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How Word of Mouth Influences the Storyteller: Does the Effect Replicate in China?

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INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM) is the most influential form of marketing communications (Nielsen 2013). While most research starts from the assumption that it is the story-receiver (not the storyteller) who experiences WOM, Moore (2012) challenges this assumption and expands research on WOM.

She shows that the act of storytelling has a particular effect on the storyteller. She demonstrates that explaining language in stories weakens storytellers' evaluations of and intentions to repeat/recommend hedonic experiences but strengthens their evaluations and intentions in the case of utilitarian experiences, regardless of experience valence. Explaining language addresses why experiences happened or why experiences were liked or disliked.

In the four years following Moore's publication, a substantial number of researchers have cited the original article. To date, the overall Thomson Reuters Web of Science and Google Scholar citations counts are 21 and 53, respectively. The article has been cited 3 times in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) and 3 times in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. It was further awarded the JCR Ferber Award of 2012 and it ranks among the ten most cited JCR articles of 2012 (Harzing 2007).

Other researchers have investigated how WOM of hedonic experiences influences storytellers. Scholars largely converge on the viewpoint that unpacking an enjoyable past hedonic experience into its constituent sub-activities amplifies consumers' retrospective affective evaluation (Cowley 2014, Van Boven and Epley 2003, Vilches-Montero 2015, Vilches-Montero and Spence 2015). Telling the story of an enjoyable past experience also enhances experience duration estimation (Vilches-Montero and Spence 2015) and the self (Chawdhary and Riley 2015). Value derived from talking about experiences (Kumar and Gilovich 2015) and retrospective dilution of the most extremely negative moment in a positive experience (Cowley 2014) explain these amplifications. The previously mentioned articles measure the effects of WOM on storytellers in a western context. In contrast, Yang et al. (2014) show that audience responses moderate Chinese storytellers' experiences.

Despite Yang et al. (2014), however, extant research on WOM influence on the storyteller remains predominantly western, in terms of its empirical findings, and except for Moore (2012, 2015) and Vilches-Montero and Spence (2015), no research investigates explaining language. Meanwhile, in consumer research as in any other field, replications are one of the building blocks of the structures of knowledge. Replications are important for knowledge accumulation, and for gaining greater understanding into new and important effects. As such, Moore (2012) marks a starting point from which to initiate a replication study into a possible WOM effect on Chinese storytellers as well as a meta-analysis across the Chinese and North American samples.

This research highlights the importance of specific WOM content and demonstrates its impact on storytellers from different cultures. More than two millennia ago, upheavals across the East and West sparked ambitious visions of what humans could achieve, spearheaded by two trailblazers: Confucius and Socrates, great thinkers from the ancient world whose ideas still shape consumer behavior (Lian 2002; Yang 2009). They lay the foundations of the modern eastern and western world. While Socrates' philosophy challenged superstitious belief (Plato 399BC/2010), Confucius' vision led to the promotion of 观物取象 ("inferring from metaphors") and 中庸 ("the Doctrine of the Mean") (Legge 1971). Thus,

Socrates encouraged his fellow citizens to rationally examine every aspect of their lives, and Confucius believed that moral education could transform both individuals and society. While Moore (2012) explains how Socratic thought influences North American consumers' explaining language and evaluations, the current research focuses on consumers that are Chinese and tests the impact of Confucianism on explaining language and evaluations. Given the morally didactic versus rational bases of Confucian versus Socratic thought, culture should differentially influence overall evaluations of hedonic experiences.

The study needed to meet the replication criterion. Therefore, the study needed to be conceptually related to the plethora of existing research. That is, we focused on hedonic experiences. A replication was performed on Moore's most comprehensive study (3A) with a predefined deviation: Chinese participants instead of North American participants. This way, the consumer research field can learn more about the relevance and boundaries of the effect of WOM on storytellers. We address three hypotheses for which Moore found support in a North American sample:

- H1:** Individuals using more explaining language will evaluate positive hedonic experiences less positively and negative hedonic experiences less negatively than individuals using less (or no) explaining language.
- H2:** Individuals using more explaining language will be less likely to repeat and recommend positive hedonic experiences and more likely to repeat and recommend negative hedonic experiences than individuals using less (or no) explaining language.
- H3:** Individuals using relatively more explaining language will be less likely to retell stories about hedonic experiences than individuals using less (or no) explaining language.

