

The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth as a Marketing Strategy: Findings from Research in Malaysia

Over 80 percent of consumers trust the recommendations of family and friends. Consequently, in our digital age, firms and other organisations, including universities, increasingly rely on electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) as a marketing tool.

A recent article discusses three sequential studies undertaken in Malaysia that each investigated how readily people both accept (or agree with) and forward (or share) EWOM communications.** In particular, the research examined the ways different positive emotions influenced readiness to accept and forward EWOM communications. The research took place at a public university in Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia's Sabah state.

Study One surveyed 423 undergraduates to assess whether any correlations to acceptance of EWOM could be drawn from nine positive 'dispositional' emotions. The latter refers to emotions that an individual's personality is predisposed to. For marketers, dispositional emotions can be triggered, for instance by advertising that elicits personal memories.

Students who self-reported high dispositions towards feeling hope, joy or love were more likely to accept EWOM. Perhaps surprisingly, compassion showed a marginally negative correlation with EWOM acceptance. Amusement, awe, contentment, gratitude and pride disclosed no significant correlation.

In a follow-up, Study Two used an experimental design on 153 undergraduates to establish causation in addition to correlation. It addressed the same emotions, but as "incidental" or "state" emotions, as primed by reading certain poignant, emotion-inducing stories before being asked how the student would react to EWOM communication from the university.

This second study found that hope, joy and love indeed increased acceptance of EWOM. The apparent negative effect of compassion in Study One was ruled out. Importantly, this experiment also provides empirical

evidence supporting the long-held assumption that accepting EWOM leads to forwarding the communication.

Finally, Study Three teased out the novel and knottier question of how different combinations of the three key emotions could encourage acceptance of EWOM. Three combinations proved effective: (1) the presence of joy and love, even without hope; (2) hope and love, without joy; and (3) joy and hope, without love. In other words, any two of those positive emotions were enough to increase acceptance.

Firms and other organisations can apply these findings by honing the emotions they seek to trigger in marketing communications like printed or video advertisements and in promotional activities, rather than simply fostering broad positivity. The study implies eliciting compassion may well not help acceptance or forwarding of EWOM. Nor, surprisingly, might pride in the firm or organisation.

Certainly, firms should craft messages that EWOM consumers can accept and agree with. Relationship marketing to engender "love" in the form of consumer loyalty and commitment also ought to promote EWOM. Next, consumer satisfaction can approximate joy. Additionally if electronic searchers seek word-of-mouth in the hope of useful advice, then possibly that hope, too, may in itself spur good EWOM. It is not necessary to simultaneously elicit all three of love, hope and joy. A communication such as a video advertisement that evokes any two will do.

**The full study results are available in an article by Felix Septianto and Tung Moi Chiew: "The Effect of Different, Discrete Positive Emotions on Electronic Word-of-Mouth", *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 44: 1-10 (2018).

