Online Communication In Different Cultural Settings

A Comparison Between Austrian And Thai Consumers

[Agnieszka Zablocki, Bodo Schlegelmilch, Michael Houston]

Abstract— **Research shows that consumers share different content in online and offline settings. In offline settings, consumers tend to communicate primarily rational content with strangers and emotional content with people they know. In addition, previous findings indicate that consumers in collectivistic cultures (interdependent self-construal) display more emotional content than consumers in individualistic cultures (independent self-construal). Our results reveal considerable differences between online and offline content of communications and differences according to the self-construal of Austrian and Thai consumers. Out of this, theoretical and managerial implications emerge.**

Keywords—**Online Communication, Content, Self-Construal**

I.   Introduction

A growing number of online tools and social media allows consumers to interact with each other with great ease [19,22]. Reviews shared in these online tools are now one of the most frequently used information sources [11], as consumers perceive consumers-provided content as more credible than marketer-provided content [2,12,20]. Research in the offline sphere suggests that consumers tend to communicate primarily rational content with strangers and emotional content with people they know [16,17]. However, it remains unclear whether this also applies in online settings, as online communication is substantially different from offline communication [3]. Our study therefore focuses on the content consumers share with each other in online reviews, and on the role of culture in online communication as well. It has been shown that individuals with an interdependent-self construal [22] are more influenced by the opinion of others [9]. Research suggests that consumers with interdependent self-construal tend to share more emotional content than those with an independent self-construal [23].

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Out of this, the following three questions emerge: (1) whether the content of the reviews shared depend on the audiences (public and private), (2) whether culture impacts on the type of contents shared (primarily emotional versus rational) and (3) whether the cultural context (interdependent versus independent self-construal) influences the perceived utility, the usage frequency and the purchase influence of online reviews. To investigate the research questions, we distinguish between online communication with strangers (public online interaction) and online communication with friends (private online interaction).

II.   Theoretical Backgorund

A.   *Type of online interaction, content and the self-construal*

People consider emotions as private [14,28]. The regulation of emotions in personal relationships depends on the development from strangers to a more intimate level [5]. Intense expression of emotions is perceived as not appropriate during the early stages of relationship-development [4]. As intimacy increases, the breadth and depth of communication increases likewise [17]. Authentic expression of emotions comes through knowing each other [16]. In the presence of strangers – as one can imagine on a medium like Amazon – individuals are inhibited in expressing their emotions [6], keep their emotional distance [14,15] and the communication is more rational [4]. Based on the insights, we can assume that public versus private online interaction differs in terms of their proportion of emotional and rational content. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1: In public online interaction consumers display a higher proportion of rational content than in private online interaction.

H2: In private online interaction consumer display a higher proportion of emotional content than in public online interaction.

Giving the cultural setting, individuals from Western (individualistic) cultures tend to have an independent-self, while in Eastern (collectivistic) cultures individuals with an interdependent-self are more dominant [21,30,31]. The independent-self is mostly autonomous; feelings, thoughts, preferences and interests are widely unaffected by the social context and private opinions are being expressed regardless of possible group pressure [18]. Autonomy and personal choice is of greater importance in these cultures [32] and individuals feel free from social forces [8]. Contrary, the interdependent-self is highly responsive to the social context. The self is perceived as a part of other individuals and their self in turn as a part of the individuals self [14,24].

Individuals with an interdependent-self feel a stronger connection to others and therefore share a higher amount of intimate topics [23], which leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: In private online interaction consumers with an interdependent self-construal display a higher proportion of emotional content than those with an independent self-construal.

As discussed, individuals with an interdependent self-construal strive for close relationships and define themselves through their closed ones [21]. Considering that people rather talk about positive than negative emotions with closed ones [3], we hypothesize as follows:

H4: In private online interaction consumers with an interdependent self-construal display more positive emotions than individuals with an independent self-construal.

B. *Self-construal and usefulness, usage frequency and purchase influence of online reviews*

Park and Lee [25] investigated cultural influences of online reviews in collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Their findings suggest that consumers of collectivistic cultures are more affected by online reviews in their purchase decisions than consumers of individualistic cultures. Measures concerning the perceived usefulness, usage of frequency and purchase influence of online reviews indicated significantly higher scores for consumers in collectivistic cultures. Apparently, consumers of collectivistic cultures are more influenced by online reviews in their online decision-making process than consumers in individualistic cultures. Since there is an overlap between collectivistic and individualistic cultures with the constructs of the interdependent- and independent self-construal [21,30], we propose the following:

H5a: Consumers with an interdependent self-construal do perceive online reviews as more useful than consumers with an independent self-construal.

