# How Word of Mouth in Social Media Affects Attitudes Toward Brands

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People constantly communicate with each other; they talk and share information about everything. The Internet provides numerous ways for consumers to share their views, preferences, or experiences with others and also has changed the way customers and firms interact. Whether firms like it or not, customers talk about them in social platforms, blogs, forums so firms have to carefully evaluate if, how, and when to participate, so that they can take advantage of word-of-mouth marketing. Through their growth in online participation, customers generate word-of-mouth marketing that exerts a great influence over the brands, firms and also over customer's attitude toward those brands. Integrating word of mouth into marketing strategy may be beneficial and would be consistent with the development of a customer focused approach to a market. The aim of the paper is to present an overview and assessment of challenges and opportunities for companies, emerging from the greater diversity and complexity of word-of-mouth marketing in a new communication era. This paper adopts a theoretical approach and brings a summary of empirical findings that reveal the evolution of word-of-mouth marketing, how firms can generate positive word-of-mouth marketing in social networks, and what is its impact in customer's brand attitude.

*Keywords:* word of mouth, social media, electronic word of mouth, motivations, brand attitude

## Introduction

Word of mouth has been acknowledged for many years as a major influence on what people know, feel, and do. Word of mouth has been shown to influence a variety of conditions: awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioral intentions and behavior (Buttle, 1998). There is reason to believe that it has more potential impact than any other form of communication. Word-of-mouth communication includes any information about a target object (e.g., company, brand) transferred from one individual to another either in person or via some communication medium (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007).

Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, and Fahy (1993) suggest that word of mouth may serve as an important proxy for more detailed evaluation especially, when buyers cannot easily evaluate the qualities and value of the service or the capabilities of the service provider so this form of communication is arguably of particular importance in

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relation to services which are characterized by a high degree of experience and credence qualities (Ennew, Banerjee, & Li, 2000).

Although word of mouth can be spontaneously generated, an increasing number of companies are pro-actively intervening in an effort to stimulate and manage word-of-mouth activity. Managed word of mouth may operate at an individual or organizational level (Buttle, 1998). Knowing this firms in their word-of-mouth campaigns which involve sending consumers promotional giveaways to encourage them to talk about the product (Berger & Schwartz, 2011), but according to Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster (1998), the generation of effective recommendations from consumers may be more reliant on good relationship and good service than on simple incentives.

Specifically, a firm's role in managing social communications may be either passive or active (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). Passive engagement is more of a push communication approach in which messages are delivered via social media by a firm, with consumers providing the bulk of follow-up conversations. In contrast, active engagement takes place when the firm is involved in all stages of the communication process from delivery to response (Barger, Peltier, & Schultz, 2016).

When a company stimulates word-of-mouth activity, it is no longer "organic" word of mouth; it could be called "fertilized" word of mouth. If the paid nature of word-of-mouth activity is known to prospective members, fertilized word of mouth may be substantially less effective than organic word of mouth (Trusov, Bodapadi, & Bucklin, 2010). Cheong and Morrison (2008) state that consumers have more trust in product information generated by other consumers than information given from companies. Firms seeking to make use of word of mouth for marketing purposes must realize that positive word of mouth is less easily generated than its negative counterpart and that its strength comes from the credence qualities associated with the sender's message. Any obvious attempts to manipulate the sender or benefit them for directly for passing word of mouth may be counterproductive. Managers who seek to take advantage of word of mouth as a marketing tool will need to ensure existing customers are satisfied with the company's products or services (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2005), but even when the conversation starts from advertising, it might turn toward discussion about the brand or product in general and end on a positive note (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007).

New available technologies have altered our way to communicate and interconnect with people, and we can use the internet to give far more visibility to a conversation that has always been happening. However, user-generated communication does not necessarily need to be positive in order to raise awareness, implying that negative user-generated social media communication can increase the brand awareness, but need not necessarily increase brand attitude positively (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Scafer, 2012). Finally, companies must learn to talk with their customers instead of talking to them and that way influence the discussion taking place in the social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Given the importance of word of mouth as a means of disseminating information and the increasing role of electronic word of mouth, the aim of the paper is to present an overview and assessment of challenges and opportunities for companies, emerging from the greater diversity and complexity of word-of-mouth marketing in a new communication era. This paper adopts a theoretical approach and brings a summary of empirical findings that reveal the dimensions of word of mouth related to social ties strength, motivations for engaging in word of mouth and electronic word-of-mouth marketing, word-of-mouth valence and content and their impact in customer's brand attitude.

