Negative with Friends, Positive with Strangers: How Interpersonal Closeness Influences Word-of-

Mouth Valence

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How Interpersonal Closeness Influences Word-of-Mouth Valence

Summary: This project examines how interpersonal closeness between consumers affects the sharing of valenced word-of-mouth (WOM). We propose that communicating to a close other fosters a tendency to share negative information, whereas communicating to a distant other fosters a tendency to share positive information. We argue these tendencies occur because communicating to a close other activates an interdependent self-construal, whereas communicating to a distant other activates an independent self-construal. In turn, an independent self-construal activates a motive to enhance the self that makes consumers more likely to share positive rather than negative information. In contrast, an interdependent self-construal activates a motive to protect others that makes consumers more likely to share negative rather than positive information. Four experiments provide systematic evidence for the basic effect as well as for the underlying role of self-construal. Implications for our understanding of how WOM spreads within social networks are discussed.

Keywords: social transmission, interpersonal closeness, word-of-mouth (WOM) communications, message valence, self-construal.

Social transmission of information is a primary vehicle of economic, political and cultural change. Every day, consumers share billions of messages about news, rumors, and trends (Berger 2013), which sway important decisions such as what products they buy (Godes and Mayzlin 2009), whom they vote for (Bond et al. 2012), or why they quit smoking (Redmond 1996). Particularly important to managers is to understand what factors influence consumers to share positive or negative information, as valenced word-of-mouth (WOM) has a crucial influence on the success or downfall of products and services.

The bulk of marketing research on WOM has mainly focused on exploring whether positive versus negative WOM is more prevalent in consumers' conversations. While some contexts seem to prompt the sharing of positive WOM (East, Hammond, and Wright 2007; Godes and Mayzlin 2004), in other contexts negative WOM seems to prevail (Donavan, Mowen, and Chakraborty 1999; Kamins, Folkes, and Perner 1997). Only recently, research efforts have been mounted to explore psychological factors prompting consumers to share more positive or negative WOM. For instance, De Angelis et al. (2012) showed consumers tend to share more positive than negative WOM in the generation stage (i.e., when talking about their own experiences) but more negative than positive WOM in the transmission stage (i.e., when talking about experiences they heard occurred to others).

This research aims to advance our understanding of factors that might induce consumers to share more positive or negative WOM, by investigating how a key feature of social interactions – interpersonal closeness (hereafter IC) – influences the sharing of positive versus negative information. A central construct in the social sciences, IC refers to the perceived psychological proximity between two individuals (e.g., a sender and a recipient; Gino and Galinsky 2012; Kreilkamp 1984). Variations in feelings of IC can stem from the nature of the

relationship as well as incidental factors shaping the interaction. For instance, tie strength (Granovetter 1973) can influence IC, as two strongly tied individuals (e.g., friends) are likely to feel psychologically closer than two weakly tied individuals (e.g., acquaintances; Marsden and Campbell 1984). In addition, features of the conversation, such as the type of language used (e.g., different pronouns) that characterize consumers' interactions with one another may foster high versus low feelings of IC. To illustrate, in many languages, such as French, Italian and Spanish, people use different types of pronouns and verb endings depending on how close they feel with their recipient (i.e., in French *tu* for close others versus *vous* for distant others; Brown and Gilman 1960).

Across marketing (Brown and Reingen 1987; Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993), psychology (Weenig and Midden 1991) and sociology (Friedkin 1980), researchers have shown that IC influences the reach (Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn 1981) and impact (Brown and Reingen 1987) of socially transmitted information. To illustrate, Weenig and Midden (1991) compared the implementation of two identical communication programs in two neighborhoods with different levels of social cohesion and found that the diffusion of information was higher in the weakly tied neighborhood, characterized by low IC, than in the strongly tied neighborhood, characterized by high IC. Yet, less is known about how IC influences the kind of information shared. Besides Frenzen and Nakamoto's (1993) seminal work showing that IC impacts individuals' tendency to share information deemed useful, missing from the literature is an investigation of the effect of IC on the valence of shared information.

This research explores the idea that communicating to a close other is more likely to prompt consumers to share negative over positive information, whereas communicating to a distant other is more likely to prompt consumers to share positive over negative information. We

argue this occurs because IC activates different self-construals, which in turn trigger different psychological motives that drive consumers to share more positive versus negative information.

