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경영학 석사 학위논문

**What Drives Consumers to Express  
without Prior Consumption Experience?  
The Role of Identity Signals on  
Consumers' Word-of-Mouth  
Transmission**

정체성 관련 메시지가 비경험 구전활동에  
미치는 영향

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# Abstract

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication is one of the most powerful forces in consumer decision. Extant previous researches have examined the motivations and effects of WOM and found that it is common for consumers to use WOM as a source of self-signaling; individuals strategically choose what to talk. However, few prior researches distinguish WOM of their own experience from that of others. This research proposes that usage of identity-signals on product message frame can exert positive influence on potential consumers who have not yet purchased or consumed the firm's product or service. Across two experiments, this research shows that the fundamental psychological motive to manage one's impression can lead consumers to transmit WOM given identity-signals in the product message. Experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate that the tendency to transmit WOM is likely to increase when individuals with no prior consumption experience on a product is framed with identity-relevant message. Experiment 2 reveals that consumers with no prior consumption experience had greater impression management motive, thereby increasing their intent of WOM transmission. This research concludes that given the identity-relevant message on the same product domain, individuals are more likely to transmit WOM as they strategically manage impression to others about the product with which they have no purchase or consumption experience.

.....  
**Keywords:** Identity-signals, Message frame, Word-of-mouth, Recommendation behavior, Impression management, Consumption experience, Word-of-mouth transmission

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# 1. Introduction

Consumers often communicate with other consumers about product and service related information. Many of the previous research have demonstrated that consumers speak out about their purchases and experiences, and this is called word-of-mouth (WOM). Different motives are involved when consumers engage in WOM. Some individuals merely share information about their purchase for altruistic purpose (Cheung and Lee 2012; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster 1998). Others engage in positive WOM to express their satisfaction about their purchase (Brown et al. 2005). In addition, as they choose products or brands to signal who they are (Argo, White, & Dahl 2006; Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon 2014; Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal 2011; White and Argo 2011), consumers often utilize their communication as a route to signal their identities. For instance, individuals who seek to be unique generate WOM about their exclusive and attractive purchase (Cheema and Kaikati 2010). Mainly, consumers are more likely to express to enhance themselves (Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus 2013; Angelis et al. 2012; Wojnicki and Godes 2008).

Therefore, using WOM as a source of self-signaling, individuals strategically choose what to talk. However, few previous researches distinguish WOM of their own experience from that of others. We can often observe situations in which individuals talk about other's experience or

purchase, and this WOM behavior can be discriminated from the conventional WOM behavior.

Stephen and Lehmann (2009) distinguish between "initial" transmission and "retransmission" based on the condition whether WOM is generated based on one's own experience or on that of third person. Examining differences in WOM valence, Angelis et al. (2012) define the situation "WOM generation" as consumers' sharing information about their own personal experiences, while "WOM transmission" refers to a situation in which consumers pass on information about experiences occurred to someone else.

As mentioned earlier, prior research has suggested that consumers often exploit the marketplace as a way to express and fulfill psychological and sociological needs (Berger and Heath 2007; Sirgy 1982), so identity-signaling messages in the same product domain will affect consumer's WOM intention in a higher degree, especially when they have not yet purchased or experienced the product. This can be explained by the efforts to manage one's image appeared to others. In this research, I call such effort as impression management (Paulhus 1984, Paulhus and Reid 1991), and it can be an underlying motive of consumers to speak out, or to "transmit" WOM, given no prior consumption experience about the product or service.

The objectives of this research paper are: (1) to examine the role of identity-signals on consumers' WOM intentions under the same product

domain; (2) to investigate the difference between WOM intentions of consumers with and without prior consumption experience in identity-relevant product frame; and (3) to discover underlying driving force of consumers' intentions to articulate more when a product or service with which they have no prior consumption experience is framed with identity-signals.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Motivational Analysis on Word-of-Mouth**

Word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to an informal communications to other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services (Westbrook 1987) including consumers' own evaluations and opinions (Anderson 1998). Because it is charged with real personal experiences and feelings (Herr, Kardes & Kim (1991), WOM is considered realistic and vivid form of information exchange. Many researchers have focused on motives of WOM (Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus 2013; Dichter 1966; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster 1998), and some have specifically focused on investigating social and psychological factors that drive consumers to articulate themselves.

Factors including self-enhancement, impression management, and need for uniqueness encourage consumers to communicate information with others (Belk 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Berger and Schwartz 2011;



Cheema and Kaikati 2010). Altruism, vengeance, deception, and anxiety reduction are some other emotional and arousal-driven factors that motivate consumers' WOM behavior (Anderson and Simester 2014; Berger 2011; Sundaram, Mitra & Webster 1998). Through emotional sharing, consumers may experience greater social connectedness or satisfy their needs for consistency (Peters and Kashima 2007). As a result, when people spread words, they communicate information not only about the product or services but also about themselves (Wojnicki and Godes 2008). Some consumers even choose to talk more unusual, interesting products (e.g. iPhones) or brands (e.g. Nike) rather than mundane products (e.g. dish soap) or brands (ex. Tide) because it makes them seem interesting among others (Berger and Milkman 2012; Berger and Schwartz 2011). Cumulatively, consumers seek to satisfy their self- and social-needs via spreading words to others.

## **2.2 Benefits and Costs of WOM on Consumers Identity**

Among many psychological and behavioral motives of WOM intention, consumers make a use of word-of-mouth to achieve social or psychological benefits. Prior research indicates consumers who are more likely to engage in WOM as market mavens (Feick and Price 1987). Packard and Wooten (2013) suggest that people heighten word-of-mouth intentions when they have knowledge discrepancies. Consumers are more likely to engage in

WOM to signal their knowledgeability. At extremes, consumers' willingness to lie increases when individuals perceive social comparison information threatening (Argo, White & Dahl 2006). Consumers also engage in WOM to justify their decisions, or to get approval, or signal social status (Robertson and Gatignon 1986) through their consumption experience or brand mentions (Seckon et al. 2015). Other findings suggest that consumers can satisfy both self-needs (e.g. self-enhancement, self-affirmation) and social-needs (e.g. social comparison, social bonding) via sharing information with others (Alexandrov, Lilly, & Babakus 2013). Some consumers can enhance themselves by engaging in positive WOM about their own experience and negative WOM about others' (Angelis et al. 2012). However, there are also costs for WOM engagement.

