

## **ABSTRACT**

Technological developments, Internet expansion and the ubiquity of smartphones have revolutionized modern communication. Millions of people link to countless desktops or mobile e-platforms, and information transfer has never been faster or simpler. Previous research has consistently found that online reviews can mould consumers' attitudes toward a product, thereby influencing sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Ante, 2009), and highlighting the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication as a key factor affecting consumer purchasing decisions.

Message quality plays a decisive role in eWOM communication effectiveness (Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol, 2008; Cheema and Kaikati, 2010). A persuasive message is comprised of two critical components, message valance and argument strength (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), but understanding of their characteristics is limited. Until now, most eWOM investigations have ignored the written content of persuasive messages, tending to use quantitative measures, such as product ratings, to study WOM or eWOM communication (Schlosser, 2011). Additionally, the growing role of China in the global economy points to an increasingly important role for Chinese language communication. To-date English has been the primary language used in past eWOM studies, but findings from non-Chinese language studies may not apply to the Chinese language eWOM communications. The current study is intended to fill this gap.

Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study aims to identify the message features of Chinese language eWOM communication and understand the combined effects of valence and argument strength on attitude and purchase intention towards a product. This study takes both a qualitative approach and quantitative approach in its research design. First, a qualitative content analysis technique is used to examine the review content. Then experiments are performed to test and verify messages with respect to affecting the audience's attitude and product purchase intention. Findings show that different review types carry distinct message features and have varying levels of persuasiveness in eWOM communication.

The present study deepens the knowledge of eWOM communication because it integrates message features into the ELM of eWOM influence. It also extends Sweeny, Soutar and Mazzarol's (2012) traditional WOM study to the Chinese language eWOM context. Practically, this study introduces actual themes, languages and presentation approaches to product reviews that significantly or marginally affect a receiver's attitude toward a product and influence purchase intention. It provides an important reference for the eWOM givers on how to strengthen Chinese eWOM message content by understanding the message features of different review types.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>DECLARATION</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Problem Statement.....	5
1.3 The Purpose of the Study.....	9
1.4 Research Questions .....	10
1.5 Significance of the Study.....	11
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT</b> .....	<b>16</b>
2.1 The Influences of WOM on Consumer Behaviour.....	16
2.1.1 Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Communication and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Communication.....	16
2.1.2 Differences between WOM and eWOM Communication.....	18
2.1.3 The Influences on Consumer Behaviour.....	20
2.2 WOM/eWOM Communication Models .....	22

2.2.1 Information Adoption Model - Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)	27
2.2.2 Culture Differences and Influences in Communications	30
2.2.3 Message Quality and eWOM Communication Effectiveness	34
2.2.4 Valence	36
2.2.5 Argument Strength	38
2.2.5.1 Indirect Approach – Cognitive Response Approach	39
2.2.5.2 Direct Approach – Intrinsic Message Feature Approach	40
2.2.6 The Combined Effects of Message Valence and Argument Strength in eWOM Effectiveness	42
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY OF PHASE I</b>	<b>49</b>
3.1 Phase I	49
3.1.1 Sample Selection	51
3.1.2 Data Collection for the Chinese eWOM Messages	56
3.1.2.1 Sampling Method	58
3.1.3 Data Analysis to Derive Message Features	64
3.1.4 Coding Process	64
3.1.4.1 Building a Coding Frame	65
3.1.4.2 Trial Coding	69
3.1.4.3 Evaluating and Confirming the Coding Frame	75
3.1.5 The Main Analysis	76
3.1.5.1 Comparing Coding Consistency	77
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>RESULTS OF PHASE I</b>	<b>82</b>

4.1 Findings I - What Message Features Were Found in Each of the Review Types.....	91
4.1.1 Message Features of Strong-Positive Reviews.....	91
4.1.2 Message Features of Weak-Positive Reviews.....	98
4.1.3 Message Features of Strong-Negative Reviews .....	104
4.1.4 Message Features of Weak-Negative Reviews .....	110
4.2 Findings II – What Message Features Can Be Derived from Comparisons of Different Review Types.....	113
4.2.1 Comparing and Contrasting the Message Features of Strong-Positive Reviews and Weak-Positive Reviews .....	114
4.2.2 Comparing and Contrasting the Message Features of Strong-Negative Reviews and Weak-Negative Reviews .....	119
4.3 Discussion and Implications.....	122
<b>CHAPTER 5.....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY OF PHASE II.....</b>	<b>133</b>
5.1 Phase II.....	133
5.1.1 Methodology .....	134
5.1.2. The Control Variables .....	139
5.1.3 The Dependent Variables .....	141
5.1.4 The Manipulated Variables .....	142
5.1.5 Pretest and Refinement .....	143
<b>CHAPTER 6.....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>RESULTS OF PHASE II.....</b>	<b>145</b>
6.1 Sample Characteristics .....	145
6.2 Reliability Measures .....	148

6.3 Manipulation and Control Checks .....	148
6.4 Findings .....	152
6.5 Discussion and Implications .....	156
<b>CHAPTER 7 .....</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>161</b>
7.1 Limitations .....	165
7.2 Recommendations for Future Study .....	167
<b>REFERENCE LIST .....</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>185</b>
Appendix A: Coding Manual .....	185
Appendix C: Kappa Results .....	230
Appendix D: Extracted Reviews Content of Strong-Positive Reviews .....	238
Appendix E: Extracted Reviews Content of Weak-Positive Reviews .....	242
Appendix F: Extracted Reviews Content of Strong-Negative Reviews .....	244
Appendix G: Extracted Reviews Content of Weak-Negative Reviews .....	247
Appendix H: Survey Designs in Experiments .....	248
Appendix I: The Restaurant Menu in Experiments .....	258
Appendix J: Review Designs in Experiments .....	260
Appendix K: Reliability Test Results .....	266
Appendix L: Manipulation Check Results .....	269
Appendix M: Hypothesis Test Results .....	274
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE .....</b>	<b>281</b>