Self-construal refers to how individuals define and make meaning of the self vis-à-vis others (Gardner et al. 1999). An independent self-construal is characterized by construing one's self as separate from others. In contrast, an interdependent self-construal is characterized by incorporating others' values and views into one's self-definition (Brewer 1991). We propose that addressing an individual one feels close to might trigger features of one's identity typically associated with this type of interaction, thus activating an interdependent self-construal. In contrast, addressing an individual one feels distant from might trigger features of one's identity typically associated with this type of interaction, thus activating an independent self-construal. Consistent with our prediction, Gardner et al. (1999) found that participants exposed to an interdependent prime were more likely to define themselves in terms of those they feel close to (e.g., "I am engaged to marry Scott"), whereas those who received an independent prime were more likely to define themselves in terms of their personal attributes (e.g., "I am intelligent").

In turn, we contend that different self-construals activate distinct psychological motives that drive consumers' behavior in social interactions: an independent self-construal activates a motive to enhance the self (Belk 1988; Blaine and Crocker 1993; Heine et al. 1999) as it prompts people to see relationships as mirrors for social comparisons (Cross and Madson 1997). Consequently, these individuals typically engage in actions aimed to create good impressions and portray a positive image of themselves (Blaine and Crocker 1993; Heine et al. 1999). In contrast, an interdependent self-construal activates a motive to protect others (Cross, Bacon, and Morris 2000; Cross and Madson 1997; Heine et al. 1999). This occurs because when individuals construe others as an "integral part of the person's very being" (Cross and Madson 1997, p. 7),

they tend to experience a sense of responsibility (Clark, Fitness, and Brissette 2001; Clark and Mills 1993), which prompts them to engage in actions aimed to protect those others.

Crucially, a large body of work suggests that sharing positive information is typically more effective at self-enhancing than sharing negative information (Berger 2014; Folkes and Sears 1977). Indeed, people prefer to interact with others who are bearers of good news (Bell 1978; Kamins et al. 1997; Nisbett and Wilson 1977) and talking about positive experiences typically reflects positively on the communicator (Berger 2014). In contrast, sharing negative information is typically more effective at protecting others than sharing positive information (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster 1998). Indeed, negative information helps people to preserve social bonds (Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs 2004; Dunbar 1996) by warning others about potential cons of products and services, thus preventing them from negative experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Sundaram et al. 1998). As a result, communicating to a distant other should foster the sharing of positive over negative information, whereas communicating to a close other should foster the sharing of negative over positive information.

Four experiments examine how IC between a sender and a recipient influences the sharing of negative versus positive WOM. Experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate the effect and explore the role of self-construal by testing whether differences in self-construal mediate (Experiment 1) and moderate (Experiment 2) the effect of IC on WOM valence. Experiments 3A and 3B use a causal-chain design (Spencer, Zanna, and Fong 2005) to test whether changes in psychological motives induced by differences in self-construal mediate the effect of IC on the sharing of valenced WOM.

EXPERIMENT 1: T-V DISTINCTION AND WOM VALENCE

Procedure

Sixty-one participants (M_{age} = 22.90, SD_{age} = 3.29, 27 males) participated in a lab study and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (IC: low (T-form) vs. high (V-form)). Participants first read a product review for a camera that included eight product features: four positive features (touchscreen, 10fps continuous shooting, integrated Wi-Fi, low light sensitivity) and four negative features (accidental mode changes, no orientation sensor, no physical mode dial, slow shutter speed). The product features were pretested on a separate sample of sixty-two participants (M_{age} = 20.11, SD_{age} = 2.07, 25 males) to check that they differed in terms of valence, but not on other dimensions. In this pre-test, respondents rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely) how *positive, important, abstract* and *useful* they perceived each product feature to be. Positive features were judged more favorably (M = 4.36, SD = 1.21) than negative features (M = 2.92, SD = .96), $F(1, 60)$ = 26.90, $p < .001$. However, positive features, were judged equally important (M = 3.51, SD = .93), abstract (M = 3.64, SD = 1.04), and useful (M = 3.64, SD = 1.02) as negative features (respectively M = 3.35, SD = .92; M = 3.77, SD = 1.14; M = 3.92; SD = 1.42); All ps > .34).

After reviewing the product information, respondents were instructed to write a message about the camera as if they were writing an email to another person. In particular, participants were instructed to choose five out of the eight product features presented to describe the product. To manipulate IC, we built two pre-written message openings. While the message content was the same across conditions, we manipulated whether the message to be completed used the V-form in the low IC condition or the T-form in the high IC condition (see Appendix). Then,

participants completed a well-established self-construal scale (Singelis 1994) successfully used in past literature (Lee et al. 2000; Holmvall and Bobocel 2008). The items were assessed on 7-point scales and averaged to form a self-construal score (α = .90), with higher numbers indicating greater interdependence. Finally, to check whether our language manipulation created the intended differences in IC, we asked respondents to indicate how distant they felt from their message recipient on 2 7-point scales (α = .88).