One possible cost of WOM is image impairment. Especially under engaging negative WOM, consumers talk negatively about the products or services may be perceived as bad consumers who list up complaints. In addition, they can often be seen as consumers who made a wrong choice (Zhang, Feick, & Mittal 2014). In addition, WOM may incur opportunity costs when opportunities are limited. By sharing information and making recommendations, consumers can encounter competition with other consumers over the limited amount of products or services (Cheema and Kaikati 2010).

Berger and Heath (2007) demonstrate that consumer choices often seem divergent to secure their identities depending on product domains. Consumers also diverge from others to maintain their identities via purchasing unique products and abandoning tastes adopted by other social groups (Berger and Heath 2008). Another finding supports that consumers can be unwilling to promote a product if others will buy it and decrease its exclusivity. Especially for individuals with high need-for-uniqueness and need for self-expression, consumers are more likely to feel painful when sharing identity-relevant information can threaten one's distinctiveness (Cheema and Kaikati 2010). Consequently, consumers might become reluctant to engage in WOM because they fear the products or services they mention to be commonplace.

### **2.3 Identity Relevance of Products**

Given the benefits and costs of WOM behavior, products with high identity relevance affect consumer behavior. A great deal of literatures builds upon the significance of identity-signaling products. Some researchers suggest that consumers buy products for what they symbolize, and they use products to signal their own or desired identities (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine & Kernan 1993). Among these products, their domains can be divided into symbolic versus non-symbolic products. For example, music or hairstyles can be seen as symbolic of identity, while backpack and stereos are not

symbolic (Berger and Heath 2007; Shavitt 1990). Chernev, Hamilton, and Gal (2011) also divide product domains into symbolic versus functional to observe the effect of need for self-expression on brand preference. People react differently to the product domains, and several research has found that individuals show divergence from a majority in domains that others use to infer identity. Social comparison literatures, including optimal distinctiveness (e.g. Brewer 1991) and individual differentiation (Spears, Jetten & Scheepers 2002) support these predictions about identity-relevance marketing. Since many products often signal identities of the users, individuals make adjustments to their product choices to boost their identities or to deviate from lower-status groups or out-group members.

In addition to the product domains, contextual factors can affect consumers when receiving messages of the products in the same domains. When a product in the same domain is framed differently, one signaling identity-relevance and another signaling function-relevance, consumers reveal decreased liking for the product when the product is identity-primed and is associated with dissimilar others. Some show greater divergence or lower preference on messages that explicitly define identities (Berger and Heath 2007). Other research reveals that consumers reduce their purchase likelihood when products are framed with messages that explicitly define identity (Bhattacharjee, Berger & Menon 2014). Thus, people are more likely

to make identity references about others and adjust their choices when product domains and frames are seen as symbolic of identity.

## **2.4 Word-of-Mouth in Different Experience Stages**

Exploring existing definitions of WOM, few prior researches distinguish difference in the stage at which WOM occurs. Specifically, WOM can be divided into two types depending on consumers' experience with the products or services. Some consumers speak about the products and services they have purchased or experienced, and the motivations and consequences of this behavior have vastly studied. However, there are situations in which people talk about products or services while they have no prior purchase experience.

A prior research was addressed to distinguish WOM transmission situations. Stephen and Lehmann (2009) separate transmission situations into "initial transmission" versus "retransmission" in order to examine the reasons and the audiences of sharing information based on the two distinct situations. Initial transmission refers to the situation in which people share their own opinions about products, while retransmission refers to the situation in which people pass on other's opinions.

Similar approach was made by other researchers. While many prior research use the verbs "generate" and "transmit" WOM mixed to describe the situation of spreading words between consumers, Angelis et al. (2012)

have defined the two terms to indicate the distinction between two stages. The term “WOM generation” is to describe a situation in which consumers share information that refers to their own experiences with products or services, and thus the source of information “generates” words about their experience. On the other hand, the term “WOM transmission” is used to describe a situation in which consumers play a role of passing on information about others’ experiences with products or services they have heard. In other words, information about the products or services purchased or experienced by a third person is passed on, or “transmitted” to other audience. Building on these findings, I suggest that consumers can display different WOM intentions conditional on their prior consumption experience about the products or services. Furthermore, situational factors may affect consumers’ motivations for WOM intentions under two stages: WOM generation and WOM transmission.

### **3. The Current Research**

#### **3.1 Hypotheses**

The product domains and frames affect individuals’ consumption behavior (e.g. purchase likelihood, taste preference), and they may also influence consumers’ WOM likelihood to satisfy various motives. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster (1998) conducted surveys in which respondents self-reported their willingness to generate WOM and

found out that self-enhancement motive was a main driver of positive WOM. Wojnicki and Godes (2011) also analyzed data collected from a controlled experimental setting to show that experts tend to generate more positive WOM as a means to signal their expertise, boosting themselves and maintaining their reputation (Angelis et al. 2012). These findings provide preliminary evidence for the possibility that individuals will engage more in positive WOM when the products or services have high identity-relevance. More specifically, symbolic products, when compared to functional products, are more likely to be shared. Likewise, consumers will display different recommendation behaviors (or positive WOM) about the same product domain framed with different messages - identity-relevant versus functional messages.

However, not all WOM behaviors should be considered the same. As previously reviewed, WOM can be divided into two types depending on the prior consumption experience. As Angelis et al. (2012) define, hereafter, I refer WOM generation as recommending and sharing information about one's own prior consumption experience. WOM transmission, on the other hand, means referral behavior about other's prior consumption experience. Under some situations, consumers will more likely to "transmit" WOM in order to use it as a source of identity-signaling. When a product is framed with high identity-relevance, individuals will be more likely to purchase the product to satisfy their self- and social-needs for purchasing symbolic

products. In order to manage their image to others, some consumers will be engage in WOM to signal based on their consumption experience.

