Compound Attitudes, Customer Engagement and eWOM: An Empirical Study on WeChat

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to build a framework to explain the relationships among compound attitudes (i.e., affective attitudes, cognitive attitude), customer engagement and eWOM(electronic word of mouth) behaviors in the context of WeChat. Based on the relevant theories and practices of compound attitudes, customer engagement, and eWOM, we proposed a conceptual model. This research enhanced the understanding of compound attitudes, customer engagement, and eWOM. These finding will not only help to better understand the mechanism of eWOM communication in the context of social media, but also help the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) marketers to develop effective social media marketing strategies and build strong consumer – brand (product) relationships.

Keywords

Wechat, Social Media, Compound Attitudes, Customer Engagement, eWOM

1. Introduction

With the development of mobile internet and instant messaging, an emerging online social media platform which named WeChat, has draw great attention from marketers. Since the number of monthly active users worldwide reached 272 million as of end-September last year (Agence France-Presse [AFP], 2014), WeChat became one of the most popular online social media platforms. The rising popularity of social media in the last few years has created a new online social platform for consumers and changed the ways they communicate and exchange information (Cheung, Lee, & Jing, 2011). By using these online social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Renren, Twitter, Weibo, WhatsApp, and Wechat), consumers can connect each other and share their feelings about their favorite brands (products) with their followers, friends and family. Furthermore, the diffusion of word of mouth among consumers has become faster and more efficient than ever, and the market power of word of mouth is reaching an unprecedented scale (Dellarocas, Awad, & Zhang, 2005). In particular, Berger and Iyengar (2013) suggested that compared to traditional oral communication, written communication (e.g., eWOM) leads people to bring up more interesting products and brands.

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Recent research shows that consumers have migrated from the in-store shopping experience to online shopping engagement through a variety of means ranging from friends' recommendations, customer reviews, and ratings to how-to guides via Web 2.0 platforms (Amblee & Bui, 2011). Since online social media platforms engagement has become an important element of successful electronic commerce strategies, firms begin to treat these online social media platforms as their new "battle field"; meanwhile, in order to get public's interest and reach the actual and potential clients, marketers are more willing to focus on online social media marketing than before. Besides, signals from trusted sources (e.g., friends) are known to be most useful and effective for brands (products) that consumers have yet to experience (Kirmani & Rao, 2000), accordingly, firms were interested in delivering brand-related content that consumers will share with one another as a way of extending the reach for a message and to add an implicit consumer endorsement of the brand associated with the content(Keller & Fay, 2012); base on these theories, marketers had made lots of efforts to encourage consumers to share their comments and recommendations about the brands (products) through the online social media platforms.

In the process of this research, the relationships among compound attitudes, customer engagement, and eWOM were studied by both qualitative and quantitative research. Compound attitudes included four dimensions: brand (product) related affective attitudes, social media platform related affective attitudes, brand (product) related cognitive attitudes, and social media platform related cognitive attitudes. Customer engagement includes three dimensions: vigor, absorption, and dedication. eWOM includes three dimensions: opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing. Understanding the relationships among these constructs could not only help the marketers to develop effective social media marketing strategies and build strong consumer–brand (product) relationships, but also benefits for future studies in social media.

The research questions for this study were the following:

1. Is there a positive correlation between compound attitudes and customer engagement?
2. Is there a positive correlation between compound attitudes and eWOM?
3. Is there a positive correlation between customer engagement and eWOM?
4. Does customer engagement mediate the relationship between compound attitudes and eWOM?

