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E-WOM messaging on social media: social ties, temporal distance, and message concreteness

Abstract

Purpose
In this study, we explore intentions to share e-WOM messages on social media websites depending on tie-strength, perceptions of temporal distance, and the concreteness of promotional messages.

Design/methodology/approach
A 2 x 2 x 2 mixed design is used. Temporal distance (near vs. distant) and message concreteness (text vs. picture) are between-subjects factors; sharing intentions (close friends vs. general public) is a within-subjects factor.

Findings
Findings indicate that consumers are more likely to share promotional messages with their strong rather than weak ties. If they perceive that purchases will occur soon, concrete promotional messages will more strongly motivate them to share the message with their friends. However, if they perceive that purchases will occur in the distant future, abstract messages are more motivating. The difference occurs because construal level theory is more effective among strong e-WOM ties.

Originality/value
By studying senders' perspectives, we make a new theoretical and practical contribution to the emerging literature on e-WOM communication. Specifically, we show how senders are persuaded to share information with their strong or weak-tie audiences according to the concreteness of a message and temporal distance. We add construal level theory and advertising message processing to the domain of e-WOM and social ties research.

Keywords: construal level theory, e-WOM, social ties
Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

With the emergence of social networking site (SNS) platforms, individuals can now communicate with hundreds or even thousands of people about products, brands, and companies (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Consequently, researchers are increasing their attention to consumer-to-consumer communications as they impact online promotional

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strategies (Jeong and Koo, 2015; Lee and Koo, 2012). To successfully craft brand promotion messages that will motivate purchases and encourage sharing, digital marketers must understand why and how consumers share promotional messages. Thus, interest is growing in electronic word-of mouth (e-WOM), defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Previous studies have largely focused on why consumers read e-WOM messages (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2003); how e-WOM influences purchase decisions (e.g., Gupta and Harris, 2010; Jeong and Koo, 2015); and what may cause consumers to perceive credibility in e-WOM communications (e.g., Awad and Ragowsky, 2008). Although much is known about how e-WOM impacts on receivers, considerably less is known about why and how consumers decide to share messages on SNS platforms (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015).

Our purpose is to investigate the senders' perspectives of e-WOM usage in SNS platforms. Specifically, informed by recent consumer psychology developments, we investigate how senders share e-WOM on social media websites according to their perceptions regarding tie strength, temporal distance, and message concreteness. We designed and conducted an experimental study with a two (strong tie vs. weak tie) by two (near future vs. distant future) by two (abstract message vs. concrete message) mixed design involving South Korean users of SNS platforms. The results support previous suggestions that consumers are generally more likely to share promotional messages within their strong-tie relationships, such as friends and family (e.g., Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015). However, we further show that senders will more willingly share messages that are congruent with the purchase situation. Specifically, they are more likely to share concrete pictorial messages with their friends if they expect the purchase to occur in the near future. In contrast,

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they are more likely to share abstract textual messages with their friends if they expect the purchase to occur in the distant future. Thus, we show that strength of ties between e-WOM participants moderates the effect of congruency between psychological distance and message concreteness (Trope and Liberman, 2010).

We take the senders' perspectives to make new theoretical and practical contributions to the emerging literature on e-WOM communication (Cheung et al., 2015; Chowdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015; Garnefeld et al., 2011). In particular, we show that senders are motivated to share information with their strong-tie audiences according to whether the concreteness of a message is congruent with their perceptions of temporal distance. Our findings suggest that managers who wish to develop more successful SNS-based campaigns should consider the strength of SNS users' relationships, potential congruency with concrete or abstract messages, and psychological perceptions of whether the purchase will occur sooner or later.

Hypotheses Development

Social ties and sharing e-WOM

E-WOM research has paid much attention to the role of social ties (e.g., Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Koo, 2015; Yoon, 2012), formally defined as a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services that characterize the tie" (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Some authors argue that tie strength is one of the most significant factors influencing e-WOM (Wallace et al., 2012). Regardless of the message, the strength of social ties among communicators can determine e-WOM processes and effects on message receivers (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). For instance, word-of-mouth referral is more likely among strong-tie sources (Brown and Reingen, 1987).

