

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING  
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**ANTECEDENTS OF INTENTION  
TO SPREAD NEGATIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH  
ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Reasons for choosing the topic

The digital age has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of consumer-brand interactions Donthu et al. (2021). The growth of social networking sites (SNS) has empowered consumers to actively engage in brand-related negative conversations through features such as reactions, comments, shares, ratings, tweets, and video testimonials (Akbari et al., 2022), giving rise to various forms of negative word-of-mouth (NWOM). Consequently, the rapid growth of social media platforms has enabled dissatisfied customers to communicate with vast audiences globally in a matter of moments (Sigurdsson *et al.*, 2021). While this connectivity offers companies new avenues for engagement, it also presents a formidable challenge (Armstrong et al., 2021). In the online sphere, a single dissatisfied customer's complaint can go viral, spreading across networks and reaching millions of potential consumers (Kusumawati et al., 2024; Pfeffer et al., 2014). This puts companies under pressure to deeply understand the motives behind the spread of NWOM on SNS, and to effectively manage this form of customer communication.

Prior research has explored many motives driving dissatisfied consumers to share negative such as cognitive, affective, social, individual, and situational antecedents (Ribeiro and Kalro, 2023). Surprisingly, although morality is acknowledged as an antecedent of NWOM (Kapoor et al., 2021), studies examining its influence remain limited. Moreover, the unique characteristics of the digital environment make this ethical dimension even more salient. New digital mechanisms like anonymity foster digital disinhibition, which can result in exaggerated or fake reviews (Baker & Kim, 2019), underscoring the need to reevaluate digital ethics related to electronic NWOM. In this vein, this study uses the

well-established ethical decision-making framework by Hunt and Vitell (1986) (H-V theory) to examine how consumers' ethical evaluations affect intentions to spread NWOM on SNS.

A further significant gap in literature pertains to the cultural influences governing electronic NWOM. Recent studies have consistently highlighted a lack of research in this area (Ribeiro and Kalro, 2023; Colmekcioglu *et al.*, 2022). Given the inherently global reach and profound cultural diversity of SNS user bases, understanding cultural foundations is vital for effective marketing communication and brand reputation management. While previous research on consumer ethics has primarily focused on the factors influencing ethical intentions (Hassan et al., 2022), this study advances the discourse by investigating the crucial link between ethical judgment and behavioral intention. To achieve this, it incorporates a key psychological moderator: the fear of negative evaluation. This allows for a more nuanced explanation of why two individuals with similar ethical judgments might ultimately exhibit different NWOM intentions. By focusing on the vibrant and understudied markets likes Vietnam, this study seeks to generate valuable insights that are both theoretically significant and practically actionable for global brands navigating the complex digital landscape. Hence, this dissertation is entitled: "Antecedents of intention to spread negative word-of-mouth on social networking sites".

### 2. Research objectives and questions

The main objective of this research is to develop and empirically test a model that explains the ethical decision-making process behind consumers' intention to spread NWOM on SNS. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding by examining the interplay of ethical evaluations, key cultural factors, and specific psychological influences.

In detail, this dissertation aims to achieve the following research objectives:

First, investigating how consumers' ethical evaluations (deontological and teleological) and ethical judgments shape their intention to spread NWOM on SNS.

Second, assessing the impact of key cultural factors, specifically belief in karma, uncertainty avoidance, and self-construal, on consumers' deontological and teleological evaluations of NWOM on SNS.

Third, examining the moderating role of the psychological factor "Fear of negative evaluation" on the relationship between consumers' ethical judgment and their intention to spread NWOM.

To achieve these above-mentioned objectives, the dissertation aims to answer three main overarching research questions:

RQ1: How do consumers' ethical evaluations (deontological and teleological) and ethical judgments influence their intention to spread NWOM on SNS?

RQ2: What is the impact of key cultural factors (belief in karma, uncertainty avoidance, and self-construal) on these ethical evaluations?

RQ3: How does the psychological factor "Fear of negative evaluation" moderate the relationship between ethical judgment and the intention to spread NWOM on SNS?