This study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduced the relevant background information, justification, significance, purposes and process of the research. Section 2 reviewed the literature on WeChat, compound attitudes, customer engagement and eWOM. Later, we analyzed the relationships among these constructs and developed the hypotheses. Section 3 described the measurement of constructs, sample, data collection procedure and the quantitative methodology in detail. Section 4 presented the analysis of the data, including descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, validity analysis, correlation analysis, Offending estimate, normality test, fitness test, factors analysis, mediation effect analysis, and moderating effect analysis. Section 5 concluded the thesis with a summery, theoretical contributions and managerial implications based on the analysis of data, limitations and future direction.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Background information of WeChat

WeChat (as know as Weixin in Chinese) is a free instant messaging mobile application, which developed by Tencent Holdings Limited in China and officially launched in January 2011. August 2012, WeChat launched a new function named "Official Accounts". Later, firms (e.g., China Unicom, China Merchants Bank, China Southern Airlines Company Limited) came out with their official accounts one after another. Through the sub-function of Official Accounts (i.e., Service Accounts; Subscription Accounts), firms can push information of new products to their followers, propagandize their corporate culture, and offer customer services, etc. According to Ying Zhang the vice president from product department of WeChat, there are more than 2 million Official Accounts in WeChat till November 2013, and these accounts process over a hundred million times of interactive information everyday.

Chang (2014) indicated that social media such as WeChat has displaced print and broadcast to dominate the chinese news industry, and these emerging online social media platforms is breaking the information monopoly. Studies (e.g., Gong, 2013) pointed out that in the context of social media, the concept of precision marketing become more and more important. Since WeChat is a substitute for SMS, the relationships with mobile operators could be an obstacle for the further development of WeChat (Yan & Wu, 2013). Yu (2013) argued that WeChat is one of the best platforms for CRM. Given some functions are location-based; Tan (2012) highlighted the privacy issues in WeChat, and he claimed that these issues may hurt the users' benefit.

2.2 Attitudes

Kotler (2000) defined attitude based on the concept of human learned disposition. He developed this concept and considered attitude as being an expression of the individual personal evolution, an action tendency and an emotional feeling towards some objects or ideas. The formation of attitude depends on a series of factors: knowledge, learning, information, education, thinking, experience, lifestyle, predisposition, belief, faith or communication. It could generally be translated in good or bad, positive or negative, optimistic or pessimistic, friendly or unfriendly. Attitudes could be consistent, could change due to external factors, could be influenced by some contextual elements, or could influence attitude of other persons(Alina, 2013). Bohner and Dickel (2011) argued attitude is an evaluation of an object of thought and it objects comprise anything a person may hold in mind, ranging from the mundane to the abstract, including things, people, groups, and ideas.

Higgins (1996) indicated that judgments are rendered chronically more accessible after having been constructed many times in similar situations with the same result. Contrarily, Schwarz (2007) proposed a model to argue that attitudes are not construct from enduring personal dispositions, but more like evaluative judgments that shaped in the situation based on currently accessible information. Eagly and Chaiken (2007) presented an "umbrella definition" embrace the critical elements of tendency, entity (or attitude object), and evaluation. Cunningham, Zelazo, Packer and Van Bavel (2007) indicated that "current evaluations are constructed from relatively stable attitude representations" by using an iterative reprocessing model. Similarly,

researches proposed the "mental file-drawer" effect to assume that attitudes are stored in long-term memory, ready to be accessed and used when needed (Bohner, Erb, & Siebler, 2008; Smith & Conrey, 2007). Meanwhile "mental file-drawer" might explain the context effects on attitudes in a variety of ways (Castelli & Tomelleri, 2008; Tormala & Petty, 2007; Visser & Mirabile, 2004). Integrating these viewpoints, researches assume that attitude involves both the retrieval of stored evaluations and the consideration of new evaluative information to varying extents and people process information with the result of forming an evaluation of an object of thought (Crano & Prislin, 2006; Walthe & Langer, 2008).

2.3 Customer engagement

In the last two decades, the term ''engagement'' has been used extensively in fields including psychology, sociology, political science, and organizational behavior, leading to a variety of conceptual approaches that highlight different aspects of the concept (Hollebeek, 2011). The concept of engagement has been explored in the organizational behavior literature as a means to explain organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior and has been subsequently utilized as one means by which to predict financial performance (Saks 2006). Within the organizational behavior literature, engagement has been defined as "task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others," which are expressed physically, cognitively, and emotionally and which stimulate personal development and increase employee motivation (Kahn, 1990).