## Literature Review

It is a matter of fact that consumers, as social individuals, like to talk about everyone and everything, and as an outcome word of mouth, it is frequent and important. They talk about new smartphones and movies, complain about bad restaurant service and food, and share information about the best way to get out tough stains or help to translate slangs and archaic words. Word-of-mouth practitioners often argue that products need to be interesting to be talked about. For example, Sernovitz (2012, p. 8) suggests that the most important rule of word-of-mouth marketing is to "be interesting" and that "nobody talks about boring companies, boring products, or boring ads". There is reason to believe that word of mouth has more potential impact than any other form of communication. Trusov et al.'s (2010) empirical findings support the notion that word of mouth may be among the most effective marketing communication strategies.

Researchers have given different definitions of word of mouth, based on people involved, form and information transmitted. Arndt (1967, pp. 291-295) describes word of mouth as "oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, a product or a service". Westbrook (1987, pp. 258-270) defined word of mouth as "informal communication directed toward other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers". Word of mouth can also be defined as the method of communication between two noncommercial people and without benefit in the business they are talking about (Taylor, Strutton, & Thompson, 2012). According to Richins (1984), word of mouth is a form of interpersonal communication among consumers concerning their personal experiences with a firm or a product. Helm and Schlei (1998) use the term word of mouth to describe verbal communications (either positive or negative) between groups such as the product provider, independent experts, family and friends and the actual or potential consumer. Solomon, Zaichkowsky, and Polegato (2008) defined word-of-mouth communication as communication between individuals that transmits product information between one another, e.g., when a person is telling his or her insight from a product or service.

Table 1

*Definitions of Word of Mouth*

| Author | Channel of communication | Pairs involved | Informs about |
|---|---|---|---|
| Arndt (1967) | Oral, person to person, perceived as non-commercial | Communicator and a receiver | Brand, product, service |
| Richins (1984) | Interpersonal communication | Among consumers | Personal experiences with a firm or product |
| Westbrook (1987) | Informal communication | Toward other consumers | Ownership, usage, characteristics of goods, services and/or their sellers |
| Helm and Schlei (1998) | Positive or negative verbal communications | Product provider, independent experts, family and friends and actual or potential consumer | |
| Brown et al. (2007) | Personal or via communication medium | From one individual to another, in person | A target object |
| Solomon et al. (2008) | | between individuals | Product information; insight from a product/service |
| Taylor et al. (2012) | Method of communication | Non-commercial people | A business |

Source: Authors from the above mentioned literatures.

As services are intangible, difficult to evaluate before purchase, not covered by guarantees and unstandardized, which makes them higher-risk choices than goods (Murray, 1991), word-of-mouth communication is more important and influential in a service context because it helps reduce the risk associated with such situations (Ennew et al., 2000). Word of mouth can influence investment decisions (influence markets) and is also an important source of information in the recruitment market (Buttle, 1998).

**Valence of Word of Mouth**

Word of mouth can be positive or negative according to the level of individual satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Positive word of mouth occurs when good news testimonials and endorsements desired by the company are uttered. Negative word of mouth is the mirror image (Buttle, 1998). Hartline and Jones (1996) concluded that intention to utter word of mouth is correlated with the customer's perceptions of value and quality. The higher those perceptions, the stronger the intention of uttering positive word of mouth. According to Sundaram et al. (1998) providing superior product performance experiences by selling only high quality, reliable, and durable products and ensuring satisfying employee-consumer contact experiences is likely to spark positive word of mouth.

Just as positive word of mouth has been linked to satisfaction, so has negative word of mouth been linked to dissatisfaction (Singh & Pandya, 1991). Loyal, satisfied customers will engage in favorable word of mouth to the firm (Bitner, 1990; Gremler & Brown, 1999). Whereas, dissatisfied customers engage in greater word of mouth than satisfied customers (Anderson, 1998). Consumers who fail to perceive that their purchase was not a "value buy" based on post-purchase cost-benefit evaluations are likely to share the experience with others in the form of negative word of mouth (Sundaram et al., 1998).

Positive word of mouth encourages brand choice and is expected to impact consumer responses positively (Anderson, 1998; Bruyn & Lilien, 2008), while negative word of mouth discourages brand choice and is expected to have a negative impact on brand attitude (Anderson, 1998). Emphasizing the power of unfavorable word of mouth, negative word of mouth appears to be twice as likely to cause receivers to change their opinion about a firm (Arndt, 1967).

