

The Effect of Self-Construal on Preference for Products with Polarized Word-of-Mouth: The Underlying Mechanism

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Abstract

Products with polarized reviews refer to those that are rated favorably by many consumers while simultaneously being rated unfavorably by many others. With the advent of the era of personalized consumption, it has become increasingly common for products that satisfy individualized needs to receive mixed word-of-mouth. When confronted with products featuring polarized reviews, how do consumers perceive them? What factors influence consumer preferences for such products? What are the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions? Answering these questions holds significant importance for enterprises to conduct marketing effectively. Polarized word-of-mouth can heighten consumers' perceived shopping risk, evoke "conflict" associations, and may also engender perceived uniqueness of the target product. These characteristics align with the behavioral differences in need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus between independent and interdependent self-construals in self-construal theory. Consequently, self-construal constitutes an important antecedent variable affecting preferences for products with polarized reviews, with need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus serving as three mediating pathways. Shopping risk level, shopping task context, public nature of the consumption occasion, and product type constitute the boundary conditions for the aforementioned mediating effects.

Full Text

The Influence of Self-Construal on Consumer Preference for Polarizing Products and Its Underlying Mechanism

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Abstract

Polarizing products are those that receive simultaneously high praise from many consumers and strong criticism from others. With the advent of the era of personalized consumption, it has become increasingly common for products that meet individual needs to receive mixed reviews. How do consumers perceive such polarizing products? What factors influence consumer preference for polarizing products? What are the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions? Answering these questions is of great significance for enterprises to conduct effective marketing. Word-of-mouth polarization can increase consumers' perceived shopping risk, trigger associations with "conflict," and may also generate perceived uniqueness of the target product. These characteristics align with behavioral differences in need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus between independent and interdependent self-construal as posited by self-construal theory. Therefore, self-construal is an important antecedent variable affecting preference for polarizing products, with need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus serving as three mediating pathways. Shopping risk level, shopping task context, consumption context publicity, and product type constitute the boundary conditions for these mediating effects.

Keywords: self-construal; word of mouth; polarizing product; need for uniqueness; conflict resolution style

1. Problem Statement

Word of mouth (WOM) refers to all informal communication and dissemination about a product's characteristics, purchase, usage, and sellers (Westbrook, 1987). With the development of information technology, the internet has revitalized this traditional marketing method, and online WOM increasingly influences consumer purchase decisions. It is common for enterprises to face products with mixed reviews, and some products even exhibit "polarization" in their WOM. This study defines such products as "polarizing products," referring to those that are simultaneously praised by many consumers and criticized by many others. Online reviews are a typical manifestation of WOM; however, product WOM polarization can also occur in traditional oral communication contexts. To broaden the applicability of this research, we adopt the term "WOM polarization" rather than "review polarization" or "online review polarization."

When facing polarizing products, will consumers choose to purchase them? What types of consumers and psychological factors drive such purchases? What factors influence consumer preference for polarizing products? Answering these questions is crucial for effective marketing. This exploration is particularly relevant in the era of personalized consumption, as products that meet individual needs inevitably attract mixed reviews (Luo, Wiles, & Raithel, 2013).

Current marketing research on WOM has grown increasingly rich, yielding sub-

stantial findings. However, most studies examine how WOM volume, average rating, and content characteristics (such as positive versus negative reviews) affect product sales or perceived review usefulness (Yue & Wang, 2015), paying relatively little attention to the impact of overall WOM distribution patterns. Moreover, existing research predominantly relies on information processing theory and reference dependence theory, with scarce investigation from the perspective of psychological needs into the symbolic meaning implied by rating distributions and its potential effects. Building on these observations, this study first explores how consumers perceive polarizing products, then examines the antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions affecting individual preferences for polarizing products from the psychological perspective of self-construal theory.

Self-construal theory represents a relatively new branch in psychological research on how people interpret the self, expressing individuals' tendency to define themselves in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama distinguished two representative types: independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal. The former tends to differentiate oneself from others, emphasizing unique personality and pursuing differentiation; the latter tends to view oneself as part of a group, seeking consistency with others. Additionally, the two types differ significantly in conflict resolution style. Research shows that Western cultures dominated by independent self-construal, such as Greece, often emphasize individuality, encourage debate, and demonstrate greater tolerance for conflict, whereas East Asian cultures dominated by interdependent self-construal value harmonious relationships between individuals and society, discourage the pursuit of individuality and confrontational forms like conflict, and prefer "compromise" or "moderation" when facing conflict (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). These differences suggest that individuals with different self-construals are likely to exhibit significant preference differences when facing polarizing products. This is because polarizing products often possess self-expressiveness (Rozenkrants, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2017) and represent the result of "conflict" between two opposing viewpoints, easily triggering conflict associations. These characteristics align with the goal orientation of independent self-construal individuals while contradicting that of interdependent self-construal individuals. Therefore, this project uses self-construal theory as a breakthrough to explore the influence of self-construal on preference for polarizing products and its underlying mechanisms.