Results and Discussion

 Manipulation check. An ANOVA on the IC index revealed that participants felt closer to the intended recipient in the high IC condition (M = 2.95, SD = 1.02) than in the low IC condition (M = 3.78, SD = 1.20), $F(1, 59) = 8.46$, $p = .005$.

 Message valence. We counted the number of negative features participants mentioned in their messages. The proportion of negative features was significantly higher (60.0%) in the high than in the low IC condition (41.0%), $\chi^2 (1) = 7.22$, p < .01.

 Mediation via Self-Construal Score. IC condition was dummy coded such that 0 = high IC (T-form) and 1 = low IC (V-form). When both IC and participants' self-construal score were entered into a regression predicting the sharing of valenced information, the effect of IC was no longer significant (β = -.10, t(58) = -1.55, p = .13) but self-construal significantly predicted the sharing of valenced information (β = -.18, t(58) = -2.65, p = .01). We tested the significance of the indirect effect by constructing a 95% confidence interval (Shrout and Bolger 2002). Zero fell outside of the interval (95% CI = -.191 to -.011), suggesting successful mediation (see Figure 1).

 Overall, consistent with our predictions, recipients shared more negative information when feeling close than when feeling distant with their message recipient. Furthermore, this

tendency was mediated by changes in self-construal induced by different levels of IC. In addition, we did not find evidence that conversational norms played a role in our effect.

EXPERIMENT 2: MANIPULATING SELF-CONSTRUAL BEFORE SHARING

Procedure

Two hundred and forty participants (M_{age}= 22.99, SD_{age} = 3.86; 134 female) were assigned to a 3 (self-construal prime: independent vs. interdependent vs. none) × 2 (IC: low vs. high) × 2 (role: sender vs. recipient) between subjects design. We used a yoked design such that each recipient was paired with a specific sender.

IC manipulation. In order to generate different degrees of IC, participants took part in a relationship-closeness induction task drawn from prior literature (RCIT; Sedikides et al. 1999; Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005; Vohs and Heatherton 2004). Upon arrival at the lab, the experimenter formed dyads of participants, accompanied each dyad to a separate room, and seated the two participants across from each other. Participants were then told that they would engage in a communication exchange and received a list of questions that served as a basis to engage in as natural conversation as possible, by taking turns asking and answering the questions (description available in Sedikides et al. 1999).

Self-construal manipulation. Participants completed a separate pronoun-circling task extensively used in prior research (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999). To activate either an independent or an interdependent self-construal, two versions of the same paragraph were created: one in which the paragraph contained all first-person-singular pronouns (i.e., personal pronouns such as I, my, mine, etc.; independent self-construal prime); and one that

contained all first-person-plural pronouns (e.g. we, our, ours, etc.; interdependent self-construal prime). Based on the condition to which they were randomly assigned to, the participants' task was to circle all the first-person-singular pronouns (e.g. I, my, mine, etc.), or first person plural pronouns (e.g. we, our, ours, etc.) in the paragraph. In the baseline condition participants did not complete this task.

After participants completed this second task, the experimenter informed them that they would take part in a third task that would involve communicating with another participant. The experimenter then formed dyads of participants. Importantly, the experimenter either kept the same dyads as those who engaged in the first communication task (initial pair preserved; high IC condition) or formed new dyads by pairing participants who did not perform the first communication task together (new pair formed; low IC condition).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to the role of sender or recipient. The communication task consisted in asking senders to share with their assigned recipient – in writing – their last experience at a restaurant. We coded for the number of positive and negative thoughts in the message, as well as for the total number of thoughts in the message. Initial agreement between coders was 91% or better on each dimension.

Finally, participants completed two manipulation check items presented in a counterbalanced order, for IC and self-construal (2 items each, on 9-point scales; α= .86 and α= .93 respectively and thus aggregated into two indiced).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. A two-way ANOVA on the IC index revealed a significant effect of IC condition, $F(1, 114) = 20.47$, $p = .001$ confirming that our IC manipulation. Similarly, a

two-way ANOVA on the self-construal index revealed a significant effect of self-construal, $F(1, 114) = 10.71$, $p = .001$ (no other main effect or interaction, $F<1$).

