Women Trust Others and Consensus; Men Trust Numbers and Their Own Judgment: A Conceptual Analysis of the Impact of the Self-Construal Mechanism on the Relationship Between Online Feedback Mechanisms and Online Trust

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ABSTRACT

The literature on self-construal has paid significant attention to the behavioral outcomes of independent and interdependent self-construal in different contexts, across gender or across cultures. Few studies, however, have explicitly examined the extent to which self-construal has an impact on the extent to which a consumer is influenced by online feedback mechanisms such as written post feedbacks or quantitative ratings in sequential order. In this study, a thorough literature review elaborates four research propositions that predict to what extent self-construal has an impact on the relationship between online feedback mechanisms and online trust, in the specific case of trust toward a peer who proposes collaborative consumption services (second-hand selling, product location, and bartering, among others). An explanation follows as to the predicted relationships in light of the semantic procedural interface that underlies the self-construal process. Potential theoretical and practical implications of presumably validated research propositions are also discussed.

Keywords: Self-construal, online feedback mechanisms, semantic procedural interface, online trust, collaborative consumption
1. INTRODUCTION

The study of online feedback mechanisms (OFM) has been under-theorized in the marketing literature [24], compared with other website-related variables affecting online trust such as design (e.g., user-friendliness) [9, 87, 31] or privacy and security [19, 62, 68, 70, 76, 9]. Furthermore, the small amount of research that has investigated OFM is limited to the mere effect of reviews and ratings on trust in online retailers (i.e., B2C) [72, 2], but not in other peers (i.e., C2C). In addition, reputation systems such as OFM act as consumer empowerment tools with assistive intents [9, 87, 78, 42], but are usually assumed to exert an equal influence on every web user. The current paper posits, however, that there might be differences between web users, in reaction to OFM information, especially in function of their self-construal [55] and more broadly their related analytic-holistic thinking tendency [65]. This paper attempts to fill the void in the literature with regard to investigations related to the underlying mechanism(s) taking place in OFM impact on online trust.

The concept of self-construal has been much echoed in the marketing literature [80, 28, 64, 1], especially regarding gender differences [59]. However, research on its impact in online settings is scarce. The present study is a distinct attempt to combine two disparate streams of research; namely, OFM literature and the self-construal body of work. In addition, it not only attempts to explore the differential impact of the relationship between OFM and online trust based on individual characteristics (i.e., self-construal), but also seeks to explain it by means of the semantic procedural interface (SPI) developed by [52]. It, therefore, provides research propositions for this latter cognitive process from an online perspective. Eventually, little research has investigated the combined impact of both written post feedback and ratings types of OFM on online trust [13]. The present study seeks also to explore additional insights into this effect.

This work is of high managerial importance, too, since the confluence of technology changes (Internet and mobile devices), the rise of online peer communities, enhanced concern for the sustainability ethos, and a shattered economy [50, 53] have produced a resurgence of alternative consumption, called “collaborative consumption” (CC) practices (e.g., online re-selling, bartering, renting, co-owning, and so on), by extending these formerly socially, geographically, or culturally restricted trade forms to much wider and often global networks; e.g., Airbnb, Landshare, eBay, Kijiji, Amazon [5]. However,
one of the main conditions of success of web-enabled CC companies remains trust between strangers [5]. This current study provides, therefore, web-enabled CC managers an exploratory view of the different impacts of OFM on trust, according to individual differences in users, from a C2C perspective. Specifically, it explores how managers can modulate either written post feedbacks or ratings, or both, on their websites and for which effect. Such conceptual findings provide additional guidelines as to the improvement of communication and marketing strategies geared toward users, in order to increase traffic and reach more quickly the critical mass required to make a C2C website more efficient and profitable [16].

This study capitalizes on previous research indicating that sequential OFM, above all, ratings, have a bigger impact on trust when they are displayed sequentially [13]. This study, therefore, is an attempt to provide research propositions for future research about the impact of both sequential positive and sequential negative OFM data (either written post feedback or ratings, or both) on users’ trust in other peers and to shed additional light on the psychological process underlying this relationship. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What is the impact of combined use of overall positive ratings systems and written comments conceptualized as online feedback mechanisms (OFM), on users’ trust?