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One explanation is that e-WOM receivers perceive strong-tie sources as being more credible than weak-tie sources (Chow and Chan, 2008). Specifically, perceived source credibility is a major antecedent of e-WOM adoption (e.g., Castillo et al., 2013; Lilijander et al., 2015), responsiveness (Kozinets, 1999), and purchase intentions (Fan and Miao, 2012). For instance, when receivers perceive a blogger to be trustworthy, a core dimension of credibility, they will believe the information is useful (Hsu et al., 2013) and will be more likely to read and like the messages (Reichelt et al., 2014). Given that strong ties are often the basis for trusting relationships (Krackhardt, 1992), e-WOM receivers are likely to view information coming from strong ties as being more credible (Chow and Chan, 2008).

More recent findings suggest that social tie strength partially moderates e-WOM impacts on future sharing intentions and self-enhancement for both senders and receivers (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015). Further support comes from research on sharing knowledge (e.g., Chiu et al., 2006) and information contribution (e.g., Cheung et al., 2015) within virtual communities. Specifically, online community members are more likely to contribute when they have a sense of belonging and reciprocity (Cheung and Lee, 2012) and have social interactions with the community (Cheung et al., 2015; Kelleher and Helkkula, 2010). In addition, strongly tied individuals are more likely to exchange useful knowledge (Levin and Cross, 2004; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998) and thus they may have increased intentions to share (Chow and Chan, 2008). Because stronger social ties stimulate trust and perceived trustworthiness (Krackhardt, 1992), strongly tied individuals may be more likely to exchange resources such as useful knowledge (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998), and more likely to ensure that receivers can understand and use the information (Hansen, 1999; Levin and Cross, 2004).

SNS platforms provide various interpersonal communication tools allowing consumers to share text messages, videos, and photos, consequently fostering interpersonal relationships (Boyd and Ellison, 2007), with some ties being stronger than others (Money et al., 1998).

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Thus, social media users can often choose whether they want to share messages with both weak and strong ties or with strong ties only. For instance, popular platforms such as *Facebook, LinkedIn,* and *Instagram* allow users to share information with the general public or within friendship circles only. If indeed people read and share advertising messages at least partly to obtain useful information (O'Donohoe, 1994), we hypothesize:

H1: Consumers will have greater intentions to share promotional messages with their strong ties.

Social ties, temporal distance, and message concreteness

Construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010) explains that psychological distance forms individual construals regarding abstract or concrete objects or events. Psychological distance refers to the subjective perception that events or objects are close or distant in location and time. Although temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distances are different sources of psychological distance, they are similar in affecting predictions, preferences, and actions. We primarily focus on temporal distance: whether an event is perceived to occur in the near or distant future. Construal level theory explains that individuals will have more abstract high-level construal thoughts about more distant objects/events, and more concrete, low-level construal thoughts about closer objects/events.

Business and communications research has found that construal level theory has multiple implications. For instance, promotional messages are more persuasive and useful when message features are congruent with receivers' construal levels (Jin and He, 2013; Martin et al., 2009; Rim et al., 2015). For example, future-oriented consumers have higher level construals and thus respond more favorably to distant-future ads featuring primary attribute information; present-oriented consumers have low-level construal and respond more

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favorably to near-future ads featuring secondary attribute information (Martin et al., 2009). Similarly, abstract messages using full-satisfaction guarantees are more effective in distant-future high-level construal settings because they instill confidence about distant future events, while attribute-specific concrete guarantees are more influential in near-future low-level construal settings, because they instill confidence about near-future events (Jin and He, 2013).

Construal level theory has also been applied to the study of e-WOM behaviors. For example, consumers were found to have more positive reactions to transaction-specific e-WOM when they were focused on perceived quality, a concrete low-level construal; whereas they favored messages dealing with cumulative evaluations when they were seeking satisfaction, a more abstract high-level construal evaluation (Wien and Olsen, 2012). Moreover, consumers had more favorable responses to e-WOM communications when social and temporal distance were congruent; recommendations from close proximal social targets were more influential for near-future preferences; recommendations from distal social targets were more influential for distant-future preferences (Zhao and Xie, 2011). Therefore, strong ties elicit lower-level construal; weak ties elicit higher-level construal.

