due to the possibility that users may turn to other relatively formal information channels such as product review sites or consumer reports to seek a more reliable source of information (e.g., experts) when making a decision for their purchases.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

My dissertation research examines social relationship factors that drive product-related eWOM in social networking sites. Two theoretical implications are drawn from the results of this study. First, this study goes beyond previous research focusing on the outcomes of eWOM and contributes to the literature on computer-mediated communication by examining determinants of eWOM in an emerging, important online social medium. Second, the present research confirms that certain social relationship variables can contribute to our understanding of product-related information use in social networking sites. For example, users who gain a higher level of bridging social capital via the sites may have a greater likelihood to use eWOM as a source of product information. Through a theoretical and empirical investigation, overall, this study helps reveal the differential effect of social factors based on a theoretical framework and helps define the role of social relationships in explaining eWOM communications. This leads to a better understanding of information exchange behaviors in online social websites.

From a managerial perspective, findings from my dissertation can also yield two significant insights for Internet marketing strategy. First, social networking sites provide an essential channel for product-related eWOM. Marketers should try to identify "social influencers" or "market mavens" in social networking sites and encourage them to spread positive product information regarding selected brands or discourage them from sharing negative information with their personal networks. Second, marketers must take social relationship factors into account and develop personalized marketing communications strategies to fulfill social networking site users' needs (e.g., gaining social capital). For example, when targeting consumers who are susceptible to interpersonal influence, eWOM marketing may be a good online communication technique, as these social networking site users are more likely to follow social influences. In summary, social network marketers need to consider the social influences on social networking site users' eWOM behavior and adapt their advertising strategies to build strong consumer-brand relationships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study presents some of the first research examining the relationships between social factors and eWOM in online social communication channels, a few limitations of this study should be noted. This study uses a college student sample which may not realistically reflect the perceptions of the total population of social networking site users. Teens, for example, are actively engaging with social media and are more comfortable using advanced online entertainment in social networking sites (e.g., downloading videos and podcasts) (Jones and Fox 2009). Thus, teens' information exchange behavior and engagement in eWOM communication may be different from those of adults. Future research could

investigate how eWOM behavior in social networking sites varies across generations.

Another limitation of this study is that it examines a limited set of determinants of eWOM communicated via social networking sites, suggesting a limited scope of coverage on possible determining variables. While this study focuses on social relationship variables due to the unique social natural of social networking sites, other possible contributing factors such as individual differences and motivational variables may produce influence on consumers' participation in eWOM communicated online. For instance, self-concept and self-efficacy may be individual characteristic factors which lead to consumers' use of social networking sites as a source of product information. Thus, future research could examine these dimensions in greater detail. This will not only enrich our theoretical knowledge about the role of social and individual factors in eWOM, but will also assist Internet marketers to develop effective social networking advertising strategies.

Furthermore, future research could examine eWOM in a cross-cultural setting. Current cross-cultural research suggests that different cultures produce distinctly different media usage and communication styles that, in turn, influence consumer behavior online (Chau et al. 2002; Pfeil, Zaphiris, and Ang 2006). Thus, opinion giving, opinion seeking, and pass-along behavior that affect purchase decisions may vary from country to country because of cultural variations. A careful investigation of eWOM in different cultural contexts is valuable for our understanding of the universal phenomenon, product-focused eWOM in social networking sites and the roles of culture in social relationships and communications online.

In conclusion, social networking sites have become an important channel that can be used by marketers to target the young generations both easily and affordably

(Lewis and George 2008). Examining social relationships in social networking sites could contribute to our understanding of the underlying process of eWOM, which thereby influences the extent and pattern of eWOM and enables companies to direct their product diffusion strategies. My dissertation contributes by offering an in-depth understanding of the impact of social relationship factors on eWOM and provides a new theoretical perspective for the computer-mediated communication literature by linking social relationships and eWOM in one study.