Brodie et al., (2011) distinguished the engagement from ''involvement'', the concepts of ''involvement'' and ''participation,'' in marketing literatures may be viewed as customer engagement antecedents, rather than dimensions. Specifically, customer engagement is suggested to extend beyond involvement in that it encompasses a proactive, interactive customer relationship with a specific engagement object (e.g., Mollen & Wilson, 2010) which distinguish engagement from the ''participation'' and ''involvement'' concepts, because the latter fail to reflect the notion of interactive, cocreative experiences as comprehensively as does customer engagement. The rationale underlying this assertion is that customer engagement, including ''involvement'' and ''participation'', is different from traditional relational concepts. Customer engagement is based on the existence of a customer's interactive, cocreative experiences with a specific engagement object (e.g., a brand). Involvement and Social interactions in an online social platform will have a positive effect on customer engagement in an online social platform (Cheung, Lee, & Jing, 2011).

Customer engagement, as a concept, emerged recently in the marketing literature as an evolution of the relational paradigm advocating ongoing company–customer interaction (Haven, 2007; Patterson, Yu, & De Ruyter, 2006; Vivek, 2009), as a basis for gaining a better understanding of customer needs and expectations, increasing chances of meeting those needs and expectations and, as a result, for fostering a series of transactional (repurchase, loyalty) and non-transactional behaviors (commitment, word-of-mouth and customer-to-customer recommendations). These behaviors do not usually have an immediate impact on company cash-flows as they are not directly linked to a transaction – but are particularly valuable as they contribute to generating present and future value, enable firms to better attend to customers, enhance brand image and capture new clients (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

2.4 eWOM

Arndt (1967) defined Word-of-mouth (WOM) as an informal communications among consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of products and services, including their sellers. Later, researchers made lots of effort to try to figure out the mechanism of WOM spreading. Early studies used psychological properties (e.g., customer satisfaction) to predict WOM behaviors (Swan & Oliver, 1989); the motivations for altruism, involvement, and self- enhancement are also conducive to generating positive WOM (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998).

The term electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" in the most cited article of eWOM (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). Prior research has focused on eWOM as a signal of product quality, a dimension of product reputation(Amblee & Bui, 2011). Recently, study regards eWOM as spreading behaviors which consumers post their personal experiences (e.g., online review; arguments; recommendations) of specific products or services and generate convictive effects on the targeted receivers by using the internet(Shih, Lai, & Cheng, 2013).

Chu and Kim (2011) indicated that eWOM in SNSs (i.e., Social Network Sites) conceptually included three aspects: opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing. When consumers making a purchase decision, some of them are more likely to search for information and advices from others because of they had a high level of opinion seeking behavior (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996). In contrast the opinion leaders who with a high level of opinion giving behavior may cause significant influence on others' behavior and attitude by spreading their comments (Feick & Price 1987). Dellarocas (2003), Norman and Russell (2006) argued that under the online social context, opinion passing behavior could easy reach to the receivers since the multidirectional communications on the internet is quite a common thing. Hence, Chu and Kim (2011) pointed out that opinion passing behavior is a supplement concept of eWOM in SNSs.

2.5 Critique

The preceding literature review reflects a substantial amount of research on the subjects of WeChat, attitude, customer engagement, and eWOM. Scholars in Mainland China showed enormous enthusiasm in study WeChat, the research topics including: the commercial potential of WeChat, CRM in WeChat, etc. However, most of the articles have its basis in practice rather than in theory or empirical research, after search Wanfang Data and CNKI, no empirical study of WeChat was found in these databases, and researchers didn't figure out the mechanism of social media commerce in WeChat till now. According to marketing literatures, attitude is a predictor of consumers' behavior, however, one of the major drawbacks of these studies is the failure to address how attitude influence customer engagement and eWOM behavior. Hollebeek (2011) indicated that the specific types of engagement antecedents, or drivers, are limited to date. Very few researches focus on the concept of customer online social media engagement, and it understood in a very vague and unsystematic way. Little theory-guided research has been undertaken to understand the nature of customer engagement, and its antecedents and consequences in the specific context of online social platforms (Cheung et. al., 2011). Most studies regard eWOM as an antecedent of expectation, perception, behavioral

intention, and behavioral intention, in contract, not many scholars emphasize eWOM as an outcome variable in their conceptual frameworks, and the communication process and communication effectiveness of eWOM are still not clear. Hence, our study will endeavor to bridge these gaps by figuring out the relationships among attitude, customer engagement and eWOM in the context of WeChat.