Finally, advertisers know that they can use pictures or words to manipulate message concreteness. Pictures are associated with low-level construal because they fully resemble their referent objects and are subject to the same perceptual processes; words are associated with high-level construal because they convey the abstract essence of an object (Amit et al., 2009; Amit et al., 2012; Rim et al., 2015).

From the discussion above, we can postulate important implications for studying e-WOM from senders' perspectives. Specifically, congruency between message concreteness and temporal distance is known to enhance the persuasiveness and usefulness of promotional messages. That is, when targets are making purchase decisions soon, pictures may be more

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persuasive and useful; when targets are making purchase decisions in the distant future, words might be best (Amit et al., 2012; Meyvis et al., 2012). As we have discussed, strongly tied consumers have more incentives to share and exchange useful knowledge (Mayer et al., 1995; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). Knowing that construal fit increases the perceived persuasiveness and usefulness of a message (Jin and He, 2013; Moldovan et al., 2011), we can assume that strongly tied consumers would be more inclined to share messages when temporal distance and message concreteness match.

In other words, we predict that congruency between temporal distance and message concreteness will have more positive influence in strong-tie contexts: strongly tied consumers will have greater intentions to share concrete pictures about near future events and greater intentions to share abstract text about distant future events, leading to our second hypothesis:

H2: Social tie strength moderates the congruency between temporal distance and message concreteness: strong ties show a stronger congruency effect.

Method

Stimuli Design and Manipulation Checks

To test our hypotheses, we first developed two mock promotional messages for a fictitious furniture brand using text format (i.e., high-construal, abstract condition) and picture format (i.e., low-construal, concrete condition). Black and white calligraphy appeared in both ads to minimize confounds between conditions. In the text condition, the words *drawer*, *chair*, and *table* were placed in the middle. A fictitious brand logo, phone number, and web address appeared at the bottom. In the picture ad condition, pictures of a drawer, chair, and table replaced the words (Figure 1). To ensure that participants did not confuse the

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fictitious brand with actual brands, we asked whether they recognized the brand logo. They did not.

Figure 1 is about here.

In a pre-test, participants rated message concreteness of the pictorial versus textual formats on a seven-point scale. They perceived the pictorial advertisement to be more concrete [M = 4.45 vs. 3.57; $t(32) = -2.66$, $p < .05$] and imagery provoking [M = 3.97 vs. 3.12; $t(32) = -2.05$, $p < .05$], than the textual advertisement (Jin and He, 2013; Martin et al., 2009). Hence, consistent with previous studies, we confirmed that a message in the picture condition was more concrete and induced lower-level construal in comparison with the text condition (Amit et al., 2012; Meyvis et al., 2012).

Next, a separate group of participants used a seven-point Likert scale to indicate their SNS platform communication with strong versus weak ties: 1 = *do not communicate at all* to 7 = *very frequently communicate* and importance of the communications: 1 = *not important at all* to 7 = *very important*) (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Steffes and Burgee, 2009). The results indicated more frequent communication with friends ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.84$) rather than with the general public (M = 2.0, SD = 1.06; $t(17) = 6.58$, $p < .001$) and that communication with friends ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.99$) was considered more important than communication with the general public ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.0$; $t(17) = 4.50$, $p < .001$). Therefore, we deemed appropriate the choice of friends and the general public as a manipulation for the strength of social ties (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Steffes and Burgee, 2009).

Experimental Procedure

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Participating for course credit were 107 undergraduate students (*men = 58.3%,* M_{age}= *22*) from marketing and advertising courses in a large private university in Seoul, South Korea. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (temporal distance: near vs. distant) x 2 (message concreteness: text vs. picture) x 2 (close friends vs. general public) between-subjects design with a repeated measure on the last factor. In South Korea, social media usage is highest among twenty-year-olds (75.6%), followed by thirty-year-olds (65.1%), and teenagers (51.3%). Because twenty-year-olds spend the most time on social media per day (Kim, 2016), we deemed university students to be an appropriate population for our purposes.

When students arrived at the test site, computer-generated numbers randomly assigned them to each condition and specified which computer they would use. After a brief introduction about the experiment, we primed distant temporal psychological distance by having them read a scenario about moving next year or primed proximal psychological distance by having them read about moving next week. Next, they viewed one of the mock ads in the timeline of an SNS website and rated whether they would recommend the product on a SNS website to their (1) close friends and (2) general public using a rating scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). Participants then completed a brief survey regarding demographic information and were debriefed.