To answer the question of the boundary condition, we also include a meta-analysis across Moore's original, comparably designed studies 2 and 3A and the replication, following Chark and Muthukrishnan (2013) and Rosenthal and Dimatteo's (2001) procedures.

METHOD

The experiment is a replication of Moore's study 3A: Two hundred and four Chinese, who averaged 24 years of age (20–30 years) and included 63.7% women, participated. All had graduated from tertiary education. Participants were instructed to recall either a positive or a negative dining experience. Participants in the writing conditions then read that Dianping, "the Chinese Yelp", was trialing a guided online review process, so they would be given a series of sentences with blanks to fill in about their experience. They were told that they could fill in the blanks using any words they wished and as many words as they wished as long as the final sentence was coherent. They were asked to write exactly what they would say in a real online review for a highly inclusive hosting site for reviews of dining experiences, such as Dianping. On the next page of the booklet, participants in the writing conditions saw the explain or the nonexplain story shell. The nonexplain shell had 11 sentences with 22 blanks; the explain shell had explanatory clauses added to eight of the nonexplain shell sentences: "The best part of the whole experience was _____, because _____." Control condition participants did not see a story shell; they simply recalled an experience without writing about it. Because the participants' language skills did not necessarily include English, we carried out International Test Commission translation to Mandarin and back-translation procedures on all materials and instruments. Overall, the study was a 2 (valence: positive or negative) × 3 (story shell: explain, nonexplain, or none) between-subjects design.

After writing about their dining experience, participants reported their evaluations of the experience on four 9-point scales, and their intentions to repeat and recommend, as well

as their likelihood of retelling the experience on 7-point scales (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely. Evaluation scales as well as intention to repeat and recommend the experience scales were standardized and combined into two dependent variables for brevity (evaluation: $\alpha = .98$; intention: $\alpha = .93$). Analyzing them separately yields similar results. Likelihood of retelling was left as a single-item measure.

The meta-analysis featured Moore's Studies 2 and 3A and our replication. Together, the 3 studies featured 378 participants (204 Chinese and 174 North American). We determined that there was no heterogeneity due to measurement decisions in the studies ($F(2, 15) = 1.76, p > .21$).

RESULTS

To test hypothesis 1, a model using valence, story shell, and their interactions to predict final evaluations ($F(5, 198) = 99.89, p < .001$) showed a large main effect of valence ($F(1, 202) = 487.93, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .71$), and a small valence by story shell interaction ($F(2, 201) = 4.54, p < .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$).

Follow-up analyses do not support Moore's hypothesis 1. Participants in the nonexplain condition who wrote about positive experiences had more positive evaluations ($M = 1.00$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 0.83; F(1, 72) = 4.39, p < .04$). However, the explain condition ($M = 0.96$) differed neither from the nonexplain ($F(1, 71) = 0.61, p > .40$) nor from the control condition ($F(1, 67) = 1.27, p > .26$). Further, participants in the explain condition who wrote about negative experiences had more negative evaluations ($M = -0.78$) than participants in the control ($M = -0.41; F(1, 63) = 22.13, p < .001$) condition but did not differ from the nonexplain condition ($M = -0.56; F(1, 60) = 1.44, p > .23$).

To test hypothesis 2, a model using valence, story shell, and their interactions to predict final intentions ($F(5, 198) = 111.11, p < .001$) showed a large main effect of valence ($F(1, 202) = 545.25, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .73$). However, the interaction effect was not significant $F(2, 201) = 1.20, p > .30$, rejecting Moore's hypothesis 2.

