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A prideful posting a day keeps admiring readers awake: voluntary bloggers in a self-construal framework

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ABSTRACT

This study develops a self-construal framework containing both individual- and social-level variables to explain bloggers' inner motivations to create contents voluntarily. With the aim of bridging the gaps in previous blogger-related studies, this research explores intrinsic and psychological benefits behind voluntary bloggers' sharing behaviour via social network sites or weblogs. The proposed structural equation model is tested with survey data from 414 bloggers, and all hypotheses are statistically supported. The findings indicate that voluntary bloggers' involvement results from self-reassurance, which is induced by a self-construction process comprising both independent and interdependent selves. This study enriches extant literature on bloggers' behaviour by incorporating self-construal theory into the sphere of creating contents. In essence, the self-construal model paves the way for future comprehensive psychological frameworks, which can help researchers and practitioners deepen their understanding of blogger enthusiasm in self-building.

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Voluntary blogger; blogger involvement; self-construal theory; independent self-construal; interdependent self-construal; self-building

1. Introduction

In the Internet era, weblogs have become one of the most important platforms for people to acquire and share their thoughts, feelings, or information through interactions (Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005; Wang et al. 2015). Many for-profit organisations use weblogs to gather market information and conduct marketing plans (Dearstyne 2005; Ojala 2005; O'Leary 2011). As initiators and maintainers of weblogs, bloggers (i.e. 'blog writers') have two key functions: information intermediaries and content creators. First, bloggers can serve their 'relay roles' like opinion leaders in interpreting and passing information to others, as suggested by the two-step flow theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). In this sense, bloggers are essentially 'digital influencers' who facilitate the viral dissemination of information (Uzunoğlu and Kip 2014). Second, bloggers are also vigorous content contributors who post their thoughts, opinions, personal reflections or experiences, commentary on certain subject, gossip, and so on. Consequently, blogging in the digital era is a huge engine for generating electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

Although not all blog posts are produced with specific marketing purposes, some 'sponsored blog posts' are backed by a third party (such as a brand marketer) (Hwang and Jeong 2016; Mutum and Wang 2010). In

exchange for their provision of sponsored content, some bloggers are rewarded with direct monetary compensations or indirect benefits/subsidies (Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014). Similar to 'sponsored bloggers' who become key contributors in influencer marketing, these incentive-driven bloggers are reimbursed for generating eWOM in social media in favour of specific brand owners or organisations (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks 2019). These paid bloggers post informative news, opinions, comments, reviews, and product experiences, yet sometimes the highly incentivized posts may go astray. When a blogger's role as an invisible 'internet ghostwriter' backfires, his/her perceived credibility and unbiasedness is at stake Hwang and Jeong (2016) have found that bloggers' disclosure of sponsorship (e.g. a declaration of 'this is a sponsored post') might lead to users' lower source credibility perceptions and less favourable message attitudes. At times, there may even be anger or indignation if consumers find deliberately posted disinformation reflects an aggressive advertising or promoting goal.

On the other hand, 'voluntary bloggers' are those who voluntarily maintain and edit their weblogs without being commercially affiliated with any specific entity. Voluntary bloggers' primary motivations are often self-expression, networking, and identity management (Erz,

Marder, and Osadchaya 2018; Fullwood, Nicholls, and Makichi 2015; Fullwood, Sheehan, and Nicholls 2009; Liu, Min, and Han 2020; Panteli, Yan, and Chamakiotis 2011). Oftentimes, blog users are highly concerned about bloggers' trustworthiness and impartiality when a huge part of users' consumption choices hinge on bloggers' opinions. Consequently, consumers would rather trust voluntary bloggers, because they believe non-purposive and organically generated eWOM and information-sharing contain warranted truthfulness (Chang, Lee, and Huang 2010; Hussain et al. 2018; Johnson and Kaye 2004; Wang et al. 2015). In the blogosphere full of diverse or even conflicting information, voluntary bloggers are more likely to become key opinion leaders, with strong influential power in the process of consumers' purchase decision-making (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018; Ki and Kim 2019).

This study focuses on voluntary bloggers, namely those who blog of their own accord without the expectation of receiving extrinsic payment or rewards from specific sponsoring entities. Voluntary bloggers are worthy of academic attention with three main reasons. First, non-purposive eWOM has probably a higher likelihood of earning consumer trust. Second, it is worthwhile for researchers to explore why voluntary bloggers do not seek extrinsic compensation for their provision of weblog content. Third, given the non-purposive nature of voluntary bloggers, companies must seriously consider the necessity of mobilising bloggers' support without using traditional financial incentives. To identify the common thread upon which all these three reasons hang, we need to investigate the crucial motivator of voluntary blogging behaviour.

To date, the literature on bloggers' motivation and behaviour is relatively fragmented, due to a lack of cohesive or systematic theoretical foundation. Accordingly, our review of the existing blogger-related studies identifies three major research gaps which need to be resolved. *Firstly*, researchers and practitioners have previously paid scant attention to voluntary bloggers' intent on eWOM sharing. In the past, researchers have tried to identify the motivating factors for bloggers to actively construct blogs, including personal, psychological or social reasons, personality features, gratifications received from blogging, ways of communication/expression, and so on (Fullwood, Nicholls, and Makichi 2015; Fullwood, Sheehan, and Nicholls 2009; Guadagno, Okdie, and Eno 2008; Harju, Pehkonen, and Niemi 2016; Nardi et al. 2004; Sepp, Liljander, and Gummerus 2011; Stefanone and Jang 2007). Other scholars have endeavoured to explore sponsored blogging behaviour from various perspectives (Hwang and Jeong 2016; Lu, Chang, and Chang 2014; Uzunoğlu and Kip 2014). All

in all, what stimulate voluntary bloggers in the blogosphere hasn't been systematically assessed.

Secondly, there's still a strong need to probe into voluntary bloggers' 'inner selves' and understand their grounds of self-definition. In general, to construct and 'label' their specific selves, people can hold two different beliefs: beliefs regarding the self as distinct from others, and beliefs concerning the relationship of the self to others. Earlier studies have focused on the former (i.e. 'distinct self' beliefs) to explore bloggers' motivations (e.g. Gannon and Prothero 2016; Guadagno, Okdie, and Eno 2008; Herring et al. 2005; Huang et al. 2007; Lee, Im, and Taylor 2008; Park, Ahn, and Kim 2010; Qian and Scott 2007; Siles 2012; Zhang et al. 2009). Other pieces of research have emphasised the latter (i.e. 'self-to-other' beliefs) to investigate blogging motivations (e.g. Smith 2010; Stefanone and Jang 2007; Tian 2013; Wang and Lin 2011). A very limited number of studies adopted both perspectives (e.g. Chang and Yang 2013; Fullwood, Nicholls, and Makichi 2015; Hsu and Lin 2008; Miura and Yamashita 2007). So far, we haven't found any dual-focus frameworks which examine the impact of both self concepts (defined independently of others and interdependently with others). A lack of academic endeavours in this regard therefore triggers our study.