### 3. Original contributions of the research

This study offers significant theoretical contributions and practical managerial implications in several ways. First, it stands out as one of the earliest endeavors to employ the Hunt-Vitell theory of ethics in elucidating consumers' intention to spread NWOM on SNS. Second, this study uncovers cultural determinants shaping the intention to disseminate NWOM on SNS. Specifically, it identifies novel factors influencing the intention to spread NWOM through the mediating effects of ethical evaluations from a cultural perspective, such as belief in karma, uncertainty avoidance, and self-construal. Third, this study offers a

pioneering examination of the moderating role of fear of negative evaluation. The effort helps to extend the understanding of the boundary conditions within the H-V model that either enables or constrains the impact of ethical ideology on intention to spread NWOM on SNS. Finally, while previous studies in NWOM and consumer ethics have been done in developed countries, this research focuses on emerging markets, namely Vietnam. For practical implications, this study provides managerial implications for companies' managers to effectively manage NWOM on SNS, avoiding social media crises. Specifically, companies can shift consumers' ethical perspectives by privately resolving complaints and projecting a more humanized brand. Critically, these strategies must be tailored to different cultures, ranging from empowering individualists to creating clear processes.

## **CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **ON THE ANTECEDENTS OF NEGATIVE WORD OF MOUTH ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES**

#### **1.1. Negative word-of-mouth on social networking sites as a form of customer complaint behavior**

##### ***1.1.1. Customer complaint behavior***

Singh (1988) offers one of the most widely accepted definitions of customer complaint behavior (CCB), describing it as a series of both behavioral and non-behavioral responses triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase encounter.

##### ***1.1.2. Classification of customer complaint behavior***

Customers can respond to service failure in various ways, including through complaint actions or non-complaint actions (Day & Landon, 1977; Kim et al., 2003). Day & Landon (1977) distinguished consumer complaint behavior as action (voice and exit) and no action (loyalty); action was then subdivided into public (i.e., voice) and private (i.e., exit and NWOM).

##### ***1.1.3. Negative word of mouth on social networking sites***

Based on the definition of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Yen (2016), this research defines NWOM on SNS as any negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via social media platforms.

##### ***1.1.4. Intention to spread negative word of mouth on social networking site***

The "intention to spread NWOM on SNS" is defined as a consumer's subjective judgment about the probability of engagement in the future act of sharing negative feedback about a product or company following a purchase on social networking sites.

##### ***1.1.5. The consequences of negative word-of-mouth on social networking sites***

Research suggested that electronic NWOM is more influential than traditional NWOM for several reasons (Liang et al., 2013). First, with the development of the Internet and various electronic media, online messages can be quickly reach a potentially large audience (Litvin et al., 2008). Second, recipients of the messages actively seek a broader range of comments online and therefore do not rely only on the limited opinions (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Third, electronic NWOM can be accessed anytime and anywhere; its digital footprint can remain online permanently (Sun et al., 2006). Fourth, anonymity encourages people to publish reviews online as they know that they cannot be identified (Phelps et al., 2004).

#### **1.2. Applied theory in research related to negative word-of-mouth**

##### ***1.2.1. Theories of individual cognition and decision-making***

Theories of individual cognition and decision-making focus on the internal mental processes that occur within a person as they think, interpret, and evaluate information to form judgments and make decisions. This group of theories examines how individuals make sense of the world around them and how those cognitive processes subsequently influence their attitudes and behaviors. The representatives of this group includes justice theory, **Theory of planned behavior**, **Attribution theory**

##### ***1.2.2. Theories of social interaction and influence***

Theories of social interaction and influence share a core premise: an individual's behavior and cognition are not formed in isolation but are profoundly influenced by the social environment, relationships, and interactions with others. Rather than focusing solely on internal psychological processes, this group of theories emphasizes how external factors shape and direct our actions. Two popular theories within this group that have been used to study NWOM include social cognitive theory and social support theory.

### ***1.2.3. Theories of technology acceptance***

Theories of technology acceptance comprises foundational models that are widely used to explain and predict the psychological factors driving an individual's decision to accept and use a new technology. The focus of this group is to answer the question: "Why do users intend to use a specific technology?" Popular theories within this group that have been used to study NWOM include the technology acceptance model (TAM) and the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology 2 (UTAUT2).