Other consumers without prior consumption experience will also be likely to engage in WOM because contents of WOM including opinions or recommendations can allow others to make inference about the message deliverer. When a product is given with identity-signaling messages, those without purchase experience might be motivated to transmit WOM in order to manage how they are viewed by others. For example, an individual can suggest or recommend a fancy product to signal his or her interest level, knowledge, or taste as a strategic impression management. Thus, I predict that how a product with identity-signals and consumers' experience will make interplay to influence the likelihood to engage in WOM. Formally,

**Hypothesis 1:** Under the same product domain, consumers provided with identity-relevant messages (vs. function-relevant messages) will have greater WOM intention.

**Hypothesis 2:** When a product is framed with identity-relevant messages (vs. function-relevant messages), individuals without prior consumption experience (vs. with prior consumption experience) will have greater WOM intention.



## **3.2 Impression Management Motive on Word-of-Mouth**

### **Intention**

Impression management, “a tendency to give favorable self-descriptions to others” (Paulhus and Reid 1991) has been identified as one of the most important aspect of socially desirable responding (Mick 1996). People are highly interested in how others evaluate and recognize them. Impression management, also interchangeably called self-presentation, is the process of individuals attempting to control the impressions others form of them (Leary and Kowalski 1990). Because people form implications about others based on how they compare and perceive, individuals are interested in creating and regulating certain impressions in others’ eyes. Generally speaking, individuals wish to be viewed in a “positive light” (Leary and Kowalski 1990), and in order to attain this positive light, they regularly engage in impression management behaviors.

Symbolic interactionism (Leigh and Gabel 1992) explains that some products or brands act as “societal tools” in that they are used to communicate symbolically among people, and this is one of the ways to regulate and manage impression to others. Consumers often pick specific brands in the process of impression formation. Fennis and Pruyn (2006) examined that consumers are highly affected by brand personality because it affects how others perceive the personality of the brand’s owner.

Besides possession and consumption, previous studies have examined impression management motive as an underlying cause for communication and information exchange between consumers. For instance, consumers online construct identities by associating themselves with specific symbols, products, or places (Schau and Gilly 2003). At some extremes, people tend to tell a lie or misrepresent to create a positive impression, consequently boosting his or her self-image (Sengupta, Dahl, & Gorn 1999).

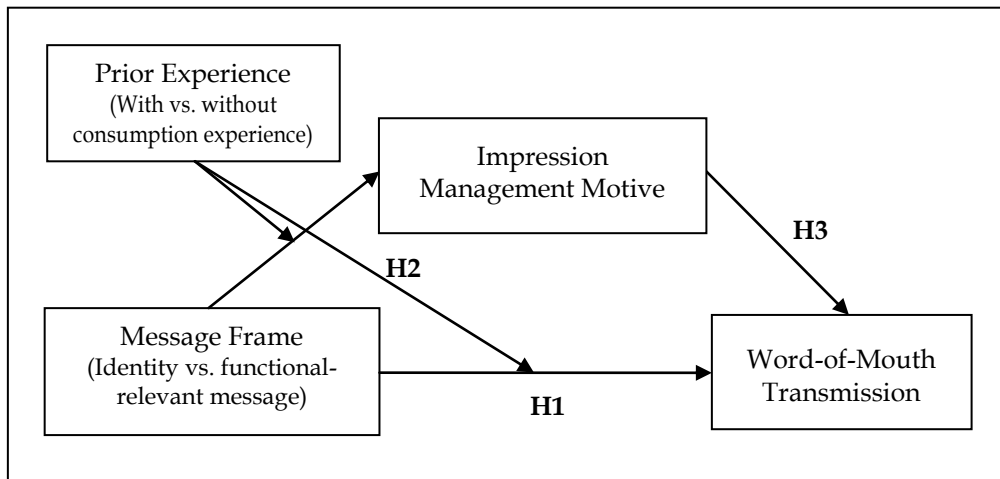
As consumption itself can be a self-defining and self-expressive behavior, what people talk about can also affect impression formation. Therefore, when consumers acquire and display possessions of products to tangibly symbolize one's identity and to form ideal impression to others. Similarly, consumers would involve in WOM by mentioning a certain product or service to create and manage their impression, especially when a product or service is framed with identity-relevant messages.

Taken all together, I can conclude that when identity-relevant message is salient for the same product domain, consumers who have no prior consumption experience with the product will use WOM as a means to symbolically manage their impression by mentioning about them. In other words, impression management will mediate the effect of identity-relevant messages on WOM intention for consumers with no prior experience. Formally,

**Hypothesis 3:** When a product is framed with identity-relevant messages (vs. function-relevant messages), individuals without prior consumption experience (vs. with prior consumption experience) will have greater impression management tendency, thereby increasing their WOM intentions.

To be specific, a product with identity-relevant message will stimulate individuals who have no prior consumption experience with it to express bring about perceptions of unfavorable discrepancies between their actual and ideal purchase experience, and consumers are motivated to engage in WOM transmission as a means to manage one's impression on others (see Fig. 1).

**Figure 1. The Conceptual Model**



## 4. Experiments

## 4.1 Study 1: Interplay between Identity Signals and Experience

The objective of Study 1 is to test H1 and H2. Study 1 examines the moderating role of prior consumption on the relation between the product frame and WOM intention. It is designed to find out (1) whether consumers reveal greater intention to engage in WOM when the product message is identity-relevant (vs. function-relevant), and to examine (2) whether consumers with no prior consumption experience reveal greater WOM intention under the identity-relevant message (vs. function-relevant) frame condition for the same product domain.

### 4.1.1 Method

In this experiment, I presented participants with a set of writing task and scenario-based product information with different product frame and experience condition, and then I compared their intentions to engage in WOM depending on their prior consumption experience conditions.

*Participants and Design.* 157 participants (91 females and 66 males,  $M_{age}=35.38$ ,  $SD=12.96$ ) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) for a small amount of incentives. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 2 (message frame: identity vs. functional)  $\times$  2 (prior

experience: with vs. without consumption experience) between-subject conditions.