To test hypothesis 3, a model using valence, story shell, and their interactions to predict likelihood of retelling ($F(5, 198) = 4.41, p < .001$) showed only a medium size effect of valence ($F(1, 202) = 17.15, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$). However, the interaction effect was not significant ($F(2, 201) = 0.86, p > .42$) rejecting Moore's hypothesis 3. See table 1.

Insert table 1 about here

To conduct the meta-analysis, final evaluations found in Moore's Studies 2 and 3A and our replication were examined. A model using valence (the single consistently significant factor across the three studies), culture (Chinese or North American), and their interaction to predict final evaluations ($F(5, 12) = 90.27, p < .001$) revealed a large main effect of valence ($F(1, 16) = 409.33, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .97$) and a large valence by culture interaction ($F(2, 15) = 4.01, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .4$). Chinese and North American evaluations of positive experiences did not differ from one another ($F(1, 8) = .60, p > .40$). Chinese participants who wrote about negative experiences had less negative evaluations ($M = -0.58$) than North American participants ($M = -0.96; F(1, 8) = 10.02, p < .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .59$), as we detail in figure 1.

Insert figure 1 about here

DISCUSSION

Moore (2012) demonstrates that explaining is a key process in altering North American consumers' evaluations of experiences; compared to those who told nonexplaining stories and to those who did not tell stories, only North Americans who told explaining stories had dampened evaluations of their hedonic experiences. Those who told explaining stories were also less likely to retell their experience in the future. Further, her studies' story shell method constrained individuals' language use, weakening alternative explanations that these findings are due to differences in the detail or consistency of stories rather than differences in explaining language.

We used the same story shell method to examine the impact of explaining language on Chinese hedonic experiences. We demonstrate that the effects of explaining language on evaluations obtained for hedonic experiences (hypothesis 1) do not replicate for Chinese consumers, arguably due to their Confucian culture (Lian 2002) as we elaborate subsequently. In contrast to explaining for North Americans, *not* explaining why hedonic experiences were purchased or why they were liked increased evaluations of positive experiences for Chinese consumers. Whereas explaining why hedonic experiences were purchased or why they were disliked made evaluations of negative experiences less negative for North American consumers, explaining made evaluations of negative experiences *more* negative for Chinese consumers. Chinese storytellers are more situational in causal attribution of experiences (Morris and Peng 1994). Retrospective dilution of the most extremely negative moment in an experience seems more difficult to endorse.

Hypotheses 2 and 3, that hedonic experiences' individuals explain more influence their intentions to repeat/recommend and likelihood to retell, were not supported. Perhaps Chinese consumers are more willing to repeat/recommend experiences for esteem reasons (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) or they acknowledge less the importance of a consistent attitude-behavior relationship (Fishbein and Yzer 2003).

We used a story shell method where individuals write about their hedonic experiences by filling in the blanks of provided sentences. Evaluations may be hard to retrieve and consumers tend to recall the constituent activities of the experience in order to reconstruct them (Cowley 2014). Vilches-Montero (2015) shows that recalling these constituent activities in a packed versus unpacked fashion influences both the reconstruction process and its outcome. This may be a behavior where there is a fundamental cultural difference in play. Unpacking corresponds to the western cultural tendency to process information piece-by-piece. In contrast to unpacking experiences, Chinese cultural disposition dictates that evaluations of experiences are at least partial inferences from metaphors. To complete the story shell, our Chinese participants were asked to recall and write about an experience piece-by-piece; misaligned with Confucianism, this method may have dampened positive hedonic experiences and polarized negative hedonic experiences. Moreover, compared to the nonexplain condition, the number of blanks in the explain condition was 36.4% greater. The difficulty of expressing their experience in this unpacked form may have further damped participants' evaluations in this condition. Though self-reported difficulty in writing did not predict evaluations ($F(15, 119) = 0.82, p > .64$), it is possible that social desirability influenced individuals self-reported difficulty in this study.