3. Research framework

3.1 Relationship between attitude and customer engagement

According to Saks (2006), engagement is argued to be positively related to individuals' attitudes. Numerous evidences demonstrated that attitudes guide the processing of information and influence behavior(Bohner & Dickel, 2011); it also determine what people see, hear, think, and do things (Allport, 1935). Calder and Malthouse (2008) indicated that ''media engagement'' is ''the sum of the motivational experiences consumers have with a media product''; and the experiences could be customer's attitudes toward online social media platform.

Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) indicated that engagement is a "pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual or behavior". The dyadic view also presumes the affective and cognitive dimensions to be independent variables that affect behavioral intention(Yang & Yoo, 2004). Mollen and Wilson (2010) argued that online brand engagement is the customer's cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value.

Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that attitudes will affect customer engagement. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated to explore the relationships between attitude and customer engagement in the context of online social media:

H1a. Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences vigor
H1b. Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences absorption
H1c. Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences dedication

H2a. Social media platform related affective attitudes positively influences vigor
H2b. Social media platform related affective attitudes positively influences absorption
H2c. Social media platform related affective attitudes positively influences dedication

H3a. Brand (product) related cognitive attitudes positively influences vigor
H3b. Brand (product) related cognitive attitudes positively influences absorption
H3c. Brand (product) related cognitive attitudes positively influences dedication

H4a. Social media platform related cognitive attitudes positively influences vigor
H4b. Social media platform related cognitive attitudes positively influences absorption
H4c. Social media platform related cognitive attitudes positively influences dedication

3.2 Relationship between attitude and eWOM

Sherif and Hovland (1961) suggested that judgments of objects can be affected by contextual factors eWOM. In some situations, the same person could have contradictory beliefs about a brand, being also positive about it in some situations, and negative in other situations; starting from these beliefs, a consumer could develop certain feelings (e.g., attitude) towards a brand or product; in accordance with these feelings, a consumer will manifest behavioral (e.g., eWOM) intention directed to a specific brand or product; in other word a good impression and a positive attitude will reflect in a positive evaluation of the brand or product(Alina, 2013). Studies pointed out that engaged customers may experience confidence in the brand, belief in its integrity, pride in the brand, and a passion for it (McEwen, 2001; McEwen, 2004; McEwen and Fleming 2003). Saks (2006) argued that engagement positively related to individuals' intentions and behaviors.

Social judgment theory assumed that people would judge and assimilate new information base on existing feelings, and existing attitudes which treated as a sort of behavior guiding framework significant affect the process of information (Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1993). When an assimilation effect occurs, judgments and contextual information are correlated positively, i.e. a positive context stimulus results in a positive judgment, whereas a negative context stimulus results in a negative judgment (Schwarz, 2007).

Given the discussion above, following hypotheses are formulated to explore the relationships between attitude and customer engagement. Thus, following hypotheses are formulated to figure out the relationships between attitude and eWOM in the context of online social media:

H5a. Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences opinion seeking
H5b. Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences opinion giving
H5c. Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences opinion passing
H6a. Social media platform related affective attitudes positively influences opinion seeking
H6b. Social media platform related affective attitudes positively influences opinion giving
H6c. Social media platform related affective attitudes positively influences opinion passing
H7a. Brand (product) related cognitive attitudes positively influences opinion seeking
H7b. Brand (product) related cognitive attitudes positively influences opinion giving
H7c. Brand (product) related cognitive attitudes positively influences opinion passing
H8a. Social media platform related cognitive attitudes positively influences opinion seeking
H8b. Social media platform related cognitive attitudes positively influences opinion giving
H8c. Social media platform related cognitive attitudes positively influences opinion passing

3.3 Relationship between customer engagement and eWOM

Brodie et al (2011) identify that engaged customers play a key role in viral marketing activity by providing referrals and recommendations for specific products, services, or brands to others(Brodie et al., 2011). Similarly, for repeat purchase to happen, the

marketer not only has to keep the brand salient in the consumer's mind but also has to keep the customer 'engaged' to the brand; the customer should not only be satisfied with the product but should also be willing to promote, defend and do battle with others, on behalf of the product (Tripathi, 2009). eWOM could be considered as one of these promotion behaviors. Beside, Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) suggested that customer is positively associated with an individual's word-of-mouth activity.