*Procedure.* Participants were first asked to complete a writing task from which was adopted and revised from previous research (Berger and Heath 2007). In the identity-relevant (function-relevant) condition, they read: “Sometimes people choose things based on *how well that thing expresses their identity (they perform a specific function)*. In the space below, please write 5-7 sentences about something or things you own that you bought *that expresses who you are to the people around you (for the functional benefits it provides)*. Please include as many details as possible about the product such as when and where you bought it. You may include the reason why you decided to purchase the product and *how it expresses your identity (how it performs a specific function)*. I also manipulated the prior experience condition in the writing task instruction; under the “with (without) prior consumption experience” condition, participants were asked to describe things that they purchased (*they do not own*) and to write about the reason they decided to purchase (*the reason they want to have*).

Once the writing task was finished, participants read scenarios prepared for each of the four assigned conditions (Appendix 1). The stimulus product was restaurant, and it was considered appropriate because it is one of the most frequently mentioned categories along with beverages, automobiles and tech-products in consumers WOM behavior research

(Keller Fay Group 2007). In the experience condition, participants were asked to read the description and to imagine that they had visited the presented restaurant. In no experience condition, participants were asked to read an online review written by a consumer about an imaginary restaurant. In each condition, the same restaurant was framed differently; under the identity-relevant message frame, the restaurant was described with the words such as *trendy*, *cultural*, *cool*, and *stylish*, while the function-relevant message frame described the restaurant with words *easy*, *good location*, *convenience* and etc. I measured word-of-mouth intention using two seven-point items (Brown et al. 2005): (1) how likely they would recommend the restaurant to others; (2) how likely they would recommend this restaurant to someone else who seeks their advice (1 = “very unlikely” and 7 = “very likely”). The two items (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.946$ ) were averaged to obtain a measure of WOM intention.

After reading the scenario, participants indicated how much were they willing to generate WOM. They then completed further questionnaires about the product, reported demographic information, and were thanked for their participation.

#### **4.1.2 Results**

*Manipulation check.* To check whether the manipulation was successful, each participant was asked to answer three questions: “To what

extent does this restaurant express who you are?" "To what extent does this restaurant communicate something about you?" and "How much this restaurant symbolizes what kind of person you are?" on seven point scales (1 = "not at all" and 7 = "very"), which were adopted (White and Argo 2011) and revised for appropriate context (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.887$ ). An ANOVA with the identity-relevance index as a dependent variable and the product message frame (function vs. identity-relevant) as an independent variable elicited only a main effect of identity-relevant message ( $F(1, 155) = 10.47, p < .01$ ), indicating that the participants felt that the product was more identity-relevant in the identity-relevant message condition than in the function-relevant message condition ( $M_{identity}=4.02$  vs.  $M_{function}=3.29$ ). Similarly, an ANOVA with the identity-relevance index as an dependent variable and the prior consumption experience (with vs. without experience) as an independent variable revealed no significant main effect ( $F(1, 155) = 0.374, p > .05$ ), indicating the participants in the identity-relevant message condition felt no difference in identity-relevance level when compared to the participants in the function-relevant message condition ( $M_{no\ experience}=3.76$  vs.  $M_{experience}=3.62$ ). Furthermore, an ANOVA with the identity-relevance index as an dependent variable and the interaction term of product frame and prior consumption experience as the independent measures elicited no significant interaction effect of identity-

relevant messages ( $F(1, 153) = 0.867, p > .05$ ), suggesting that manipulations were successful.

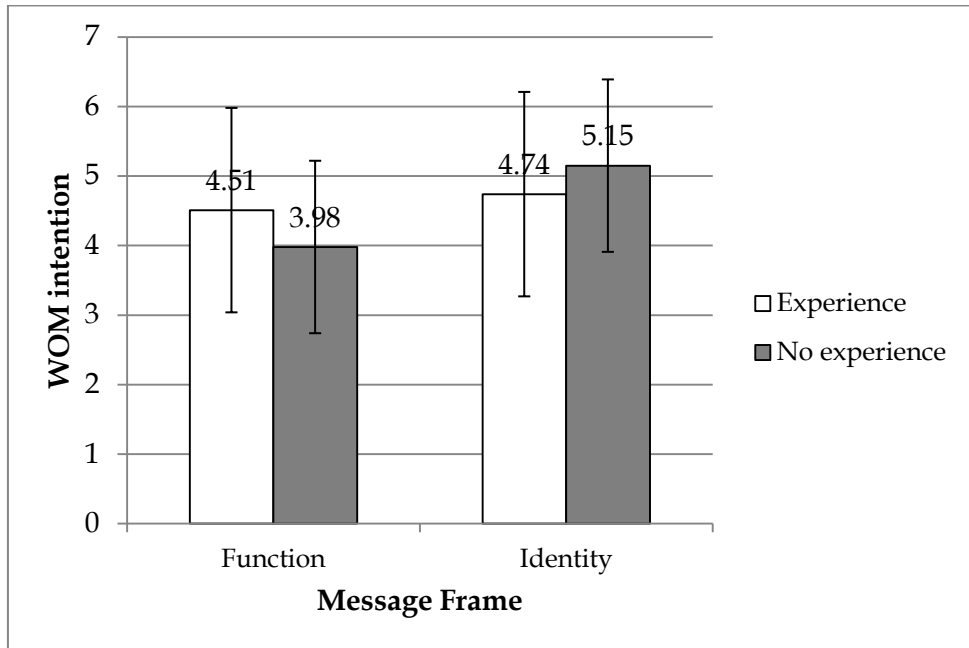
*Main effect.* An ANOVA with WOM intention as the dependent measure elicited a main effect of product frame ( $F(1, 153) = 10.86, p < .01$ ). Participants with identity-relevant messages revealed greater WOM intentions ( $M_{identity}=4.92$  vs.  $M_{function}=4.28$ ), supporting H1.

*Interaction effect.* An ANOVA with WOM intention as the dependent measure and the interaction term of product frame  $\times$  prior consumption experience as the independent measures elicited a significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 153) = 5.21, p < .05$ ). Product category consumption frequency was included as covariates in order to rule out any possible explanation regarding them. Consumption frequency asked how often participants dine out and spend money on restaurant. The interaction effect indicates that given the same product, under the function-relevant message frame, participants with consumption experience displayed greater WOM intention than those without prior consumption experience ( $M_{experience}=4.51$  vs.  $M_{no\ experience}=3.98$ ). On the other hand, under the identity-relevant message frame, participants with no prior consumption experience displayed similar WOM intention as those with prior consumption experience ( $M_{experience}=4.74$  vs.  $M_{no\ experience}=5.15$ ). They were statistically indifferent, meaning that when the product is framed with



identity-relevant message, consumers with no prior experience are as much likely as consumers with experience to engage WOM (see Fig.2 and Table 1).