H5b: Consumers with an interdependent self-construal use online reviews more frequently than consumers with an independent self-construal

H5c: Consumers with an interdependent self-construal are more influenced in their purchase decisions by online reviews than consumers with an independent self-construal.

III. **Method**

Design and Procedure: To test the hypotheses, respondents from cultures with a predominantly independent (Austria) and interdependent self-construal (Thailand) participated in an online experiment. The choice of the countries is based on Hofstede's scores measuring individualism and collectivism. The questionnaires were translated into Thai by a professional agency. For the online experiment, one group was asked to imagine they interact with strangers (public online interaction) in the online environment about a certain branded product (a tablet

computer labeled as branded product M to avoid previous brand associations and attitudes) and indicate their level of rational and emotional content on a five-point Likert-Scale. The second group was asked to imagine they interact with a friend, family member or a person they know (private online interaction) about the same branded product in the online environment. Respondents were randomly assigned to the two conditions and to a control group. Respondents in the control group were asked to imagine that they interact in the online environment about a branded product without specifying, with whom they interact. Additionally, each experimental group received a scale measuring the self-construal [29] and the usefulness, usage frequency and purchase influence of online reviews [25].

Participants: 236 participants (150 women, M_{age}=23, SD=19) were randomly assigned in Austria (*N*=122) and Thailand (*N*=61) to the experimental conditions and to the control group (*N*=53) as well.

IV. **Results**

To begin with the self-construal, Thai consumers (M= 3.68, SD=0.49) perceive themselves as more interdependent than Austrian consumers (M =3.33, S=0.44), $t(181)$= - 4.81, p<0.1. Therefore, Thai consumers can be seen as representative consumers for an interdependent-self culture (α=.67 for the scale measuring the independent self-construal and α=.76 for the scale measuring the interdependent self-construal).

Taking a closer look at the ratio of emotional (α=.77) and rational (α=.88) content, when consumers either interact with strangers (public online interaction) or with friends (private online interaction) in the online environment, there is a significant difference, $F(4, 86.23)$=2.58, p<.05. In Austria, consumers share significantly more rational content than emotional content about a branded product with strangers (public online interaction) (M=4.21, SD=0.67) than with friends (private online interaction) (M=3.77, SD=1.01) (p<.05). This supports hypotheses H1 for Austrian consumers. There is no significant difference for Thai consumers (p>.05). Apparently, they share the same amount of rational content with strangers (public online interaction) (M=4.17, SD=0.57) and with friends (private online interaction) (M=3.94, SD =0.68) (see Fig. 1).

Within each country, neither Thai consumers nor Austrian consumers share significantly more emotions when interacting with friends compared to strangers (p>.05) (see Fig. 2). Consequently, hypothesis H2 has not been supported. Comparing both countries, a main significant difference occurs in the ratio of emotional content in online reviews about a branded product, $F(4, 231)$=12.94, p<.05. Thai consumers display significantly more emotional content in online reviews with friends (M=2.92, SD=0.49) and strangers (M=2.94, SD=.049) than do Austrian consumers with friends (M=2.42, SD=0.64) and strangers (M=2.15, SD=0.68), (p<.05). This supports hypothesis H3, saying that private online interaction (with friends) has a higher ratio of emotional content for individuals with an interdependent self-construal than for individuals with an independent self-construal (see Fig. 3).
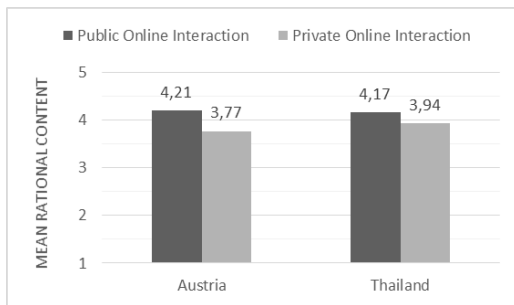
Figure 1. Rational content in public and private online interaction within Austria and Thailand (significant for Austrian consumers, *p*<.05, but not for Thai consumers, *p*>.05) (H1)
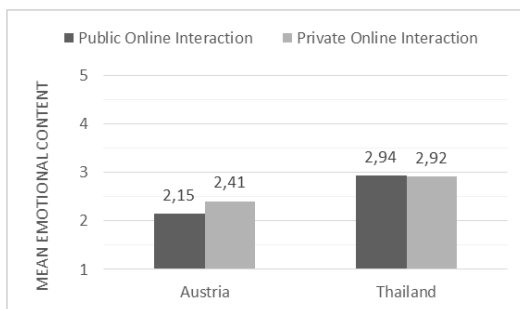