Specifically, this study addresses the following questions: (1) How do consumers perceive polarizing products? (2) Do preferences for polarizing products differ significantly between individuals with different self-construals? What are the mediating mechanisms? This project proposes to reveal the mediating mechanisms through three pathways: need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus. (3) What are the boundary conditions for the effect of self-construal on preference for polarizing products? This project will examine the moderating effects of contextual factors (consumption context publicity, shopping task context) and product factors (risk level, product type).

2.1.1 The Concept and Main Dimensions of Word of Mouth

Traditional WOM is an oral communication behavior evaluating products or services (Arndt, 1967). Internet technology development has provided consumers with convenient and fast channels to exchange and share shopping experiences online, forming online word-of-mouth. Compared with traditional WOM, online WOM spreads and preserves more easily, facilitating measurement and research, thus becoming a hot topic in recent WOM research (Yu & Wang, 2013). Especially with the popularity of online shopping, online reviews have become a typical manifestation of online WOM. Online reviews have multiple dimensions: at the aggregate level, such as total review quantity, mean, and variance; at the micro level, such as review valence, subjectivity, and length.

Typically, consumers may not read all review content carefully but are more likely to first focus on aggregated review characteristics, such as quantity, average rating, and dispersion (e.g., variance, deviation). Existing literature indicates that consumers often do not spend limited cognitive resources and time processing all information contained in user reviews. For instance, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggests that when potential buyers have low motivation to process information, they first consider easier-to-process information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). WOM research also finds that consumers tend to first focus on overall distribution characteristics rather than specific text content, because processing text information requires higher cognitive demands than processing numerical or image information (Hsee, Yang, Gu, & Jie, 2009). Rating distribution is an important dimension of online WOM, revealing the proportion of different product evaluations and is typically easily noticed by consumers. Notably, the object of this study—WOM polarization—is not equivalent to simply high variance in review distribution. In other words, when a product's WOM distribution shows high variance, it does not necessarily mean polarization has occurred (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). The difference lies in that variance only indicates market heterogeneity, which is relatively common and does not reflect reviewers' personality characteristics. In contrast, WOM polarization, through two opposing camps expressing contradictory views, often serves as a strong signal highlighting reviewers' personality characteristics (Rozenkrants et al., 2017).

2.1.2 The Impact of Word of Mouth on Product Sales and Consumer Decision-Making

Among WOM dimensions, total volume and review valence have been most studied (Du, Zhao, & Cui, 2015; Gong, Liu, Liu, & Zhao, 2012; Lu & Feng, 2009; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Liu, 2006; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Many studies show that WOM volume and valence significantly affect product sales (Chintagunta, Gopinath, & Venkataraman, 2010; Liu, 2006), though conclusions are not yet consistent. For example, Liu (2006) found that review quantity rather than rating positively affected movie box office revenue.

Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) found that both review quantity and rating significantly affected book sales, with one-star reviews having greater impact than five-star reviews. Notably, these dimensions influence purchase decisions differently: volume often increases product awareness and thus selection probability, while valence changes perceived quality and affects choice (Gong et al., 2012; Duan et al., 2008).

Review extremity is also an important attribute. Research finds extreme reviews attract more attention than moderate ones (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Except for a few studies (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009), most find negative WOM more influential than positive WOM (e.g., Gong et al., 2012; Cui, Lui, & Guo, 2012), especially when WOM includes both positive and negative information, which enhances credibility (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Additionally, review length (Hao, Ye, & Li, 2010; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010), presence of images, follow-up reviews, and seller responses (Zhang & Li, 2016; Li & Chen, 2016; Zhang, Li, & Zhao, 2017), whether reviews are pictorial or textual (Yang & Zhu, 2016), and consistency between review content and rating (Li, Ma, & Ruan, 2014) also affect review usefulness or consumer decisions. Beyond WOM characteristics, the impact on consumer decisions is also influenced by review source, receiver characteristics, and product price (Du, Ding, Xie, & Lei, 2016; Lu & Feng, 2009; Yin, 2012).

Research on review distribution characteristics remains relatively scarce. A few scholars have examined how review dispersion affects firm performance at the aggregate level, but empirical studies are limited and conclusions are inconsistent. Some find high variance leads to low sales (Zhu & Zhang, 2010), while others find that when average ratings are low, high variance can increase sales (Sun, 2012). Still others find that review variance has no effect on sales profit (Kim, Lim, & Brymer, 2015). These divergent conclusions may be explained by Wang, Liu, and Fang (2015), who argue that high variance in review distribution is a double-edged sword for product sales: on one hand, inconsistent reviews imply quality uncertainty, causing some consumers to avoid the product due to perceived risk; on the other hand, inconsistent reviews, especially when critics' reviews are also highly inconsistent, may highlight product uniqueness and attract some consumers.