RQ2. To what extent is there a mediating influence of self-construal between OFM and trust?

RQ3. What is the underlying process of this impact of self-construal on trust?

2. ONLINE FEEDBACK MECHANISMS AND ONLINE TRUST

This section discusses the impact of online feedback mechanisms (OFM) on online trust, the specificities of web-enabled collaborative consumption marketplaces and trust, the process underlying the impact of OFM on online trust, and the magnitude, polarity, and sequence attributes of OFM.

2.1. The Impact of Online Feedback Mechanisms on Online Trust

Online feedback mechanisms (hereafter, OFM), are defined as, “The use of internet’s bidirectional consumption capabilities, to artificially engineer large-scale, word-of-mouth, networks in which individuals share opinions and experiences, on a wide range of topics, including products, services and even
OFM are customer-generated information composed of two major and distinct forms:

(1) “Consensus ratings that provide consumers an objective account of [peer] performance from aggregated reports of customer experience” [24, p. 847]; and
(2) “Written feedback posts which refer to any positive or negative individual comment made by former customers about a [peer], and which are made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (adapted from [13, 41]).

Trust is “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions of behaviors of another” [75]. This paper focuses on online trust. According to [84], online trust is a three-dimensional construct composed of beliefs related to the integrity/confidence, ability/competence, and benevolence of an online vendor. In addition, there are three major website-related components affecting trust; namely, privacy/security (e.g., safe payment systems, warranty); website design simplicity (e.g., user-friendliness); and consumer empowerment tools (e.g., feedback, ratings). This paper focuses on the third component in the specific case of a peer (not a company) being a vendor.

This paper defines online trust as: “Consumer perceptions of how the site would deliver on expectations, how believable the site’s information is and how much confidence the site commends” [75, p. 395; see also 9, p. 134]. Trust-building mechanisms, such as state-enforced contractual guarantees, are less effective in large-scale, online environments [51]. These environments also entail new challenges introduced by the distinct properties of online interactions (e.g., the volatile nature of online identities) [32, 23]. In addition, about 89% of e-commerce transactional relationships are one-time and often non-physical deals (e.g., eBay) [71], which may increase fraud behaviors because of the lack of accountability and coercive control a merchant may perceive.

OFM, which include ratings and written comments, have emerged as viable mechanisms for fostering cooperation among strangers in such settings by ensuring that behaviors of a trader toward any other trader become publicly known and may therefore affect the behavior of the entire community toward that
trader in the future [24]. Knowing this, traders have an incentive to behave well toward each other [71].

2.2. The Specificities of Web-Enabled CC Marketplaces and Trust

Collaborative consumption (hereafter, CC) is defined as “an aggregate composite of web-enabled economic transactions taking place online and/or offline, between physical peers to move unwanted, unused, under-used, or used goods, skills, places, services, land, and assets, to (re-)use or increased use, in a horizontally, decentralized, and informal fashion, with peer-, entrepreneurs-, or business-run platforms facilitating this process” [adapted from 5, 16, 35, 66, 86].

CC platforms differ from traditional e-commerce platforms in several aspects.

First, they are intended at enabling transactions between physical consumers, not between physical consumers and a moral group; e.g., a company (B2C).

Second, they rely on the “power of idling capacity”; i.e., consumers own products that sit idle because they do not use them.

Third, CC platforms imply a heightened “belief in the commons” (i.e., people) to share products with other users, favoring use over ownership and typically providing second lives or multiples lives to used products, instead of merely buying new ones, which reduces waste and contributes to a sustainable consumption mode [53, 86].

Fourth, CC requires a critical mass to work efficiently, meaning that a certain number of people are needed to participate in the offer and on the demand side to render the process functioning.

Fifth, CC requires a high level of trust between strangers [5].