Negative thoughts. There was a significant main effect of IC, $F(1, 114) = 9.06$, $p < .001$: participants wrote more negative thoughts in the high IC condition ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.65$) than in the low IC condition ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.56$). In addition, there was a main effect of self-construal, $F(1, 114) = 5.23$, $p = .024$, such that the number of negative thoughts generated was an increasing function of participants' self-construal (interdependent: $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.69$; baseline : $M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.59$; independent: $M = 1.27$, $SD = 1.44$). In addition, baseline participants wrote more negative thoughts when close than when distant, $F(1, 114) = 5.95$, $p = .01$. However, this pattern dissipated in the interdependent and independent conditions. Participants primed to be interdependent included more negative thoughts regardless of IC condition ($p = .41$), similar to participants in the baseline high IC condition ($p = .56$), and significantly more than participants in the baseline low IC condition $F(1, 114) = 11.58$, $p = .01$). In contrast, participants primed to be independent included less negative thoughts regardless of IC condition ($p = .48$), similar to participants in the baseline low IC condition ($p = .95$), and significantly less than participants in the baseline high IC condition, $F(1, 114) = 8.26$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 2).

Positive thoughts. There was a main effect of IC, $F(1, 114) = 3.30$, $p = .07$, such that participants wrote more positive thoughts in the low IC condition ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.69$) than in the high IC condition ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 1.48$). Also, there was a main effect of self-construal, $F(1, 114) = 3.99$, $p = .024$, such that the number of positive thoughts generated was a decreasing function of participants' self-construal (interdependent: $M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.37$; baseline : $M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.46$; independent: $M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.83$). Post-hoc tests showed that baseline participants wrote more positive thoughts when distant than when close, $F(1, 114) = 4.12$, $p =$

.04. However, this pattern dissipated in the interdependent and independent conditions. When primed to be interdependent, participants included less positive thoughts, similar to participants in the baseline high IC condition ($p = .77$), and significantly less than participants in the baseline low IC condition $F(1, 114) = 4.21$, $p = .04$. In contrast, when primed to be independent, participants included more positive thoughts regardless of IC condition ($p = .68$), similar to participants in the baseline low IC condition ($p = .81$), and significantly more than participants in the baseline high IC condition, $F(1, 114) = 6.65$, $p = .01$ (see Figure 2).

Overall, this experiment both replicates the initial effect and provides convergent evidence for the role of self-construal as the underlying psychological mechanism. Specifically, directly activating an interdependent self-construal induced participants to share more negative thoughts and less positive thoughts, even when the sender felt distant from the recipient. In contrast, directly activating an independent self-construal induced participants to share more positive thoughts and less negative thoughts, even when the sender felt close to the recipient.

EXPERIMENT 3A: FROM IC TO SELF-CONSTRUAL (CAUSAL CHAIN I)

Procedure

Fifty-five participants ($M_{age} = 22.90$, $SD_{age} = 3.78$; 25 male) were randomly assigned to a 2 cells design (IC: low vs. high).

IC manipulation. First, participants completed the same manipulation as the one used in Experiment 3 (Sedikides et al. 1999; see Appendix).

Self-construal measure. Next, participants sat in front of each other in pairs (new or old) and completed the Twenty Statements Task (TST; Gardner et al. 1999; Kuhn and McPartland,

1954). Participants were asked to respond with twenty answers to the question "Who am I"? Past research has shown that interdependence leads people to use statements that describe group membership whereas independence leads people to use statements that describe individual attributes (Wyer, Chiu, and Hong 2013). Responses were coded as independent if they described a personal attribute (trait, ability, physical descriptor, or attitude—e.g., "I am intelligent") and as interdependent if they described a role or membership in a social group (e.g., "I am a member of the local soccer team")

Finally, participants completed a manipulation check IC (2-items, 7-point scale α= .91).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA on participants' IC index revealed a main effect of IC $F(1, 53) = 9.84$, $p = .003$, suggesting our manipulation was successful.

Self-construal. We analyzed the proportion of interdependent self-construal descriptors that participants reported in the TST and found that participants in the high IC condition described themselves with a significantly greater proportion of interdependent condition descriptors (22.4%) than those in the low IC condition (8.7%), $F(1,53) = 7.89$, $p = .007$.

Thus, Experiment 4A further demonstrates that differences in IC affect self-construal, supporting the first part of our causal chain.

EXPERIMENT 3B: FROM SELF-CONSTRUAL TO WOM GENERATION

Procedure

One hundred and one participants (46 males, 55 females) were randomly assigned to a 3-cell design (self-construal: interdependent; independent; baseline).

Self-Construal manipulation Participants first completed the same self-construal prime used in Experiment 3 (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Gardner et al. 1999).

Message generation. Next, participants were asked to write a WOM message about their last experience at a restaurant. After the experiment, we asked two independent coders to count the number of positive, negative and neutral thoughts (inter-coder reliability: 97%).

