Word of Mouth Vs. Word of Mouse: the Effect of Communication Channel on Subsequent Reactions to the Brand

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Consumers are more likely to invoke the self when discussing a brand orally as compared to writing about it. Consequently, they feel more connected to the brand in the former case. Four studies investigated this effect, its marketing implications and relevant boundary conditions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

With the increasing popularity of the internet, more and more word of mouth is generated online. Consumers not only talk face-to-face to their friends, but also write online reviews, provide comments or text messages to others about their view of a product or a brand. This research examines whether a communicator’s own reactions to and behavior towards a favored brand might change as a consequence of discussing it orally vs. in writing.

We propose that oral communication is more likely to invoke the self than written communication. The communications literature suggests that this might occur, because of multiple reasons. First, because oral communication is more involving than written communication, speakers refer to themselves more frequently than writers (Chafe 1982, 1985; Jahandarie 1999). Second, writing often serves to “disembody the written text from the writer” (Rubin 1987, pg. 10). Speech, in contrast, is ephemeral and therefore cannot be separated from the speaker (Jahandarie 1999; Rubin 1987). Third, oral communication is typically more spontaneous than written communication; accordingly, it is more likely to be a truer reflection of the self, rather than being corrected by a consideration of social norms (Berger and Iyengar 2013; Klesse, Levav and Goukens 2015).

These findings suggest that consumers who talk (vs. write) about a brand are more likely to evoke thoughts about the self, as manifested in heightened ego-involvement (Chafe 1985; Jahandarie 1999), increased self-expressiveness (Rubin 1987; Chafe 1982) and a greater inclusion of personal experiences (Chafe 1982; Tannen 1985). We argue that this in turn should strengthen the self-brand connection, which captures the extent to which the brand is integrated into the consumer's self-representation (Escalas 2004). The positive consequences of a strong self-brand connection should therefore also be obtained, such as a greater resistance to an attack on the brand (Cheng, White and Chaplin 2012) and a greater willingness to wait for the brand in cases – e.g., in case of stockout (Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg 2009).

Study 1 provided evidence for our predictions, showing that participants reported a greater self-brand connection with a positively-viewed brand (Apple) after discussing it orally than after writing about it. In support of the premise that this effect of communication channel arises because of greater self-activation in the oral case, this effect disappeared if participants, across conditions, were explicitly instructed to focus on the self when discussing the brand. Exactly the same pattern was observed for the frequency of “I” mentions during the communication, which serves as a proxy for self-activation. Finally, willingness to wait for the discussed brand (in stockout situations) also followed this pattern: oral (vs. written) communication had an advantage in the control condition, which disappeared in the self focus condition.

Study 2 examined whether the effect of speech vs. writing will disappear if the discussion is with the reference to a second party’s views. Participants in the control condition either talked about their views of a positively-viewed brand (Samsung) to a voice recorder or wrote about it on a piece of paper. In the other-person condition, they were instead asked to think of someone else who uses “Samsung” products, and discuss this person’s views of the brand. After participants provided their initial attitudes towards Samsung, they then read a consumer critique of Samsung, and reported their attitudes again. As predicted, in the control condition, talking once again produced a higher SBC than writing, which also translated into a greater resistance to attack. Both of these differences disappeared, however, when discussing Samsung from another person’s perspective. Finally, a protocol analysis of the communication content also provided evidence supportive of our theorizing: participants in the control condition mentioned more self-relevant positive thoughts about the brand during oral than written communication, but this difference disappeared if they discussed someone else’s perception of the brand.

Having found good support for our basic premises in these studies (as well as others not reported here), Study 3 investigated when writing about the brand will benefit it more than talking about it. We suggest that a reversal of earlier results will obtain when consumers have an explicit goal of persuading the recipient as to their opinions about the brand. Given such a goal – as opposed to simply sharing thoughts on a brand – consumers might themselves believe that they have done a more persuasive job if given the opportunity to write out their message (even if this does not reflect actual recipient persuasion) because of greater opportunity to refine and structure the message (Berger and Iyengar 2013). This belief should increase their own certainty about their already-favorable attitudes towards the brand (Visser and Mirabile 2004), which in turn is likely to not only increase self-brand connection, but also bring about other benefits such a willingness to wait for the favored brand (Visser and Mirabile 2006). Study 3 found support for these ideas by manipulating the communication goal: sharing vs. persuasion. Previous results were replicated when participants were simply required to share their views: talking produced a stronger SBC and a higher willingness to wait for the favored brand (in this case, Adidas). However, given a persuasion goal, not only did the SBC difference disappear, but certainty in post-communication attitudes was higher for the writing (vs. talking) condition – in turn, this produced a greater willingness to wait for the brand.

In our final study, we explore whether this link is bi-directional. Because the self-expressive function served by brands with a high SBC is more likely to be fulfilled in the oral rather than the written modality. We predict, therefore that not only does talking vs. writing about a favored brand increase the self-brand connection (which is the central thesis of this research), but also, an enhanced self-brand connection increases the likelihood that consumers will choose to talk rather than write about the brand. Study 4 provided support for this argument.

This research contributes both to the communications literature in highlighting novel consequences of talking vs. writing and also to consumer scholarship by addressing the relatively understudied issue of how the communication channel used for word-of-mouth can influence the consumer’s own reactions to a brand. The findings also contain applied implications in terms of informing managers as to when it might be beneficial to encourage consumers to talk (vs. write) about a brand – and also when it might be useful to encourage the reverse.

REFERENCES