Word-Of-Mouth: Are We Hearing What the Consumer Is Saying?

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Most of the extant literature on word-of-mouth shares a common view of the consumer as a cognitive information processor. This perspective has shaped the conceptualization of word-of-mouth to the extent that the research suggests that people engage in word-of-mouth solely as a mechanism for sharing information about brands and services. My goal with this conceptual paper is to demonstrate how new and complementary research directions emerge for examining the word-of-mouth phenomenon by adopting the Consumer Culture Theory perspective of the consumer. Using this perspective, I discuss three new research streams which reflect this different view of the word-of-mouth phenomenon.

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On a given night, if you look at the moon through a telescope you will see peaks and valleys, craters and crevices. From this perspective, you can make numerous assumptions and study individual elements which combine to make the whole. However, what you see is only half of a sphere; the other half is shrouded in darkness. This is akin to taking a singular perspective for examining word-of-mouth (WOM), which raises the question: what are we missing? The motivation behind WOM research over the past fifty years has been primarily managerial, seeking to understand and harness word-of-mouth’s persuasive power. Generally approaching the phenomenon of WOM from a positivist perspective, marketing researchers have sought an understanding of the causal link between company actions and consumer WOM responses. Two underlying assumptions guide most of the work in this area: (1) consumers are information-seeking cognitive processors seeking to maximize their utility and (2) the sole purpose of word-of-mouth is to spread an evaluation of the product or service between fellow consumers. These assumptions are deeply rooted in the origins of WOM research and manifest themselves in how researchers commonly define WOM: an informal communication of information about, and evaluations of, a company or brand between two individuals (Brown, Barry, Dacin and Gunst 2005; Chung and Darke 2006; Dichter 1966). However, by relaxing the assumption that consumers are only spreading information about products or services to make rational decisions, and examining word-of-mouth through a lens of consumer culture theory (which adopts different philosophical assumptions), we can explore WOM from a new perspective and reveal what is hidden about WOM.

Extant research examining word-of-mouth (WOM) can be broadly subdivided into three streams of research. In the mid 1960s WOM researchers began examining the network aspect of WOM in an attempt to understand how the information moved from consumer to consumer (e.g., Arndt 1967, Sheth 1971) and the role of individuals as marketplace influencers (e.g., opinion leaders) and information seekers (e.g., Reynolds and Darden 1971; Stafford 1966). In the 1980s two other WOM streams emerged: an examination of negative WOM (e.g., Richins 1983) and individual constructs which influence the persuasiveness of WOM (e.g., Bearden and Etzen 1982). When combined, all three streams of research have produced a large, rich body of literature expanding our understanding of WOM. However, the underlying assumptions and motivations have left certain unexplained gaps and have not captured important factors required for a better understanding of WOM phenomena. Adopting a different perspective would allow us to apply different assumptions and address the unexplored aspects of the WOM phenomenon.

This conceptual paper begins with the dominant perspective of the consumer in the existing WOM research and subsequently demonstrates how early development in the area has led to the three major streams of WOM research. Next, I highlight the limitations of the extant WOM research and suggest that the consumer culture theory (CCT) literature offers a unique perspective that can complement and extend our understanding of the phenomenon. I conclude the paper by proposing three new WOM research domains derived from integrating the CCT identity literature with the extant WOM research.

WOM: PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONSUMER

The roots of the marketing discipline itself have influenced the direction taken by many WOM researchers. Marketing research flowed out of economics, resulting in many early marketing researchers also adopting the economic man view of the consumer. The economic man framework depicts the consumer as someone who is motivated by the desire to maximize the economic utility of his decisions. To accomplish this goal, the individual seeks as much information as possible about the available alternatives in his consideration set, and with this information, the person is able to make the most rational and value-maximizing decision (e.g., Whyte 1954). While this perspective has been overtly dropped from the literature, many of the assumptions from this view continue to permeate WOM research.

THE DIFFUSION LITERATURE

Social Networks

Although researchers and practitioners have long been aware of the existence of WOM as a persuasive influence, very little was known about WOM’s underlying mechanisms early on. As Arndt (1967) described, “word-of-mouth advertising [had] been thought to be an almost mysterious force, with its effects taken for granted” (Arndt 1967, 291). This gap in understanding led to the emergence of the WOM diffusion literature, which focused on social networks and the role of marketplace influencers.