Few studies have analyzed the micro-level mechanisms of how review dispersion affects consumer decisions. He and Bond (2015) argue that the impact of WOM dispersion depends on product type: for products with large individual taste differences, consumers attribute dispersion to individual differences; for products with small taste differences, they attribute it to the product itself. Huang, Li, and Wang (2016) suggest that purchasing new products with inconsistent reviews brings consumers social value (e.g., enhancing self-image), which positively affects purchase decisions. Huang, Wang, Liao, and Liu (2017) further note that the impact of review inconsistency depends on specific product attributes—inconsistency in vertical attributes reduces purchase intention, while inconsistency in horizontal attributes increases it. Rozenkrants et al. (2017) find

that consumer preference for polarizing products is more favored by consumers who desire self-expression.

2.2.1 The Connotation, Measurement, and Priming Methods of Self-Construal

People's thinking and behavior patterns differ significantly across social and cultural contexts, with one important difference being how individuals cognize the relationship between self and others (Hofstede, 1980). Western cultures often emphasize distinction from others and advocate self-discovery and self-expression, while Eastern cultures 主张 individuals are inseparable from others and view the self as part of a social network. Based on these differences, Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed the concept of self-construal (also translated as self-construct), defining it as the degree to which people perceive themselves as separate from or connected to others. In their study, self-construal was divided into two types: independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal (also translated as interdependent self-construal). Independent self-construal individuals tend to believe they are unique and distinctive, focusing on discovering their own uniqueness and maintaining an "independent" view. Interdependent self-construal individuals tend to seek consistency with others, focusing on harmonious relationships and maintaining an "interdependent" view (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Notably, although individuals under mainstream cultural influence often exhibit a stable self-construal tendency, both types coexist within the same cultural background (Singelis, 1994), and self-construal can be activated in specific situations (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Therefore, based on stability, self-construal can be divided into trait self-construal and situational self-construal (Liu, 2011).

Trait self-construal is typically measured through questionnaires. For example, Singelis (1994) developed a 24-item 7-point Likert scale containing two dimensions— independent and interdependent self-construal—with 12 items each. Despite some scholars' 质疑, it has been widely applied (e.g., Song, Xu, & Wu, 2017; Zhang, Feick, & Price, 2006). Notably, Lu and Gilmour (2007) innovated in sample selection, using four types of Chinese and British students and adults to develop a 42-item scale also containing independent and interdependent dimensions with 21 items each, providing a Chinese version.

Situational self-construal is primarily activated through different manipulation methods. Scholars have attempted various priming methods, such as instruction activation, pronoun circling task, task activation, and story activation (Liu, 2011). Instruction activation primarily uses researcher-designed instructions to activate a specific self-construal tendency, referencing Trafimow et al.'s (1991) method for activating private and collective selves. Specifically, the independent self-construal activation group asks participants to think about differences between themselves and family/friends and their own expectations for themselves; the interdependent activation group asks participants to think about commonalities with family/friends and their expectations for them. In their second exper-

iment, the authors also attempted story reading to activate self-construal types, where protagonists in different activation groups exhibited independent or interdependent behavioral characteristics. This method has also been attempted by other scholars (e.g., Wang, Wang, & Luo, 2012). Brewer and Gardner (1996) proposed the pronoun circling task, which is simple to operate and widely used (e.g., Wang, Fan, & Ouyang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2006). The main operation involves having participants from different groups read the same article and circle pronouns, with articles using first-person versus third-person pronouns to activate independent versus interdependent self-construal. Additionally, previous studies have attempted task completion methods. For example, Kühnen and Hannover (2000) used a sentence construction task where participants formed grammatically correct sentences from randomly arranged words, with words and constructed sentences in different activation groups relating to independent or interdependent self-construal tendencies.

2.2.2 The Relationship Between Self-Construal and Related Variables

In psychology, existing research has explored differences between self-construal types in cognitive style, social comparison, interpersonal communication, interaction, relationship quality, and personal autonomy (Liu, 2011). Studies find that because self-construal expresses how individuals view relationships between self and others, differences first manifest in conflict resolution styles when conflicts arise (Nisbett et al., 2001; Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001). Much cross-cultural psychology research has examined attitudinal and behavioral differences when individuals face inconsistency or conflict (Spencer-rodders, Williams, & Peng, 2010). Nisbett et al. (2001) and Peng and Nisbett (1999) argue that collectivist traditional values dominated by interdependent self-construal (e.g., East Asian cultures) value harmonious relationships between individuals and society/environment, thus encouraging conflict avoidance and discouraging confrontational forms like debate and conflict. In contrast, individualist traditional values dominated by independent self-construal (e.g., Western countries) emphasize individuality, value free will, and encourage confronting conflict. For example, in ancient Greece, debate was the second most basic skill after being a warrior (Nisbett et al., 2001). These different conflict resolution styles are demonstrated in studies using both trait and primed self-construal.