## **1.3. Antecedents of NWOM and electronic NWOM on SNS**

### ***1.3.1. Consumer-related antecedents***

Consumer-related antecedents play a significant role in influencing NWOM. Previous studies have shown that demographic characteristics such as age and gender influence the likelihood of engaging in NWOM (Grace & O'Cass, 2001; Joe & Choi, 2019; Ngai et al., 2007). In addition to these demographic variables, prior experiences with the brand, trust levels, and technological savviness also play a significant role in driving NWOM behavior (Ahmad et al., 2021; Hancock et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2017). Notably, altruistic motives, where customers aim to protect others from similar negative experiences, have been identified as a significant driver of electronic NWOM (Verhagen et al., 2013).

### ***1.3.2. Firm-related antecedents***

Firm-related antecedents are centered around failures within the company, such as product or service deficiencies, promotional errors, pricing issues, unethical practices, and insufficient recovery responses (Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023). Prior studies have highlighted the significant role of firm-related failures in prompting NWOM, especially issues like promotional disappointments, unfair pricing strategies, or problematic company policies (Ashley & Noble, 2014; Haywood, 1989; Sundaram et al., 1998). A firm's response to customer issues is a critical determinant of subsequent complaint behavior.

### ***1.3.3. Contextual antecedents***

Contextual antecedents refer to factors related to the specific context in which the negative experience occurs. The cause and severity of a service failure, along with the customer's interpretation of its origin, are critical initial factors that shape their complaint behavior. Service failures are a leading cause of customer dissatisfaction, frequently prompting customers to complain on social media (Kusumawati et al., 2024). The perceived severity of the failure positively influences the decision to complain publicly rather than privately. Furthermore, the customer's allocation of blame, or locus attribution, plays a key role.

### ***1.3.4. Social media context antecedents***

In addition to the common group of antecedents, there are distinct factors that influence the spread of NWOM on SNS, such as the characteristics of the platforms themselves and the nature of the messages and content shared. The characteristics of social media platforms themselves is the unique group of factors influencing the spread of NWOM. Social media has dramatically lowered the barriers to complaining in terms of time, effort, and money, making it easier than ever for dissatisfied customers to engage in widespread NWOM (Grégoire et al., 2015). Different platforms have varying architectures, cultures, and norms that influence user-generated content and the type of complaints shared (Balaji et al., 2016).

## **1.4. The limitations of the related works and the issues requiring further study**

***First, limitations of existing theories and the need for an ethical framework.*** A significant gap in the literature is the lack of theoretical frameworks that explain how ethical evaluations affect the spread of NWOM (Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023). While existing models effectively explain aspects related to perceived injustice or social norms, the role of an individual's moral principles and ethical judgments in the decision to

spread NWOM remains a largely unexplored area. To address this gap, this study proposes the application of the Hunt-Vittel Theory of Ethics (Hunt & Vitell, 1986).

***Second, limitations related to cultural factors affecting NWOM on SNS.*** Although the role of culture in shaping consumer behavior is increasingly recognized, its influence on the spread of NWOM remains a domain with significant research gaps (Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023). Much of the previous research has relied heavily on Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, a framework that has been criticized for failing to capture the diversity and complexity of cultural orientations at the individual level (Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023). Therefore, this study aims to apply the personal cultural orientation theory to investigate how traits such as the independent self and interdependent self influence NWOM behavior, thereby providing a new and more nuanced perspective. Moreover, a major limitation of current research is its predominantly Western-focused lens, which often emphasizes religious motives and short-term goals (Casidy et al., 2021; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Therefore, this study makes a unique contribution by integrating belief in karma, aiming to provide a richer and more globally relevant understanding of NWOM behavior.

***Third, limitations in explaining the gaps between ethical judgment and ethical intention.*** A critical gap exists in understanding the complex relationship between ethical judgment and behavioral intention within the context of NWOM. While foundational frameworks like the H-V model posit that ethical judgments drive intentions, both the theory itself and later empirical studies acknowledge a significant potential divergence between them (Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Mayo & Marks, 1990a). However, research exploring this specific link has predominantly adopted the provider's perspective (Culiberg et al., 2023). Notably, although complaining on

social media is an inherently public behavior, many early studies have overlooked social factors, focusing instead on individual or situational drivers (Balaji et al., 2018).

