Does Word-Of-Mouth Change With the Passing of Time?

Anat Toder-Alon, Boston University, USA
Frederic Brunel, Boston University, USA

In this netnography, we extend WOM research beyond dyadic and static approaches. We investigate how group WOM interactions evolve over time as a result of the dynamic social nature of the communities in which they take place. In particular, we study how community development and relationship building influence WOM rhetoric. Our findings stem from a longitudinal ethnomethodological analysis of bulletin board discourse in a parenting website. From this analysis, we develop a typology of WOM interaction genres and show that they change over the community lifespan. Our findings confirm that the levels of social connection and the interaction communicative functions are the main factors that distinguish different WOM genres.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12875/volumes/v34/NA-34

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over several decades, sustained consumer research on word-of-mouth (WOM) has produced a substantial body of knowledge about this consumer phenomenon, its components and some of its processes. However, most of this previous research has treated WOM interaction as a static and mostly dyadic event, and has not fully investigated the content of the actual WOM exchange. Even though this focused research perspective has lead to significant advances, it also seems problematic in our current hyper-connected social and business environments, where WOM can be performed not only by close contacts, but also within large groups of virtual strangers who may never physically meet and who are only connected through some computer mediated community. The growth of online communities has created borderless virtual spaces where geographically dispersed consumers can become participants in informational exchanges. Although the importance of this phenomenon is undeniable, much remain to be learned with respect to the relationship dynamics and WOM communication dynamics in these communities. This basic acknowledgement underscores the importance of studying WOM not just from a dyadic (source-seeker) perspective, but instead as a group activity that is achieved through group communication practices. As such, we seek to understand how WOM affects are affected by the social nature of the groups or communities in which they take place. In particular, we seek to extend our knowledge of how the dynamics of community development and community relationship building can influence WOM exchanges in general and WOM rhetoric in particular.

In this netnography (Kozinets 2002), we analyzed text data from the discourse of bulletin boards hosted at BabyCenter.com - a website for new and expectant parents. Our unit of analysis was the verbatim thread transcript, which was operationalized as a post with all of the replies. The complete text of all messages of one bulletin board was captured for a nine month period. The threads were concerned with WOM talk (661 threads) or interpersonal relationships within the community (used for contextual grounding of the data).

Our analysis followed an ethnomethodology program (Garfinkel, 1996). From this analysis, we develop a typology of WOM interaction genres and show that they change over the community lifespan. Our findings confirm that the levels of social connection and the interaction communicative functions are the main factors that distinguish different WOM genres. This conceptualization assumes that linkages between messages (i.e., between WOM initiation and WOM responses, and between WOM responses themselves) vary from loosely connected messages to tightly connected bonds, and that simultaneously these messages can serve instrumental (task-oriented) or socio-emotional functions. When a group WOM conversation stems from interactions between individual members who are focused on their own personal identity, the overall WOM genre is disconnected. Group members act or react in a non-coordinated way, with no notions of mutual sharing or collective concepts incorporated into the interaction. In this genre of WOM, interactions are pseudo-dyadic despite their group setting, and WOM advice giving/seeking roles and practices are static throughout the WOM episode, with generally a limited potential repertoire of WOM rhetorical methods. There are two main genres of disconnected WOM, and they differ based on the function of the overall interaction. In the disconnected mental WOM genre, consumers’ intentions within these WOM episodes may be viewed through efforts to achieve private instrumental goals (i.e., task-oriented). In this genre of WOM, initiators typically provide no detail about their situation or problem, and focus solely on the potential solution. Also, the requested response is framed as paradigmatic and object-oriented. Correspondingly, the WOM responses are typically non-personal and paradigmatic. Alternatively, in the disconnected experiential WOM genre, WOM initiators typically provide background information for their problem and situation, and frame the requested response as narratives, thereby inviting personal and experiential accounts. Correspondingly, responses are often self-referential anecdotal stories.

By contrast, when participants to group WOM interactions develop a group identity and orient their actions toward the group, we found that the WOM genres are connected (or even multidirectional). In these WOM genres, group members jointly construct mutual understandings and shared volitional commitments to perform group actions and consciously come to see their actions in this way. Collective concepts such as group objectives, we-intentions, and social identity are central variables in this genre of WOM interactions. The WOM genres associated with this connected orientation are based on ‘real’ group interactions (as opposed to pseudo-dyads) and can lead to indirect outcomes in the WOM exchanges, with others besides the initiator also being influenced. Further, in these connected WOM genres, the rhetorical repertoires appear more diverse and richer, and there is general fluidity between advice seeking and advice giving roles, with members often switching roles during an interaction. There are two main genres of connected WOM, and they differ based on the function of the overall interaction. In the connected instrumental WOM genre, participants’ communicative practices focus on instrumental goals. WOM initiations are typically framed in solution-oriented terms and the requested response is typically framed in object and paradigmatic terms. Corresponding responses also follow a non-personal and paradigmatic focus. Further, in this genre of WOM exchange, it seems that even though we have a true group discussion, the nature and dynamics of the exchanges are limited to achieving basic informational exchanges and basic alignment of the group goals. In contrast, in the other connected genre: multidirectional communal WOM, we found that the interaction mechanisms were more complex and sophisticated, fully leveraging the potentials that group discussions offer. In this genre, we found that the WOM discussions exhibited a wide range of collaborative conversation practices such as: tag-teams, agreements and debates. In order to fully leverage the group resources, in this WOM genre, WOM initiators typically provide detailed background information for their problem and situation, generally providing a full diagnostic. Further they frame the requested response as narratives, inviting personal and experiential accounts. Since members are closely collaborating, in this communal connected WOM genre, responses are often recipient-referential anecdotal stories, utilizing narrative tools, often co-produced and revised through multiple messages. To conclude, it seems that in this WOM genre, something far more important than the exchange of information motivates participants to invest such amounts of time and energy.

As a whole, this study shows that the methods used in seeking and providing WOM advice or more broadly engaging in some aspect of a WOM communicative practice can reveal the context in
which they are occurring, demarcate group membership and individuals’ social identity orientation, indicate purposes of interaction, and define participants’ motivations in a particular episode.

REFERENCES