Motives. We assessed participants' motive to enhance the self versus protect others using 4 items each (See full list of items in Appendix; α= .88 for acquisition motive and α= .90 for protective motive).

Results and Discussion

Positive and Negative Information. First, there was no effect of self-construal on the total amount of information communicated, $F < 1$. Second, we found a significant effect of self-construal on negative information ($F(2, 98) = 3.13$, $p =. 04$): interdependent participants sent more negative information ($M = 3.33$; $SD= 1.67$) than both baseline ($M = 2.45$; $SD= 1.78$; $F(1, 98) = 4.06$, $p =. 04$) and independent ($M = 2.34$; $SD= 1.84$; $F(1, 98) = 5.31$, $p =. 02$) participants. Third, we found a significant effect of self-construal on positive information ($F(2, 98) = 3.10$, $p =. 05$): independent consumers sent more negative information ($M = 2.91$; $SD= 1.82$) than both baseline ($M = 2.09$; $SD= 1.68$; $F(1, 98) = 3.94$, $p =. 05$) and interdependent ($M = 1.97$; $SD= 1.61$; $F(1, 98) = 5.18$, $p =. 02$) participants.

Motive to protect others. There was a main effect of self-construal ($F(2, 98) = 4.30$, $p =. 01$): interdependent participants reported a stronger motive to protect others ($M = 4.67$; $SD= 1.59$) than both baseline ($M = 3.73$; $SD= 1.20$; $F(1, 98) = 7.51$, $p =. 007$) and independent ($M = 3.90$; $SD= 1.35$; $F(1, 98) = 5.25$, $p =. 02$) participants.

Motive to enhance the self. There was a main effect of self-construal (F(2, 98) = 4.68, p =. 01), but it took a radically different shape: independent consumers reported a stronger motive to enhance the self (M = 4.35; SD= 1.43) than both baseline (M = 3.48; SD= 1.15; F(1, 98) = 7.19, p =. 009) and interdependent (M = 3.51; SD= 1.40; F(1, 98) = 6.70, p =. 01) participants.

Mediation Analyses. We first tested whether the motives to enhance the self and protect others mediated the effect of self-construal on the sharing of negative information. This analysis first revealed that self-construal both predicted the motive to enhance the self (B = .42, t(97) = 2.59, p =.011) and the motive to protect others (B = -.38, t(97) = -2.23, p =.028). In addition, consistent with our proposition, the motive to protect others significantly predicted negative information shared (B =.56, t(97) = 4.93, p <.01), whereas the motive to enhance the self did not (B =.12, t(97) = 1.02, p =.31). Last, this analysis revealed that self-construal no longer predicted the sharing of negative information (B =-.32, t(97) = -1.60, p =.11). The indirect effect involving protection motive was significant (95% CI = -.458 to -.027), indicating successful mediation through this path, whereas the indirect effect involving the motive to enhance the self was not significant (95% CI = -.026 to .231; see Figure 3, top panel).

Second, we looked at whether the differences in the sharing of positive information as a function of self-construal could be accounted for by each of the proposed mediators. Self-construal predicted both the motive to enhance the self (B = .42, t(97) = 2.59, p =.011) and the motive to protect others (B =-.38, t(97) = -2.23, p =.027). In addition, consistent with our proposition, the motive to enhance the self was significant (B = .51, t(97) = 4.41, p < .01), and the motive to protect others did not significantly predict the amount of shared positive information (B =.14, t(97) = 1.26, p =.21). Last, this analysis revealed that self-construal no longer predicted the sharing of positive information (B = .31, t(97) = 1.54, p =.12). Furthermore,

the indirect effect of the motive to enhance the self was significant (95% CI = .046 to .487), indicating successful mediation, whereas the indirect effect involving the motive to protect others was not significant (95% CI = -.217 to .011; see Figure 3, bottom panel).

Overall, Experiment 3B supported the final causal link in our model, by providing evidence that interdependent self-construal fostered a motive to protect others and lead to greater sharing of negative information, whereas independent self-construal fostered a motive to enhance the self and lead to greater sharing of positive information.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Four experiments examined the role of IC on the sharing of valenced WOM. The results showed that consumers tend to share more negative information when IC is high versus low, whereas they tend to share more positive information when IC is low versus high. Across experiments we employed different manipulations of IC all tied to perceived psychological proximity within social settings (Experiment 1: relationship type; Experiment 2: formality of language used; Experiment 3 and 4A: relationship closeness). A last experiment offered empirical evidence that the role of self-construal in our effect is tied to the activation of different psychological motives – to enhance the self and to protect others – that uniquely mediate the effect of self-construal on the sharing of positive versus negative information, respectively.