**Motivations for Engaging in Word of Mouth**

Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1993) classified the motivations for engaging in word-of-mouth into five categories: (1) involvement, (2) self-enhancement, (3) concern for others, (4) message intrigue, and (5) dissonance reduction. Dissonance reduction is seen as a reason for articulating negative word of mouth. Sundaram et al. (1998) identified eight motives for engaging in word of mouth, which were grouped in motivations for engaging in positive and negative word of mouth. The motivations for engaging in positive word-of-mouth and negative word-of-mouth communication differed except for the motive of altruism which was found in both types. Sundaram et al. (1998) classified the motives for positive word-of-mouth communication in four major categories: (1) altruism, (2) product involvement, (3) self enhancement, and (4) helping the company, and explained them as follows:

(1) Altruism. It is the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return. These individuals have the intention of aiding the receiver to make a satisfying purchase decision.

(2) Product involvement. The purchase and use of products that are perceived highly important or relevant tends to create excitement and word of mouth is employed to vent the positive feelings. Personal interest in the product, excitement resulting from product ownership. Product involvement was the main reason for engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication.

(3) Self-enhancement. Enhancing their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers, to show connoisseurship, to project themselves as experts, to enhance status, and to seek appreciation.

(4) Helping the company. The desire to help the company.

Sundaram et al. (1998) grouped motivations for engaging in negative word-of-mouth communication in the following categories: (1) altruism, (2) anxiety reduction, (3) vengeance, and (4) advice seeking, and explained them as:

(1) Altruism. To prevent others from experiencing the problems that they had encountered. The motive was to help others by warning them about negative consequences of a particular action.

(2) Anxiety reduction. As an avenue to vent their anger. Sharing their negative experiences with others helped in easing their anger, anxiety, and frustration.

(3) Vengeance. To deterre others from patronizing the businesses that they perceived did not care enough about customers, did not listen to customer complaints, and consequently should not be allowed to operate. Vengeance was used from most of the respondents to elicitate negative word of mouth.

(4) Advice seeking. To obtain some advice on how to resolve their problems because they had encountered negative consumption experiences.

## Word-of-Mouth Content

Mazzarol et al. (2007) and Sweeney et al. (2005; 2008) analyzed word of mouth in terms of its content and delivery aspects and identified three dimensions that underlie cognitive and affective message elements, which are cognitive content, content richness, and strength of delivery. Content richness and strength of delivery reflect the affective element. The first dimension (cognitive content) reflects the logical appeal of the message and is the core of the message. The cognitive elements of a word-of-mouth message are reflected through the reliability, detail, and clarity of information such as evaluations of product performance and service quality (Mazzarol et al., 2007). The second and third dimensions reflect the more intangible nature of a word-of-mouth's message power. The affective elements are reflected through the richness of communication and the strength of its delivery or tone, which includes the use of vivid language and descriptive words (Mazzarol et al., 2007). Both cognitive and affective aspects of a word-of-mouth message may determine its effectiveness. Mazzarol et al. (2007) suggest that a word-of-mouth message is most effective when it is clear, informative, rich in context, and strongly delivered.

## Word of Mouth in Internet Networking Sites

New available technologies have altered our way to communicate and interconnect with people. People now use more technology platforms such as email, phone, or social networking websites (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991) than previous, when they used face-to-face communication or mails. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-word-of-mouth) communication can take place in many ways (e.g., Web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott Web sites) and news groups can be originating in effective communities: consumer reviews, blogs, forums, and social networks.

The advent of the Internet has extended consumers' options for gathering unbiased product information from other consumers and provides the opportunity for consumers to offer their own consumption-related advice by engaging in electronic word of mouth (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2004) because consumers have more trust in information regarding the products and services received through social media,

rather than through the traditional means of communication through a promotional mix (Foux, 2006) and has enhanced the opportunity to easily spread the opinions to a large number of people (Dellarocas, 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) suggesting that electronic word of mouth can come from diverse sources including acquaintances and total strangers (Ratchford, Talukdar, & Lee, 2001; Lim & Van Der Heide 2015) compared to traditional word of mouth which comes mainly from family and friends. A question of credibility of the information gathered through electronic word of mouth arises as the perceived credibility of the word-of-mouth sender is important to the outcome, whereas in internet networking sites, the validity of the information is often uncertain due to the fact that the information is unfiltered and because of the large number of unknown participants (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009).

Electronic word of mouth can be defined as "the knowledge exchange consumers carry out online" (Wu & Wang, 2011, p. 448) "as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004, pp. 38-52).

Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) suggest that the valence of the message can be either positive or negative, where negative word of mouth seems to be twice as likely to cause receivers to change their opinion about a firm, emphasizing the power of unfavorable word of mouth, however according to Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, and Bell (2015), consumers are less willing to engage in negative word of mouth on social media than in person due to the higher perceived social risk associated with online sharing but the need to self-enhance increases willingness to engage in online word of mouth and diminish the perceived risk.