Thirdly, people in the real world frequently find it difficult to either distinguish reward-driven blog content from non-purposive eWOM sharing or segregate voluntary and non-voluntary bloggers. Under such circumstances, people's reliance on blog content may cause their vulnerability to lopsided or misleading information. Luckily, governmental agencies such as FTC in the U.S. have promulgated rules requesting appropriate disclosure of sponsorship information by bloggers. Regulations in this regard make it practically possible for researchers to investigate why voluntary bloggers willingly share eWOM which has a significant impact on consumers' purchase decisions (Chang, Lee, and Huang 2010; Hussain et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2015).

The objective of this research is to pinpoint the underlying triggering factors which bolster voluntary bloggers' commitment to non-sponsored eWOM sharing, and understand the intrinsic and psychological driving forces for their blogging engagement. Specifically, we intend to uncover the antecedents and consequences of voluntary bloggers' vigorous involvement in non-sponsored blogging. Our research framework is conceptually built on the self-construal theory which was first coined by Markus and Kitayama (1991) and has been widely applied in self-related research in psychology (see Cross, Hardin, and Gercek-Swing 2011 for a review). As suggested by Markus and Kitayama (1991), western civilisation

essentially construe the self as individual and distinctive from others (i.e. 'the independent self-construal'), while East Asian cultures fundamentally construe the self as connected to others and defined by relationships with others (i.e. 'the interdependent self-construal') (Cross, Hardin, and Gercek-Swing 2011). Recent research on self-construal has considered both independent and interdependent self-construal as they can coexist and wield their respective influences (Aaker and Lee 2001; Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Hu, Zhang, and Luo 2016; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). Yet so far there're no empirical studies addressing both self-construal concepts in blog-related research.

In this paper, we develop a comprehensive, dual-route model incorporating both independent and interdependent self-construal to explain voluntary blogging behavior. To empirically examine how bloggers' construction of their selves can achieve self-reassurance and enhance involvement, we apply the structural equation modelling method to a set of survey data to verify our hypotheses. The research findings ultimately support all hypotheses and prove that the motivations of bloggers' involvement in blogging derive from the construction of their independent and interdependent selves, which leads to self-reassurance. This study contributes not only to the blogger-related literature, but also to marketing and communication research fields, as there are profound implications for so many industries.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: the next section reviews prior literature associated with bloggers and self-construal theory. After that, the hypotheses and conceptual framework are proposed. Next, the methodology, including sampling, measurement development, and the adopted analytical method, is illustrated and the descriptive statistics, the measurement and validation of the structural model, and hypotheses testing results are presented. The paper ends with a discussion of the findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Voluntary bloggers' motivations and sharing behaviours

In the past few decades, scholars have proposed many motivations for blogging and sharing behaviours. In exploring bloggers' motivation, past scholars have paid lots of attentions. Huang et al. (2007) have asserted blogger' motivations differ from types of weblogs. For example, video or photo weblogs (e.g. MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr) are typically used for self-expression; weblogs of personal online diaries are created for life documenting; political weblogs mostly serve the purpose

of commenting; project weblogs are for community forum participation; and aggregator weblogs, such as investment-related aggregator blogs, attract readers because of the need for information.

Following the stream of research on bloggers' motivation, Sepp, Liljander, and Gummerus (2011) have provided a more comprehensive classification. Using gratification theory, blogger motivations were divided into process gratification, content gratification, and social gratification. Process motivations include enjoying oneself (e.g. Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010; Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006; Hsu and Lin 2008; Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece 2006), enjoying helping others (e.g. Lee et al. 2006), managing and venting emotions (e.g. Chung and Kim 2008; Nardi et al. 2004), improving the self (e.g. Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006; Nardi et al. 2004), or seeking escapism (e.g. Courtois et al. 2009; Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010; Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006; Huang et al. 2007). Content motivations include documenting life (e.g. Huang et al. 2007; Nardi et al. 2004), commenting (e.g. Huang et al. 2007; Nardi et al. 2004), searching information (Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010; Huang et al. 2007; Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece 2006), sharing information (Chung and Kim 2008), or entertaining others (e.g. Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece 2006). Social blogging motivations include supporting the community forum (e.g. Huang et al. 2007; Nardi et al. 2004; Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece 2006), receiving empathetic support (e.g. Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece 2006), presenting the self (e.g. Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010; Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006), finding people like oneself (e.g. Dunne, Lawlor, and Rowley 2010; Grace-Farfaglia et al. 2006; Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece 2006), or expecting reciprocal benefits (Lee et al. 2006). However, although the listed motivations are useful to explain voluntarily blogging and sharing behaviours, they may or may not be the determinants. The current research aims to fill this research gap.

Wasko and Faraj (2005) investigate sharing behaviours using social capital theory as a basis. In their view, sharing behaviours in virtual communities are encouraged by individual motivations (i.e. reputation and enjoying helping), structural capital (i.e. centrality), cognitive capital (i.e. self-rated expertise and tenure in the field), and relational capital (i.e. commitment and reciprocity). Chang and Chuang (2011) apply such social capital theory concepts as structural dimension (i.e. social interaction), relational dimension (i.e. trust, identification, and reciprocity), and cognitive dimension (i.e. shared language) to explain knowledge-sharing motivations and behaviours, adopting participant involvement as a moderator. Hsu et al. (2007) examine the

relationships among trust, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations as factors that determine knowledge-sharing behaviours in virtual communities. Yu, Lu, and Liu (2010) propose that enjoying helping, sharing culture (i.e. fairness, identification, and openness), and usefulness/relevancy are the major factors influencing knowledge-sharing behaviours via weblogs. However, the proposed frameworks associated with sharing behaviours remain fragmented and fail to simultaneously consider both the individual- and social-aspects. The self-construal model suggested herein is a more integrated one for explaining voluntary bloggers' motivations and blogging behaviours.