Theoretical Contributions

This paper contributes to the research on WOM and social transmission in three significant ways. First, our work also complements that of Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993) by looking at how information that consumers deem valuable can change as a function of

psychological motives: when aiming to enhance the self, positive information might become more valuable and potentially useful in the sender's eyes than negative information. In contrast, when aiming to protect others, negative information might become more valuable and potentially useful in the sender's eyes than positive information. In addition, we add to a growing literature investigating how situational and personal factors influence senders' self-views and WOM sharing (e.g., Barasch and Berger 2014; De Angelis et al. 2012).

Second, our study offers a contribution to understanding how positive and negative information spreads throughout social networks. Notably, the bulk of past efforts focused on factors affecting the quantity of information shared, by triggering greater or weaker diffusion or adoption of a product or service (Brown and Reingen 1987). In contrast, our work focuses on how IC qualitatively affects social transmission, and suggests that the nature of a social network can systematically shape the sharing of valenced information across multiple transmissions. That is, strongly tied networks might be more conducive to sharing negative WOM, relative to positive WOM; in contrast, weakly tied networks might be more conducive to sharing positive WOM, relative to negative WOM. Our results are in line with research suggesting that rumors or negative gossip tend to particularly flourish within networks of people who relate to one another (Kamins et al. 1997). Our findings are also consistent with a tendency for successful WOM (i.e., positive information) to spread across diverse audiences. In particular, Godes and Mayzlin (2004) studied the effect of online WOM on future success of TV shows in the form of higher ratings and found that more dispersed online communication (i.e., distributed across weakly tied groups) yielded higher future TV show ratings, relative to more concentrated online communication. In other words, shows for which online WOM communications took place *across* communities got higher ratings than those for which online WOM communications took

place *within* a few communities, where ties linking members are likely stronger. Such a finding could be explained by a more successful transmission of positive information across weakly tied communities of TV watchers, compared to strongly tied communities of TV watchers.

Third, our work establishes a link between the WOM literature and the literature on self-construal. Past work focused on how self-construal makes people differentially sensitive to different types of ads (Aaker and Williams 1998), price-quality judgments (Lalwani and Shavitt 2013) and consumption (Zhang and Shrum 2009). Our research tests a novel antecedent of self-construal – IC – and documents a novel effect of self-construal on the extent to which consumers share positive versus negative WOM.

Limitations and Future Research

First, our experimental setting only allowed us to invoke impressions of high versus low IC in participants. Unknown is whether or how our results would replicate whether differences in IC stemmed from actual relationships (e.g., friends, blood relatives vs. anonymous recipient). One could predict that senders' negative bias would be stronger under actual high IC than psychological high IC, given people's motive to protect might increase as recipients become closer (i.e., acquaintance, friend, family member). Alternatively, one could predict that senders' positive bias would be weaker under actual low IC than psychological low IC, as people might not be willing to put effort into enhancing the self if they know that there is little change they will interact in the future. Without empirical evidence, one can merely speculate how our results might change and we encourage future research to address this important question.

Second, future research could explore the issue of consumers' tendency to edit and distort various aspects of a WOM message other than its valence, when sharing with close or distant

others. For instance, products often have features that are more or less extreme, or provocative. One could investigate whether and how IC affects the editing and the sharing of provocative information. That is, one might expect individuals to tone down the most provocative negative information and emphasize instead the most provocative positive information when communicating with distant others and do the opposite when communicating with close others.

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FIGURE 1

Mediation of transmission of positive vs. negative WOM by self-construal

(Experiment 1)