Whyte (1954) provided one of the first examinations of the makeup of a social network. During a walk through Philadelphia, Whyte (1954) observed a striking phenomenon. By marking homes that displayed air conditioners in the window on a diagram of the neighborhood, it was possible to discern a pattern of ownership. He followed up these findings by conducting interviews with family members from a portion of these households and found that many of the decisions to buy the air conditioners could be linked to the influence of neighbors. The diffusion research continued through the 1980s, examining the relationships within the social networks and seeking to understand their inner workings (e.g., Reingen, Brown, Foster and Seidman 1984; Reingen and Kernan 1986). In general, this stream of research suggested that strong social ties were not required for passing along opinions. Weak ties could provide the bridge from one social group to the next, allowing word-of-mouth to spread a great distance (Brown and Reingen, 1987).

More recently, the diffusion literature has examined social networks in the context of the Internet. As consumers began to embrace online word-of-mouth, it became apparent that this technology provided an unprecedented increase in the size of social networks (Dellarocas 2003) and the amount of information available to consumers (Chatterjee 2001) far exceeded traditional word-of-mouth. However, increasing the scope and scale of word-of-mouth has not generated many unique or significant insights about how information travels within and between social networks. In short, as a body of research, the diffusion literature has contributed to our understanding of how information travels through social networks, however this research stream would benefit from an infusion of new perspectives that can generate new research questions, rather than applying existing knowledge to new contexts.
Marketplace Influencers

During this same period of network examination, another group of researchers was concurrently seeking to identify and understand the origins of the networks. Marketing literature has defined three distinct categories of marketplace influencers: opinion leaders, innovators and ‘market mavens’. Opinion leaders tend to have influence within a specific domain or product category (Reynolds and Darden 1971; Stafford 1966). Innovators are early product adopters who spread the word to others about the benefits (or faults) of the product or service (Clark and Goldsmith 2005; Leonard-Barton 1985). Marketing mavens tend to be the most sought-after supporters by retailers as they influence the decisions of other consumers in multiple product domains (Feick and Price 1987).

Marketing researchers have extensively sought an understanding of the marketplace influencers’ motivation for disseminating product information. Swan and Combs (1976) believed a logical motivating factor for spreading WOM was product satisfaction. An early definition of satisfaction reflects the perception of the consumer as a logical, information seeker: consumers gathered information about products, made predictions about performance of a product leading to consumption, consumed the product, and then compared the actual and predicted performance on relevant attributes (Swan and Combs 1976). In this bi-modal view, if the comparison was favorable, the consumer was satisfied; otherwise he was dissatisfied. Tying together satisfaction with identification, some research has shown that one’s level of commitment has a moderating influence on the link between satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth (Brown, Barry, Dacin and Gunst 2005). However, the extant literature is somewhat equivocal in linking positive WOM to satisfaction with a product or service. While Brown et al. (2005) were able to demonstrate this link, other researchers have offered evidence that satisfaction cannot be related to WOM dissemination (e.g., Arnett, German and Hunt 2003; Bettencourt 1997).

THE RELEVANCE OF VALENCE

Emerging out of the satisfaction and opinion leader literature, the second stream of WOM research examines the effects of valence on the persuasiveness of WOM. In particular, marketing researchers examining negative WOM have focused on the cognitive reasons why negative information is more persuasive than positive WOM and the underlying motivations behind disseminating negative feedback. Arndt’s (1967) study indicated that while favorable product experiences were more numerous, unfavorable word-of-mouth was far more effective at deterring new product adoption. Examining this differential influence, Mizerski (1982) suggested an attribution-based explanation for why negative information appeared to be more persuasive (i.e., the negativity effect). Specifically, while the motivation behind positive WOM could be attributed to a variety of reasons (e.g., social norms, message source), negative WOM tended to be attributed solely to the product itself (Mizerski 1982). Just as the extant WOM diffusion literature assumes that satisfaction stemming from direct contact with the product or service drives positive WOM, much of the negative WOM literature is based on the assumption that disseminators of negative WOM have experienced dissatisfaction with the product or service (e.g., Richins 1983).

The product-centric assumptions from the initial research examining WOM are also prevalent in the WOM valence literature. This literature suggests that the consumer spreading negative information to his fellow information seekers does so based on a poor experience with a product and is seeking justice for this wrongdoing (e.g., Blodgett, Granbois and Walters 1993). Furthermore, the valence literature tends to focus on the dissuasion of consumers by this negative information. These assumptions bias the research questions being examined, and yield gaps that remain unexplained. For example, Liu (2006) examined the relationship between WOM and movie success using a data set from a popular online message board. In summary, Liu found that the volume of WOM (regardless of valence) acted as a good predictor for box-office revenue, suggesting that negative feedback did not have the predicted effect of dissuading others from purchasing the product. The proscribed relationship between product experience, dissatisfaction and negative WOM also does not explain anecdotal evidence whereby consumers spread negative WOM based on a company’s policies, without having direct experience with that company (e.g., negative WOM regarding Wal-Mart’s anti-unification position). Researchers have also spent considerable time examining which factors, beyond valence, impact the persuasiveness of WOM communications.