Different self-construal individuals also exhibit different regulatory focus orientations. Higgins' (1997) regulatory focus theory distinguishes two differential regulatory approaches in goal pursuit: promotion focus and prevention focus. The former relates to growth, advancement, and achievement, focusing more on positive outcomes; the latter relates to protection, safety, and responsibility, focusing more on negative outcomes. Lee, Aaker, and Gardner (2000) found that independent self-construal individuals focus more on promotion-focused information and exhibit a "promotion" regulatory style, while interdependent self-construal individuals focus on prevention-focused information and exhibit

a “prevention” style. Hamilton and Biehal (2005) also found that priming independent versus interdependent self-construal orientations activates promotion versus prevention regulatory styles, systematically affecting risk preferences—interdependent self-construal consumers prefer lower-risk choices.

Since the late 1990s, self-construal has been introduced into consumer behavior research and has increasingly become a common topic in top-tier journals. Research finds self-construal affects consumers’ risky behavior (Hamilton & Biehal, 2005); self-brand connections (Escalas & Bettman, 2005); impulsive consumption (Xiong & Jing, 2009); persuasive effects of imaginative advertising (Yao, Chen, & Zhao, 2011); price-quality relationship judgments (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2013); willingness to donate to out-groups (Duclos & Barasch, 2014); and savings and consumption intentions (Zeng, Chen, Lü, & Pan, 2016). Overall, different self-construal individuals’ consumption behaviors relate to their own goal orientations.

Moreover, research finds product preferences also differ across self-construal types. Generally, independent self-construal consumers tend to differentiate themselves from others and thus prefer products and brands with unique symbolic meaning, while interdependent self-construal consumers tend to pursue group consistency and prefer products that connect them with others (Aaker & Schmitt, 2001).

Recent domestic scholars have also explored preference or behavioral differences arising from uniqueness needs across self-construal types. For example, Wang et al. (2012) found that because different self-construal individuals have different sensitivity to uniqueness, the effectiveness of ingredient branding strategies in highlighting product uniqueness differs significantly. Wang et al. (2017) similarly focused on uniqueness need differences, verifying that different self-construal consumers prefer different brand logo shapes—angular versus circular. Li, Zhang, and Ma (2016) found that in stockout situations, different self-construal consumers differ in their choice of available products: interdependent consumers prefer similar products, while independent consumers prefer dissimilar ones. Additionally, Song, Xu, and Wu (2017) found that due to differences in autonomy needs, self-construal significantly affects preference for user-designed products.

2.3 Summary and Evaluation of Previous Research

With internet development, consumers increasingly use various online platforms to share and exchange product and service information, and online WOM exerts growing influence on purchase decisions. This new WOM form has received substantial attention from scholars, generating many high-quality research outcomes. Analysis of current research reveals several limitations: (1) Literature specifically studying “WOM polarization” is rare. While WOM volume and valence have received much attention, research on distribution characteristics is relatively scarce. WOM polarization is not equivalent to high variance in

review distribution and carries stronger metaphorical meaning, making it a substantive extension of WOM research. (2) Current WOM impact research mostly adopts cognitive processing or prospect theory, with scarce research from individual psychological needs perspectives, especially using social psychology theories to explore WOM' s effect on consumer preferences. (3) Existing research shows contradictory results regarding variance' s impact on sales, indicating boundary conditions. While product type' s moderating role has been studied, other potential moderators, especially contextual factors, remain underexplored. (4) In consumer behavior research, studies exploring self-construal' s influence remain in early stages. Although some high-quality domestic research exists, self-construal' s impact on consumption motivation, thinking patterns, and cognitive processes is direct or indirect with diverse and complex mechanisms and boundary conditions that require further exploration.

3. Research Framework

This study will proceed in three parts: (1) Psychological cognition research on polarizing products. (2) The influence of self-construal on preference for polarizing products and its mediating mechanisms, examining need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus. (3) Boundary conditions for self-construal' s influence, exploring moderating effects of risk level, shopping task context, consumption context publicity, and product type.

3.1 Study 1: Psychological Cognition of Polarizing Products

Is controversy necessarily bad? Existing research finds that when people choose discussion topics, they prefer more controversial topics within a certain range because these are inherently more interesting (Chen & Berger, 2013). A direct effect of WOM polarization is increased uncertainty about product quality, raising perceived shopping risk. Additionally, polarization presents two distinct opposing viewpoints that may trigger associations with “conflict” and “contradiction,” giving products conflictual and contradictory characteristics. Beyond these direct negative effects, might people also perceive polarizing products as more unique and distinctive? This section addresses these questions.