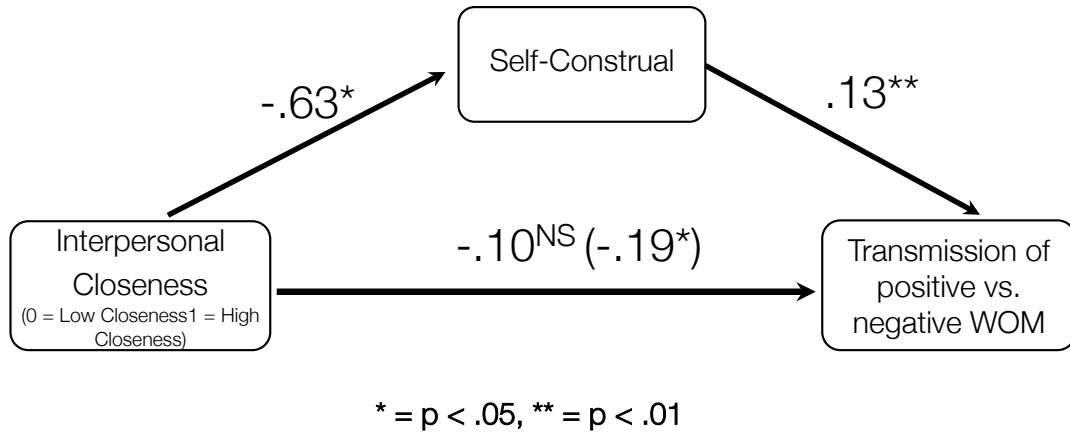

* = p < .05, ** = p < .01

FIGURE 2

Number of positive and negative thoughts as a function of self-construal and IC (close vs. distant; Experiment 2)
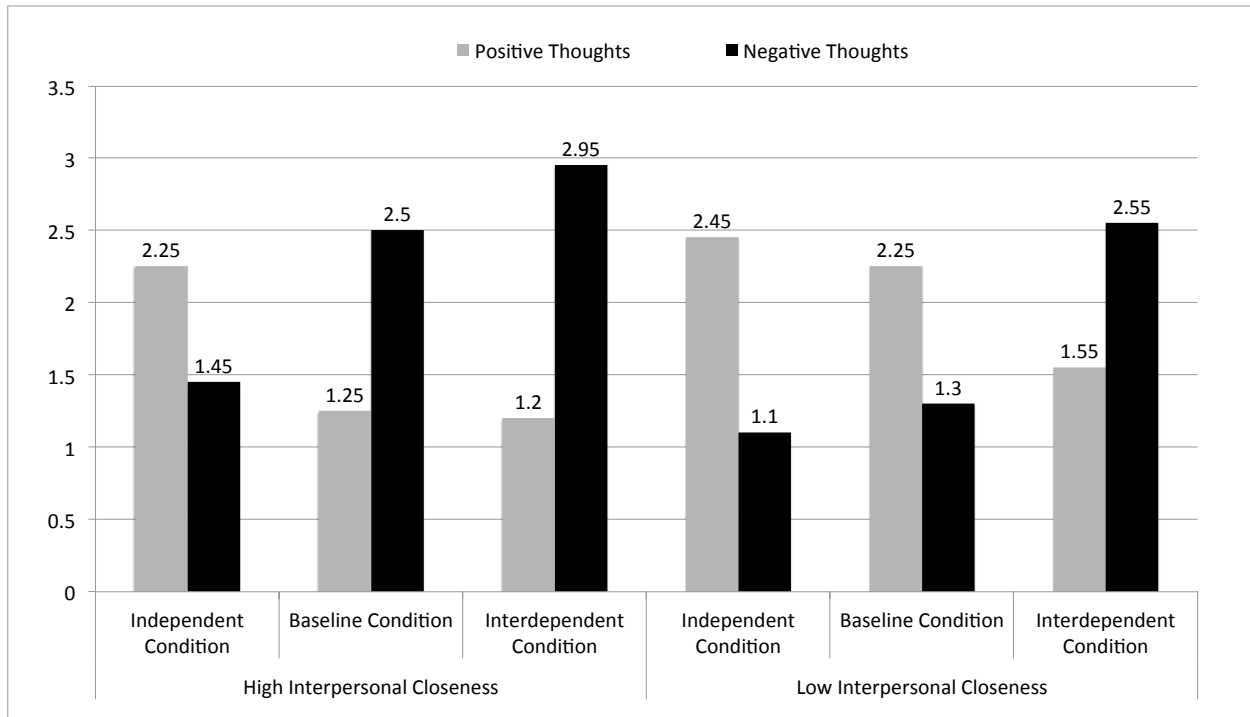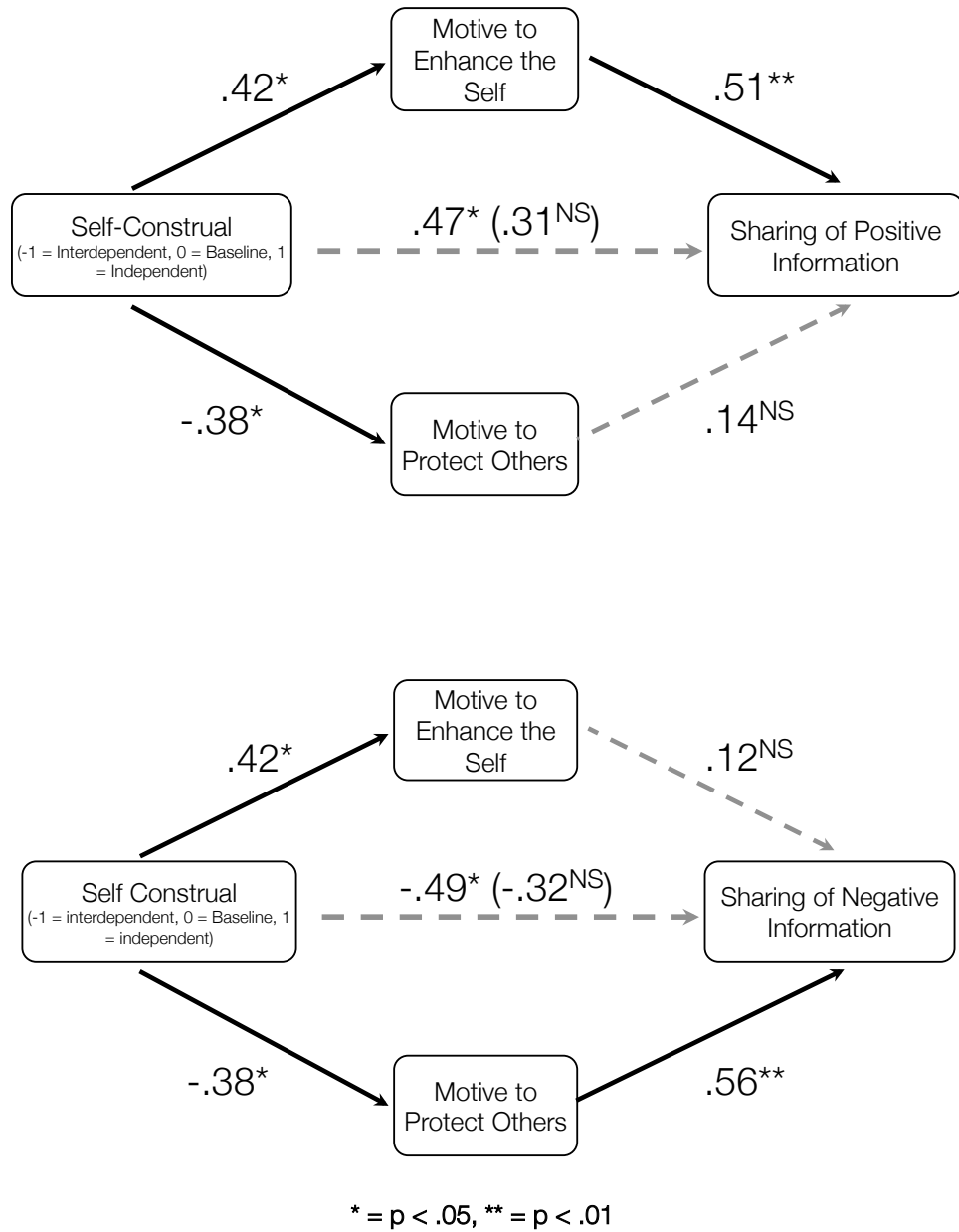
FIGURE 3