2.2. Self-construal theory: the independent and interdependent selves

Self-construal theory posits that individuals may construct their specific selves to differentiate themselves from others. 'Self-construal' is a psychological term that describes how individuals perceive, comprehend, and interpret the world, and it refers to individuals' sense of self in relation to others and affects the degree to which individuals see themselves as separate from or connected with others (Atakan, Bagozzi, and Yoon 2014). Self-construal implicitly shapes individuals' cognitions, emotions, and motivations (Cross and Madson 1997; Markus and Kitayama 1991). Researchers maintain that individuals have at least two selves, the independent self and the interdependent self (Markus et al. 1991; Singelis 1994). Prior studies (e.g. Markus et al. 1991) show that individuals with an independent self-construal perspective tend to consider themselves distinct from others. They perceive themselves as separate and distinct, with unique personality traits, perceptions, emotions, judgments, and actions. By contrast, individuals with an interdependent self-construal view perceive themselves as part of a group (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are strongly connected with and less differentiated from their social contexts, relationships, or organisations.

Self-construal, as a collection of thoughts, feelings, and actions, is often used to describe an individual's status, and it is strongly connected with his/her cultural backgrounds (Akpınar, Verlegh, and Smidts 2018; Triandis and Gelfand 2012). Previous studies have pointed out that people from western culture tend to exhibit independent self-construal, while people of a non-western cultural background lean toward interdependent self-construal (e.g. Gardner, Gabriel, and Lee 1999; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Triandis 1995; Triandis and Gelfand 2012). Individuals with independent self-construal has been labelled as individualistic, egocentric, idiocentric, and self-contained,

while those with interdependent self-construal care more about the interpersonal relationships and social-connected contexts. The self-construal theory postulates that people can have independent self-construal or interdependent self-construal (Dogan 2019; Hawi and Samaha 2019; Markus and Kitayama 1991). The independent and interdependent selves are created by different cultures (i.e. individualism or collectivism), and each individual should have one self-construal trait (Markus and Kitayama 1991). By contrast, other researchers argue that most individuals have dynamic self-construal, with both independent and interdependent characteristics (e.g. Aaker and Lee 2001; Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Hu, Zhang, and Luo 2016; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007). However, previous research has seldom examined the notion that both self-construal concepts simultaneously exist regardless of people's original cultural background.

In this study, we adopt a 'dual-route process' view to define people's efforts toward 'construction of self.' In our opinion, 'construction-of-self' endeavours should be a dynamic process for individuals trying to build up their inner minds rather than just a static status or trait. Besides, following the notion of Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli (2007), we also believe it justifiable to include both independent and interdependent self-construal concepts in a dual-route framework and determine how they work simultaneously. The two-in-one self-construal model combining independent and interdependent selves could help explain voluntary bloggers' motivations and behaviours in terms of both self- and social-aspects.

In our opinions, past definitions of self-construal (i.e. independent or interdependent self) is used to describe an individual's status. It helps us distinguish persons with different traits. However, consistent with the notion of dynamic self-construal, we propose that both independent and interdependent selves can exist in one's personally, and it should be a dynamic evolution process of self-construction. Therefore, we apply the dynamic self-construal proposition and extend it to our self-construal model of voluntary bloggers, which consists of the independent and interdependent selves, and this self-construction process helps bloggers achieve self-reassurance. Through this self-construction process, self-reassurance ultimately leads to higher levels of blogger involvement.

3. Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

Our conceptual framework (see Figure 1), which is based on the foundation of self-construal theory, maintains that the independent and interdependent selves always

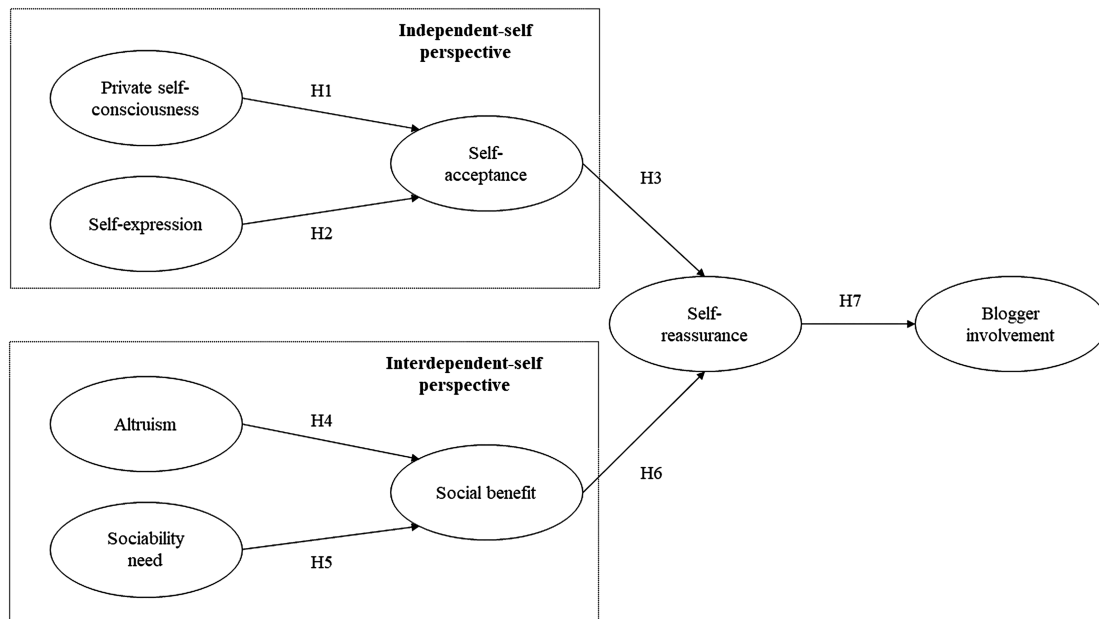


Figure 1. Research framework.

exist simultaneously in an individual's mind, consistent with Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli's (2007) conceptualisation. The self-construction process derived from extant literature is integrated into our self-construal framework to shed more light on voluntary bloggers' motivations and behaviours. In the following subsections, we use previous research as a basis to posit reasonable and testable hypotheses for the links between each construct in the framework.