**Figure 2. The Effect of Interaction between Message Frame and Experience on WOM Intention**



Planned contrasts further revealed that non-experiencers who exposed to identity-relevant message showed greater WOM intention ( $M_{identity * no\ experience}=5.15$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) than those exposed to function-relevant message ( $M_{function * no\ experience}=3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ;  $t(153) = -3.59$ ,  $p = .00$ ). On the other hand, identity-message effect did not reveal any significant difference for experiencers ( $M_{function * experience}=4.51$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ,  $M_{identity* experience}=3.98$ ,  $SD=1.80$ ;  $t(153) = 1.40$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Lastly, under

identity-relevant message frame, individuals conditional on their prior consumption experience did not reveal difference in WOM intention ( $M_{identity * experience} = 4.74, SD=1.26, M_{identity * no experience} = 5.15, SD = 1.19; t(153) = 1.40, p > .05$ ), indicating that non-experiencers are as much likely as experiencers to engage in WOM given identity-relevant messages.

Taken together, these results indicate that prior consumption experience has a significant interplaying role on consumers' WOM intention only when the product is framed with identity-relevant messages, supporting H2.

**Table 1. Interaction Effect between Product Message Frame and Experience**

A. Descriptive Statistics

Dependent variable: WOM

Message Frame	Experience	Mean (SD)	sample
Function-relevant	No experience	3.98 (1.80)	32
	Experience	4.51 (1.12)	41
	Total	4.28 (1.47)	73
Identity-relevant	No experience	5.15 (1.19)	36
	Experience	4.74 (1.26)	48
	Total	4.92 (1.24)	84
Total	No experience	4.60 (1.61)	68
	Experience	4.63 (1.19)	89
	Total	4.62 (1.38)	157

B. Two-way ANOVA – Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent variable: WOM

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model(a)	30.198	4	7.550	4.274	.003
Intercept	125.804	1	125.804	71.218	.000
Consumption Freq	5.888	1	5.888	3.333	.070
Message Frame	19.175	1	19.175	10.855	.001
Prior Experience	.321	1	.321	.181	.671
Msg * Experience	9.204	1	9.204	5.210	.024
Error	268.503	152	1.766		
Total	3651.250	157			
Corrected Total	298.701	156			

a. R Squared = .101 (Adjusted R Squared = .077)

### **4.1.3 Discussion**

Study 1 found that participants were more willing to engage in WOM when the product or service is framed with identity-relevant message. The role of identity-relevant message has, in general, positive impact on WOM intention; it is especially greater for individuals with no prior consumption experience. While non-experiencers are less likely to engage in WOM when compared to experiencers when the product has function-relevant message (here, it is considered as a control condition), they become evenly likely to recommend and spread words when the identity-relevant message is framed to the given product or service. Specifically speaking, WOM generation and WOM transmission intentions are at similar level given identity-signals. This result is consistent with the hypotheses 1 and 2. An additional study is designed to investigate the underlying mechanism of this effect found in Study 1. I expect that the impression management motive is mediating the effect between the identity-relevant message frame and WOM transmission.

## **4.2 Study 2: Mediating Role of Impression Management**

### **Motive**

The objective of Study 2 is to investigate an important underlying mechanism associated with the findings in Study 1. Specifically, it is

designed to examine whether the interplay between identity-signals and no prior consumption experience can be attributed to the usage of WOM as managing one's impression. As H3 mentions, I expect that when a product is framed with the identity-relevant messages (vs. function-relevant messages), individuals without prior consumption experience (vs. with prior consumption experience) will have greater impression management motive, thereby increasing their WOM intentions.

#### **4.2.1 Method**

In this experiment, I provided participants scenarios of four different conditions used in Study 1, and measures for mediation test were added.

*Participants and Design.* 340 participants (168 females and 172 males,  $M_{age}=36.09$ ,  $SD=12.29$ ) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk) for a small amount of incentives. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 2 (message frame: identity vs. functional)  $\times$  2 (prior experience: with vs. without consumption experience) between-subject conditions.

*Procedure.* As those in Study 1 did, participants in Study 2 read scenarios prepared for each of the four assigned conditions (Appendix 1). The stimulus product was restaurant, and it was used to replicate the results of Study 1. After reading the scenarios, participants indicated how much were they willing to generate WOM using two seven-point items used in

Study 1. The two items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.939$ ) were averaged to obtain a measure of WOM intention. To find out the effect of impression management motive, participants answered impression management measurement scales adopted and revised from previous researches (Chaplin and John 2007; Crowne and Marlowe 1960): (1) In order to get along and be liked, I am what people expect me to be; (2) I can change my behavior depending on who is around; (3) I try to show desirable behavior in front of others; (4) I care about how others think about me, thereby presenting attractive behavior (1 = "never" and 7 = "all the time"). The four items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.715$ ) were averaged to obtain an index for impression management motive.

## 4.2.2 Results

*Manipulation check.* Manipulation check was successful using the same three items used in Study 1. The three items (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.918$ ) were averaged. An ANOVA with the identity-relevance index as the dependent variable and the interaction term of product frame and product consumption experience as independent measures were conducted. Both participants under identity-relevant message condition felt that the stimulus was more identity-relevant than in function-relevant message condition ( $M_{identity}=5.67$  vs.  $M_{function}=4.27$ ;  $F(1, 338) = 110, p = .00$ ), suggesting that manipulations were successful.

*Main effect.* An ANOVA with WOM intention as a dependent variable elicited a main effect of product frame ( $F(1, 336) = 12.45, p < .01$ ). Participants with identity-relevant message revealed greater WOM intention ( $M_{identity}=4.80$  vs.  $M_{function}=4.30$ ), replicating the results found in Study 1.