Mediation of positive (top) and negative (bottom) information via motives to self-enhance and

protect others as a function of self-construal

(Experiment 3B)

* = p < .05, ** = p < .01

APPENDIX

T-form and V-form used in the message script in Experiment 1

French (T-form)
Bonjour à toi, j'espère que tu vas bien. Je t'écris pour te donner des informations sur un modèle de caméra qui pourrait t'intéresser. Laisse moi commencer par te dire …

French (V-form)
Bonjour à vous, j'espère que vous allez bien. Je vous écris pour vous donner des informations sur un modèle de caméra qui pourrait vous intéresser. Laissez moi commencer par vous dire …

(*English Translation:* Hi, I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to share some information about a camera that you might find interesting. Let me first start by saying that…)

Items measuring the motives to enhance the self and protect others, Experiment 4B

Items to measure the motive to enhance the self

Sharing positive information about the restaurant is a way to keep the recipient safe (R)

Sharing negative information was a good way to warn the recipient about potential bad outcomes when it came to the restaurant

I shared negative information about the restaurant because I care about the message recipient

I aimed to protect the recipient by sharing negative information about the restaurant

Items to measure the motive to protect others

I made sure I shared positive information about the restaurant to create a positive image of myself

When I was writing to the person about restaurant, I had in mind to give a positive image of myself by sharing positive information

Emphasizing positive aspects of the restaurant will positively reflect on the recipient's attitude about me

Sharing positive word-of-mouth about the restaurant is a good way to make sure I will be liked