The fifth aspect is of utmost importance. Web-enabled CC platforms are in majority based on peer-to-peer interactions in which the main currency is trust [16]. Trust is obviously more important in monetized exchanges and at a minimum in swaps, but less so in gifts and donations (e.g., Freecycle). Because of the very nature of CC as being peer-driven, a consumer may not be able to compare products or services as he or she would with standard commercial offerings. There is information asymmetry since sellers or providers know the quality of their goods and services better than the buyers who have no means of verifying this quality [33, 3]. It is the company’s – namely, the CC platform’s –
responsibility to emit believable quality signals to decrease such kinds of perceived risks [79, 27, 17]. One of such signal may be emitted by OFM.

2.3. Process Underlying Impact of OFM on Online Trust

According to attribution theory, individuals make judgments about the likely causes of events [26]. Such attributions are explanations that account for previous outcomes [40]. Therefore, attributions form when people are given information about prior outcomes [13]. OFM provide information about aggregated reports of past consumer experiences and may thus, if positive, increase trust between traders. Consequently, high-reputation sellers fare better than others because more buyers tend to rely on them and these buyers are also willing to pay these sellers slightly more [73], which validates the attribution impact of OFM signals. Consequently, OFM inclusion may create a “bandwagon effect” in which people tend to adopt opinions of the majority [60]. OFM mechanisms may therefore foster trust between online individual traders.

Trust signals such as OFM have usually been studied in the form of quantitative and aggregated consensus information (i.e., ratings) [13, 73]. But customer-generated feedback is not limited to ratings. It includes also written posts feedback, and both often appear online. Written comments about the trading experience with a specific trader may be considered a specific form of eWOM [41] and provide a less impersonal and more vivid assessment of a given trader. It has even been demonstrated that a few negative feedbacks do not change a person’s overall positive perception if all other comments are positive [73]. Besides, although the relative and complementary nature of both ratings and written comments has not been much explored, it is expected that both complement and enhance each other to leverage the OFM potential on trust and should thus be used conjointly [13].

2.4. Magnitude, Polarity, and Sequence Attributes of OFM

People are influenced by those with whom they happen to interact [6, 49, 47]. Most OFM are nonetheless intrinsically uni-dimensional and do not allow interactivity. Consumers read user-generated feedback but typically cannot reply to it, although some websites (e.g., eBay) allow users to rate the usefulness of ratings or raters themselves. Consequently, users pay increased attention to what
is being said about a peer for it is the minimal information they have and it cannot be complemented through interactive discussions.

Trust and perceived risk affect people’s beliefs and decision-making processes in economic transactions [45]. The study by [48] drew upon [54] and [15], as well as the theoretical framework of [69] on risks and benefits, to demonstrate that perceived risks and perceived benefits are typically combined in the mind of the consumer to provide a valence framework, which assumes that consumers perceive another party as having both positive and negative attributes and, accordingly, consumers make decisions to maximize the net valence (i.e., magnitude) resulting from the positive and negative (polarity) attributes of the decision [48, 54, 15, 69]. Consumers will therefore evaluate the benefits associated with transacting with the peer, which may decrease their perceived risks. OFM provide uni-directional feedback, but if the magnitude of such feedback is high enough to offset perceived risk, it may in turn increase trust and the subsequent decision to engage in the purchase behavior. Although this effect is difficult to estimate in written posts, magnitude is easily quantified in consensus ratings.

Based on normative expectations, outcome sequences are evaluated based on reference points, which can be part of the sequence or derived from external criteria [46]. Some of the most complex ratings systems, such as that used by eBay, typically use histories of ratings for the last 1, 6, and 12 months on the platform; whereas, Amazon provides aggregated ratings for the last 1, 3, and 12 months and for the lifetime of the trader. These are consensus sequences, which provide additional polarity information about the consensus ratings [13]. In addition to displaying high net valence [48], the consensus ratings sequences should also have positive directionality (i.e., follow an increasing pattern), or at least a stable pattern over time. And, since individuals are more responsive to perceived changes than to absolute levels [81, p.201], consumers avoid purchasing when performance decreases because decreased sequences result in less trust [58].

