

“Word-of-Mouse” in China: In-Depth Interviews

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate why information about products, brands or organisations is generated among consumers online and what influences the initiation of online word-of-mouth from the sender’s perspective. An exploratory study was conducted involving 18 semi-structured interviews with Chinese consumers either face-to-face or online. The findings presented factors that influence consumers’ engagement of online word-of-mouth communication and revealed the impact of personal cultural orientation on this communication.

Keywords: Word-of-mouse, online word-of-mouth, communication, consumer behaviour, collectivism

Introduction

For nearly 50 years market orientation was seen primarily as an organizational phenomenon

Marketing communication has seen dramatic changes over the years in terms of the number and diversity of communication options available to marketers in reaching consumers. The last two decades have seen the Internet revolutionise communication and numerous Internet-based media channels present a vast network to marketers and consumers. They now allow consumers to generate content themselves and there has been a mushrooming of user-created communication content online. Searches for such content have greater meaning, relevancy and value for consumers in Web 2.0 and relatively new and intelligent Web 3.0, compared with the dictated and passive communication of Web 1.0. Marketing communication has inevitably changed with the advent of social media, crowdsourcing, changing media consumption and hyper-competition (Smith & Zook, 2011). From a consumer point of view, consumers can engage in communication concerning a product, a brand or company whenever they

desire. These new media facilitate participation and interactive communication, and they allow consumers to engage in two-way communication easily, cost effectively, and in real time. The interactive and social nature of these media means that messages can be communicated through dialogue or conversation whereby the communicating parties can be both message originators and recipients. Some of these conversations are within the brand's official online space, and some occur way beyond the brand's space and are just amongst customers without any corporate influence (Smith & Zook, 2011).

The Internet provides consumers with various venues not only in searching for information, entertainment and networking, but also for sharing experiences and views about products and services they have experienced. Because of the speed of technological innovation and global acceptance of various Internet-based media, consumers now communicate with more people, faster, and in more ways than ever before. Channels such as chat rooms, message boards, weblogs, and social networking sites (SNSs) have enabled today's consumers to 'talk' to individuals outside their personal communication network of family, friends and colleagues. One person's opinion no longer impacts just his or her family and friends: it is shared with the world. This ability to exchange opinions on the Internet is known as word-of-mouse or online word-of-mouth (WOM). Word-of-mouse has been acknowledged as a critical tool for facilitating information diffusion throughout online communication networks. According to a study of social media site users conducted in America (AmericanExpress, 2012) 47% of such individuals share information about their shopping experience with a broader audience. Compared with face-to-face communication, the Internet, with its limited cues and inherent asynchronicity, has led to a high level of consumer acceptance and reliance on word-of-mouse (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). The power and process of personal influence has been reinforced by various phenomena including buzz (contagious WOM commentary about products, services, brands, and ideas (Carl, 2006; Walker, 2004)) and tipping points (the point at which an idea, behaviour, or product 'tips', crossing a threshold from being a minor phenomenon to a wild epidemic (Carl, 2006; Gladwell, 2000)). More and more companies are paying attention to how their brands are discussed online (Bailey, 2004).

The extant research on word-of-mouse in marketing has investigated how WOM influences individuals' learning, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in online communities to promote socially desirable interests and ideas (Henderson & Gilding, 2004). Researchers studied aggregated outcomes of online WOM, such as product success (e.g., Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991) and financial returns (e.g., Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009), which highlight the value of online WOM in business practices. Despite the considerable number of studies devoted to word-of-mouse, the initiation of word-of-mouse by consumers has not been given much attention. Given the increasing and persuasive power attributed to word-of-mouse communication, an understanding of what affects consumers' initiation of word-of-mouse activity from the consumer's perspective is important for marketers in order to incorporate relevant elements into their marketing strategy.

Furthermore, WOM research to date has mostly been conducted in an individualist (Western) context (one end of the individualist/collectivist spectrum). Marketing theory cannot be applied universally without considering context (Wells, 2002).

Questions remain to be answered concerning the transferability of the findings to collectivist societies (e.g., China), particularly where interpersonal communication is valued differently.

Literature Review

WOM is inherently a social phenomenon (Ryu & Han, 2009). It involves dyadic exchanges; in the WOM encounter there is a sender as well as a receiver. WOM communication is a popular marketplace phenomenon. Consumers frequently share their purchase experiences with people after the consumption of a particular product and/or service. The communication process is fundamental to consumers' social interaction as they repetitively engage with others (De Fleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982). The dyadic and network relationships serve as a basis for the interpersonal influences that WOM generates (Carl & Duck, 2004). Subjective evaluations of the product/service are often sought from and shared with peers.