3.1. Independent-self concepts and self-reassurance: self-acceptance arising from private self-consciousness and self-expression

To construct independent-self concepts for voluntary bloggers, we adopt the self-enhancement mechanism. Self-enhancement, which is motivated by the need to view oneself in a positive light and to protect the self from negative information, has long been considered one of the basic tendencies of the self (Taylor and Brown 1988). As Hogg and Cooper (2007) note, self-enhancement affirms the self, suggesting the pursuit of a more positive self-view (i.e. self-promotion) or maintaining or defending an already positive self-view (i.e. self-protection). In the self-enhancement mechanism, self-esteem is a more concrete term for us to measure. Rosenberg (1979) defines 'self-esteem' as a person's evaluation of his or her objectified self and 'global self-esteem' as a person's respect for him- or herself as a whole, including self-acceptance, self-respect, and feelings of self-worth. Kaplan (1978) posits a self-enhancement thesis from which he develops a theoretical

model based on a measure of self-esteem that combines both positive (self-acceptance) and negative (self-rejection) dimensions. 'Self-acceptance' denotes a class of psychological phenomena that involves taking a tendentially positive view of oneself (Sedikides and Gregg 2008) and allows a person to develop a favourable self-view (Hoorens 1993). We use the term 'self-acceptance' herein as the most appropriate construct.

Using the self-enhancement mechanism as a basis, we then propose that private self-consciousness and self-expression are two relevant factors that lead to self-acceptance. When self-acceptance is achieved, self-reassurance is also improved. According to Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975), self-consciousness comprises both private and public self-consciousness. Private self-consciousness denotes the tendency to attend to one's own thoughts and feelings (i.e. the covert aspects of the self); it focuses on one's inner emotions and attitudes, away from the sight of others (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975; Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita 1998). Public self-consciousness refers to the tendency to attend to the self as others view it (i.e. the overt aspects of the self); it emphasises how one is viewed by others (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975; Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita 1998). Research suggests that individuals with high private self-consciousness tend to attach a higher value to personal identity than social identity (Cheek and Briggs 1982) and behave in accordance with their own feelings, attitudes, and perceived rights (e.g. Scheier 1976). In this paper, we adopt the concept of private self-consciousness because it is more suitable to measure the independent-self-concern in our self-construal model.

Voluntary bloggers who have higher private self-consciousness tend to blog with an introspective motive and anticipate inner benefits to the self, especially the ability to understand themselves more deeply (Miura and Yamashita 2007). Through the process of writing weblogs, bloggers learn more about themselves and obtain private self-consciousness. Then, bloggers who have higher private self-consciousness achieve self-acceptance through blogging. Thus, we hypothesise the following:

H1: Private self-consciousness is positively related to self-acceptance.

Previous studies cite self-expression as a motivating factor that contributes to blogging behaviour (e.g. Fullwood, Nicholls, and Makichi 2015; Fullwood, Sheehan, and Nicholls 2009). Self-expression denotes the tendency of projecting one's own thoughts and ideas into the world (Kim and Sherman 2007). According to Miura and Yamashita (2007), bloggers acquire a higher level of self-understanding and become more capable of coping with problems when writing weblogs. We further posit that it helps them then achieve self-acceptance. Thus:

H2: Self-expression is positively related to self-acceptance.

Self-reassurance is the tendency to connect with other people to reassure the self of its worth (Joiner et al. 1999). Individuals with higher self-reassurance needs are likely to try to confirm frequently whether they are loved or of value to others through various explicit behaviours (Miura and Yamashita 2007). Self-reassurance is a part of not only the inner self-construction process but also the outer one; in other words, it is formed through the construction of the independent and interdependent selves. For voluntary bloggers, not acquiring any monetary returns does not mean that they do not receive anything during blog-writing periods. They enhance themselves through this process and also obtain self-reassurance when self-acceptance is achieved. Therefore:

H3: Self-acceptance is positively related to self-reassurance.

3.2. Interdependent-self concepts and self-reassurance: social benefit arising from altruism and sociability need

We apply the sense of community theory to explain the formation of interdependent-self concepts, which leads to the enhancement of self-reassurance. 'Sense of community' is a psychological term Sarason (1974) proposes as the perception of similarity to others, an

acknowledged interdependence with others, and a willingness to maintain the interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them. In the twenty-first century, the sense of community also exists in the virtual world (i.e. virtual sense of community). Individuals can now strengthen social interactions, bonding and bridging relationships via the internet. It can lead to an increase in social capital, which can in turn enhance the feeling of belongingness to communities, organisations, or nations (Kloos et al. 2011).

Using the sense of community theory as a foundation, we propose altruism and sociability need as two significant factors that increase social benefit. We propose that when social benefit is obtained, self-reassurance is also enhanced at the same time. Previous studies define an individual with altruism as someone who is willing to help other people without expecting anything in return (Hsu and Lin 2008), and social benefit is associated with individuals' needs for recognition and social support. Being accepted by a familiar other is even more important for altruistic people (Patterson and Smith 2001). Research posits that they obtain social benefit from others. Voluntary bloggers who are willing to share information with others and do not expect any payment or return (i.e. are altruistic) may be more easily recognised and accepted by others. Although this kind of blogging behaviour is not financially rewarded, bloggers can still obtain social and intrinsic benefits in return. Therefore:

H4: Altruism is positively related to social benefit.

Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) use the term 'maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity' to describe the need for social benefits derived from establishing and maintaining contact with other people, such as social support, friendship, and intimacy. In this study, we use the term 'sociability need' to convey the concept of maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity. We infer that individuals with higher sociability need are more likely to put more emphasis on acquiring social benefit. In other words, bloggers' social benefit originates from their sociability need. Thus:

H5: Sociability need is positively related to social benefit.

In line with the previous discussion, we define 'self-reassurance' as the tendency to connect with other people to reassure one self's worth (Joiner et al. 1999). Individuals with higher self-reassurance are likely to frequently seek confirmation of whether they are loved by or value to others through various kinds of explicit behaviours (Miura and Yamashita 2007). As mentioned previously, social benefit means one's need for recognition, social support, being accepted as more than simply another

person, and dealing with someone who is familiar (Patterson and Smith 2001). Bloggers who gain higher social benefit in writing weblogs may thereby also reassure themselves. Therefore:

H6: Social benefit is positively related to self-reassurance.