*Interaction effect.* An ANOVA with WOM intention as a dependent measure and the interaction term of product frame X prior consumption experience as independent measures elicited a significant interaction effect ( $F(1, 336) = 5.83, p < .01$ ). The interaction effect indicates that given the same product, under the function-relevant message frame, participants with consumption experience displayed greater WOM intention than those without prior consumption experience ( $M_{experience}=4.56$  vs.  $M_{no\ experience}=4.05$ ). On the other hand, under the identity-relevant message frame, participants with no prior consumption experience displayed similar WOM intention as those with prior consumption experience ( $M_{experience}=4.71$  vs.  $M_{no\ experience}=4.89$ ). They were statistically indifferent, and this result, again, replicates the finding in Study 1.

*Mediation.* Mediation test was conducted to find out the underlying mechanism of the main effect using a set of regression analyses (Baron and Kenny 1986). I predicted that consumers would display greater level of impression management motive when consumers are provided with

identity-relevant message, and this will cause consumers to show higher WOM intention under no prior consumption experience. First, in model 1, I regressed the WOM intention as a dependent variable on the message frame. The main effect of identity-relevant message on WOM intention was statistically significant ( $B = 0.497, t(338) = 3.50, p < .01$ ). Second, in model 2, I regressed the mediator on product message frame, and the path revealed that the effect of product message frame was significant ( $B = 0.366, t(338) = 2.69, p < .01$ ). Third, in model 3, I regressed WOM intention as a dependent variable on the product message frame as an independent variable and the impression management as a mediator. In this model, the effect of independent variable was still significant, while the size of the effect became smaller ( $B = 0.432, t(337) = 3.05, p < .01$ ). The effect of impression management motive on the dependent variable was also significant ( $B = 0.180, t(337) = 3.20, p < .01$ ), concluding that impression management motive was partially mediating the main effect. A Sobel test was conducted and found that impression management motive mediates the relationship between product message frame and WOM intention ( $z = 2.00, p < .05$ ).

I also applied the bootstrapping method (Hayes 2012; 5000 Bootstrapped samples; PROCESS SPSS Macro; Model 4) to access mediation. The direct effect of product message frame on WOM intention revealed that the 95% confidence interval excluded zero ( $B = 0.432, 95\%$  bias corrected CI [.153 to .710],  $p < .01$ ), and the indirect effect of product message frame on



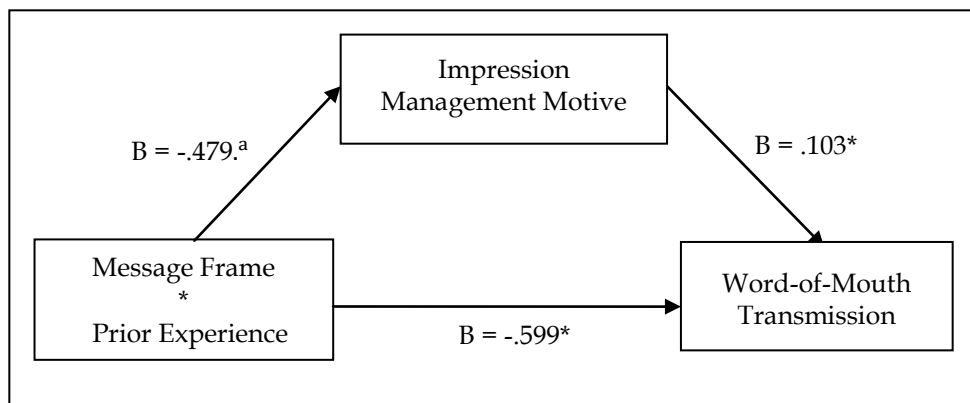
WOM intention through impression management motive did not include zero either ( $B = 0.07$ , 95% bias corrected CI [.013 to .156],  $p < .01$ ). I conclude that the impression management motive partially mediated the main effect of product message frame on WOM intention.

*Mediated Moderation.* In order to test mediated moderation effect as proposed in H3, I followed the bootstrapping method procedure by Hayes (2012, 5000 Bootstrapped Sample; Model 8). First, the interaction effect of message frame and prior consumption experience predicted WOM intention at significant level (path a:  $B = -0.599$ , 95% bias corrected CI [-1.15 to -.05]  $p < .05$ ). Next, the interaction term of product message frame X experience on impression management motive as an independent variable and impression management motive as a dependent variable indicates that the interaction effect predicted impression management motive at marginally significant level, (path b:  $B = -0.479$ , 95% bias corrected CI [-1.012 to .055],  $p = 0.08$ ). The conditional direct effect of product message frame on WOM at moderator shows that it is statistically significant only in no prior consumption experience condition ( $B = 0.735$ , 95% bias corrected CI [.342 to 1.13],  $p < .01$ ), while the conditional direct effect was not significant under with consumption experience condition ( $B = 0.136$ , 95% bias corrected CI [-.252 to .523],  $p > .05$ ). Altogether, I can conclude that there is a significant mediated moderation effect, and the analysis points out that consumers with no prior consumption experience are likely to transmit WOM given

identity-relevant message, but not when the product is framed with function-relevant message.

Furthermore, the conditional indirect effect of product message frame on WOM at moderator through impression management motive shows that the effect is statistically significant under no prior consumption experience ( $B = 0.103$ , 95% bias corrected CI [.027 to .222] excluded zero). In other words, this supports H3 that consumers who have no prior consumption experience are motivated to transmit WOM because of the elevated impression management motive. This effect was not observed for those individuals with prior consumption experience ( $B = 0.02$ , 95% bias corrected CI [-.039 to .115] included zero). Lastly, 95% confidence interval of the index of mediated moderation also excluded zero (95% bias corrected CI [-.226 to -.001]), concluding the effect of interplay relationship between product message frame and prior consumption experience on WOM intention was mediated by impression management motive (see Fig.3).