From structural anthropology perspective, human thinking is typically binary opposition (e.g., life/death, male/female). This binary cognitive structure helps individuals organize worldviews; its essence is difference, which helps individuals define or demarcate (Levi-Strauss, 1972). As product WOM becomes increasingly polarized, strong and differentiated opposing viewpoints can more clearly demonstrate reviewers' or buyers' positions, enabling clearer self-definition and expression (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). Maimaran and Simonson (2011) categorized many binary choices consumers face daily—such as extreme versus compromise options, risky versus conservative options, and hedonic versus utilitarian options—according to “self-expression/unconventional versus other-

expression/conventional,” finding that compromise, conservative, and utilitarian options have other-expressive, conventional default characteristics, while extreme, risky, and hedonic options are self-expressive and unconventional.

To make the research more targeted and specific, this study constructs two opposing product options: “polarizing product” and “non-polarizing product.” Referencing the above research, we can infer that self-expressive polarizing products belong to the “unconventional” category defined by Maimaran and Simonson (2011). Indeed, their empirical results found that compared to all-average options, mixed-value options (i.e., options performing well in some aspects but poorly in others) were perceived as less conventional, ordinary, and traditional—similar to our “polarizing” option. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to non-polarizing products, consumers perceive higher uniqueness in polarizing products.

Study 1 will test this hypothesis using qualitative methods (focus groups, depth interviews) combined with surveys. The manipulation of polarizing products will reference methods from He and Bond (2015) and Rozenkrants et al. (2017). We plan two manipulation methods: First, using specific product rating distribution graphs where polarizing products show a bimodal distribution (high proportions of both positive and negative reviews), while non-polarizing products show either (a) relatively uniform distribution with more positive reviews, or (b) unimodal distribution with mostly moderate reviews. To exclude the influence of mean ratings, all conditions will have identical means. To avoid potential effects from showing specific distributions, we will also use a text description method to verify results by describing whether a product’s WOM is polarized.

3.2.1 The Influence of Self-Construal on Preference for Polarizing Products

Polarizing products can generate uniqueness perception while triggering conflict associations, and due to high uncertainty, also increase perceived risk. The former satisfies uniqueness needs, while the latter triggers risk avoidance tendencies. These align perfectly with goal orientation differences between independent and interdependent self-construal individuals in self-construal theory— independent self-construal individuals tend to express uniqueness, pursue differentiation, and tolerate risk better, while interdependent self-construal individuals pursue consistency and avoid conflict and risk (Hamilton & Biehal, 2005). Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Self-construal significantly affects preference for polarizing products. Compared to interdependent self-construal consumers, independent self-construal consumers will show stronger preference for polarizing products.

3.2.2 The Mediating Role of Need for Uniqueness

When individuals feel their uniqueness is threatened, they develop a need to differentiate themselves from others—this is the need for uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Product consumption is an important way for consumers to express self-uniqueness and satisfy uniqueness needs (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Generally, consumers with stronger uniqueness needs prefer non-traditional, more self-expressive products (Maimaran & Simonson, 2011; Rozenkrants et al., 2017). As discussed earlier, independent self-construal emphasizes differentiation from others and thus has stronger uniqueness needs than interdependent self-construal (Wang et al., 2017). Therefore, we propose that differences in uniqueness needs may lead different self-construal individuals to exhibit different preferences for polarizing products with uniqueness implications. Thus:

Hypothesis 3: Need for uniqueness mediates the relationship between self-construal and preference for polarizing products.

3.2.3 The Mediating Role of Conflict Resolution Style

As previously discussed, research finds that different self-construal individuals differ in conflict resolution style. Specifically, independent self-construal individuals exhibit a “confrontation” style, while interdependent self-construal individuals exhibit a “compromise” or “moderation” style (Ting-Toomey et al., 2001). These different styles lead interdependent individuals to prefer reconciliation and conflict resolution when facing social contradictions, while independent individuals are more tolerant of long-term contradictions (Neto & Mullet, 2004). Although past research on conflict resolution styles has focused on interpersonal contexts, studies show these differences also apply to non-interpersonal situations. For example, Zhang et al. (2006) found that different conflict resolution styles lead to different aesthetic preferences for angular versus rounded shapes, with angular shapes triggering “confrontation” associations and rounded shapes triggering “compromise” associations.

Based on the same logic, we propose that WOM polarization results from “conflict” and “inconsistency” between different groups, triggering conflict associations. Different self-construal individuals’ conflict resolution styles will generalize to the context of polarizing products, leading to different preferences. Therefore:

Hypothesis 4: Conflict resolution style mediates the relationship between self-construal and preference for polarizing products.