Appendix 1
Measurement Items

Electronic Word-of-Mouth ***Opinion Leadership*** (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")	1. I often persuade my contacts on the social networking site to buy products that I like. 2. My contacts on the social networking site rarely come to me for advice about choosing products. (R) 3. My contacts on the social networking site pick their products based on what I have told them. 4. My opinion of products seems not to count with my contacts on the social networking site. (R) 5. On the social networking site, I often influence my contacts' opinions about products. 6. When they choose products, my contacts on the social networking site do not turn to me for advice. (R)
Opinion Seeking (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")	1. When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on the social networking site for advice. 2. I don't need to talk to my contacts on the social networking site before I buy products. (R) 3. I like to get my contacts' opinions on the social networking site before I buy new products. 4. I rarely ask my contacts on the social networking site about what products to buy. (R) 5. I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten my contacts' opinions on them on the social networking site. 6. When choosing products, my contacts' opinions on the social networking site are not important to me. (R)
Pass-Along Behavior (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")	1. I tend to pass on information or opinion about the products to the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site when I find it useful. 2. On the social networking sites, I like to pass along my contacts' comments containing information or opinions about the product that I like to other contacts on the social networking site. 3. When I receive product related information or opinion from a friend, I will pass it along to my other contacts on the social networking site. 4. On the social networking site, I like to pass along interesting information about products from one group of my contacts on my "friends" list to another. 5. I tend to pass along my contacts' positive reviews of products to other contacts on the social networking site. 6. I tend to pass along my contact' negative reviews on products to other contacts on the social networking site.
Social Capital ***Bridging Social Capital*** (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")	1. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me interested in things that happen outside of my town. 2. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me want to try new things. 3. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me interested in what people different from me are thinking.

	4. Talking with people on the social networking site makes me curious about other places in the world. 5. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me feel like part of a larger community. 6. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me feel connected to the bigger picture. 7. Interacting with people on the social networking site reminds me that everyone in the world is connected. 8. I am willing to spend time to support general community activities on the social networking site. 9. Interacting with people on the social networking site gives me new people to talk to. 10. I come in contact with new people on the social networking site all the time.
Bonding Social Capital (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")	1. There are several members of the social networking site I trust to help solve my problems. 2. There is a member of the social networking site I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions. 3. There is no one on the social networking site that I feel comfortable talking to about intimate personal problems. (R) 4. When I feel lonely, there are members of the social networking site I can talk to. 5. If I needed an emergency loan of $500, I know someone at the social networking site I can turn to. 6. The people I interact with on the social networking site would put their reputation on the line for me. 7. The people I interact with on the social networking site would be good job references for me. 8. The people I interact with on the social networking site would share their last dollar with me. 9. I do not know members of the social networking site well enough to get them to do anything important. (R) 10. The people I interact with on the social networking site would help me fight an injustice.
Tie Strength	1. Approximately how frequently do you communicate with the contacts on your "friends" list on this social networking site? (1= "never" and 7= "very frequently") 2. Overall, how important do you feel about the contacts on your "friends" list on this social networking site? (1= "not at all important" and 7= "very important") 3. Overall, how close do you feel to the contacts on your "friends" list on this social networking site? (1= "not at all close" and 7= "very close")
Homophily (7points semantic-differential)	***In general, the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site:***
Attitude	1. Don't think like me/Think like me 2. Don't behave like me/Behave like me 3. Different from me/Similar to me 4. Unlike me/Like me
Background	5. From social class different from mine/From social class similar to mine 6. Economic situation different from mine/Economic situation like