The present study capitalizes on previous research and displays feedback ratings in chronological sequences because it is more informative and increases trust, compared with non-sequential ratings. Besides, the increased effect on trust is higher when the valence of ratings is bigger (strong magnitude) and/or show positive polarity (increasing direction). Similar effects are expected for written posts feedback types of OFM. Conversely, the effect on trust is lower
when the valence of ratings is smaller (low magnitude) and/or show negative polarity (decreasing direction).

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This section discusses the impact of self-construal, the specific impact of interdependent self-construal, and the underlying semantic procedural interface mechanism.

3.1. Impact of Self-Construal

Self-construal can be defined as “a constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning one’s relationship to others such as the self being distinct from others or connected to others” [77, p. 581]. An independent self-construal can be found in an individual “whose behaviour is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one’s own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings and actions of others” [55, p. 226]. An interdependent self-construal can be found in individuals who see themselves “as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognize that one’s behaviour is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent, organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings and actions of others in the relationship” [55, p. 227]. An interdependent relational self “represents those aspects of the self-concept most sensitive to the evaluation of significant others and consists of cognition about the self that reflect interactions and relationships with those others” [18, p. 84]. An interdependent collective self “reflects internalizations of the norms and characteristics of important reference groups and consists of cognition about the self that are consistent with that group identification” [18, p. 84].

People everywhere are likely to develop an understanding of themselves as physically distinct and separable from others [39, 63], which corresponds to the independent self-construal as developed by [55]. However, on certain occasions, the sense of a set of significant inner attributes of the person may cease to be the primary unit of consciousness, and the sense of belongingness to a social relation may become so strong that it makes better sense to think of the relationship as the functional unit of conscious reflection [4]. This latter perspective refers, on the other hand, to interdependent self-construal [55]. When confronted with the decision to trust an online peer, an independent user may rely on significant
others who already have experience with the unknown peer. In such case, the user engages in a more interpersonal functioning.

Self-construal can be considered as based on cultural orientation, especially collectivistic versus individualistic societies [55, 67, 56], gender with men being more independent and with women typically more interdependent [59, 21]. It can be activated through situational priming [64, 1, 83, 38], such as with the method of [82] or the method of [36], as well as the pronoun circling method of [18]. On the other hand, some authors consider self-construal as rather innate and measurable [59, 34, 19] by using measurement scales (e.g., the self-construal scale of [78]).

The distinctive properties of online interactions introduced new challenges (e.g., the volatile nature of online identities) [32, 71]. This increased perceived risk is heightened when users’ goods, properties, or valuables are at stake, such as is typically the case in CC practices. People may swap their homes, which is a highly involving and crucial type of transaction. But, even buying basic second-hand products from an unknown peer may be risky business because, in most purchase situations, users perceive various kinds of risks (e.g., physical, financial, temporal, psychological, social, or related to performance) [14]. This is especially true over the web since online transactions are deemed inherently risky [8, 37, 44, 85]. OFM information can therefore lessen the amount of perceived risk. According to [29]’s social comparison theory, people tend to evaluate their thoughts and attitudes based on other people [10]. An extension of this theory is the notion of informational social influence, which posits that people may use others as a source of information to define the social reality and guide behavior [10, 7].

Now, assuming that OFM information was available to users, those more interdependently self-construed individuals would rely more on this OFM information because their actions and behavior are determined by and are contingent on what they “perceive to be the thoughts, feelings and actions of others” [55, p. 227]. They will be more prone to social comparison and ultimately to informational social influence. They will not only elaborate more on OFM, but also tend to think more optimistically about other users’ feelings and beliefs about their past experience with the peer, when OFM is overall positive [24], and will think more pessimistically about other users’ feelings and beliefs about their past experience with the peer, when information is overall negative, especially in comparison to independently self-construed individuals. In fact, [22] show that people with interdependent self-construals, especially highly
relational individuals, tended to think optimistically about others’ beliefs and that such a self-construal was more strongly related to relationship cognition in distant relationships. Hence, interdependent individuals are more likely to trust social information because they are more optimistic about the trustworthiness of information sources and also engage easily in distant relationships, which is typically induced through web-mediated relationships with other reviewers and raters.