3.2.4 The Mediating Role of Regulatory Focus

Because polarizing products possess both uniqueness and uncertainty, preference for them will depend on which attribute receives more weight, which relates to regulatory focus type—promotion-focused individuals attend more to positive aspects, while prevention-focused individuals attend more to negative features (Higgins, 1997). As discussed, independent self-construal individuals tend to

adopt promotion-focused regulatory styles, while interdependent self-construal individuals adopt prevention-focused styles (Lee et al., 2000). Thus, different regulatory focus styles lead the two types to focus on different product attributes, resulting in preference differences for polarizing products. Therefore:

Hypothesis 5: Regulatory focus mediates the relationship between self-construal and preference for polarizing products.

Study 2 will examine these mediating mechanisms through several laboratory experiments. For self-construal priming, we will reference Brewer and Gardner's (1996) pronoun circling method and Trafimow et al.'s (1991) instruction activation method. Need for uniqueness will be measured using Tian and McKenzie's (2001) Consumer Need for Uniqueness Scale. Conflict resolution style will be measured using Zhang et al.'s (2006) scale. For regulatory focus, we will adopt Higgins et al.'s (2001) Regulatory Focus Questionnaire to measure trait regulatory focus. To control for brand interference, this experiment will use fictitious brand names.

3.3 Study 3: Boundary Conditions for Self-Construal's Influence on Preference for Polarizing Products

The influence of self-construal on preference for polarizing products is also constrained by boundary conditions. This study focuses on analyzing moderating effects of contextual factors such as consumption context publicity (public versus private context), shopping task context (purchasing for self versus others), and product factors (risk level, product type).

3.3.1 The Moderating Role of Risk Level

Consumer perceived risk significantly affects purchase decisions (Mitchell, 1999); generally, stronger risk perception leads to weaker purchase intention (Petersen & Kumar, 2015). When facing polarized WOM, consumers develop uncertainty about expected product outcomes, increasing perceived risk (Huang et al., 2017). High perceived risk reduces evaluation and purchase intention for polarizing products. We propose that self-construal's effect on preference for polarizing products is bounded by risk level. Within a certain range, independent self-construal individuals focus on uniqueness seeking, conflict acceptance, and promotion focus, thus preferring polarizing products. However, when perceived risk exceeds the value of uniqueness seeking, conflict tolerance limits, and regulatory focus applicability, they may choose less uncertain products to avoid risk. Therefore:

Hypothesis 6a: Risk level moderates the effect of need for uniqueness on preference for polarizing products. Compared to low risk, the effect will weaken under high risk.

Hypothesis 6b: Risk level moderates the effect of conflict resolution style on preference for polarizing products. Compared to low risk, the effect will weaken

under high risk.

Hypothesis 6c: Risk level moderates the effect of regulatory focus on preference for polarizing products. Compared to low risk, the effect will weaken under high risk.

3.3.2 The Moderating Role of Consumption Context Publicity

Whether products are consumed in public affects consumer preferences and behaviors (Wang, Zhu, & Shiv, 2012). Products used mainly in public are highly visible to others, while those used in private are not noticed by others (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Due to products' symbolic functions, people can express themselves through purchases. When products are used in public, the individual self is strengthened (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). In other words, when products are used privately, reference group factors (e.g., group norms, consistency) have weaker influence. We infer that when purchasing products for public use, independent self-construal individuals' higher uniqueness needs and confrontation styles will strengthen preference for polarizing products, while interdependent self-construal individuals seeking consistency and conflict avoidance will prefer non-polarizing products. When products are for private use, the effects of uniqueness needs and conflict resolution styles will weaken (Wang et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2006), narrowing preference differences between the two self-construal types. Therefore:

Hypothesis 7a: Consumption context publicity moderates the effect of need for uniqueness on preference for polarizing products. Compared to public contexts, the effect will weaken in private contexts.

Hypothesis 7b: Consumption context publicity moderates the effect of conflict resolution style on preference for polarizing products. Compared to public contexts, the effect will weaken in private contexts.

3.3.3 The Moderating Role of Shopping Task Context

Self-construal's influence may also be moderated by shopping task context. Research finds that when purchasing for self versus others, consumers' attention to uniqueness and risk differs—when buying for self, individuals focus more on uniqueness and prefer limited-edition products; when buying for others, they focus more on avoiding mistakes (i.e., perceived risk is an important consideration) and prefer popular products (Wu & Lee, 2016). Campbell and Goodstein (2001) also demonstrated that when buying unfamiliar wine, consumers perceive high risk if they don't know the taste or whether guests will like it. We infer that compared to self-purchases, other-purchases make buyers focus more on uncertainty (negative attribute) from polarization rather than uniqueness, weakening preference for polarizing products. Therefore:

Hypothesis 8a: Shopping task context moderates the effect of need for uniqueness on preference for polarizing products. Compared to self-purchase, the effect will weaken when purchasing for others.