		mine
	7.	Status different from mine/Status like mine
	8.	Background different from mine/Background similar to mine
Morality	9.	Morals unlike mine/Morals like mine
	10.	Sexual attitudes unlike mine/Sexual attitudes like mine
Appearance	11.	Look different from me/Look similar to me
	12.	Different size than I am/Same size I am
	13.	Appearance unlike mine/Appearance like mine
	14.	Don't resemble me/Resemble me
Trust (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")	1.	Generally speaking, most contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site can be trusted.
	2.	I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.
	3.	The contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site will do everything within their capacity to help others.
	4.	I trust most contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.
	5.	I have confidence in the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.
	6.	My contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site offer honest opinions.
	7.	I can believe in the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.
Interpersonal Influence (1= "strongly disagree" and 7= "strongly agree")		
Normative	1.	I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve of them.
	2.	It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.
	3.	When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of.
	4.	If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.
	5.	I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others.
	6.	I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase.
	7.	If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy.
	8.	I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.
Informational	1.	To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using.
	2.	If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product.
	3.	I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class.
	4.	I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy.

Appendix 2
Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. The objective of this study is to understand the use of social networking sites among college students like you. Please read the questions carefully and answer them. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers and I am interested in your own thoughts and feelings.

I. First, I am interested in your general use of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Please read each of the questions and click on the appropriate answer.

1. From the following list, which are the social networking sites that you use? Please rank the order in terms of the frequency (**1**: Use most frequently ~**10**: Use less frequently).

__MySpace __Facebook __Classmates Online __Windows Live Spaces

__AOL Hometown __Club Penguin __LinkedIn __myYearbook

__Reunion. Com __Other (Please specify)

2. How long have you used the social networking site that you ranked using most for Q1? _____ year(s) _____ month(s)

3. How often do you visit this social networking site on an average day? _____ time(s)/day

4. How long do you use this social networking site on an average day? _____ hour(s)_____ minute(s)/day

5. What activities do you usually do on this social networking site?

Very infrequently 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very frequently

__Updating textual profile information (e.g., status, personal information)

__Updating visual profile information (e.g., photos, visual background)

__Using applications (e.g., sending virtual gifts, taking quiz, playing games)

__Reading news feeds, comments on the wall

__Posting comments on the wall

__Searching existing friends

__Making new friends

__Sending inbox messages

__Chatting (e.g., Facebook chat)

__Participating in brand communities (e.g., adding brands as friends)

__Other (Please specify)

6. Which of the following topics do you usually talk about with your contacts on social networking sites? Please check all that apply.

__Music __Fashion __News __Rumors/Gossip

__Products or brands __Political issues __School stuff __Social events

__Other (Please specify)

7. Approximately how many contacts in each category do you have on your "friends" list on this social networking site?

_____ (1) Family _____ (2) Relatives _____ (3) Close friends
_____ (4) Acquaintances _____ (5) Classmates _____ (6) Neighbors
_____ (7) Other (specify)

8. Approximately how frequently do you communicate with the contacts on your "friends" list on this social networking site?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very frequently

9. Overall, how important do you feel about the contacts on your "friends" list on this social networking site?

Not at all important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very important

10. Overall, how close do you feel to the contacts on your "friends" list on this social networking site?

Not at all close 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very close

II. Here, I am interested in your social relationships on the social networking site that you reported using most. Please read each question and click on the answer that best reflects your feelings.

1. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me interested in things that happen outside of my town.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

2. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me want to try new things.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

3. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me interested in what people different from me are thinking.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. Talking with people on the social networking site makes me curious about other places in the world.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me feel like part of a larger community.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. Interacting with people on the social networking site makes me feel connected to the bigger picture.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. Interacting with people on the social networking site reminds me that everyone in the world is connected.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

8. I am willing to spend time to support general community activities on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

9. Interacting with people on the social networking site gives me new people to talk to.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

10. I come in contact with new people on the social networking site all the time.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

11. There are several members of the social networking site I trust to help solve my problems.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

12. There is a member of the social networking site I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

13. There is no one on the social networking site that I feel comfortable talking to about intimate personal problems. (R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

14. When I feel lonely, there are members of the social networking site I can talk to.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

15. If I needed an emergency loan of $500, I know someone at the social networking site I can turn to.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