Results

As H1 predicted, the ANOVA analysis revealed a significant main effect of intentions to share ($F(1, 104) = 9.39, p < .005, \eta^2=.083$), indicating that intentions to share with strong ties (*close friends:* $M = 3.09, SD = 1.73$) is generally higher than intentions to share with weak ties (*general public:* $M = 2.64, SD = 1.56$). Therefore, H1 was supported.

More interestingly, the results yielded a significant three-way interaction effect between social tie strength, temporal distance, and message concreteness ($F(1, 104) = 10.94, p < .005,$

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η^2=.095). Specifically, intentions to share with strong ties were higher than intentions to share with weak ties when temporal distance and message concreteness were matched (i.e., construal fit). The analysis of simple effects further demonstrated that participants in the distant future condition had higher intentions to share textual, abstract messages with close friends ($M = 4.0$, $SD = .32$) rather than with the public ($M = 2.78$, $SD = .30$; $F(1, 104) = 18.90$, $p < .001$). Comparatively, in the near future condition, concrete pictorial messages led to higher intentions to share with close friends ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .32$) rather than with the public ($M = 2.37$, $SD = .30$; $F(1, 104) = 4.44$, $p < .05$). Strong and weak ties showed no significant differences when temporal distance and message concreteness mismatched (in the near future and textual message condition: $M_{near\ future\ \&\ text\ \&\ friends} = 2.64$, $SD = .29$; $M_{near\ future\ \&\ text\ \&\ public} = 2.51$, $SD = 0.27$; $F(1, 104) = 0.23$, $p = 0.64$; in the distant future and picture condition: $M_{distant\ future\ \&\ picture\ \&\ friends} = 2.81$, $SD = .36$; $M_{distant\ future\ \&\ picture\ \&\ public} = 3.0$, $SD = .34$; $F(1, 104) = .36$, $p = .55$). Figure 2 illustrates the findings.

Figure 2 is about here.

To further investigate the underlying mechanism, we separately analyzed sharing intentions with strong and weak ties by conducting a two (temporal distance: near vs. distant) x two (message concreteness: text vs. picture) ANOVA analyses – one with the intention to share with strong ties as a dependent variable; and another with weak ties. The results showed no significant interaction between temporal distance and message concreteness for intentions to share with the public ($M_{near\ future\ \&\ picture} = 2.37$ $SD=1.52$; $M_{near\ future\ \&\ text} = 2.52$ $SD=1.50$; $M_{distant\ future\ \&\ picture} = 3.0$ $SD=1.82$; $M_{distant\ future\ \&\ text} = 2.78$ $SD=1.48$; $F(1, 107)=.36$, $p=.55$, Figure 3). Consequently, the context of weak ties did not support construal level theory.

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For strong ties, however, we found a significant two-way interaction ($F(1, 107) = 5.47; p<0.05$, Figure 3). Planned comparisons revealed that, in the distant-future condition, a textual abstract message motivated higher intentions to share with friends than a pictorial concrete message ($M_{distant\ future\ \&\ text} = 4.0\ SD=.32;\ M_{distant\ future\ \&\ picture} = 2.81\ SD=.36,\ F(1, 104)=6.05,\ p<.05$); in the near-future condition, intentions to share with friends were the same for textual and pictorial messages ($M = 2.96\ SD=.32;\ M_{near\ future\ \&\ text} = 2.64\ SD = .29;\ F(1, 104)=.57,\ p=.45$). Accordingly, construal level theory was supported in the context of strong tie relationships, although concrete pictorial and abstract textual messages were significantly different only in the distant-future condition. We also compared whether the distant-future condition or near-future conditions would change the power of social ties and message congruency to affect sharing intentions. However, the slopes of the two-way interaction showed no significant difference. Thus, our three-way and two-way analyses support H2; that is, the congruency between temporal distance and message concreteness is more evident in strong-tie relationships.

Figure 3 is about here.

Discussion

Research Contributions

We offer novel theoretical contributions to the emerging research regarding senders' perspectives in e-WOM communications on SNS platforms. Specifically, we examine how congruency between the perceived temporal distance and message concreteness affects sharing intentions. The results support that tie strength influences intentions to share promotional messages (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015). In particular, our empirical

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analysis reveals that consumers are more likely to share promotional messages within their strong-tie relationships.