3.3. Self-reassurance and blogger involvement

Scholars agree on the definition of 'involvement' as a subjective psychological state during which highly involved people may have greater personal relevance, affect cognitions, attitudes, and behaviours than those less involved (Amoako-Gyampah 2007; Barki and Hartwick 1994). In this study, 'blogger involvement' refers to an individual's perceived relevance of his or her weblogs based on inherent importance, need, and values (Shiau and Luo 2013). Bloggers who achieve a higher level of self-reassurance benefit from not only self-aspects (i.e. the independent-self-concept) but also social-aspects (i.e. the interdependent-self-concept). The more bloggers benefit continuously in this way, the more they can reassure themselves and the more involvement they may have in blogging. Thus:

H7: Self-reassurance is positively related to blogger involvement.

4. Research method

4.1. Sampling and data collection

Adopting a convenience sampling approach, we recruited respondents in Taiwan via either posting our online questionnaire link on weblog message boards or distributing printed questionnaires to blog-writing undergraduate students from northern Taiwan universities with which this paper's coauthors are affiliated. For online participants, the questionnaire link was posted for two months on top five well-known and most visited blog platforms in Taiwan, including PIX-NET, Xuite, Blogger, MySpace, and WordPress. These platforms were selected because of their rankings in terms of popularity and variety of topics covered. The undergraduate students who wrote blogs were recruited from marketing-related courses and asked to fill out the questionnaires after classes. All participants were informed that the survey was only for the academic purpose, and their personal information would not be revealed to guarantee anonymity.

To ensure that the participants are qualified as voluntary bloggers, we added two screening questions enquiring about the subjects' objective for blogging, and

whether there were monetary paybacks or extrinsic benefits for writing blogs. Participants who were reward-driven or financially sponsored were deleted from the sample. Finally, consistent with our definition of voluntary bloggers, our analysis sample comprised bloggers who participate in blogging of their own accord by actively creating weblog content and sharing their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and experiences online without the expectation of receiving direct/indirect rewards from sponsoring firms.

Participants answered questions in four parts. First, they provided basic information about their own weblogs and blogging behaviours (e.g. the purpose of writing blogs, duration and frequency of blog writing and blog management, types of blog, the hit and response rate of the blog, and self-reported extrinsic rewards for writing blogs). Second, they answered questions about their motivations in establishing weblogs (i.e. the extent of private self-consciousness, self-expression, self-acceptance, altruism, sociability, social benefit, and self-reassurance). Third, they indicated their participating behaviours in their personal weblogs (i.e. blogger involvement). In the fourth part, they provided their personal information.

4.2. Measures

We adopted tested and proven measures from prior studies. Participants gave responses to all items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 7 ('strongly agree'). To reach the construction of independent self, we adopted three constructs (i.e. private self-consciousness, self-expression, and self-acceptance). We operationalised private self-consciousness as the tendency of being aware of covert, private aspects of the self that cannot be externally observed by others (Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975) and measured it with a three-item scale adopted from Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita (1998), and Miura and Yamashita (2007). We operationalised self-expression as the tendency of projecting one's own thoughts and ideas into the world (Kim and Sherman 2007) and measured it using a four-item scale adapted from Huang et al. (2007) and Jung, Youn, and McClung (2007). We operationalised self-acceptance as a class of psychological phenomena that involves taking a tendentious positive view of oneself (Sedikides and Gregg 2008) and allows oneself to develop a favourable self-view (Hoorens 1993) and measured it with a three-item scale modified from Jang and Thornberry (1998), and Stuppy, Mead, and Van Osselaer (2019).

We used altruism, sociability, and social benefit to form the construction of interdependent self. We

operationalised altruism as the degree to which an individual is willing to increase other people's welfare without expecting returns (Hsu and Lin 2008) and measured it with a three-item scale adapted from Hsu and Lin (2008), and Park and Gabbard (2018). We operationalised sociability need as the need of the social benefits derived from establishing and maintaining contact with other people, such as social support, friendship, and intimacy (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004), and measured it with a two-item scale modified from Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004), Cheung, Chiu, and Lee (2011), and Yen et al. (2019). We operationalised social benefit as one's need for recognition, social support, being accepted as more than simply another person, and dealing with someone who is familiar to them (Patterson and Smith 2001) and measured it with a three-item scale modified from Patterson and Smith (2001) and Gupta and Kim (2007).

Finally, we used self-reassurance and blogger involvement to measure the consequences of the self-

construction process of voluntary bloggers. Self-reassurance is operationalised as the tendency to demand significant contact with others excessively to reassure oneself of one's worth. It is a relatively stable pattern of motivation and behaviour with one's significant others (Joiner et al. 1999; Katsuya 2004), and we measured it with a five-item scale adapted from Katsuya (2004), and Miura and Yamashita (2007). Blogger involvement is operationalised as the tendency of an individual's perceived relevance of his or her weblogs based on the inherent importance, need, and values (Shiau and Luo 2013) and measured through a scale consisting of five items modified from Mathwick and Rigdon (2004), and Hepola, Karjaluo, and Hintikka (2017). All the measurement items are listed in the Table 1.

An initial version of the questionnaire was distributed to a pretest sample composed of 12 graduate students, and some minor modifications were then made to raise readability and comprehensibility of the finalised questionnaire. To increase the face validity of measurement

Table 1. Measurement model and reliabilities.

Construct	Description	Source	Standardised Loading
Private self-consciousness (CR = 0.93; α = 0.88; AVE = 0.81)	I am always trying to figure myself out.	Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita (1998); Miura and Yamashita (2007)	0.90
	I reflect about myself a lot.		0.91
	I am alert to changes in my mood.		0.88
Self-expression (CR = 0.88; α = 0.82; AVE = 0.65)	I use my blog to free my mind when I am moody.	Huang et al. (2007); Jung, Youn, and McClung (2007)	0.76
	I express myself by writing in my blog.		0.90
	My blog is the place where I express what I feel.		0.80
	I can tell others a little about me via my blog.		0.75
Self-acceptance (CR = 0.94; α = 0.90; AVE = 0.83)	By writing my blog, I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	Jang and Thornberry (1998); Stuppy, Mead, and Van Osselaer (2019)	0.88
	By writing my blog, I can do things as well as most of other people.		0.95
	By writing my blog, I feel that I am at least as good as other people.		0.90
	I like helping other people.		0.75
Altruism (CR = 0.89; α = 0.82; AVE = 0.74)	Writing and commenting on weblogs can help others with similar problems.	Hsu and Lin (2008); Park and Gabbard (2018)	0.89
	I enjoy helping others through blogging.		0.93
	I have something to do with others via my blog.		0.93
Sociability need (CR = 0.92; α = 0.83; AVE = 0.85)	Weblogs make me stay in touch with others.	Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004); Cheung, Chiu, and Lee (2011); Yen et al. (2019)	0.92
	Blog readers always recognise me the moment I contact them.		0.91
Social benefit (CR = 0.92; α = 0.86; AVE = 0.79)	Blog readers are more likely to treat me as a personal friend.	Patterson and Smith (2001); Gupta and Kim (2007)	0.90
	Interacting via weblogs helps me establish warm relationships with other members.		0.85
	It is important for me to receive higher click rate in my blog.		0.83
	Blog readers' supports are more likely to make me feel important.		0.84
Self-reassurance (CR = 0.93; α = 0.91; AVE = 0.74)	It is important for me to receive positive comments from blogger readers.	Katsuya (2004); Miura and Yamashita (2007)	0.89
	It is important for me to always be accepted by blogger readers.		0.91
	It is important for me to receive consideration from friends who treasure my blog.		0.82
	I think writing a blog is valuable to me.		0.88
	I think writing a blog is interesting to me.		0.83
Blogger involvement (CR = 0.94; α = 0.92; AVE = 0.77)	I think writing a blog means a lot to me.	Mathwick and Rigdon (2004); Hepola, Karjaluo, and Hintikka (2017)	0.88
	I think writing a blog is fascinating to me.		0.92
	I think writing a blog is needed to me.		0.87