Conversely, users with independent self-construals are not contingent on actions, beliefs, or behaviors of others because their self is determined independently from others [20]. They will tend to be more suspicious or skeptical about others’ beliefs and thoughts since, as [18] pointed out, they rely more on individualistic, egocentric, separate, autonomous, and self-contained repertoires of cognition. Hence, they will not elaborate as much on information provided by others through OFM and care less about distant relationships with unknown reviewers. Consequently, the level of trust they might have at the address of the peer may be relatively less strongly impacted by the “overall positive or negative” OFM information with which they are confronted. The self-construal is therefore expected to have the following mediating effect on OFM and trust in online peer:

**Research Proposition 1:** Consumers with an interdependent self-construal will perceive a higher (lower) level of trust toward an online peer, than consumers with an independent self-construal, when confronted with overall positive (negative) OFM information.

If measured within-subjects (i.e., with a scale without priming), the author expects that consumers with an independent self-construal will display lower levels of (dis)trust when confronted with overall (decreasing) increasing OFM sequences than will interdependent consumers. On the other hand, the author expects interdependent self-construed consumers to display higher levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing OFM sequences, than will independent consumers.

Similarly, if measured between-subjects, consumers who will have been primed with an independent self-construal, without being necessarily independently construed, will display lower levels of (dis)trust when confronted with overall (decreasing) increasing OFM sequences than will interdependent
consumers. On the other hand, the author expects consumers that are interdependent self-construed through priming, without having necessarily an inherent independent self-construal, to display higher levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing OFM sequences, than will independent consumers.

3.2. The Specific Impact of the Interdependent Self-Construal

The interdependent self-construal can be further subdivided into either a collective or a relational self-concept [55]. In the relational self-concept, individuals focus preferably on establishing and maintaining a small number of close relationships; whereas, under the collective self-concept, individuals privilege relationships with more abstract and larger groupings of people [59, 20, 12].

Consumers who display a higher level of collective interdependence will focus on the more abstract and aggregated set of feedback about a peer. Consensus ratings typically provide consumers an objective account of the peer performance from aggregated reports of customer experience [13]. This is more likely to appeal to the collective self-concept because it implies “a social extension of the self in which social connections are impersonal bonds derived from common identification with some symbolic group or social category” [18, p. 83].

On the other hand, written posts feedback is written by a distinct user who provides experiential information in a personalized and individualized fashion. Such kind of OFM may be more appealing to individuals displaying higher levels of relational interdependence because it “induces a social extension of the self in which social connections are personalized bonds of attachment” [18, p. 83], and not abstract-level composites of grouped evaluations. The interdependent self-construal is expected to have the following mediating effect on OFM and trust in online peer:

\textbf{Research Proposition 2}: The interdependent self-construal mediates the relationship between OFM and trust as follows: (a) Individuals with a collective self-construal will perceive a higher (lower) level of trust toward the peer when confronted with overall positive (negative) consensus ratings; (b) individuals with a relational self-construal will perceive higher (lower) level of trust when confronted with overall positive (negative) written posts feedback; and (c) these differences cancel out when both OFM types are present.
The author expects that consumers who have a collective self-construal – compared with relational consumers – will display higher levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing consensus ratings types of OFM sequences only and lower levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing written comments type of OFM sequences only.

Conversely, the author expects that consumers who have a relational self-construal – compared with collective consumers – will display higher levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing written post feedback type of OFM sequences only and lower levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing consensus ratings type of OFM sequences only.

In addition, these differences between collective and relational self-construal are expected to cancel out when both types of OFM are presented, and, in that case, the level of (dis)trust will be slightly higher (lower) compared with the instances when the better OFM type is used, according to self-construal.