CHARACTERISTICS AFFECTING PERSUASIVENESS

The third stream of WOM research adopts a reductionist perspective on the topic, identifying specific characteristics which impact the persuasiveness of WOM and testing them in an experiment. For example, researchers have demonstrated an effect on the persuasiveness of interpersonal influence by source credibility (Dichter 1966), the type of product (i.e., luxury or necessity), private versus public consumption (Bearden and Etzel 1982), as well as the similarity of the referent and his/her perceived expertise (Price, Feick and Higie 1989). Bone (1995) examined the effects of WOM on short- and long-term judgments and found effects for both, particularly when the information was contrary to previous experience. Another factor found to be influential in the level of persuasion was vividness of the positive word-of-mouth description (Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991). The authors found that participants retrieved vividly presented information more easily from memory, and this information had a positive influence on subsequent judgments.

Although researchers have examined the effect of many characteristics on WOM, the researchers have tended towards a positivist approach using experimental methodologies. This methodological approach removes the contextual impact from WOM, attempts to determine causal relationships and thus, may miss certain relevant factors. For example, information received from an acquaintance at a party may be interpreted differently than when that same person provides information in a workplace.

LIMITATIONS IN CURRENT WOM RESEARCH

An analysis of the extant WOM research highlights the dominance of the positivist approach to examining the WOM phenomenon. This, in turn, has resulted in a singular method of examination (primarily experimental) as well as certain deep-seated assumptions. Cumulatively, this approach has impacted the nature of the questions researchers in the area have sought to answer. The majority of WOM research has typically adopted a view of the consumer as an information-seeking and information-processing individual. This perspective of the consumer has tended to result in a product-centric approach to WOM content, whereby the focus of the communication is strictly on the brand. This focus on the consumer as a product-information-seeker led to the assumption of a sole motivation for generating WOM: a reaction to a direct experience with a product or service.

I suggest that WOM research would benefit from an integration of the philosophical perspectives and research stemming from the CCT paradigm, and the methodological approaches typically adopted within this research stream. This perspective brings with it
a different set of assumptions (e.g., different views of the consumer and the impact of context) and thus seeks to address different research questions. Positivism and interpretivism differ at an epistemological level, and though it can be (and has been) argued that the two are therefore incomparable, I propose that the research deriving from these philosophical positions is complementary and serves to enhance our understanding of various phenomena. In the context of WOM, the existing and future positivist research exposes one view of WOM, while an interpretivist approach to future research in the area, drawing on a different body of literature and methodologies, would serve to illuminate additional elements of WOM which currently remain unexplored (Figure 1).

**CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY: AN OVERVIEW**

Consumer culture theory is not one specific theory, but rather a theoretical perspective that views consumer actions, the market and cultural meanings as interconnected (Arnould and Thompson 2005). At a broad level, CCT research focuses on “...how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 871). Work in the identity subsection of CCT research conceives of the consumer as an identity seeker and maker. CCT researchers seek to investigate the consumption experience within the sociocultural context because “...an understanding of consumer symbolism and lifestyle orientations is essential to successful marketing strategies” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 871).

**WOM AND CCT: SHARED VIEWS**

Integrating the CCT identity stream of literature into WOM research is not an unreasonable task. The two bodies of research share several similar conceptual frameworks based on networks, particularly in the WOM diffusion area of research. Arnould and Thompson (2005) describe consumer culture itself as “...a densely woven network of global connections and extensions through which local cultures are increasingly interpenetrated by the forces of transnational capital and the global mediascape” (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 869), a description similar to how researchers envision WOM networks.

The WOM research on marketplace influencers also provides a good example how WOM and the CCT identity literature relate at the construct level. Taking a reductionist approach, some WOM researchers have examined opinion leaders and marketing mavens to determine if they share particular traits or motivations for engaging in WOM communication (e.g., Feick and Price 1987). The extant research in the area suggests that a common motivation is the desire to be perceived as an ‘expert’ by others (Walsh, Gwinner and Swanson 2004). The CCT identity literature expands on this social motivation by suggesting that consumers classify themselves through specific action-related consumptive experiences such as rituals or traditions (Holt 1995). For example, Holt (1995) refers to “mentoring” as being an action which contributes to an individual’s authority and legitimacy, strengthening the individual’s socially visible bond to the brand. As Holt (1995) describes it, mentoring is akin to a demonstration of one’s expertise on a particular topic.