Hypothesis 8b: Shopping task context moderates the effect of regulatory focus on preference for polarizing products. Compared to self-purchase, the effect will weaken when purchasing for others.

3.3.4 The Moderating Role of Product Type

Hedonic and utilitarian products represent a common classification in marketing. Hedonic products are positioned to “satisfy consumers’ pleasure desires” and are often non-essential; utilitarian products are “tools for consumers to achieve goals or complete practical tasks” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Research finds that when purchasing hedonic products, individuals pay more attention to novelty, stimulation, and adventurous experiences than when purchasing utilitarian products (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). We infer that when purchasing hedonic products, independent self-construal individuals, due to higher uniqueness needs, will show stronger preference for polarizing products than interdependent individuals. When purchasing utilitarian products, where the goal is to “achieve goals or complete practical tasks,” even independent self-construal individuals will prioritize risk avoidance over uniqueness seeking, narrowing preference differences. Therefore:

Hypothesis 9: Product type moderates the effect of need for uniqueness on preference for polarizing products. Compared to hedonic purchases, the effect will weaken for utilitarian purchases.

Study 3 will examine these boundary conditions through laboratory experiments, with measurement of dependent, mediating, and independent variables consistent with previous studies. Risk level manipulation will reference Mitchell (1999) by selecting high- versus low-value products. Shopping task context manipulation will reference Wu and Lee (2016) by having participants imagine purchasing for self or others. Consumption context publicity manipulation will reference Wang et al. (2012) by having participants read descriptions of different usage contexts, with participants asked to purchase the same product category across contexts to avoid product type effects. Hedonic/utilitarian manipulation will reference existing research using consumption motivation as the classification basis, with pre-tests conducted to select experimental materials.

4. Theoretical Framework and Research Significance

With internet and social network popularization, WOM, especially online WOM, increasingly influences consumer decisions. Previous research has either examined micro-level review characteristics (valence, length, extremity, textual features) or macro-level aggregate characteristics (volume, mean) (Du et al., 2015; Gong et al., 2012; Cui et al., 2012; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010; Zhu & Zhang,

2010). Literature on review distribution characteristics, especially “WOM polarization,” remains scarce. As personalized consumption emerges, polarized WOM becomes increasingly common. How consumers perceive polarizing products, which consumers will purchase them, what mechanisms underlie these effects, and what boundary conditions constrain them—all lack in-depth exploration. This project uses self-construal theory as a breakthrough to explore self-construal’s influence on preference for polarizing products, its mediating mechanisms, and boundary conditions, constructing a theoretical model with multiple mediating mechanisms as shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

First, revealing the metaphorical meaning of WOM polarization to understand consumer cognition is the foundation and prerequisite for subsequent research. Beyond the direct effect of increasing quality uncertainty and perceived risk, we propose that WOM polarization may also generate “perceived uniqueness.” WOM polarization is not equivalent to high variance; variance only indicates market heterogeneity, which is common and does not reflect reviewers’ personality characteristics (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). From structural anthropology perspective, humans tend to dichotomize the world, a cognitive approach that helps identify differences and essentially defines (Levi-Strauss, 1972). Applying this theory, WOM polarization expresses opposing views from two camps, releasing signals of consumers’ personality characteristics. Thus, purchasing such products represents self-definition and expression (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). Research finds that self-expressive products are often unconventional and non-traditional (Maimaran & Simonson, 2011), leading us to expect that WOM polarization also has a positive effect of highlighting target product “uniqueness.” Additionally, polarization presents two distinct opposing viewpoints that may trigger associations with “conflict” and “contradiction,” giving products conflictual characteristics.

Second, these features of polarizing products align perfectly with typical differences between independent and interdependent self-construal in need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus. Therefore, we propose self-construal as an important antecedent variable affecting preference for polarizing products, expecting need for uniqueness, conflict resolution style, and regulatory focus as three mediating pathways. Specifically, self-construal expresses how individuals view self-other relationships. According to classic self-construal theory, independent self-construal individuals view the self as separate from others, maintaining an “independent” view, while interdependent self-construal individuals view themselves as part of surrounding relationships, maintaining an “interdependent” view (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These fundamental cognitive differences lead to significant psychological and behavioral differences. First, the “independent” view makes independent self-construal individuals (compared to interdependent) more likely to pursue differentiation, thus having stronger uniqueness needs (Wang et al., 2017). Consumers with high uniqueness needs show stronger uniqueness perception and consumption preference for products with uniqueness implications (Song & Lee, 2013). Thus, we expect that dif-