***Fourth, research context limitations.*** The majority of existing studies originate from the individualistic cultures of North America and Europe (Donthu et al., 2021; Ribeiro & Kalro, 2023). Applying these Western-centric frameworks to an emerging economy like Vietnam presents two significant gaps due to fundamental structural and cultural divergences.

## CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

### 2.1. Hunt and Vitell theory

The H-V theory provides a framework for understanding ethical decision-making processes (Hunt and Vitell, 2006). Building upon the foundational principles outlined in the general theory of marketing ethics (Hunt and Vitell, 1986), when consumers must make decisions that involve ethical issues, they assess each alternative by drawing upon two fundamental categories of moral philosophy: deontological evaluation and teleological evaluation. While deontological norms focus on an individual's specific actions or behaviors, teleological norms emphasize the outcomes of the actions or behaviors. In other words, while deontological evaluation is based on the inherent righteousness of each behavioral alternative, teleological evaluation is rooted in the estimated goodness or badness of the consequences of each behavioral alternative (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Chan *et al.*, 2008). Consumer ethics research has been predominantly concentrated in developed and democratic regions, notably North America and Europe (Hassan *et al.*, 2022). However, applying ethical framework to emerging markets requires considering unique contextual factors (Le & Kieu, 2019).

The development of social media in recent years has given customers the opportunity to talk with hundreds, even thousands, of other customers around the world in a very short period of time (Bruhn *et al.*, 2012). An empirical study by Cheung *et al.* (2008) indicated that the impact of negative electronic word-of-mouth is stronger than the positive one. When negative feedback is posted on social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok, this can reach a huge number of potential customers, far more extensive than traditional ways. This could trigger negative emotions among other customers, consequently, many of them

might avoid the business in the future and even warn their friends and relatives about this situation. In a more terrible situation, these kinds of information could go viral by supporting other famous social media accounts or competitors could take advantage of the firm's mistake, resulting in the ugliest possible consequence for a firm, that is, the worst form of public crisis (Grégoire *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, when customers look at the huge negative consequences of their complaints on social media channels, they might consider this from an ethical perspective before making complaints on these kinds of channels. Some previous research indicated that the theoretical link between moral factors and customer complaints (Kapoor *et al.*, 2021; McAlister & Erffmeyer, 2003). Additionally, there was evidence that small negative online information may lead to suboptimal decisions and influence choice, also raising an interesting question from an ethical perspective (Gupta & Harris, 2010; Kapoor *et al.*, 2021). However, there is neglected research considering complaint behavior from ethical perspectives. To address this gap, this research uses Hunt & Vitell's ethical model to analyze customer complaint behavior on social media.

### 2.2. Ethical evaluations, ethical judgment, and intention

#### 2.2.1. Deontological evaluation and ethical judgement

From a deontological perspective, "the individual evaluates the inherent righteousness or wrongness of the behaviors implied by each alternative" (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, p. 9).

*H1.* Deontological evaluation of NWOM positively affects ethical judgments about NWOM on SNS.

#### 2.2.2. Teleological evaluation, ethical judgement and intention

A teleological evaluation is a component of the ethical decision-making process where an individual assesses the moral rightness of an action by focusing on its consequences (Yin *et al.*, 2018).

*H2.* Teleological evaluation of NWOM negatively affects ethical judgments about NWOM on SNS.

*H3.* Teleological evaluation of NWOM negatively affects the intention to spread NWOM on SNS.

### ***2.2.3. Ethical judgment and intention to spread NWOM on SNS***

Ethical judgment is the heart of the H-V model, which is a function of the individual's deontological evaluations and teleological evaluations (Hunt & Vitell, 1986).

*H4.* Ethical judgment about NWOM positively affects the intention to spread NWOM on SNS.

## **2.3. Cultural factors and ethical evaluations 35**

### ***2.3.1. The independent self, interdependent self and ethical evaluations***

The independence is defined as “a personal cultural orientation associated with acting independently, a strong self-concept, a sense of freedom, autonomy, and personal achievement”, while interdependence is defined as “a personal cultural orientations associated with acting as a part of one or more in-groups, a strong group identity, a sense of belongingness, reliance on others, giving importance to group-goals over own individual goals, and collective achievement” (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 790).