Figure 2. Emotional content in public and private online interaction within Austria and Thailand (*p*>.05) (H2)
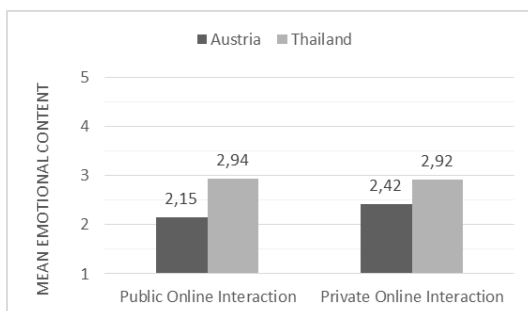

Figure 3. Emotional content in public and private online interaction compared between Austria and Thailand (*p*<.05) (H3)
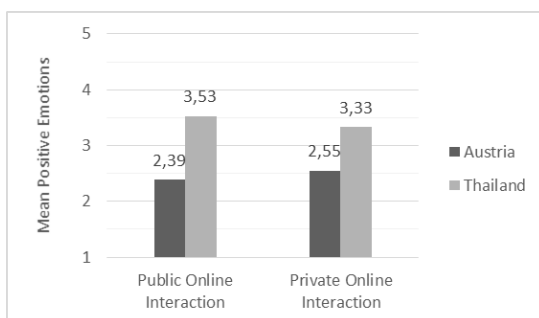

Figure 4. Positive Emotions in public and private online interaction compared between Austria and Thailand (*p*<.05) (H4)

There is a significant difference in the distribution of positive emotions between consumers in Thailand and Austria in private and public online interaction, $F(4, 231)$= 9.99, p<.05. Thai consumers display significantly more positive emotions in public online interaction (with strangers) (M=3.53, SD=0.71) than do Austrian consumers in public online interaction (M=2.39, SD=0.96) (p<.05). The same pattern is also observable in private online interaction. Thai consumers display significantly more positive emotions with people they know in the online environment (M=3.33, SD=0.84) than Austrian consumers do (M=2.55, SD=1.11). These results support hypothesis H4 (see Fig. 4).

On the topic of usefulness (α=.86), usage frequency (α=.82) and purchase influence of online reviews (α=.83), Thai consumers use online reviews from other consumers more frequently (M=4.07, SD=0.63) than Austrian consumers (M=3.82, SD=0.78), $t(181)$= -2.17, p<.05, and are more influenced in their purchase decisions by online reviews (M=3.63, SD=0.80) than Austrian consumers (M=3.15, SD=0.92), $t(181)$= -3.45, p<.05. There is no significant difference between Thai consumers (M=4.05, SD=0.58) and Austrian consumers (M=4.10, SD=0.62) regarding the usefulness of online reviews $t(181)$= .56, p>.05. These results support hypotheses H5b and H5c, but not H5a.

V. Discussion

The goal of the study was to determine if patterns in personal communication in the offline context do also count for the online environment. Specifically, the question is if consumers reveal more rational content in online reviews with strangers (public online interaction) and more emotional content in their online reviews with people they know (private online interaction). When it comes to the ratio of emotional and rational content consumers provide in online reviews, the results are contradictory to previous research from the offline context, which indicates that people adapt the ratio of emotional content they share with others to the state of the relationship [16]. As people get to know each other, they talk about their emotions. With strangers, people tend to be more inhibited in expressing their emotions [6] and the communication between individuals is more rational [4]. According to the results from this study, this pattern does not apply entirely to the online environment. The study was conducted in Austria and Thailand, countries with an independent and interdependent self-construal. Only in Austria, consumers display more rational than emotional content with strangers as individuals do in the offline context. But there is no difference in sharing emotions with strangers or with friends in the online environment. In Austria and in Thailand consumers reveal the same amount of emotions to strangers and to friends in the online environment. This finding is in line with Roed [27], saying that people who communicate in the online environment tend to be more willing to reveal personal information. This might be due to the anonymity of the online environment, where consumers can use pseudonyms.