Brand attitude is made up of the overall evaluation of the brand, which encompasses factors such as brand awareness, brand image, and brand based associations of attributes and benefits (Bruhn et al., 2012). Consumers' attitudes toward a product can be affected by electronic word of mouth through social networking sites (Diffley, Kearns, Bennett, & Kawalek, 2011). Electronic word of mouth can influence consumer product judgements and has a causal impact on consumer's purchase behavior (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006). Recommendations available on-line can also have the same effect and increase a product's overall sales, since they can have an impact on consumers' opinions regarding a product, and therefore encourage a purchase (Cheung et al., 2009). Electronic word of mouth has increased in popularity and has become a crucial element during consumers' evaluation of products before making a purchase, but on the other hand, the easy access to online customer reviews has led some observers to posit that brand names, as assurances of product quality and performance, will lose much of their importance in the interactive marketing environment (Chen, 2001).

Product recommendations online have a huge influence on the receivers' product selections, since it has been confirmed that those consumers who were confronted with a product recommendation online were more likely to purchase that product than those who were not (Senecal & Nantel, 2004), moreover, online customer reviews differ from marketer-sponsored communications in that they are more credible (Cheong & Morrison, 2008; Hung & Li, 2007). The control of brands involving timing, frequency, content, and medium of communication has decreased dramatically, which indicates a paradigm shift in marketing communications (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Accordingly, organizations have reduced expenditures on traditional advertising and re-visited word of mouth as a powerful marketing tool (Kirby & Marsden, 2007). Weak brands should focus on generating positive online customer reviews because they will directly benefit increased sales as well as an enhancement in the brand's equity as a whole (Ho-Dac, Carson, & Moore, 2013).

**Motives for Engaging in Electronic Word of Mouth**

The communication's technologies, which motivate mostly word of mouth, are the social networking websites in World Wide Web, which can be found in the form of blogs, forums, or personal pages such as Facebook, Myspace, Tweet, Instagram, Snapchat. In contrast to other Internet businesses, online communities rely on user-generated content to retain users. Research has shown that consumer-created e-word-of-mouth information can significantly increase people's intention to visit a webpage (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004). Thus, a community member has a direct benefit from bringing in more friends (e.g., by participating in the referral program) because each new member creates new content, which is likely to be of value to the inviting (referring) party (Trusov et al., 2010). Even though, the altruistic sender is likely to articulate an e-word-of-mouth message that is as helpful as possible without tainting it with emotion or vivid language, perhaps in an effort to appear particularly objective or unrelated to the company that is being endorsed (Soetarto, Yap, & Sweeney, 2009).

The theories that explain how consumers are affected by traditional word of mouth are transferable to an online environment (Prendergast, Ko, & Siu, 2010). Studies show that there exist a number of varying factors which may influence consumers to create their own content. For some the motivation relates to self-promotion and intrinsic enjoyment (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008) while others suggest a desire to collaborate, information dissemination, interaction, and creativity (Burmann & Arnhold, 2009).

The motivation to engage in electronic word of mouth in online forums is typically the result of the post purchase experience; therefore, what motivates a sender to write an e-word-of-mouth message depends on whether the experience was a good one or bad one (Soetarto et al., 2009). Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) conducted an empirical assessment of the motives of consumers engaging in e-word-of-mouth communication, on a sample composed of 2,041 respondents who had previously written comments for distribution on different internet platforms. As to their knowledge that there were no established scales, the authors constructed the items to measure the motives for engaging in electronic word of mouth. The 27 motive items were entered into a principal components analysis to examine the dimensionality of the entire set of items and finally were grouped into eight motives: (1) platform assistance, (2) venting negative feelings, (3) concern for other customers, (4) extraversion/positive self-enhancement, (5) social benefits, (6) economic incentives, (7) helping the company, and (8) advice seeking. They found five factors to motivate customers to write a comment on a platform, consequently generating electronic word of mouth: (1) concern for other customers, (2) extraversion/positive self-enhancement, (3) social benefits, (4) economic incentives, and to a lesser extend (5) advice seeking. They also found that social benefit was the strongest positive impact on consumers' platform visiting frequency and on the number of written comments. Some of the reasons for engaging in electronic word of mouth found by Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) are similar to those found by Sundaram et al. (1998) and some, related expecially to the Web, are totally new (e.g., economic incentives or social benefits). Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) found that consumers are not a homogeneous group in terms of their e-word-of-mouth motivations and they can be divided into four distinct motive segments:

(1) Self-interested helpers, which was found to be the largest segment driven especially by economic incentives;

(2) Multiple-motive consumers, engaged in most electronic word of mouth;

(3) Consumer advocates, the smallest but the most educated segment;

(4) True altruists, the second largest segment motivated mostly by two motives: helping other consumers and helping companies.