*H5a.* The independent self positively affects deontological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

*H5b.* The independent self negatively affects teleological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

*H6a.* The interdependent self negatively affects deontological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

*H6b.* The interdependent self positively affects teleological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

### ***2.3.2. Belief in karma and ethical evaluations***

*H7a.* Belief in karma negatively affects deontological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

*H7b.* Belief in karma positively affects teleological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

Belief in karma refers to the belief that a person's moral actions influence their future experiences, with good actions leading to positive outcomes and bad actions resulting in negative ones (White and Norenzayan, 2019).

### ***2.3.3. Uncertainty avoidance and ethical evaluations***

Uncertainty avoidance refers to “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 161).

*H8a.* Uncertainty avoidance positively affects deontological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

*H8b.* Uncertainty avoidance negatively affects on teleological evaluation of NWOM on SNS.

### ***2.3.4. Psychological factor as a moderator***

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) was originally defined as apprehension about others' evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively (Watson and Friend, 1969).

*H9.* Fear of negative evaluation moderates the relationship between ethical judgment and intention to spread NWOM on SNS such that the more fear of negative evaluation, the weaker the positive relationship between ethical judgment and intention.

The hypothesized model is demonstrated in Figure 2.1.



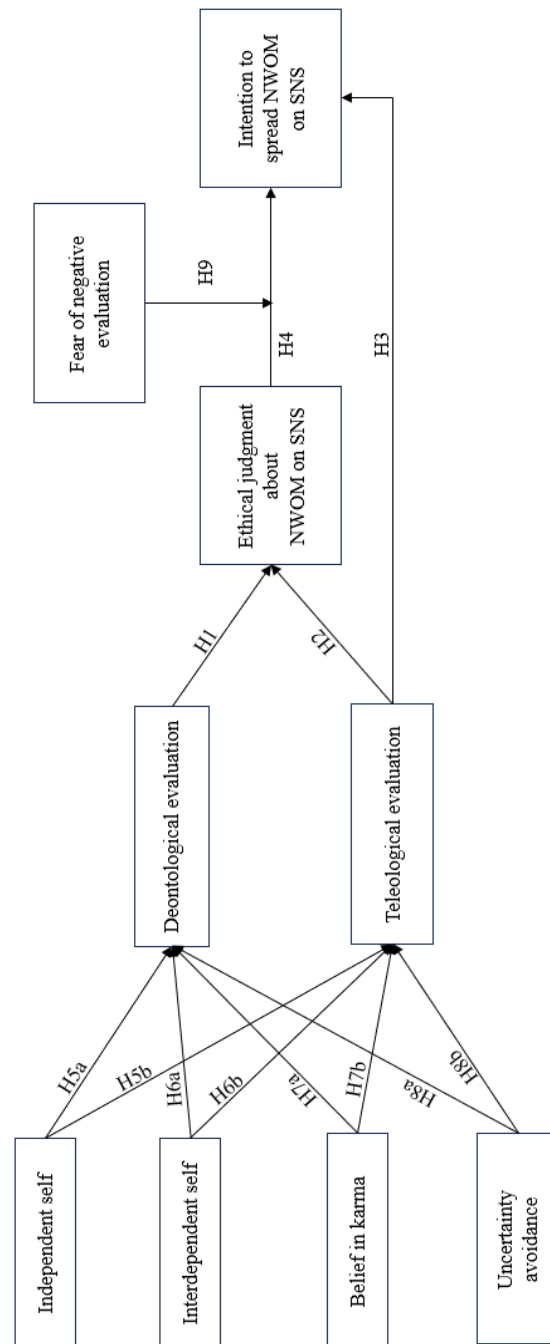


Figure 2.2. Conceptual model

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research context

The selection of Vietnam as research is justified by three compelling rationales that underscore its suitability and significance for this study. First, Vietnam presents unique structural and cultural contexts that diverge sharply from those in which most prior NWOM research was conducted. Second, Vietnam is among the top 10 countries in the World with the largest number of social media users, which makes it a perfect environment for NWOM to spread quickly. Third, the incidence of service failures is often higher in emerging markets compared to their developed counterparts (Borah et al., 2020).