**CCT: PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONSUMER AND CONSUMPTION**

Arnould and Thompson (2005) suggest that the consumer is a social being and part of a community. This cultural view conceptualizes the consumer as someone who engages in an ongoing personal narrative and creates personal meaning through consumption experiences (Thompson and Troester 2002). Whereas the traditional marketing view suggests that brand meanings emanate from the company, the CCT perspective tends to conceptualize meaning as being co-created with the consumer drawing together various cultural meanings in a form of bricolage to create a personally relevant meaning. Furthermore, these symbolic meanings are not static, but instead “[i]n a narrative, people continually make sense of their world ‘on the fly’... the flow of events is given an articulate form, made into a kind of model” (Shore 1996, as cited in Thompson and Troester 2002, p. 553). Thus, these consumer narratives are fluid and contextually dependent, drawing on salient elements from the given situation (Thompson 1997).

Holt and Thompson (2004) explore the idea of internal conflict resolution as it applies to this notion of a personal narrative. The authors suggest that consumers often address internal tension caused by perceptions of conflicting social norms by drawing on cultural artifacts and meanings in a playful manner to create a personal space where there is no conflict. The concept of play is related to how we draw from the varying cultural artifacts and put them together in new and varied combinations. At times these combinations can serve a social purpose, as with the consumer-created Doppelganger brands attacking Starbucks (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006), while in other contexts this playfulness is related to consumer fantasy (e.g., Kozinets et al. 2004).

From this perspective, we can suggest that WOM is part of the ongoing consumer narrative, but it is a distinguishable subsection in that while the storytelling aspect described by CCT authors refers to all consumption experiences, WOM in particular assumes an evaluative position for or against a brand. The concept of play suggests that consumers can create these ongoing narratives by drawing from a variety of cultural and personal meanings and combining them in ways that suit the context. Using this alternative view of consumers, we can shift from viewing WOM as product-centric and instead consider a consumer-centric perspective where WOM becomes a particular form of narrative for other uses.

**IMPLICATIONS: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

The CCT identity literature can contribute to WOM research by supporting the notion that WOM provides consumers with a means for constructing their identities. Holt (1995) argues that consumers sometimes use consumption as a means of classifying themselves for others, that “[c]onsuming not only involves directly engaging consumption objects but also includes using consumption objects as resources to interact with fellow consumers” (Holt 1995, 9). In a social situation, discussing a common brand association can serve “...to construct and sustain meaningful ties between otherwise heterogeneous consumers” (Holt 1995, 10). In this sense, adopting an evaluative position about a brand can act as a heuristic or short-hand for signaling to others a particular aspect of one’s identity. The specific meanings associated with this position are derived both through the cultural meanings available at the time, and the personal meanings created by the individual.

Using an experimental approach, Chung and Darke (2006) demonstrate that people are more likely to engage in WOM with others when the product is personally relevant as compared to products which they perceive as utilitarian. In their theoretical development, Chung and Darke (2006) suggest that people may use WOM as a means of self-presentation, and that impression management goals may, in fact, cause consumers to adjust the views which they choose to reveal. In short, the authors demonstrate a link between WOM volume and the self-relevance of the brand in question, but they do not examine how the participants integrate
aspects of self-presentation into their comments. The experimental nature of this research demonstrates that identity construction can be a motivation but does not capture how we discuss and use brands to create these identities. To gather this richness of understanding we turn to the interpretivist methodologies and theories.

Drawing on self-presentation theory, but from an interpretivist perspective, Schau and Gilly (2003) suggest that consumers use a personal Web space as a means of broadcasting constructed identities to the masses, demonstrating that it “...is a consumer narrative where multiple selves are made comprehensible” (Schau and Gilly 2003, 400). The authors found evidence that their participants were reflective about the content and construction of these Web sites, planning and integrating aspects of their identities through discourse and brand images, extending the physical self into the digital context. Some participants maintained multiple Web sites with different themes representing differing aspects of their lives (e.g., a site for promoting professional qualifications and a second fan site for music tastes).