Defining Word-of-Mouse

While early definitions focused on oral WOM (e.g., Arndt, 1967), Buttle (1998) argues that WOM need not necessarily be "face-to-face, direct, oral or ephemeral" in this electronic age; it can be mediated by the Internet, computers, and mobile phones. More recent research includes non-personal communication via electronic channels, such as email, mobile phone text messages, bulletin boards and other means that would comprise what may be called 'digital WOM' (Bickart & Schindler, 2002; Newman, 1999). The Internet has removed, or at least greatly diminished, the role of spatial distance in personal communications about ideas. Consumers are capable of reaching an unlimited number of other consumers in a manner that could be perceived as personal. This can be observed in numerous online community platforms, such as social networking sites and blogs (Stauss, 1997). The paper adopts Carl's (2006) definition of online WOM - "*informal, evaluative communication (positive or negative) between at least two conversational participants about characteristics of an organisation and/or a brand, product, or service that take place*" in online communities." (p.605). Online WOM is referred to as word-of-mouse. Adopting Harrison-Walker's (2001) position, online WOM is recognized as a multi-dimensional construct, incorporating distinct WOM communication dimensions of WOM incident frequency (enthusiasm), volume of information (detail), and valence of information.

Characteristics of Word-of-Mouse

It has been argued that the Internet has unique characteristics that differentiate it from face-to-face communication in important ways (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Research has explored the distinctive characteristics of online communication, such as limited cues and the potential for asynchronicity, that set online WOM apart from its traditional counterpart (Henderson & Gilding, 2004).

Word-of-mouse is similar to traditional WOM in that its transmission uses social networks, but it differs in the fact that it uses cybernetworks. Cybernetworks are defined as "the social networks in cyberspace, and specifically on the Internet" (Lin, 2001, p. 212). Unlike traditional WOM communication, in which social connections between information senders and receivers are necessarily strong (Brown & Reingen,

1987), the occurrence of online WOM communication is not restricted to the small circle of family and friends. The cybernetworks are constructed by individuals and groups of individuals – through various applications such as chat rooms, forums, e-mails, and messengers – as well as by informal and formal organisations (e.g., economic, political, media) for the purpose of exchanges, including resource transactions and relations reinforcement (Lin, 2001). These “virtual” connections allow consumers to connect with others with few time or space constraints.

Participation in word-of-mouth can be anonymous. In some instances the identities of people who posted a product review are not fully revealed, so that age, gender and other personal information are not known to the information recipient, and thus cannot be used as cues to judge the trustworthiness and/or relevance of the review. The source similarity, expertise and accessibility, used to determine information credibility in traditional WOM (e.g., Feick & Higie, 1992), are not very appropriate in this online context. Some online channels such as online retailers (e.g. Amazon) and forums have attempted to address this problem by giving consumers the ability to make a profile in which he/she describes his/her background and interests. However, ‘third identities’ are common in the online context, and non-disclosure of the WOM sender’s identity remains the norm. Although the identity issue reduces the consumer’s ability to identify credible sources, some research suggests that (Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005) many online customers accept consumer reviews in order to reduce the amount of effort exerted during the online search process, irrespective of the reviewer’s personal characteristics.

Findings of Previous Word-of-Mouse Studies

Research into word-of-mouth has focused on how WOM influences individuals’ learning, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in online communities that promote socially desirable interests and ideas (Bendapudi, 1997; Henderson & Gilding, 2004). The aspects of online WOM that have been investigated include the effects of the Internet on consumer’s pre-purchase activities, focusing on information-search activities and risk perception (c.f., Martin & Lomax, 2001). Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry and Raman (2004) investigated consumers’ responses to receiving pass-along emails in the US. A few researchers were interested in the role of consumer-generated comments in consumers’ assessment of information in the US (Schindler & Bickart, 2004; Xue & Phelps, 2004) and South Korea (Park & Kim, 2008). Researchers also investigated the effects of online WOM, such as product success, and the relationship between product evaluations and product sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Liu, 2006). The majority of studies tend to look at the marketer-led aspects of communication via the Internet. Few studies examine the two-way communication between marketer and consumer, and the potential for consumer-to-consumer information flow.

The extent to which consumers rely on the Internet for information has also been the subject of previous research (Chatterjee, 2001; Dholakia & Soltysinski, 2001; Ratchford, Lee, & Talukdar, 2003). However, many of these studies have been experimental in nature, where participants have been deliberately exposed to product review websites and then asked to provide their feedback. Prior research has shown the impact of the Internet as a medium for consumer feedback and information, and its influence on consumer behaviour. Online WOM studies typically use product-

review websites and forums as their contexts, since the information on these channels usually allows open access, and thus are assumed to represent online WOM communication. In comparison to research on the antecedents of traditional WOM, investigations into the antecedents of online WOM are somewhat scarce.

The Cultural Aspect in Word-of-Mouth Research

The review of WOM studies shows that most published research has been undertaken in Western societies where the persona is viewed as a self-contained, autonomous individual (Buttle, 1998). There are very few studies addressing the cultural aspect in WOM research (Money, Gilly, & Graham, 1998). Buttle (1998) argues that not all cultures view the person as independent, and he contends that people in collectivist cultures who subordinate their individuality to the collective may well demonstrate different WOM activity, whether positive or negative. He gives two examples: 1) In a collectivist culture, negative WOM about a personally unsatisfactory experience may not be offered if the collective view is generally favourable; 2) People in collectivist cultures are more likely to develop strong emotional connections to products and services when there are signs of group membership, and therefore they engage in WOM in order to develop strong and trusting relationships with the supplier.