3.3. The Underlying Semantic Procedural Interface Mechanism

The underlying mechanism behind these effects needs to be further investigated. Both independent and interdependent self-construals affect cognition in very specific ways. Drawing upon [55]’s self-construal framework, as well as [30]’s work on cognition mechanisms, [52] developed the semantic procedural interface (SPI) in which self-construal affects human behavior via two separate routes: (1) semantic, and (2) procedural.

An independent self-construal brings “autonomous self-knowledge” to mind; whereas, an interdependent self-construal makes “social self-knowledge” accessible (semantic mechanism). Simultaneously, self-construal impacts the procedural mechanism. The independent self-construal induces a “context-free thinking mode”; whereas, an interdependent self-construal induces a “context-bound cognitive procedure” (procedural mechanism) [52].

These two distinct routes relate to the analytic-holistic framework of [65]. The independent self-construal’s induced information processing corresponds to the analytic processing in which individuals focus on attributes and categories to draw inferences and make judgments [61]; whereas, the interdependent self-construal’s thinking mode refers to the holistic processing in which individuals focus on relationships between objects and the field as well as the relationship between objects [57].
According to the SPI, when confronted with OFM information, individuals apply highly accessible semantic knowledge to judgmental tasks. The answer to OFM information is therefore assimilated toward implication of either independent or interdependent self-construals. It is expected that individuals with an independent self-construal will apply more abstract thinking [65] and engage in a cognitive mode that is less context dependent. They will therefore rely more on their internal judgment [74] and be less influenced by OFM information.

Conversely, individuals with an interdependent self-construal will apply more concrete thinking [52] and will process stimuli while paying attention to their relations to the entire field, which corresponds to a more context bound thinking mode. They will therefore pay more attention to the overall context in which information about the peer is displayed and take into consideration the specific OFM information that relates to it. They will be more influenced by OFM information, which will subsequently impact their trust in online peer. The resulting hypotheses are thus as follows:

**Research Proposition 3**: Individuals with an interdependent self-construal will activate social self-knowledge, which will foster context-dependent thinking, leading to consideration of OFM and a higher level of trust in peer.

**Research Proposition 4**: Individuals with an independent self-construal will activate autonomous self-knowledge, which will foster context-independent thinking leading to non-consideration of OFM and a lower level of trust in peer.

It is expected that consumers with an independent self-construal primed with a social-dependent semantic-procedural interface (SPI) will display similar results to those of an interdependent self-construal primed with the same SPI. Specifically, they are expected to display higher levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing OFM sequences than will independent and interdependent consumers primed with an autonomous-independent SPI. Conversely, consumers with an interdependent self-construal primed with an autonomous-independent SPI will display similar results to those with an independent self-construal primed with the same SPI. Specifically, they are expected to display lower levels of (dis)trust when confronted with (decreasing) increasing OFM sequences than will interdependent and independent consumers primed with a social-dependent SPI.
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Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model and research propositions for this study.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1. Specific Conceptual Framework of the Interdependent Self-Construal Types Effects**

When exposed to OFM information – whether in the form of consensus ratings (numbers) or written posts feedback (written comments) – consumers may react differently according to their inherent self-construal. The independent (interdependent) self-construal activates autonomous self-knowledge (social self-knowledge) and a context-free thinking mode (context-bound thinking mode), which will eventually result in a more analytic thinking (holistic thinking). Hence, consumers who display, for example, an independent self-construal will be less easily influenced by overall positive or negative evaluations. More specifically, in an overall positive OFM, such consumers will pay closer attention to isolated “negative evaluations” if the consensus is positive or “positive evaluations” if the consensus is negative. This in turn leads to a lower tendency to trust in the online peer offering a collaborative consumption service. Conversely, consumers who exhibit an interdependent self-construal will tend to follow the overall evaluations (consensus) more easily since their thinking framework is more holistic than analytic. In other words, they might be less inclined to follow “outlier” evaluations that go against common consensus, and
their resulting level of trust is more contingent on the level of the overall evaluations of the online peer. The literature emphasizes that the independent self-construal typically relates more to men and Western culture; whereas, the interdependent self-construal refers more to women and Eastern culture.