Notes: CR = composite reliability; α = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted.

items, we have adopted the ‘expert judges’ approach and, with the help of three colleagues in the marketing department, the three judges consistently rated the measurement items as at least characteristic of the constructs. Besides, our questionnaire was first developed in Chinese and back-translated to English to ensure necessary translational accuracy and consistency.

4.3. Data analysis

We employed the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) approach to estimate the measurement and structural equation model and to verify the proposed self-construal model of voluntary bloggers. We chose PLS-SEM because it is a widely used multivariate analysis method to estimate variance-based structural equation models, especially in social science disciplines such as marketing, management, and information system research (Hair et al. 2012; Ringle, Sarstedt, and Straub 2012). It provides an opportunity to determine complex systems of associations and causal relationships that are otherwise difficult to uncover. Researchers primarily use PLS-SEM exploratory work and prediction purposes (Ringle, Sarstedt, and Straub 2012); thus, PLS-SEM is a suitable statistical method to analyse the measurement and structural model.

5. Results

5.1. Sample profile

The recruited respondents completed the questionnaires, expressing their objectives and experiences in conducting weblogs and self-reporting monetary rewards or other indirect benefits from sponsors, if any. After excluding 38 incomplete responses and invalid samples (i.e. non-voluntary bloggers who had received regular monetary paybacks in writing blogs), we retained 414 valid questionnaires for subsequent analysis. However, self-reporting of monetary payback is a sensitive issue to respondents and is likely to induce the ‘self-protection’ response bias. Indeed, most respondents in our study reported that they did not receive any monetary rewards for writing blogs. Others reported that they chose to obtain indirect benefits such as coupons, token gifts, or free products which were seldom viewed as regular monetary rewards. This issue may constitute a possible limitation of this paper, unless we can accurately observe and measure the monetary value of respondents’ rewards.

Among the 414 respondents, 67.5% were recruited from the online questionnaire link, and 32.5% were from the print-out questionnaires. 58.9% were male,

and 41.1% were female. Most (74.4%) were aged between 19 and 40 years. A majority of the participants (80.2%) had undergraduate or graduate degrees. Most of the respondents were students (31.6%), and others worked in the service industry (23.2%) or information and communication industry (11.4%). With regard to the average hours per day spent on blogs, 31.9% of the respondents spent less than 30 min, 31.6% spent 30 min to one hour, 19.8% spent one to two hours, and others (16.7%) spent more than two hours. Roughly 55.1% of the respondents reported managing their blogs almost every day, and 50.7% had more than three years of blog-writing experience.

5.2. Measurement model

To analyse the PLS path model, we used SmartPLS 3 software (Ringle, Wende, and Becker 2015). Following Hair et al. (2016), our interpretation of the results comprises two stages: (1) the assessment of the measurement model and (2) the evaluation of the structural model.

The results indicate that the measurement model meets all minimum requirements, as Table 1 shows. First, all standardised loadings of the indicators range from 0.75 to 0.95, which are above the 0.60 threshold suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (1988), and the indicators’ reliabilities are supported. Second, the composite reliabilities range from 0.88 to 0.94, and Cronbach’s alphas range from 0.82 to 0.92, which are all greater than 0.70 (Chin 1998), confirming the measures’ internal consistency reliability. In addition, all average variance extracted (AVE) values range from 0.65 to 0.85, which surpasses the threshold of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981), supporting the construct measures’ convergent validity.

Finally, as Table 2 shows, the analyses confirm the discriminant validity by (1) comparing the square root of AVE with the inter-construct correlations, (2) providing a cross-loading analysis, and, most important, (3) determining that the values of the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) range from 0.28 to 0.83, which are all below the recommended level of 0.90 (Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2015). We also constructed 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for each pair of correlation between constructs and found that none of the CIs included the value 1.0 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988).

5.3. Common method assessment

Because we collected the exogenous and endogenous variables the same time, with the same instrument from the same respondents, we must control for and test for common method bias (CMB) (Podsakoff et al.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and discriminant validity results.

Constructs	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Private self-consciousness	5.07	1.40	0.90	0.68	0.39	0.54	0.41	0.35	0.28	0.36
1. Self-expression	5.51	1.09	0.57	0.80	0.41	0.53	0.49	0.45	0.36	0.51
1. Self-acceptance	4.50	1.44	0.35	0.36	0.91	0.45	0.48	0.72	0.74	0.62
1. Altruism	5.40	1.22	0.46	0.44	0.41	0.86	0.69	0.51	0.46	0.50
1. Sociability need	5.32	1.34	0.36	0.41	0.42	0.58	0.92	0.71	0.55	0.48
1. Social benefit	5.02	1.35	0.31	0.39	0.63	0.44	0.60	0.89	0.83	0.63
1. Self-reassurance	4.78	1.33	0.25	0.33	0.67	0.41	0.48	0.74	0.86	0.63
1. Blogger involvement	5.19	1.19	0.32	0.44	0.57	0.45	0.42	0.57	0.58	0.88

Notes: Diagonal, boldfaced, and italicised elements are the square roots of the AVE; Correlations between the construct values are below the diagonal elements, and HTMT values are above the diagonal elements.