**Figure 3. The Mediated Moderation Effect**



\*  $p < .05$

a:  $p = .079$

**Table 2. Mediation and Mediated Moderation Effect in Study 2 using PROCESS SPSS Macro**

A. Regression

Mediation Model	Variable	Intercept	Message Frame (X)			Impression Mgmt. (ME)
(1)	WOM (Y)	4.303*** (.10)	.497*** (.14)			
(2)	Impression Mgmt. (ME)	3.725*** (.10)	.366** (.14)			
(3)	WOM (Y)	3.634*** (.23)	.432** (.14)			.180** (.06)
Mediated Moderation Model	Variable	Intercept	Message Frame (X)	Prior Exp. (MO)	Msg. * Exp. (X*MO)	Impression Mgmt. (ME)
(4)	Impression Mgmt. (ME)	3.64*** (.13)	.605** (.19)	.172 (.19)	-.479 <sup>a</sup> (.27)	
(5)	WOM (Y)	3.43*** (.24)	.735*** (.20)	.476* (.19)	-.599* (.28)	.170** (.06)

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

*a: p = .079*

B. Path Analysis

MODEL 4								
	Path		Coefficient	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
Total Effect	Message Frame (X)	→ WOM (Y)	.497*** (.14)	3.450	.001	.218	.777	
Direct Effect	Message Frame (X)	→ WOM (Y)	.432** (.14)	3.047	.003	.153	.710	
Indirect Effect	Impression Mgmt. (ME)	→ WOM (Y)	.066* (.04)			.013	.156	

MODEL 8								
	Condition	Path	Coefficient	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	
Conditional Direct Effect	No experience (MO = 0)	X → Y	.735*** (.20)	3.678	.000	.342	1.128	
	Experience (MO = 1)	X → Y	.136 (.20)	.688	.492	-.252	.523	
Conditional Indirect Effect	No experience (MO = 0)	X → ME → Y	.103* (.05)			.027	.222	
	Experience (MO = 1)	X → ME → Y	.021 (.038)			-.039	.115	

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

### **4.2.3 Discussion**

Study 2 lends additional support to the notion that identity-relevant message frame stimulates individuals to engage in WOM especially when they have no prior consumption experience with the product or service. As study 1 has identified, this study identified that individuals are more likely to “transmit” WOM under identity-relevant message. This study further examines underlying mechanism of such finding. The study found that impression management motive mediates the effect between identity-relevant message and WOM transmission intention. In other words, consumers who have not experienced to purchase or consume a product or service, when it is provided with positive identity-signals, recommend such product because they are motivated to manage how they are viewed in others’ eyes. In conclusion, the interplay between identity-signals and prior experience increases WOM transmission through elevated impression management motive.

## **5. General Discussion**

Across two experiments, I show that the fundamental psychological motive to manage one’s impression can lead consumers to transmit WOM given identity-signals in the product message. Experiments 1 and 2 demonstrate that the tendency to transmit WOM is likely to increase when individuals with no prior consumption experience on a product are faced with identity-

relevant message framed to the product. Experiment 2 especially focuses on examining the underlying psychological motive to engage in WOM transmission. This research concludes that given the identity-relevant message on the same product domain, individuals are more likely to transmit WOM as they strategically manage impression to others about the product with which they have no purchase or consumption experience.

The present research examines the role of identity-signals on product message frame on consumers' WOM behavior under different experience condition. Few previous researches has compared the generation of WOM with the transmission of WOM (e.g. Angelis et al. 2012), and to my knowledge, it is the first empirical test to classify WOM behavior given identity-signals. Based on everyday observation, consumers often engage in delivering and recommending restaurants, cosmetic goods, and other relevant products. The main question for this research was driven by a mere curiosity whether some individuals were more likely to talk about things that are framed in a fancy way.

*Theoretical and Managerial Contributions.* One theoretical contribution of this research is that I distinguish WOM across different experience stages and find when and why an individual involves greater WOM transmission even without prior consumption experience. There are many different kinds of motives to transmit WOM based on a third-person's experience; altruism (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster 1998), concern for others

(Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), or self-enhancement (Wojnicki and Godes 2008) are possible drivers to engage in WOM. However, in this research, I suggest that a desire to look positively in others' eyes, or tendency to manage one's impression, is a strong driving force of non-experiencers to strategically spread positive WOM. By expressing their knowledge, interests, and tastes, individuals with no prior consumption experience may satisfy their need for self-presentation when the product or service has identity-signals.

The importance of WOM communication in marketing is tremendous as WOM communication influence up to 50% of all purchase decisions, as it generates twice as much sales as paid advertisement does (Bughin, Doogan, & Vetvik 2010), and finally as 92% of people trust recommendations from friends (Nielsen 2012). Especially, positive WOM is a powerful force in driving recommendations and purchase intentions (Keller Fay Group 2006). Because WOM marketing involves interactive communication among individuals, it should be considered and treated differently from the traditional marketing activities. This research proposes that usage of identity-signals on product message frame can exert positive influence on potential consumers who have not yet purchased or consumed the firm's product or service. Based on the product frame, consumers are more likely to engage in sharing information and recommendation, thereby becoming voluntary WOM marketers and brand advocates. Based on the findings on this research, companies can prompt impression management

motive of non-experiencers via identity-relevant message frame, and greater WOM transmission by those individuals will work positively for the companies.

*Future Research and Limitations.* There are several additional explanations and boundary conditions to explore for future research. First, the underlying mechanism of impression management motive can be also explained through coping behavior. Coping behavior, which is cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), can attribute to explain why non-experiencers are more likely to transmit WOM. It is possible that non-experiencers given identity-signals may undergo identity-threat for they do not have a chance to achieve such identity when it is desirable. As a strategy to cope with identity-threatening situation, individuals can strategically involve in positive WOM to possibly overcome self-threat, or to compensate self-discrepancy between the actual and ideal self. Such efforts to narrow the discrepancy between their own experience and other's experience can be expressed to increase WOM transmission tendency. Thus, the motivation to promote self-concept in order to compensate for perceived deficiencies in the self, called "compensatory" self-enhancement (Baumeister 1982; Packard and Wooten 2013), can be another explanation for the effect of identity-signals on WOM intention for non-experiencers.



There can be another boundary condition to be examined. For example, current research only provided restaurant as a stimuli, but researchers can also find out whether this effect of identity-signals on WOM transmission is only applied to experiential goods. Across product type, whether it is a material good or an experiential good, the effect can be strengthened or attenuated.

Finally, further studies can be designed to observe WOM behavior online. Because online (or even mobile) communication environment is different from offline, WOM transmission tendency may reveal different results online. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, are outlets where individuals express themselves and communicate with other people, not necessarily the intimate acquaintance but also other strangers with distant social distance. Since online environment allows individuals to conceal one's own identity and self but rather promotes to appeal as a desirable figure, WOM transmission intention online, when compared to offline situation, can be greater when identity-relevant message is salient.