Concern for other customers was found to be a primary motive for all four segments to engage in e-word-of-mouth.

Table 2

*Motivations for Engaging in Positive and Negative Word of Mouth and Electronic Word of Mouth*

| Authors | Motivation for positive wom | Motivation for negative wom |
|---|---|---|
| Engel et al. (1993) | 1. involvement<br>2. self-enhancement<br>3. concern for others<br>4. message intrigue | 1. dissonance reduction |
| Sundaram et al. (1998) | 1. altruism<br>2. product involvement<br>3. self enhancement<br>4. helping the company | 1. altruism<br>2. anxiety reduction<br>3. vengeance<br>4. advice seeking |
| | Motivation for positive e-WOM | Motivation for negative e-WOM |
| Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) | 1. concern for other customers<br>2. extraversion/positive self-enhancement<br>3. social benefits<br>4. economic incentives<br>5. advice seeking | |
| Soetarto et al. (2009) | 1. extraversion<br>2. social benefits<br>3. helping the company<br>4. advice seeking | 1. venting negative feelings<br>2. warning other consumers |

Source: Authors from the above mentioned literatures.

Soetarto et al. (2009) extended Mazzarol et al.'s (2007), Sweeney et al.'s (2008; 2012) and Henning-Thurau et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of word of mouth to the online forum. They replicated the original factor structure of eight motivation items developed by Henning-Thurau et al. (2004), with the exception of "concern for other consumers", which was transformed into two new factors which "help other consumers" in sending the message and these motivations influence the cognitive and affective aspects of the individual e-word-of-mouth message, which in turn, influences the effectiveness of the word-of-mouth message. For positive e-word-of-mouth messages, extraversion, social benefits, helping the company, and advice seeking were found to positively impact both cognitive and affective aspects (Soetarto et al., 2009). For negative e-word-of-mouth messages, only venting negative feelings and warning other consumers had a positive impact on cognitive and affective aspects of the message. Both motivations capture the archetypical negative electronic word of mouth, where consumers have had a particular negative consumption experience with the company and want to either punish the company or do other consumers a favor by warning them (Soetarto et al., 2009). Results confirm that the most effective e-word-of-mouth message is one that contains clear and reliable information that is conveyed through vivid language and descriptive words (Soetarto et al., 2009).

## Research Questions

Several research questions emerge from this review:

(1) How do consumers perceive a brand's information posted in brand's social media profile or on a consumer's profile?

(2) Which age group is mostly effected by electronic word of mouth?

(3) Do motivations for engaging in electronic word of mouth vary across different age groups?

(4) What is the word-of-mouth relevance in different cultures?

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to give a broad view of elements, influencers, valence, and motivations for engaging in word of mouth and electronic word of mouth. With the evolution of new technologies, consumers can use different ways to communicate and search information. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) argue how important it is for marketers to pay attention to electronic word of mouth, since opinions online are available to a wide span of individuals for an unlimited period of time. Electronic word of mouth has a crucial influence on consumers' purchase intentions, since they rely on electronic word of mouth before making a product purchase but anyway the marketing strategy itself does have some impact on the importance of word of mouth (Ennew et al., 2000).

Godes and Mayzlin (2004) focus on electronic word of mouth and on the potential that a firm has to pose as a consumer in order to generate firm-to-customer communication that "look like" consumer to consumer communication. But how would consumers react to find out what was presumed to be noncommercial electronic word of mouth, which is in fact generated and controlled by the firm? According to Dellarocas (2003), because now they can reach a wider audience at a lower cost, electronic word of mouth is extremely popular, and thus, if electronic word of mouth is managed well, it has a huge potential to transcend a product from a small market to a much larger one (Park & Kim, 2008). Anyway, before trying to take advantage from electronic word of mouth as a marketing tool, managers should ensure the level of satisfaction of their customers. As Sundaram et al. (1998) and Soetarto et al. (2009) claim, the motivation to help the company is the quintessential positive e-word-of-mouth motivation, where consumers want to reward the company by conveying how delighted they are and why they are delighted by including factual information.

Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) suggest that the presence of different motivation segments, strategies for encouraging and increasing e-word-of-mouth participation should be developed with particular segments in mind.

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