Bowden (2009) argued that emotional bonds within a brand-relationship ultimately drive repeat patronage and WOM recommendation. Chu and Kim (2011) indicated that relational bond between consumers and online consumer discussion forums, should play a key role in shaping eWOM behaviors. Cheung et al., (2011) suggest that a customer willing to invest physical, cognitive and emotional effort into an online platform will also have a higher propensity to spread word-of-mouth communication about it. Further more, if a customer is willing to invest personal energy (physically, emotionally, and cognitively) into an online social platform, he or she will have a higher propensity to participate in activities on the online social platform, as well as to spread word-of-mouth communication about the platform (Cheung et al., 2011).

From these perspectives, it is reasonable to argue that customer engagement will affect eWOM. Hence, following hypotheses are formulated to explore the relationships between customer engagement and eWOM in the context of online social media:

H9a. Vigor positively influences opinion seeking
H9b. Vigor positively influences opinion giving
H9c. Vigor positively influences opinion passing
H10a. Absorption positively influences opinion seeking
H10b Absorption positively influences opinion giving
H10c. Absorption positively influences opinion passing
H11a. Dedication positively influences opinion seeking
H11b. Dedication positively influences opinion giving
H11c. Dedication positively influences opinion passing

3.4 Mediating role of customer engagement

To this point, we have argued affective attitude and cognitive attitude will guide the processing of information and influence behavior. Cheung et al., (2011) suggested that if a customer is willing to invest personal energy (physically, emotionally, and cognitively) into an online social platform, he or she will have a higher propensity to participate in activities on the online social platform, as well as to spread word-of-mouth communication about the platform. Indeed, researchers indicated that customer engagement may be manifested cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, or socially, the cognitive and affective elements of customer engagement incorporate the experiences and feelings of customers (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Hence we argued here that customer engagement plays an important role in explaining the relationships among attitude and eWOM. In other word, we have implicitly described a model in which customer engagement mediates relationships between compound attitudes and eWOM behavior. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

H12. Customer engagement mediates the relationship between compound attitudes and eWOM behavior

# 4. Conclusions and discussions
4.1 Conclusions
This research examined the relationships among compound attitude, customer engagement and eWOM in the context of WeChat. We analyzed these relationships in different dimensional levels, the results from structural equation model indicated that Brand (product) related affective attitudes positively influences vigor, absorption, dedication, opinion giving, and opinion seeking; social media platform related affective attitudes are positively associated with vigor, absorption, dedication, opinion giving, and opinion passing; Brand (product) related cognitive attitude positively influences vigor, absorption, opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing; social media platform related cognitive attitude are positively associated with vigor, absorption, dedication, opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing; vigor positively influences opinion seeking and opinion passing; absorption are positively associated with opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing; dedication positively influences opinion seeking and opinion passing. Beside, we also concerned that whether or not customer engagement mediates the relationship between compound attitudes and eWOM behaviors.

4.2 Theoretical contributions
Theory of reasoned action, social cognitive theory, theory of planned behavior, and decomposed theory of planned behavior model indicated that attitudes directly link to behavior intention or behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen, & Fishbein, 1980; Bandura, 2001; Shih, & Fang, 2004). Our research reinforced these theories by empirically demonstrating the relationships between compound attitude and eWOM. Further more, we found that in the context of WeChat, Brand (product) related affective attitude are not positively associated with opinion passing and Social media platform related affective attitude are not positively associated opinion seeking.