While maintaining a personal Web space is similar to engaging in interpersonal WOM in many ways, it also differs in meaningful aspects. Incorporating brand logos and discussing favored or disliked brands on a Web space is akin to making recommendations during a social interaction. However, whereas a broad audience may read the recommendations on a Web space, when engaging in interpersonal WOM we may customize what we say based on our specific audience and the responses we may have gotten from previous discussions. Schau and Gilly (2003) found that their participants spent time consciously deciding how to construct their digital identity, and while the authors found that the digital self was not vastly different from the real-life self, the specific fragments of participants’ identities were purposefully chosen and comparatively static. Because many consumer narratives, interpersonal WOM in particular, occur in ‘real-time’, such conversations are much more fluid and dynamic, resulting in both conscious and unconscious influences which affect both the content and the framing of the message. In describing the personal Web space, Schau and Gilly (2003) treat it as a digitally created identity, something linked to the creator’s identity but also separate from the person in that it exists without the creator’s presence. Interpersonal WOM, on the other hand, is far more ephemeral, integrated with the speaker as part of a conversation, and ceases to exist in any tangible way once spoken. Considering WOM in this way, one can see how consumers might use their evaluations to construct and communicate a particular identity to another person. This also leads one to consider other ways in which consumers integrate WOM into their narratives during social interactions.

**IMPLICATIONS: SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Much of the existing WOM research assumes that a person who disseminates information is doing so from a direct relationship with the product or service. Thompson, Rindfleish and Arsel, however, demonstrate the power and influence of social perceptions with respect to WOM. As the authors suggest, “...brand image is much more a matter of perceived meaning and cultural mythology ... than an aggregation of verified evidence” (Thompson, Rindfleish and Arsel 2006, 55). In social situations, consumers may
alter their personal narrative as a means of fitting-in with others, adopting a particular position on a brand to solidify in-group membership without necessarily having had that direct experience. In other words, at a social gathering a person may define himself as anti-Starbucks without ever having been into one of the coffee shops, simply because the cultural meaning of such a position can be used to enhance and clarify his identity.

Adopting this CCT perspective about consumers and WOM allows for the pursuit of another interesting stream of research: examining how consumers adjust identity-relevant WOM based on the social context. Because such a stream of research would focus on subtle changes to content and ‘real-world’ social contexts, a phenomenological or ethnographical method would be well suited to gaining this understanding. This approach would provide insights into how consumers play with the fusion of social context, larger cultural meanings and microcultural specific meanings to adapt and adopt specific positions about brands. This adjustment of WOM meaning could also lead to questions regarding how meaning changes as people pass along WOM.

**IMPLICATIONS: MEANING TRANSFORMATION**

Children will sometimes engage in a form of play called “The Telephone Game”. The children sit in a circle and one child will whisper a phrase into his neighbor’s ear. The children pass along the phrase until it returns back to the original speaker, at which point the message typically has been garbled significantly, resulting in laughter by all involved. Adopting the views of personal narratives and play, researchers can examine how WOM moves between speakers and how the meaning of the message changes as it moves through a social network. Assuming that consumers integrate elements of their own identities when sharing information, and that they playfully draw from multiple cultural resources when engaging in narratives, much like the Telephone Game, the nature and meaning of the information being passed along will quickly cease to resemble the original message. Consumers will likely not simply pass along the message verbatim as they hear it, but rather integrate related meanings into their narrative.

Such a research stream might have larger implications for understanding the formation of cultural myths and misconceptions. Often times, these myths can transform into perceived fact by consumers, as more and more ‘credible’ sources provide the same or supporting evidence. For example, despite being influential in the significant rise in the overall number of coffee shops, a common consumer perception is that Starbucks is responsible for crushing short-term and long-term product judgments, the Digitization of Word of Mouth Effects on Word-of-Mouth: Are We Hearing What the Consumer is Saying?

**SUMMARY**

The goal of this paper has been to examine the development of WOM literature in order to appreciate the current state of thought and research in the area. As part of this analysis, I have identified limitations and assumptions which result in gaps in our understanding of WOM. By relaxing these assumptions and infusing this research with insights from the CCT perspective, this paper demonstrates how these limitations may be addressed and our knowledge of WOM broadened.

By integrating the work from the CCT literature, I am able to suggest how a consumer’s identity narrative may impact WOM and how engaging in WOM can be perceived as a form of identity construction. The CCT perspective also offers a means for examining the simultaneous shaping which occurs in social situations involving WOM, how we might adopt positions based on the social context in which we find ourselves. Working from the assumption that identity and social factors impact the content of WOM, a further research stream can be developed to examine WOM communications as a means of understanding consumer-created myths. A deeper understanding of WOM communications can also contribute back to the CCT literature by yielding additional insight into how consumers playfully combine and integrate cultural meanings into their larger consumption narrative. For over 50 years, researchers and practitioners have been listening to consumers talk amongst themselves, but until we expand our views of WOM, we will miss out on a lot of the conversation.

**REFERENCES**