Since this research is not free from limitations, future research could consider and overcome limitations mentioned in the following. Although I would have liked to test my hypotheses in real communication situations, the lack of control in field situations prevented me from collecting field data. Instead, I relied on scenarios to depict a product and to manipulate

experience conditions through imagination. I also asked consumers' intentions to spread words, instead of behavioral willingness to engage in WOM. Therefore, the results of this research may not fully reflect the real situations since they involve greater actions.

Another limitation of this research is that the data were collected through online participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-turk) for small amount of monetary rewards. There still are concerns about data collected from M-Turk for its lack of reliability and demand effects of Turkers over many experiences of participation of numerous studies. Participation and the quality of data on M-Turk are also affected by compensation rate and task length (Buhrmester, Kwang & Gosling 2011); therefore, the credibility of the data should be reconsidered. If sufficient time and monetary resources are allowed, participants could be recruited offline, and the stimuli could be presented either in front of them or hypothetical online space, and WOM behavior can be observed through actual behaviors of the participants.

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# Appendix 1

## Product Frame Message Stimuli Used in Study 1 and 2

### A. With Prior Consumption Experience condition

Instruction: Please carefully read the following review about a restaurant and answer the following questions. You are allowed to proceed after few seconds of reading.

Imagine you *have visited* the following restaurant *last weekend*. You normally come here for *once a month* with family, friends and other acquaintances.

The description of the restaurant you have visited is as follows:



#### A-1. Identity-relevant message \* Experience

*Bon Appetit* provides fine meals and services, and it is appreciate by *choosy* customers. With our thoughtful flavors, *Bon Appetit* serves as a *cultural* space where customers can enjoy *cool* atmosphere and communicate with *stylish* people. It is a *trendy* restaurant where modern and classic interiors are in harmony.

#### A-2. Function-relevant message \* Experience

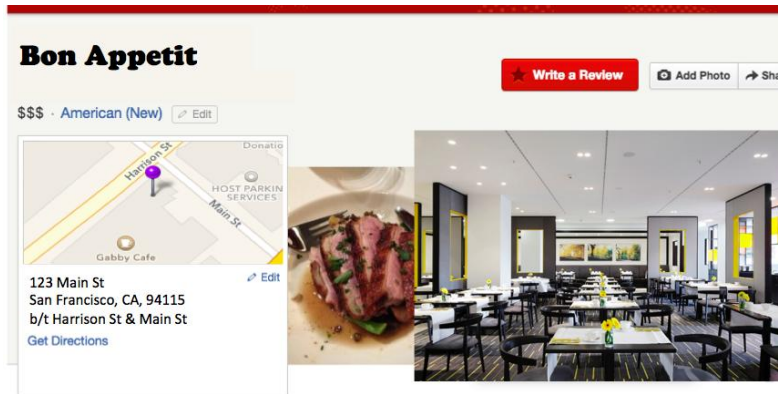
*Bon Appetit* provides good meals and services to its customers. It is *easy to find* because it is *located* at wonderful place in the center of downtown. It has a big parking lot for *convenience* for visitors. *Bon Appetit* opens from 11AM to 9PM, and the break time is from 3 to 5PM.

B. Without Prior Consumption Experience condition

Instruction: Please carefully read the following review about a restaurant and answer the following questions. You are allowed to proceed after few seconds of reading.

You *have never visited* the following restaurant and have simply *read* about it.

The review on a restaurant is as follows:



Review written by B. Smith on *Bon Appetit*

B-1. Identity-relevant message \* No Experience

*Bon Appetit* provides fine meals and services to a *trendy* customer like myself.

With its thoughtful flavors, I think *Bon Appetit* serves as a *cultural* space where I can enjoy *cool* atmosphere and communicate with *stylish* people. I think it is a *trendy* restaurant where modern and classic interiors are in harmony.

B-2. Function-relevant message \* No Experience

*Bon Appetit* provides good meals and services to me.

It is *easy to find* because it is *located* at wonderful place in the center of downtown.

It has a big parking lot for *convenience* for its visitors.

*Bon Appetit* opens from 11AM to 9PM, and the break time is from 3 to 5PM.

# 국 문 초 록

## 정체성 관련 메시지가 비경험 구전활동에 미치는 영향

구전(Word-of-Mouth, WOM) 활동은 소비자들의 구매와 의사결정에 강력한 영향을 미치는 하나의 요인으로 많은 선행연구들이 구전을 하는 동기나 구전으로 인한 효과 등에 대하여 밝혀왔다. 구전은 단순한 정보나 지식의 전달 역할 뿐만 아니라 구전 활동이나 내용 등으로 화자의 자신을 드러낼 수 있는 도구로서도 활용이 된다. 하지만 모든 구전 활동이 동일한 것은 아니며, 제품이나 서비스에 대한 소비 경험 유/무에 따라 자신의 소비 경험에 대한 구전을 하는 행동(경험 구전, WOM generation)과 타인의 소비 경험을 간접적으로 보고 들은 후 타인에게 구전을 하는 행동(비경험 구전, WOM transmission)으로 구분지을 수 있다. 이 때, 동일한 제품이나 서비스가 제시되더라도 사용자의 정체성을 드러내주는 메시지가 뚜렷할 경우 비경험 구전이 경험 구전만큼 일어날 것이라고 예상하고, 실험을 통해 검증하였다. 실험 1에서는 정체성 메시지가 존재할 때, 비경험 구전 의도가 경험 구전 의도만큼 높아져, 정체성 메시지와 사전 구매 경험과의 상호작용 효과가 있다는 것을 검증하였다. 실험 2에서는 정체성 메시지가 존재할 때 비경험 구전 의도가 증가하는 이유를 인상 관리 동기로 설명하였다. 비경험 소비자들은 정체성 메시지가 존재할 때 인상 관리 동기가 높아져, 더 많은 구전을 하는 것으로 나타났다.

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**주요어:** 정체성 메시지, 구전 커뮤니케이션, 추천 행동, 인상 관리 동기, 구매 경험, 비경험 구전 활동

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