### 3.2. Research method selection

A survey questionnaire was selected as the primary instrument.

### 3.3. Measurement and questionnaire development

#### 3.3.1. Measurement

Measures used in this research were adapted and adopted from previous studies. Measures are evaluated on a 7-point Likert Scale with all items ranging from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 7 (= strongly agreed).

#### 3.3.2. Questionnaire

The survey instrument was meticulously structured into three distinct parts to ensure a logical flow for respondents and to collect data systematically.

Part 1: Screening and scenario priming

Part 2: Measurement of key constructs

Part 3: Demographic information.

### 3.4. Sample and data collection

#### 3.4.1. Sample

In this study, a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, was employed. For this study, the sample size was

also determined through a priori power analysis, conducted using the G\*Power software.

#### **3.4.2. Data collection procedure**

The data for this study were collected through an online survey conducted between August 2nd and October 15th, 2024, targeting social media users from Vietnam. To ensure the participation is actively engaged with social media platforms, the survey was distributed via popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Zalo, and Facebook Messenger.

### **3.5. Data analysis**

#### **3.5.1. Data analysis tools**

In this study, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed as the primary analytical technique to empirically test the hypothesized relationships within the proposed theoretical framework

#### **3.5.2. Data analysis procedure**

The analysis followed a systematic two-stage approach recommended by Hair et al. (2019). The analysis followed a two-step process: assessing the measurement model (reliability, validity, and discriminant validity) and then evaluating the structural model (collinearity, path coefficients, hypothesis testing, and R<sup>2</sup> values).

### **3.6. Common method bias**

To address potential Common method bias, procedural remedies such as ensuring respondent anonymity and using clear, neutral language were implemented.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **4.1. Sample characteristics**

This chapter presents the comprehensive empirical results derived from a study involving 421 Vietnamese consumers, aimed at understanding the interplay of cultural factors and ethical reasoning in the formation of the intention to spread NWOM on SNS. The descriptive analysis reveals a well-balanced and representative sample. With a nearly equal gender split (51% male, 49% female) and a youthful demographic (58% of respondents aged 18-34). The sample closely mirrors the general social media user base in Vietnam, enhancing the generalizability of the results. Experiences at restaurants were the most common catalyst for NWOM (50%), and Facebook was the primary channel for sharing these dissatisfactions (56%), underscoring the relevance of the study to modern consumer behavior.

### **4.2. Measurement model evaluation**

Before hypothesis testing, the measurement model underwent rigorous validation. All constructs demonstrated excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability scores surpassing the recommended thresholds. Convergent validity was established, as all average variance extracted (AVE) values were above the 0.50 benchmark, confirming that the constructs explained a majority of their indicators' variance. Furthermore, discriminant validity was successfully established using both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio, ensuring that each construct in the model was empirically distinct. Finally, a collinearity assessment confirmed that all Variance inflation factor (VIF) values were well below the threshold of 3.0, indicating that the structural model results are not biased by multicollinearity.

### **4.3. Structural model evaluation**

The results in Table 4.8 revealed a moderate level of explanatory power for the construct ethical judgment, as the model accounted for

63.4% of its variance ( $R^2 = 0.634$ ). The model demonstrated weak-to-moderate explanatory power for teleological evaluation and intention to spread NWOM on SNS, explaining 41.5% and 38.5% of their respective variances ( $R^2 = 0.394$  and  $R^2 = 0.376$ , respectively). Finally, a weak explanatory power was found for the construct deontological evaluation, with 30.4% of its variance being explained by the model ( $R^2 = 0.304$ ).

**Table 4.8. R-square and Q-square**

	<b>R-square</b>	<b>R-square adjusted</b>	<b>Q-square</b>
<b>DE</b>	0.304	0.298	0.230
<b>EJ</b>	0.634	0.632	0.518
<b>INTEN</b>	0.385	0.379	0.320
<b>TE</b>	0.415	0.409	0.342

Note: DE: deontological evaluation, TE: teleological evaluation, EJ: ethical judgment, INTEN: Intention to spread NWOM on SNS.