Reilly and Seibert [26] argue that consumers rely on intense and explicit emotional expressions in the online environment to compensate their inability to communicate non-verbally. In face-to-face interaction consumers are able to send nonverbal signals as facial expressions or tone of voice to receive an affective response [10,13]. When it comes to cultural differences, Thai consumers rather reveal emotions in the online environment than Austrian consumers, which is in line with the findings of Morry and Kito [23], stating that individuals with an interdependent self-construal disclose more intimate topics among each other than individuals with an independent self-construal.

Our study also investigated cultural difference in perceived usefulness, usage frequency and purchase influence of online reviews. The results from this study differ slightly from the results of Park and Lee [25], who investigated the influence of online reviews in individualistic and collectivistic cultures. As our study shows, consumers from Austria and Thailand do not evaluate the perceived usefulness of online reviews significantly different from each other. However, Thai consumers use online reviews more frequently and are more influenced in their purchase decisions by online reviews. One can assume that, in a first step, consumers evaluate the usefulness of online reviews. In case they are being perceived as useful, online reviews begin to influence the whole decision-making and purchase process in the online environment and this might be the point where cultural differences come into play.

VI. **Implications and Limitations**

For practitioners, several recommendations can be made according to the results. To recapture, the aim of this study was to investigate which information, experiences or feelings consumers reveal in their online reviews about products for other consumers in the online environment. As the results show, consumer share rational and emotional content on public webpages (e.g. Amazon, BestBuy, online forums, chats, etc.) with strangers and on websites with a private circle (like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter) with people they know. Independently of whom they interact with, consumers display their experience they made with products, their emotions concerning these products and rational information about the functionality or price of a product. Companies therefore can emphasize the advantages of a product, as battery performance, memory capacity or image resolution, or emphasize the feelings consumers can experience when purchasing the product, depending on how companies want to position their products. In case companies want consumers to perceive their product as a very emotional one, they can encourage consumers to share their emotional experiences with others on any webpage fitting their advertising strategy. This accounts especially for countries with consumers having an interdependent self-construal, as these consumers display more emotions than consumers with an independent self-construal. If companies want to position their products as functional ones, they can establish online forums where consumers can rate or display rational information. When it comes to positive emotions,

companies should especially encourage consumers with an independent self-construal to share more positive emotions, as consumers with an interdependent self-construal already display more positive emotions in their online reviews. Furthermore, these consumers are more influenced by online reviews in their purchase decisions and use them more frequently than consumers with an independent self-construal. Therefore, companies a) can use online reviews or other opinions in their advertising campaigns in cultures with an interdependent self-construal to trigger social acceptance of their products and b) offer a higher number of online reviews for consumers with an interdependent self-construal due to a stronger frequency usage.

The present study has some limitations, which may be overcome by further research. One limitation refers to the experimental condition used in this study. Participants were asked to indicate if they would rather share emotional or rational information or experiences, respectively. However, to increase validity, real online reviews can be analyzed due to their rational and emotional content, applying a content analysis. Yet, it has to be considered that there is no access to private online interaction. Therefore, it might be a better solution to let consumers write online reviews in an experimental setting. This gives the possibility to investigate if the scales used in this study (for measuring rational and emotional content) generally are applicable for the content of online reviews. Furthermore, the study is limited to one product (tablet), which in turn limits the generalizability of this work. The question is, if this pattern of emotional and rational content is also observable for other product categories or if emotions are unimportant for a product like a tablet. Future research could investigate the way people interact with each other in the online environment for instance about hedonic vs. utilitarian products to see if these product categories moderate the relationship between the type of online interaction and the content. This seems like a fruitful approach, as hedonic products trigger positive emotions within consumers [1], so consumers rather might display positive emotions depending on the product itself and not the audience the online review is written for. Another point is the intensity of positive and negative emotions and if consumers would rather display strong and explicit emotions or rather weaken the intensity of their emotional content in the online environment. This is in line with Chakrabarti and Berthon [7], asking for how emotions are being spread in social media, as the role of emotions in social media has not been fully explored yet. Overall, more research is needed to examine how consumers compensate the absence of non-verbal cues in the online environment (by displaying intense emotions as suggested by Reilly and Seibert [26]), how communication patterns differ compared to the offline setting and generally, how anonymity in the online environment impacts communication styles. Finally, as with any study using student sample, the given sample limits the generalizability as well. One of our goals was to use a sample which is familiar with online shopping, with the usage of online tools and therefore the usage of online reviews. Therefore, students seem to be an appropriate target sample. However, future studies are needed to examine if the results can be replicated with a non-student sample.

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