2003). To control for CMB, we allocated predictor and criterion variables to separate sections of the questionnaire. Previous researchers have used three techniques to statistically assess the existence of CMB: (1) Harman's single-factor method (Harman 1976), (2) assessment of the correlation matrix (Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips 1991), and (3) Lindell and Whitney's method for assessing CMB (Lindell and Whitney 2001). Following Harman's (1976) single-factor approach, the results show that no single factor emerged from a factor analysis of all survey items and that no general constructs account for the majority of covariance among all constructs (Podsakoff and Organ 1986). The correlation matrix of the variables in the conceptual model does not include highly correlated variables ($r < 0.90$) (Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips 1991), suggesting that the data can be pooled for subsequent analysis. To further control for CMB, we employed the partial correlation technique (Lindell and Whitney 2001) using a marker variable (i.e. satisfied with the exchange outcome) that was theoretically expected to be unrelated to the key constructs of our model. Bivariate correlations between the marker and the other variables, as well as a series of partial correlations, do not indicate any significant CMB problems. In summary, these results show that CMB did not significantly affect the study's findings.

5.4. Structural model

The analysis shows the minimum collinearity in each set of predictors in our structural model, as all the variance inflation factor values are far below the threshold of 5 (Hair, Ringle, and Sarstedt 2011). Furthermore, the R^2 values of self-acceptance (0.16), social benefit (0.38), self-reassurance (0.62), and blogger involvement (0.34) illustrate the model's in-sample predictive power (Sarstedt et al. 2014). Similarly, the results from blindfolding with an omission distance of 7 yield Q^2 values of self-acceptance (0.13), social benefit (0.29), self-reassurance (0.45), and blogger involvement (0.26), which are well above zero, thus supporting the model's predictive relevance in terms of out-of-sample prediction (Hair et al.

2012). Additional analysis of the composite-based standardised root mean square residual yields a value of 0.06, which confirms the overall fit of the PLS path model (Hair et al. 2016; Henseler et al. 2014).

Finally, we applied the bootstrapping resampling procedure to test the hypothesised effects in our research model. As Table 3 and Figure 2 show, the empirical results provide support for all the hypothesised path model relationships among the constructs. In support of the claim that the private self-consciousness and self-expression link positively and directly to self-acceptance, the parameter estimates are positive and statistically significant for both H1 (path coefficient = 0.21, $p < 0.01$) and H2 (path coefficient = 0.24, $p < 0.01$). As expected, self-acceptance has a positive and statistically significant effect on self-reassurance (path coefficient = 0.34, $p < 0.01$), in support of H3. In addition, H4 (path coefficient = 0.14, $p < 0.05$) and H5 (path coefficient = 0.52, $p < 0.01$) are also verified, supporting claims that altruism and sociability need have positive impacts on social benefit. H6, which posits a positive link between social benefit and self-reassurance, also receives support (path coefficient = 0.53, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, the link between self-reassurance and blogger involvement is positive and statistically significant (path coefficient = 0.58, $p < 0.01$), in support of H7.

Table 3. Significant testing results of the structural model path coefficients.

Hypothesised path	Path coefficient	t-Value (p)	Testing result
H1: Private self-consciousness → self-acceptance	0.21	3.28 (***)	Supported
H2: Self-expression → self-acceptance	0.24	3.92 (***)	Supported
H3: Self-acceptance → self-reassurance	0.34	7.28 (***)	Supported
H4: Altruism → social benefit	0.14	2.39 (**)	Supported
H5: Sociability need → social benefit	0.52	10.48 (***)	Supported
H6: Social benefit → self-reassurance	0.53	12.29 (***)	Supported
H7: Self-reassurance → blogger involvement	0.58	14.26 (***)	Supported

Notes: ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

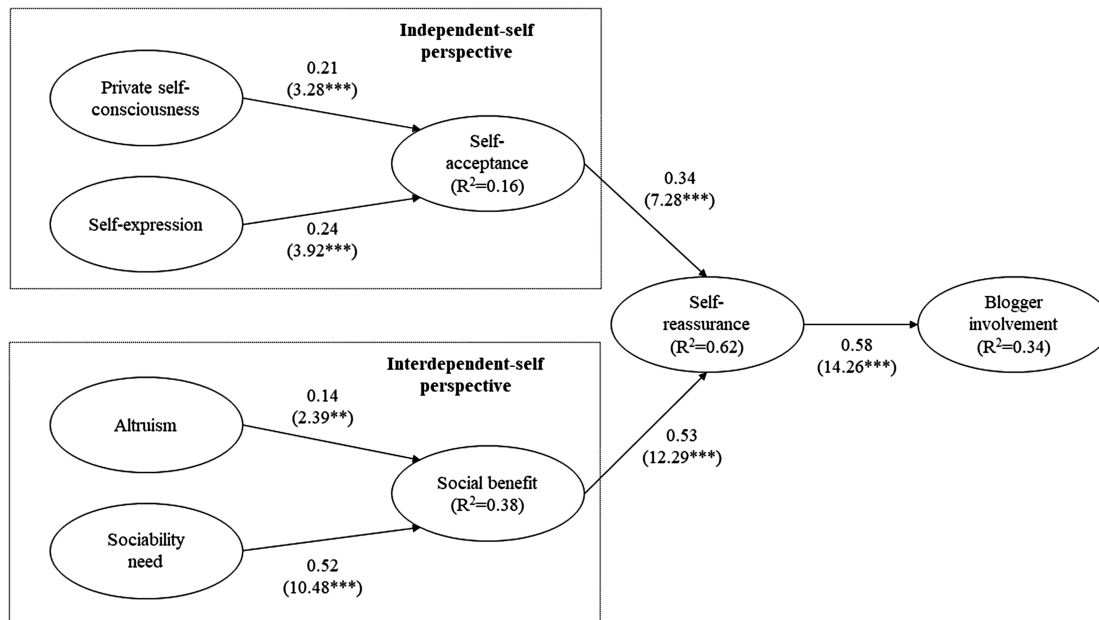


Figure 2. Path coefficients of the hypothesised model.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Previous blogger-related research does not address why bloggers voluntarily create weblogs and share information without extrinsic benefits. Most researchers focus only on bloggers' self-aspects (e.g. self-consciousness, self-expression) or on their social aspects (e.g. altruism, sociability need), and none have attempted to combine these perspectives into one framework to discuss bloggers' motivations and behaviours. Using self-construal theory, we propose a theoretical framework for examining bloggers' motivations to engage in blogging behaviours. We find evidence that these motivations derive from the construction of their independent selves (i.e. private self-consciousness, self-expression, and self-acceptance) and interdependent selves (i.e. altruism, sociability need, and social benefits), leading to self-reassurance. The data show that all the hypotheses receive support, and our self-construal model is a more comprehensive and understandable way to explain voluntary bloggers' motivations and behaviours.