Figure 2 considers the effect of the interdependent self-construal on trust in online peers in more details.

Consumers with a collective self-construal are more sensitive to group-level relationships and will therefore respond more favorably to aggregated, abstract online evaluations such as overall consensus rating. They will consider the overall evaluation of all quantitative information in the form of consensus ratings as being more trustworthy than written comments. On the other hand, consumers with a relational self-construal are more receptive to personalized bonds of attachment and respond therefore more favorably to individualized feedback in the form of overall written post feedback. That is, they will base their trust on a synthesis of all the written comments provided by other consumers rather than on quantitative consensus ratings. The literature points out that a collective self-construal is more specific to men, whereas a relational self-construal relates more to women.
4. DISCUSSION

This section discusses theoretical implications as well as managerial implications of the current study.

4.1. Theoretical Implications

This study seeks to provide theoretical support for the importance of the presence and sequential display of OFM on trust in online peers. If the results support the research propositions, such work would provide several distinctive theoretical contributions, especially regarding the non-undifferentiated nature that OFM can have on online trust, across individuals.

First, such study could provide evidence of the mediating influence of self-construal on the relationship between OFM information and trust in online peers, as well as the underlying mechanism of this process (namely, the SIP), in both within and between-subjects settings (i.e., with and without priming). The present study, therefore, extends the growing literature stream on self-construal in marketing by demonstrating its relevance and impact in an online setting.

Second, the study enriches the literature on the self-construal and on the semantic-procedural interface by applying these mechanisms to two under-theorized areas: OFM [24] and web-enabled transactions between consumers [35].

Third, the study predicts consistent results across various types of web-enabled CC websites that command varying levels of involvement (i.e., high in home swapping to low in second-hand products purchases).

Fourth, the study also estimates that variations exist within the interdependent self-construal group. Relational individuals tend to be more strongly influenced by OFM fostering individual, one-to-one relationships such as written post feedbacks. On the other hand, the study finds that collective individuals are more prone to influence by OFM, epitomizing group-level, aggregated relationships such as consensus ratings. These differences cancel out when both types of OFM are displayed. Therefore, the present study augments and enriches previous research in this area by investigating the combined effect of both consensus ratings and written post feedbacks on trust among individuals with interdependent self-construals. Specifically, the combined effect of both OFM types offsets difference in (dis)trust among both relational and collective individuals.
Fifth, the study also provides evidence as to potential manipulations of the SPI that underlies the self-construal by showing that independent individuals primed with social/context-bound SPI display similar trust levels in online peer as those of interdependent individuals primed according to their appropriate SPI. In addition, interdependent individuals primed with autonomous/context-free SPI display trust levels that are closer to those of independent individuals primed with their relevant SPI.

Methodologically, the testing of the research propositions could be preferably conducted in the form of controlled field experiments, each related to different types of websites hosting CC practices, so as to increase generalizability of results across CC contexts. Controlled field experiments are better candidates than observational studies or quasi-experiments because they enable the researcher to check for confounds and to investigate the impact of reputation in markets for non-standardized goods for which book values are unavailable [73]. They are also more desirable than cross-sectional survey-based studies since they enable to test for causality.

Theoretically, the present study also elaborates a definition for collaborative consumption, an umbrella term under which are gathered various trading practices, but which has not been recognized as a whole enabling to facilitate and encourage product disposition, something also largely under-scrutinized in the marketing literature [87].