The empirical results from the PLS-SEM analysis are comprehensively summarized in Table 4.10. The objective of this analysis was to validate the proposed theoretical framework delineating the influence of cultural factors and ethical reasoning on the intention to spread NWOM on SNS. The findings indicate a strong explanatory power of the model, with a substantial majority of the hypothesized relationships being statistically significant. Overall, 10 out of the 12 hypotheses were supported, lending robust credence to the model's structure and theoretical underpinnings.

**Table 4.10. Hypotheses test results**

<b>H</b>	<b>Relationship</b>			<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>P-value</b>	<b>Supported</b>
H1	DE	→	EJ	0.685	0.685	0.027	25.831	0.000	Yes
H2	TE	→	EJ	-0.202	-0.201	0.033	6.142	0.000	Yes
H3	TE	→	INTEN	-0.042	-0.010	0.063	0.673	0.501	No

<b>H</b>	<b>Relationship</b>			<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>T-value</b>	<b>P-value</b>	<b>Supported</b>
H4	EJ	→	INTEN	0.556	0.564	0.048	11.513	0.000	Yes
H5a	INDE	→	DE	0.258	0.260	0.043	6.007	0.000	Yes
H5b	INDE	→	TE	-0.190	-0.190	0.036	5.202	0.000	Yes
H6a	INTER	→	DE	-0.029	-0.034	0.043	0.664	0.507	No
H6b	INTER	→	TE	0.172	0.179	0.045	3.794	0.000	Yes
H7a	KB	→	DE	-0.348	-0.345	0.045	7.668	0.000	Yes
H7b	KB	→	TE	0.518	0.514	0.051	10.185	0.000	Yes
H8a	UA	→	DE	0.278	0.281	0.039	7.102	0.000	Yes
H8b	UA	→	TE	-0.061	-0.063	0.039	1.554	0.120	No
<i>Moderating relationship</i>									
H9	FNE x EJ	→	Intention	-0.100	-0.086	0.044	2.242	0.025	Yes

Note: ( $t > 1.96$  at  $*p < 0.05$ ), ( $t > 2.58$  at  $**p < 0.01$ ), ( $t > 3.29$  at  $***p < 0.001$ ) and (two-tailed). S.D.: Standard deviation.

DE: deontological evaluation, TE: teleological evaluation, EJ: ethical judgment, INTEN: Intention to spread NWOM on SNS, INDE: independent self, INTER: interdependent self, KB: belief in karma, UA: uncertainty avoidance, FNE: fear of negative evaluation.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. Discussion of findings

This chapter synthesizes a study on the ethical reasoning behind spreading NWOM on social media, using the Hunt and Vitell ethical theory framework. The research confirmed 10 of its 13 hypotheses, validating its model. A core finding is the psychological tension consumers face. A deontological evaluation positively influences the ethical judgment to spread NWOM, as consumers feel a duty to warn others. Conversely, a teleological evaluation negatively impacts this judgment, as consumers consider the potential harm to the business. This conflict is a key contribution, as these evaluations often align in other contexts. Interestingly, teleological concerns did not directly influence the intention to post, suggesting that social factors may override consequence-based reasoning.

The study makes a significant theoretical contribution by demonstrating how personal cultural values shape these ethical evaluations. An independent self promotes a deontological view while downplaying consequences. An interdependent self and belief in karma enhance teleological concerns for community harmony and cosmic balance. Uncertainty avoidance increases the deontological evaluation. The research also found that fear of negative evaluation weakens the link between a consumer's ethical judgment and their intention to post, helping to explain why some ethically motivated consumers remain silent.

### 5.2. Theoretical contributions

This research makes three important theoretical contributions. First, this study is one of the first examining NWOM on SNS from an ethical perspective of the H-V theory. This study demonstrates that consumers with elevated ethical and moral standards, influenced by deontological

evaluation, are likely to perceive NWOM as unethical or socially unacceptable. Concurrently, they are likely to perceive NWOM as unethical when they recognize its potential to impose detrimental consequences on companies via teleological evaluation.