Furthermore, by comparing the relative impact of temporal distance, we find that promotional message contents impact intentions to share e-WOM with strong ties. Specifically, if consumers perceive that a purchase will occur soon, they will be motivated to share a concrete promotional picture with their strong ties. However, if they perceive that a purchase will occur in the distant future, they will be more likely to share an abstract promotional text message with their strong ties.

Most importantly, our findings illustrate that construal fit explains why consumers have diverging intentions to share e-WOM (Trope and Liberman, 2010) across strong-tie and weak-tie relationships. That is, congruency between temporal distance and message concreteness can increase intentions to share e-WOM with strong ties, but we find no evidence that congruency influences sharing intentions with weak ties. Consequently, strength of ties between e-WOM participants determines whether temporal distance applies. Thus, we extend e-WOM and social ties research to include construal level theory (Trope and Liberman, 2010) and advertising message processing (Amit et al., 2009; Rim et al., 2015).

Managerial Contributions

The theoretical tenets we have discussed have several managerial implications. First, in developing SNS-based campaigns, managers should consider the strength of ties among target consumers. In particular, digital marketers could enhance the spread of e-WOM communication by developing stronger interpersonal relationships among consumers, perhaps by fostering online communities (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006) and considering cultural congruency (Ko et al., 2015).

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Furthermore, to encourage consumers to share messages with their strong ties, managers should design advertising concepts that more effectively match with timing of purchases. For instance, if purchases will be frequent and in the near future, actual product photos will motivate sharing among strongly tied members of small communities, sports clubs, and families. In contrast, for infrequent and delayed purchases, abstract textual messages will be more effective.

Finally, marketers should choose where and how to communicate promotional messages by considering different technological features of social networking sites such as big data tools, layout, and sharing tools. For example, they might choose a text-woven blog or a microblog (e.g., Twitter) for durable goods that have a long lead time before purchase. Or they might publish photographs of products and/or endorsers on more visually intensive SNS sites, such as Instagram or Pinterest, for convenience goods that have shorter purchase cycles. Moreover, as e-commerce becomes more social and consumers use SNS, search engines, and other networking tools in their regular decision-making processes, platforms could use the information they collect to encourage more purposive e-WOM sharing by considering how often consumers interact, whether they are likely to purchase a product or service in the near or distant future, and/or the types of promotional messages that are most suitable for the situation.

Limitations and Further research

Although our study offers a novel contribution, future research should address several limitations. First, the furniture product we used for our study stimulus may be perceived as having a relatively longer purchase cycle than other goods. Perhaps the product category induced a certain psychological distance that caused construal fit to have significant effect only in the distant-future, strong tie condition. Accordingly, more research is needed to

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explore whether similar findings consistently appear with different product types (e.g., long vs. short purchase cycle; high vs. low involvement; hedonic vs. utilitarian) and/or across various social, spatial, and hypothetical psychological distance dimensions.

Second, our participants were university students, the primary age group of social media users (Kim, 2016), but other consumer segments might behave differently. To achieve more generalizable results, the study can be replicated with non-student participants. Third, our findings suggest that consumers are more likely to share e-WOM messages within strong-tie relationships. Recent research, however, suggests that tie strength has different bridging and bonding dimensions (Levy and Gvili, 2015) that may affect e-WOM behaviors. Future research can explore these dimensions in more detail from senders' perspectives.

Fourth, we find that congruence effects favor strong rather than weak ties. Accordingly, further research can investigate how to utilize weak ties to distribute product-related information, perhaps through more creative novel, rational, and emotional appeals. Finally, we compared concrete and abstract message formats, but real-life advertisements usually integrate textual and pictorial information. Picture–text congruence has been shown to positively affect product attitudes (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy, 2005). Therefore, future studies may further investigate the effects of different message factors on e-WOM communication.

In summary, we hope that this study, with its emphasis on social ties and construal level theory, will offer new insights for researchers and practitioners who want to understand e-WOM communications from the sender's perspective.