Our study enhanced the understanding of compound attitudes, customer engagement, and eWOM behaviors by delineating the eWOM process in WeChat. We empirically investigated the customer engagement as an important antecedent for eWOM behaviors in the context of online social media, which is lack of empirical evidence before. What more, the empirical evidence indicated that compound attitudes which consist by brand related attitudes and social media related attitudes are convictive to predict customer engagement behavior. Accordingly, our conceptual model is representative in the emerging online social media platforms.

Figure 3.1 Research model

Compound attitudes
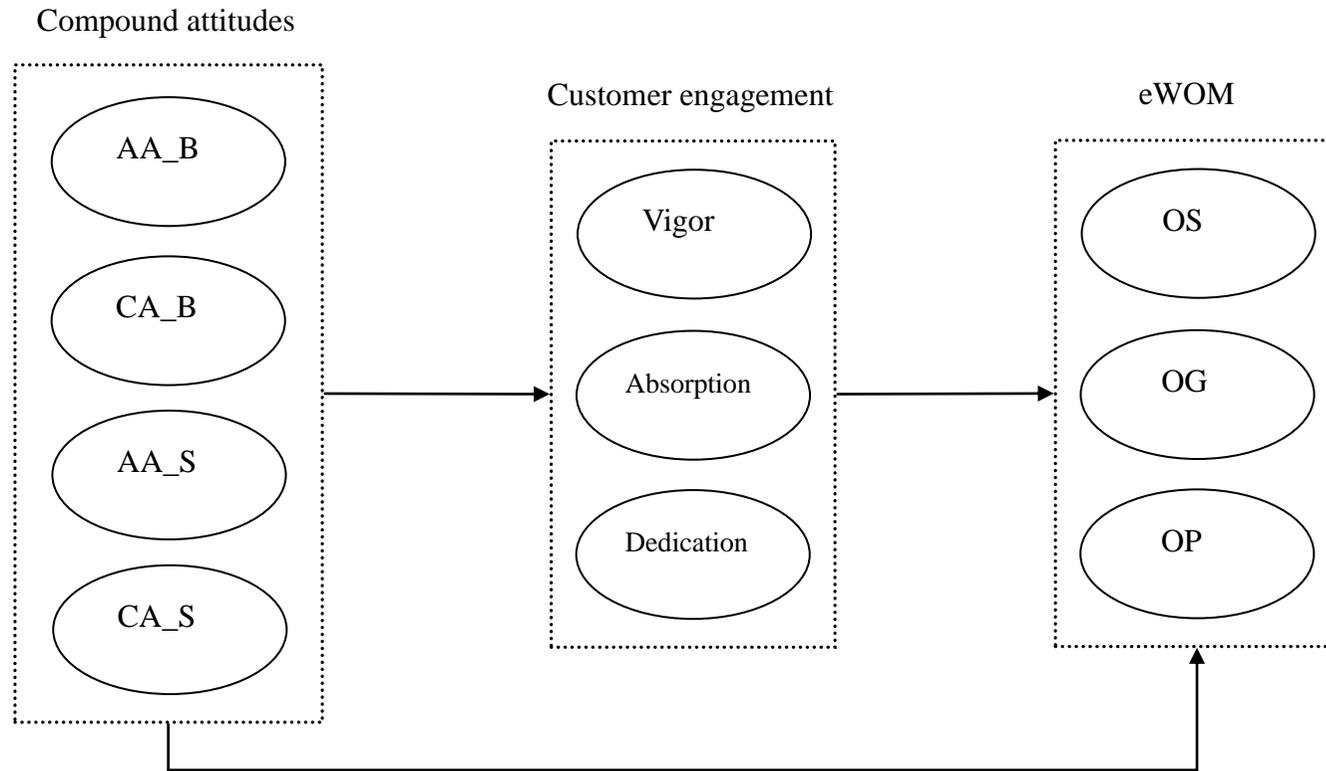
Note. AA_B = brand (product) related affective attitudes, AA_S = social media platform related affective attitudes,
CA_B = brand (product) related cognitive attitudes, CA_S = social media platform related cognitive attitudes,
OS = opinion seeking, OG = opinion giving, OP = opinion passing.

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