4.2. Managerial Implications

Support for the research propositions set forth in the present study could have substantial implications for managers. First, independent consumers cannot be easily persuaded by OFM, and other less peer-based cues may be used instead to increase their trust in other users. Apart from the consumer empowerment tool (i.e., OFM), two dimensions affect online trust; namely, privacy/security and website design [84]. Websites may therefore have two options:

1. They can prime more interdependent self-construals. For example, they should avoid focusing on the freedom, independence, and individualistic or hedonic aspects of the trading experience, but rather communicate extensively on the community aspect, social benefit, and inter-relatedness inherent to the CC trading experience; or

2. They can improve the website design and privacy/security of the website in order to lead independent consumers to focus on these aspects, which have been extensively proven to positively influence online trust [85].
This study provides additional emphasis on the importance of using sequential OFM, especially with regard to consensus ratings. For interdependent consumers, managers who use OFM based on consensus ratings only should orient their communications and marketing strategies to prime collective self-construal among users and to encourage peers offering CC to do the same on their personal page (e.g., advertising, logos, catchphrases that emphasize the belongingness of the users to groups of other peers). Users will pay greater attention and evaluate more positively consensus ratings that will have a positive impact on their trust.

Conversely, managers who rely on written comments only should gear communications and marketing strategies to activate the relational self-construal among users. Marketing efforts should emphasize the distinctive and close relationships users may have with other peers, how they are related to them, and what they have in common with them. This will lead users to put greater emphasis on written comments and consequently to display higher trust toward trader-peers.

Ideally, managers should implement both ratings and written comments OFM in order to tap into both relational and collective self-construed individuals and be free to communicate either collectively or relationally focused marketing messages. Both OFM types slightly increase trust among individuals with both types of self-construals when both OFM are increasing; but, trust reaches a medium level (between that of collective and relational self-construal) when both OFM are decreasing.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

The present study examined the influences throughout a variety of CC websites in order to increase generalizability of the findings within the web-enabled CC realm. However, the study did not consider the self-construal and the SPI mechanisms within B2C settings. Although the need for OFM would be less relevant in such instances, future research could investigate to what extent individuals with different self-construals are influenced by company-controlled cues in their evaluation of the website’s or company’s trustworthiness.

In a similar vein, the study focused on consumer empowerment tools as a vector of trust. However, [84] indicated that there are two other drivers of trust in an online website; namely, privacy/security and website design dimensions. This study did not consider the two latter, but future research might integrate
these two additional components in a larger conceptual model while testing for the self-construal and SPI mediating influence on trust in this process.

This study sought primarily to investigate the mediating influence of self-construal on trust and therefore did not modulate varying levels of OFM sequences. These were either linearly increasing or decreasing chains, which may not always be the case in the real world, and especially less easily perceptible in written post feedback. Some OFM may, for instance, also be monotonic instead. In addition, positive and negative feedbacks are generally intermingled, and a more realistic approach could thus be tested with chains of varying types of polarities and magnitudes within OFM. Further research using quantitative modeling tools on empirical or simulated data could further investigate the impact of varying levels of either consensus ratings or written post feedback or both on trust.

This study also focused on sequential OFM because previous literature suggested it had a bigger impact than static OFM, especially with regard to consensus ratings [13]. Although comments are generally presented in chronological sequences, consensus ratings are not necessarily always presented in sequential, chronological orderings. Additional study could attempt to replicate the findings in non-sequential consensus ratings settings. Eventually, feedback in most real-world OFM is overwhelmingly positive and high [25]. More than 99% of all feedback posted on eBay is positive [71, 46], which puts the overall credibility of these systems into question. Managers may implement programs to communicate about the trustworthiness and transparency of their OFM systems. In that respect, it would be interesting to investigate how such communication attempts may be perceived, believed, and reacted upon according to individuals’ self-construal and SPI.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at developing an exploratory work based on theoretical analysis to demonstrate the influence of self-construal and its underlying mechanism, the semantic procedural interface (SPI), on the relationship between online feedback mechanisms (OFM) manipulated according to nature, and sequence polarity, on trust in an online peer, from a collaborative consumption (CC) perspective. Four research propositions were developed to explain the relationships and expected effects of these different variables. Theoretical and practical discussions emphasize the implications of the potentially validated research propositions.
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Women Trust Others and Consensus; 
Men Trust Numbers and Their Own Judgment: 
A Conceptual Analysis of the Impact of the Self- Construal Mechanism on the Relationship Between Online Feedback Mechanisms and Online Trust


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