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Figure 1. Experiment Stimuli Concrete (Picture) vs. Abstract (Word)

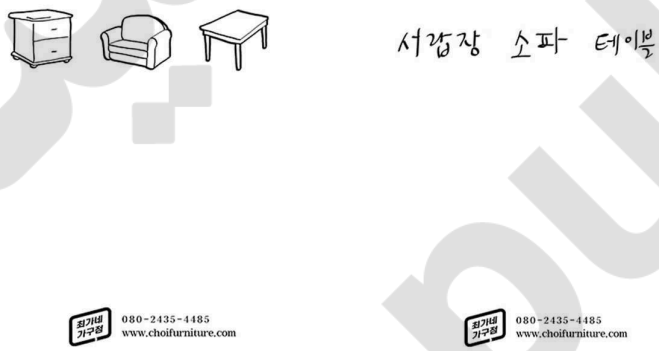

Figure 2. Near future vs. distant future.

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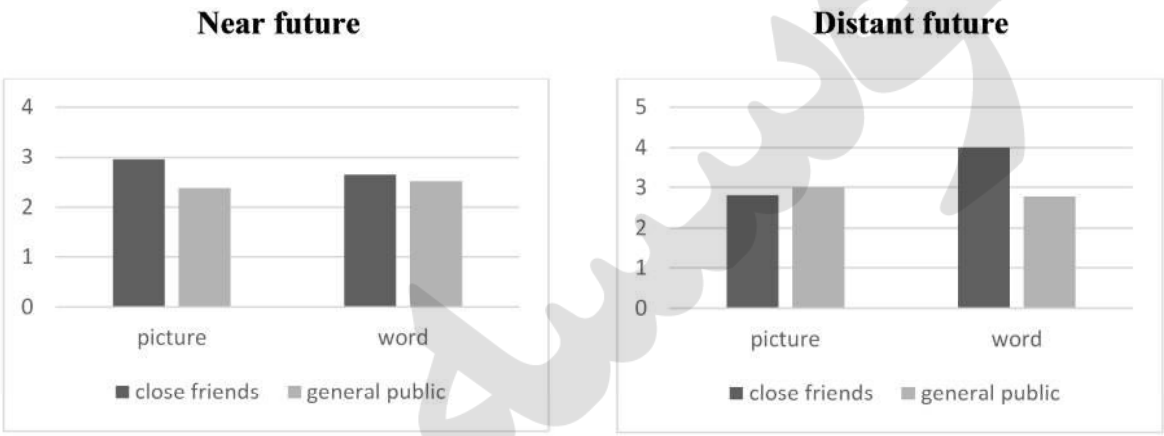
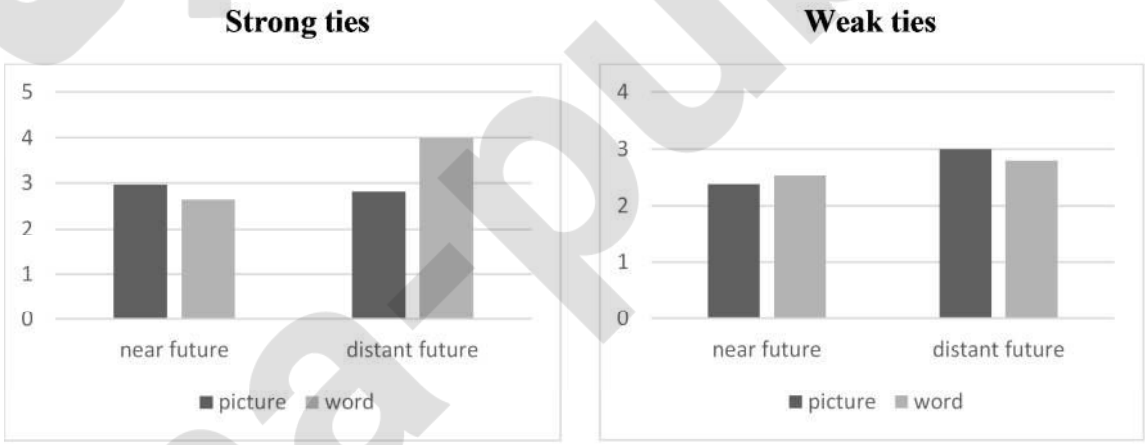


Figure 3. Strong ties vs. weak ties.



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