ferences in uniqueness needs lead independent self-construal individuals to prefer polarizing products more than interdependent individuals—that is, need for uniqueness mediates the relationship. Second, different self-construal individuals' views of self-other relationships directly affect their conflict resolution styles: independent self-construal individuals' "independent" view makes them more accepting of individual differences and contradictions, thus more able to confront and accept conflict; interdependent self-construal individuals' "interdependent" view makes them prefer harmony and fear conflict, thus more likely to avoid or compromise when facing conflict (Ting-Toomey et al., 2001). Research shows that individuals' approaches to interpersonal conflict generalize to non-interpersonal contexts (Zhang et al., 2006). Therefore, we introduce the effect of conflict resolution style differences into product consumption contexts, expecting that independent self-construal individuals will more accept and prefer polarizing products with conflictual and contradictory implications—that is, conflict resolution style also mediates the relationship. Finally, research finds independent self-construal individuals tend to adopt promotion-focused regulatory styles, attending to positive aspects, while interdependent self-construal individuals adopt prevention-focused styles, attending to losses and risks (Lee et al., 2000). Thus, we expect independent self-construal individuals to focus more on uniqueness implications, while interdependent individuals focus more on risk features, leading to different preferences—that is, regulatory focus is also a mediator.

Third, because polarizing products possess both positive (uniqueness) and negative (conflict, shopping risk) features, preference will depend on the importance of different features, which relates to specific shopping contexts and product factors. Therefore, we expect the three mediating pathways to be moderated by product and contextual factors. This project proposes that shopping risk level (high vs. low), shopping task context (self-purchase vs. other-purchase), consumption context publicity (private vs. public), and product type (utilitarian vs. hedonic) moderate the three mediating pathways.

Specifically, consumer perceived risk significantly affects decisions (Mitchell, 1999); stronger risk perception leads to weaker purchase intention (Petersen & Kumar, 2015). When risk is low, independent self-construal individuals may seek uniqueness and tolerate certain risks, thus preferring polarizing products more than interdependent individuals. When risk is high (e.g., high-priced products), purchase failure would cause significant losses, so even for independent self-construal individuals, quality uncertainty from polarization may outweigh uniqueness seeking, conflict tolerance, and promotion focus applicability, becoming the main decision factor. Thus, we expect risk level to moderate all three pathways, with effects weakening as risk increases. Second, when target products are used privately rather than publicly, reference group influence weakens. Independent self-construal individuals' self-strengthening effect through unique purchases weakens (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010), while interdependent self-construal individuals' fear of conflict also decreases. Thus, we expect that in private contexts, the effects of need for uniqueness and con-

conflict resolution style on preference will weaken—that is, consumption context publicity moderates these relationships. Third, consumer shopping goals can be divided into self-purchase and other-purchase contexts. Research finds that self-purchases focus more on uniqueness, while other-purchases focus more on risk due to uncertainty (Wu & Lee, 2016), affecting product preferences. For example, self-purchases prefer limited-edition products (more unique), while other-purchases prefer popular products (lower risk) (Wu & Lee, 2016). We expect that when purchasing for others, consumers may focus more on quality uncertainty (negative attribute) than uniqueness, narrowing preference differences between self-construal types—that is, shopping task context moderates the relationships involving need for uniqueness and regulatory focus. Finally, utilitarian and hedonic products represent an important classification: utilitarian products complete specific tasks or functions, while hedonic products satisfy consumers' subjective pleasure (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Core differences suggest utilitarian products are often necessary, while hedonic products are often considered unnecessary, making spending on hedonic products seem wasteful (Lascu, 1991). Based on these importance differences, we infer that when purchasing utilitarian products, consumers focus more on functional utility and thus attend more to risk than uniqueness. Research also shows consumers pay more attention to novelty and adventurousness when purchasing hedonic versus utilitarian products (Babin et al., 1994). Thus, we expect product type to moderate the effect of need for uniqueness, with the effect weakening for utilitarian versus hedonic purchases.

This study's theoretical contributions are: First, previous WOM research has examined either micro-level individual effects or macro-level sales effects; this study combines both perspectives, exploring micro-level effects of macro-level WOM aggregation characteristics (polarization), providing substantive extension to WOM research. Second, from personality characteristics perspective, this study introduces self-construal theory into WOM research, proposing self-construal as an important antecedent variable, and analyzing three mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions, providing new knowledge and perspectives for WOM research while extending self-construal in consumer behavior. Third, this study expects conflict resolution style to mediate the relationship, introducing this concept into consumer behavior research. Social cognition research has repeatedly demonstrated the self-construal-conflict resolution style link (Ting-Toomey et al., 2001), but few studies have applied this to marketing. This study connects conflict resolution style with product preference, expanding both concept domains and providing inspiration for future cross-disciplinary research. This project also has important practical implications. In China's collectivist culture dominated by interdependent self-construal, how to improve consumer preference and purchase intention for polarizing products is particularly important. This study's findings can help enterprises conduct precision marketing and improve marketing effectiveness for polarizing products.

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