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# Cognitive Dissonance and Online World of Mouth

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## ABSTRACT

A growing number of customers use online consumer review as a means to express their opinions about the purchasing experience or the products through online feedback forums. The online forum not only provides customers with a powerful communicative tool but also impacts potential customers' intention to patronize a brand or its association by publishing compliments or complaints. It seems to be appropriate to explain the motivation of word of mouth (WOM) when customers tend to reduce post-purchase dissonance by engaging in selective exposure, attitude change, and spreading WOM. Online word of mouth (eWOM) is basically WOM communication through the Internet; yet different from traditional WOM, eWOM serves as a useful tool for marketers to gather product information from customers who use online feedback. By providing reviews and comments about the purchase of products, eWOM could be triggered by the desire to help potential customers to make purchase decisions wisely. However, opposite to eWOM, online negative word of mouth (eNWOM) has more serious impacts on customers' trust in the company than traditional negative WOM (NWOM) since eNWOM spreads over quickly and remains online permanently. eNWOM serves as an advice from someone unknown to inform others of the failure of company's product to meet desired expectations, and convince the public the negative associations with the company.

The paper examines the consequent online word of mouth behaviors derived from cognitive dissonance in the context of cross culture. To comprehend the perception of cognitive dissonance, this study built on previous research of online reviews and both positive and negative word of mouth and then conducted both quantitative and qualitative methods. The source of data collection comes from online third party consumer forums in both China and US. The observed period of time ranges from 2009 to 2011. A total of forty cases were observed and selected based upon the complete involvement in the purchase process from the stages of pre-purchase to the post-purchase. The data examined the behaviors related to the customers' cognitive dissonance development and eWOM/eNWOM. Attributes of cognitive dissonance and contents of eWOM and eNWOM were recorded and classified based upon their frequency of occurrence from the customer's positive or negative comments/feedbacks on the web.

The study unveils that culture does play important role in forming customers' online word of mouth behaviors. The theoretical model proposed in this paper suggests that compared to individualistic customers, collectivist customers are basically relationship oriented as their behavior relates to purchase process, the advice from family and friends, and the ride performance. Relationship orientation could be the best reason to explain the cognitive dissonance pattern in China. Chinese customers generally rely on the advice from their relatives when making expensive purchase decision. Results show that Chinese who purchase cars for strictly social reasons tend to place greater value on the exterior visual aspects of the vehicle. On

the other hand, American customers are more independent than Chinese customers. They will put efforts in asking around and doing research instead of asking advice from their family or friends before they make purchase decision. To reduce the uncertainty derived from cognitive dissonance, US customers are likely to engage in doing research and reading product reviews before the purchase is made. Compared to Americans, Chinese customers are more likely to rely on the follow-up after-sales service to maintain their positive attitudes toward the vehicle or company. If the after-sales service provided by the dealer does not meet their expectation, the cognitive dissonance takes place and then eWOM will be replaced by eNWOM.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Kungpo Tao is an assistant professor of marketing at Elizabeth City State University. He earned his doctorate from Old Dominion University and he was a supervisor in retailing for years before he started PhD career. He has also published conference proceedings in AMS and AMTP.

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