16. The people I interact with on the social networking site would put their reputation on the line for me.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

17. The people I interact with on the social networking site would be good job references for me.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

18. The people I interact with on the social networking site would share their last dollar with me.

Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly agree

19. I do not know members of the social networking site well enough to get them to do anything important. (R)

Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly agree

20. The people I interact with on the social networking site would help me fight an injustice.

Strongly disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly agree

III. The following statements describe your perceived similarities and differences with the contacts on your "friends" list on the social networking site that you use most. Please read each statement and click on the answer that best reflects how you think your contacts on the social networking site.

In general, the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site:

1.	Don't think like me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Think like me
2.	Don't behave like me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Behave like me
3.	Different from me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Similar to me
4.	Unlike me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Like me
5.	From social class different from mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	From social class similar to mine
6.	Economic situation different from mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Economic situation like mine
7.	Status different from mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Status like mine
8.	Background different from mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Background similar to mine
9.	Morals unlike mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Morals like mine
10.	Sexual attitudes unlike mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Sexual attitudes like mine
11.	Look different from me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Look similar to me
12.	Different size than I am	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Same size I am
13.	Appearance unlike mine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Appearance like

mine

14. Don't resemble me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Resemble me

IV. In this section, I am interested in your beliefs of contacts on the social networking site that you reported using most. Please read each statement and click on the answer that best represents your feelings.

1. Generally speaking, most contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site can be trusted.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

2. I feel confident about having discussions with the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

3. The contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site will do everything within their capacity to help others.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. I trust most contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. I have confidence in the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. My contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site offer honest opinions.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. I can believe in the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

V. In the following section, I am interested in your communication style on the social networking site that you use most. Please read each statement and click on the answer that best reflects your behaviors and feelings.

1. I often persuade my contacts on the social networking site to buy products that I like.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

2. My contacts on the social networking site rarely come to me for advice about choosing products.

(R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

3. My contacts on the social networking site pick their products based on what I have told them.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. My opinion of products seems not to count with my contacts on the social networking site. (R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. On the social networking site, I often influence my contacts' opinions about products.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. When they choose products, my contacts on the social networking site do not turn to me for advice. (R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. When I consider new products, I ask my contacts on the social networking site for advice.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

8. I don't need to talk to my contacts on the social networking site before I buy products. (R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

9. I like to get my contacts' opinions on the social networking site before I buy new products.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

10. I rarely ask my contacts on the social networking site about what products to buy. (R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

11. I feel more comfortable choosing products when I have gotten my contacts' opinions on them on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

12. When choosing products, my contacts' opinions on the social networking site are not important to me. (R)

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

13. I tend to pass on information or opinion about the products to the contacts on my "friends" list on the social networking site when I find it useful.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

14. On the social networking sites, I like to pass along my contacts' comments containing information or opinions about the product that I like to other contacts on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

15. When I receive product related information or opinion from a friend, I will pass it along to my other contacts on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

16. On the social networking site, I like to pass along interesting information about products from one group of my contacts on my "friends" list to another.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

17. I tend to pass along my contacts' positive reviews of products to other contacts on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

18. I tend to pass along my contact' negative reviews on products to other contacts on the social networking site.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

VI. The following statements describe your personality traits. Please read each statement and click on the answer that best reflects how you feel when purchasing a product.

1. I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve of them.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

2. It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

3. When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

8. I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

9. To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

10. If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

11. I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

12. I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

VII. Finally, we would like to ask a few questions about yourself.

1. What is your gender? Male/Female
2. What is your age? _____
3. What is your school classification?

   __Freshman __Sophomore __Junior __Senior __Graduate student
4. What is your major? _____
5. Please choose items below that best describe your ethnic background.

   __Caucasian __Hispanic-American __Asian-American

   __African-American __Native American __Multiracial

   __International __Other

You have completed this study.

Thank you for your time and cooperation.

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