Second, this study contributes to ethical literature by providing theoretical and empirical evidence that cultural factors, including independent self, interdependent self, belief in karma, and uncertainty avoidance, have significant direct effects on consumers' ethical evaluations.

Additionally, the results also revealed the significant impacts of the independent self and interdependent self on deontological and teleological evaluation of NWOM on SNS. While consumer ethics literature has proved that individualists tend to believe questionable actions are acceptable and tend to engage in such behaviors to obtain desirable results (Lu *et al.*, 2015; Chang, 2022), this study differed in its use of the independent and interdependent self to measure the culture values of individuals.

### 5.3. Managerial Implications

#### 5.3.1. Managerial implications based on consumer ethical reasoning

*Shifting the consumer's ethical calculus.* Unlike traditional approaches that focus on surface-level behavioral response such as reactive apologies, compensation, and speedy resolution (Kusumawati *et al.*, 2024), this study emphasizes the need to intervene in the consumer's internal ethical calculus. Rather than adopting a reactive stance that waits for the customer to act, managers should proactively influence the cognitive process that precedes the behavior.

*Leveraging the gap between consequence and intention.* Unlike prior studies that focus narrowly on individual recovery strategies to appease specific customers (Kusumawati *et al.*, 2024), this research advocates for a broader shift toward community governance. By publicly

showcasing empathy before privatization, brands effectively treat crisis management as a stage performance that signals responsiveness to all observers. This approach not only resolves the immediate issue but also neutralizes the duty to warn among the wider audience, preventing the conflict from spreading.

***Making customers reconsider before judging.*** While prior research has predominantly focused on reactive crisis management tactics, such as apologies and response speed (Kusumawati et al., 2024; Varnali & Cesmeci, 2022), this study shifts the focus toward intervening in the consumer's internal ethical judgment process.

### **5.3.2. Turning cultural insights into strategy**

***For customers with a strong independent self.*** For consumers who exhibit a high degree of individualism, the research indicates a propensity to view the public negative feedback as a personal right or even an obligation. Consequently, they tend to display diminished concern for the potential reputational damage their actions may inflict upon the organization. An appeal to collective well-being is therefore unlikely to be persuasive. The most appropriate strategy is one centered on empowerment.

***For customers who value community.*** In contrast, individuals with strong interdependent self-construal are highly considerate of social harmony and the collective impact of their actions. This orientation makes them particularly receptive to communications that emphasize community and shared well-being. Managerial responses should therefore employ community-centric language.

***For customers with strong belief in karma.*** For customers who hold a strong belief in karma, a service failure is not merely an isolated incident but may be interpreted through a lens of cosmic justice and fairness. These individuals are evaluating the organization's long-term ethical character.

Consequently, the most effective long term strategy is to cultivate a robust reputation for ethical conduct and corporate responsibility.

***For customers with high uncertainty avoidance.*** Customers who exhibit high uncertainty avoidance possess a strong need for structure and predictability. They often perceive the act of posting negative feedback as a duty to mitigate risks for other customers. Notably, they tend to reframe their complaint as a form of constructive criticism intended to help the organization improve. By viewing their feedback as a controlled, corrective process with a positive end goal, they can ethically justify their actions as a necessary step toward creating a more predictable and accountable marketplace.

### **5.3.3. Cultivating psychologically safe feedback environments**

*Rather than allowing these unvoiced frustrations to simmer,* managers should aim to create psychologically safe online environments. This involves actively moderating brand-owned channels to ensure respectful dialogue, publicly thanking consumers for providing constructive (even if negative) feedback, and designing feedback systems that offer varying levels of anonymity.

## **5.4. Limitations and future research direction**

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the model focused exclusively on cultural and ethical factors; future studies could integrate other variables like personality and emotions for a more holistic view. Second, data was collected in a single country (Vietnam), which limits the generalizability of the findings, making cross-cultural comparative studies essential. Finally, the research relied on hypothetical scenarios to measure behavioral intentions. Future methodologies could use experiments or analyze real social media data to capture actual NWOM behavior.

## LIST OF PUBLISHED WORKS RELATED TO DISSERTATION BY PHD CANDIDATE

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