6.1. Theoretical and practical implications

This research has both theoretical and practical implications. It contributes to the academic communities in several ways. First, blogging content (about a sponsored brand) with its sponsorship information disclosed is a serious concern of the blog readers (i.e. consumers), because readers' brand recall becomes lower and their attitude toward the sponsored brand tends to be less favourable (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens

2012; Campbell, Mohr, and Verlegh 2013; Hwang and Jeong 2016). Voluntary bloggers are perceived to provide relatively neutral and unbiased opinions and are more trustworthy than sponsored bloggers. However, previous studies have not focused on voluntary bloggers, even though they typically have greater influence on consumers' purchasing decisions (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018; Ki and Kim 2019). Huang (2015) and Lee, Im, and Taylor (2008) have defined voluntary self-disclosure as an individual's willingness to disclose his/her personal information, and self-disclosure has been found to be positively influential in shaping the readers' cognitive and affective trust toward bloggers' product recommendations. In our opinion, in addition to self-disclosure, blogger should have stronger intrinsic motivations to voluntarily write blogs. Therefore, we intend to explore voluntary bloggers' motivations and sharing behaviours. Second, previous blogger-related studies are less systematic and holistic in terms of research frameworks. Looking through the lens of the self-construal theory, we propose a dual-route, process model to uncover voluntary bloggers' continuing blogging engagement. Our findings have shed light on the mechanism behind voluntary bloggers' commitment even without any sponsoring support from firms or brands. Third, few studies have combined both the self- and social-aspects in investigating bloggers' motivations and behaviours (e.g. Hsu and Lin 2008; Miura and Yamashita 2007). Essentially, the result of this paper shows that, in the context of voluntary blogging, a blogger's meaningful construction of his/her self reflects both independent and interdependent self-

construal. This finding is believed to broaden the extant literature on blogging.

Our research also provides practical implications for marketers and practitioners in understanding voluntary bloggers' inner motivations to blog. First, our research may help managers or practitioners in establishing the criteria for selecting individuals who are willing to voluntarily share eWOM. Our self-construal framework may also assist practitioners in recognising and cultivating voluntary bloggers. Second, spreading of eWOM by voluntary bloggers is especially beneficial to marketers because this kind of eWOM is more trustworthy and powerful in influencing consumers' purchase decisions. Lastly, intrinsic motivations are believed to be more important than extrinsic ones when maintaining an individual's behavior (Delmas and Pekovic 2018). As noted by Harju, Pehkonen, and Niemi (2016), blogs and blogging constitute a learning environment that promotes active participation by making interesting, meaningful and enjoyable activities possible, and consequently the enthusiasm to actively learn and develop. Moreover, compared to advertising or celebrity marketing, promoting products/services through eWOM sharing is more effective and everlasting. As far as eWOM is concerned, by self-learning the product or service related knowledge, and sharing self-activated comments and experiences, consumers are motivated and encouraged to further engage in viral marketing activities. Marketers need to erect a supportive, nurturing environment for voluntary bloggers, especially when the product or service is new to the market. Thus, the bloggers' role in future e-marketing is sure to gain increasing importance.

6.2. Limitations and future research

In interpreting the results of this study, we must take note of a few limitations, which provide some opportunities for future research. First, we emphasise self-construal theory to explain the motivations and behaviours of voluntary bloggers; however, we acknowledge that bloggers may have other reasons to share their thoughts and opinions voluntarily. For example, a need for showing off or exhibitionism may exist in voluntary bloggers' minds, or sometimes, the blogger may want to exhibit different opinions than other competitive bloggers. Thus, future research should explore more about the voluntary bloggers' motivations and behaviours.

Second, it is difficult to ensure that blogs are actually written voluntarily. In our study, bloggers self-reported whether they were voluntary writers without receiving regularly paid money or rewards. However, we are not able to check whether they were honest or not. In reality, differentiating voluntary bloggers from non-voluntary

ones is difficult, but it is worthwhile for researchers to identify ways of classifying them (e.g. using text-mining techniques to track and analyse bloggers' writing styles or blog contents). Future research on voluntary blogging needs to verify whether respondents are indeed qualified as valid samples.

Finally, this study addressed voluntary bloggers in general; we did not consider their individual differences in terms of demographic information (e.g. gender, income, social class, lifestyle, personality). Therefore, future studies could divide bloggers into specific sub-categories and empirically test the conceptual framework to ensure its generalizability.

6.3. Conclusion

Although voluntary blogging covers numerous areas including politics, education, psychology, language, literature, technology, marketing, travelling and sports, voluntary bloggers' inner motivations are not systematically investigated in the past. Voluntary bloggers deserve more academic attention because they are more likely to become digital opinion leaders, with strong influential power over other consumers' purchase decisions (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018; Ki and Kim 2019). Non-paid or active eWOM spreading from voluntary bloggers is believed to wield more influencing power than commercially manipulated one (e.g. paying internet celebrities to promote products or services). In this paper, the proposed self-construal framework indeed has satisfactory explanatory power to describe voluntary bloggers' motivations to actively share consumption and usage experiences, thoughts, or comments about products or services. The empirical results are believed to be rather fruitful and insightful.

In general, our study contributes not only to the blogger-related studies and marketing research fields but also to the combination of independent- and interdependent-self concepts in self-construal theory. Our study verifies our proposed self-construal model of voluntary bloggers, and this model provides a more comprehensive and useful framework for practitioners and marketers to understand and operationalise. The research findings suggest that voluntary bloggers are more willing to share their thoughts and opinions about product or service information and evaluations in their own blogs, even if they do not obtain financial rewards in any forms. For voluntary bloggers, operating and managing weblogs is a self-construction process through which they obtain psychological or intrinsic benefits rather than monetary ones. For marketers and practitioners, understanding voluntary bloggers is important because the type of eWOM they can provide is more likely to attract another customers' recognition. Thus,

marketers and practitioners should focus on encouraging voluntary bloggers to blog for their product or service because they can be the best opinion leaders and can help make promotions more efficient and useful.

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