The meta-analysis provides strong support for a cultural explanation by comparing evaluations and demonstrating the distinctive effect of culture on evaluations. In this study, Chinese and North Americans evaluated positive experiences equally. Our meta-analysis also demonstrates an important cultural difference in WOM: Chinese participants reported less negative evaluations of negative experiences than North American participants.

Taking a morally didactic perspective of our findings indicates that North American consumers do not treat stories of negative hedonic experiences as resources for moral education. In keeping with the high value placed on didactic narrative within the Confucian tradition however, Chinese consumers are likely to use storytelling to convey public moral standards. Confucianism thus culminates in the behavior formulated above. Evaluation is the expression of the Doctrine of the Mean: a cultural-level attitude that allows Chinese to make a choice that is acceptable. Morality determines this acceptability, that is, what the mean of most (other) humans find acceptable. Not surprisingly, Confucian-typical collectivism has been found to be positively related to response styles that use the scale midpoint and moderate values (Chen et al. 1995).

This work has implications for both consumers telling and receiving stories. Explaining language allows North American consumers who tell stories, to manage their reactions to experiences (Moore 2012). This work shows that the explaining language effect depends on the consumer's culture. While North American consumers can recover from negative hedonic experiences by explaining, Chinese consumers should know to leave explanations unsaid when telling stories. They can savor both positive and negative experiences by not explaining them. To manage this, Chinese consumers should beware of advertising or online review sites that provide vocabularies or story schemas that force them to express experiences in specific ways.

This work shows consumers who receive WOM, that the culture of the storyteller is essential. The impact of the story needs to be balanced against the impact of the culture on the storyteller: while receiving Chinese neutral stories should not influence North American consumers' own evaluations, North American storytellers would have evaluated Chinese neutrally evaluated experiences more negatively, and vice versa for Chinese consumers who receive North American stories. We suggest that story-receivers consider how culture influences the storyteller.

There are three avenues for further research in this area. First, future research could answer the call for more specific linguistic analyses to examine the impact of stories on Chinese consumers. While this paper examined the influence of written, Mandarin WOM on storytellers, Cantonese and other Asian languages could differentially influence storytellers in the transnational, imagined Asian world (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008). Second, scholars should identify other Confucian-related variables that influence Chinese storytellers, such as the power of social norms and the family (Legge 1971). Third, it is crucial to understand the influence of culture on storytellers in general. Consistent with Confucian and Socratic thought, the current research suggests that, on average, explaining why something negative occurred has a positive effect on North American consumers but a negative effect on Chinese consumers, since Chinese consumers likely are more aware of the universal and the mean than North American consumers. Although neither Confucian nor Socratic thought should greatly influence storytellers elsewhere, for instance in India, Buddhism should. That is, Gautama Buddha's thoughts and insights should influence Indian language use and evaluations: while a Chinese storyteller facing a negative experience might believe in the Doctrine of the Mean, an Indian storyteller facing a negative experience might believe in karma (Kopalle, Lehmann, and Farley 2010), with corresponding effects on evaluations and intentions.

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TABLE 1
STANDARDIZED MEAN EVALUATIONS, INTENTIONS, AND LIKELIHOOD BY
VALENCE AND STORY SHELL, OR CULTURE

		Experiment			Meta-analysis
		Evaluations	Intentions	Likelihood to retell	Evaluations
Positive	Explain	0.96	0.41	0.02	0.88
	Nonexplain	1.00 *	0.56	0.20	1.05
	Control	0.83 *	0.20	-0.81	0.96
Negative	Explain	-0.78 *	-1.24	-1.00	-0.80
	Nonexplain	-0.56	-1.08	-0.45	-0.83
	Control	-0.41 *	-1.11	-0.41	-0.66
Positive	Chinese	0.93			
	North American	1.10			
Negative	Chinese	-0.58 *			
	North American	-0.96 *			

Means marked with an asterisk (*) are significantly different from each other within that category.

FIGURE 1
STANDARDIZED MEAN EVALUATIONS BY VALENCE AND CULTURE: META-ANALYSIS

