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Topic Controversy and Wom: the Effect of Opinion Extremeness on Sharing

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We investigate how people's tendency to share more versus less extreme opinions about controversial topics is affected by the online sharing platform. Across three experiments we demonstrate that more extreme opinions tend to be shared via email, while less extreme opinions tend to be shared via post on social networks.

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Topic Controversy and WOM: The Effect of Opinion Extremeness on Sharing

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Due to its profound impact on consumers' daily purchasing decisions, word-of-mouth (hereafter WOM) is considered among the most effective marketing communication tools (Arndt 1967; Berger 2014; De Angelis et al. 2012). In particular, proliferation of websites and social media platforms has also increased the pervasiveness of peer-to-peer communications, thus stimulating the interest of marketing scholars in investigating electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter eWOM; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; King, Racherla, & Bush, 2014; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014), that is any positive or negative statement made by consumers about a product or a company, and available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Another phenomenon, strongly characterizing current society, is represented by controversial topics, that is topics on which people tend polarizing opinions (Chen & Berger, 2013). However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has investigated the relationship between WOM and controversial topics, except for a study by Chen and Berger (2013) that shows a curvilinear relationship between the degree of a topic's controversy and WOM tendency to engage in conversations about that topic.

The present research is aimed at investigating how people share, via the Internet, information about topics that are controversial in nature. Our objective is to shed light on what drives people's decision to share their opinions about controversial topics through different online platforms. More specifically, and differently from previous studies, the present research investigates how eWOM is affected by the extremeness of the opinion one holds about a controversial topic, that is how extremeness influences the online platform consumers prefer when sharing information about high controversial topics.

While people might be naturally led to develop extreme opinions about controversial topics, they might not be as much naturally led to share such extreme opinions with others. Indeed, sharing extreme opinions might be more likely to expose the sharer to the risk of social rejection than sharing more moderate opinions (Buss 1990; Hogg, Turner & Davidson 1990). Thus, as a consequence, we argue that individuals' likelihood to share their extreme opinions on controversial topics depends on how severe they perceive the risk to be negatively judged by other people. One factor that might make social disapproval perceived as more or less severe by the sharer of an extreme opinion is the channel he/she uses to communicate his/her opinion. Indeed, we expect that people are likely to share more versus less extreme opinions about controversial topics when sharing via email, whereas we expect such an effect to be less likely to manifest when sharing via post on social network pages. We argue this might happen because sharing an extreme opinion about a relatively highly controversial topic via post on one's social network page might carry a higher risk of social disapproval and rejection for the sharer than sharing the same opinion via email. Our hypotheses are empirically supported by three experiments.

Experiment 1 had the goal to test if individuals show a general tendency to share extreme opinions about high controversial topics. Hundred twenty respondents were recruited online were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the "high controversy" condition, participants read a scenario about a hypothetical announcement appeared at a bakery store reporting that the store neglects to prepare cakes for homosexuals. In the "low controversy" condition, the announcement participants read reported that consumers had to book their wedding cake with no less than thirty days before the wedding (M_{high} = 6.35, SD = 0.92 vs. M_{low} = 3.10, SD = 1.60, $F(1, 119)$ = 196.05, $p<.001$). WOM likelihood served as dependent variable, level of controversy as independent variable and the opinion extremeness as mediator. Using the PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes, 2013; model 4), results showed that level of controversy positively affects opinion extremeness (b=1.86; t=5.62; $p<.001$) with the marginal effect of level of controversy on WOM likelihood (b=.67, t=1.91, p=.06). The indirect effect of level of controversy on WOM likelihood was significant (b=.69, 95% C.I. = .31, 1.18).

Experiment 2 aimed at introducing a boundary condition, whereby we expected to find an interaction between opinion extremeness and type of platform. Hundred one respondents have been randomly assigned to either a condition in which they were told they could access their email account or their Facebook page to share their opinion. Before being exposed to the sharing platform manipulation, respondents read an advertisement about the effectiveness of slimming pills, and were asked to rate the level of controversy of it ($M_{controversy}$ = 5.19, SD = 1.42). When regressing WOM likelihood on both opinion extremeness and sharing platform results showed that both factors had a significant and positive effect on WOM, and their interaction was significant (b=-.71, t=-2.83, $p<.01$). Conditional effects of opinion extremeness on WOM likelihood revealed that when prompting respondents to use email for sharing, the effect of opinion extremeness was significant (b=.62, 95% C.I. =.22, 1.02) respect the other condition (b=-.09, 95% C.I. =-.39, .21).

Experiment 3 aimed at providing convergence with Experiment 2. With the same setting of experiment 2, 119 respondents were randomly assigning to one of two conditions (email vs social networks). We included level of controversy (measured as a single item) as an independent variable in the regression, in addition to sharing platform (manipulated) and opinion extremeness (measured), with WOM likelihood as dependent variable. Procedure (Hayes, 2013) proved the existence of a significant 3-way interaction (b=-.37, t=2.42, p=.02). Analysis of the conditional effects of the two-way interaction between level of controversy and opinion extremeness on WOM likelihood revealed that individuals were more likely to share their highly extreme opinion about a topic perceived to be highly controversial via email (b=.28, 95% C.I. =.02, .55), but not via social networks (b=-.09, 95% C.I. =-.23, .05).

Findings show the mediating role of the opinion extremeness related to the controversial topics and the moderating role of online platform, thus shedding light on how eWOM about extreme opinions regarding controversial topics depends on the type of communication channel.

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