Research Gap

The review of WOM literature reveals that although the geographic scope of these studies has broadened considerably, there are still very important gaps due to the majority of research being predominantly conducted in Western societies with a largely individualist focus. According to Howard (1989), the topic of online has only been addressed by top-level marketing journal since the last ten years or so. Review of the literature, also supported by Chan and Ngai's review(2011) reveals that there is a lack of empirical studies of online WOM in collectivist societies.

Given the critical role that online WOM plays in the lives of today's consumers', more attention needs to be devoted to understanding the antecedents of WOM in the online context. One of the questions to have emerged from Buttle's (1998) review of referral marketing is "which antecedents are most closely associated with WOM?" (p. 251). Although Sun et al. (2006) explored the antecedents of online WOM, they conceptualised online WOM from the perspective of its task-oriented purpose (i.e., information-sharing and information-seeking).

Methodology

An exploratory study was conducted using semi-structured interviews both face-to-face and online in China. This was considered an appropriate method for gaining points of view concerning personal experience and involvement in online WOM communication. A purposive sample of 18 participants ranging in age from 21 to 55 years was chosen for the study; comprising six males and twelve females; all were active users of online WOM programmes (e.g., initiated WOM online in past three weeks). The participants were located in eleven different cities in China and from a range of occupations. Six interviews were carried out online using online audio, video or text-based programs, and twelve were conducted face-to-face. Interviews varied in length ranging from 45 minutes to 1.5 hour and were digital recorded with consent

from the participants. Interview data were fully transcribed and analysed with the help of NVivo software. A deductive content analysis approach was used to analyse the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Findings and Discussion

The main research question considered the underlying reasons that consumer initiate WOM online. The findings indicate that consumer satisfaction with the purchase, perceived value of the product, consumer loyalty and customer affective commitment are the key factors that influence the initiation of WOM.

Consumer satisfaction was one of the major concepts to emerge from the interviews. Some participants indicated that they tend to initiate WOM about the products they are satisfied with, and are less likely to talk about the ones they are not.

“I posted quite a lot of details of this MP3 player, the look, features, etc. I’d done some research before I made the purchase, so I pretty much knew what I was expecting, even the possible defect of battery compartment lid – it seems a common issue with this model. But mine works perfectly fine, and has no defects at all.” [female, mid-20s].

“I am not happy with my recent purchase of a Sony Ericsson phone, but I didn’t write about it. I just gave it to my mum and bought a different one.” [male, mid-20s].

In some interviews, the participants discussed their motivations to avoid giving negative WOM on the Internet. The motivations strongly reflect their collectivism cultural orientation. In order to preserve social harmony and avoid a display of negative emotions, frowned upon in collectivist cultures, they tend to avoid offering WOM that sounds complaining. In addition, they withhold negative comments in their online WOM activities in order to maintain acceptance and inclusion and/or to make favourable impressions in their social groups. One participant stated:

“I try not to tell people bad things about the products or services I am dissatisfied with, like the coat I bought. I’d rather say ‘I don’t know much about it’, than telling the truth [negative comments]. I don’t want to criticise because it might be just me...I’m sure there must be people who like it. I don’t want to create some kind of discomfort and give people a bad impression of myself.” [female, mid-20s]

However, satisfaction appears to influence consumers’ online WOM in different ways. Other participants tend to share their experience only when their expectations are either exceeded or unfulfilled, and not when they are met. This U-shaped relationship between satisfaction and online WOM is supported by the participants. For example, two participants stated:

“I’m very satisfied with this hotel and it definitely exceeded my expectations – they offered more than I expected, so I wrote about it. I travel a lot and have stayed at many hotels. If it’s within my expectation, I wouldn’t bother. I would write about it when my satisfaction is far below or above my expectation.” [male, early-30s].

“I was very unhappy with the coat when I received it...I was actually angry. I felt I spent 200 yuan on something sold at the night market [where cheap items with poor

quality are usually sold]. I told everyone on my friend list about it and warned them.” [female, late-30s].

“Most of the skincare products are pretty much what I expected, nothing particularly good or bad, I’m satisfied, I just don’t bother [to write about it].” [female, early-30s].

Participants indicated that *consumer loyalty* is one of the underlying reasons they initiate WOM about a product/service. When they continue to patronise a given company or service provider, they are more likely to give recommendations or positive reviews about the company to their social networks. One participant stated:

“To me, this is my favourite brand of cell phone, although I know there are thousands of brands out there. There might be more expensive and better ones, like Apple, that lots of people talk about. I stick to this one. I told all my friends, even people online whom I don’t know, to buy this brand.” [male, mid-20s].

In contrast, disloyal consumers generate negative WOM when they switch to another brand, or company, in order to reinforce their decision and reduce post-decision dissonance. For example,

“I said bad things about that skincare product when I switched to this new brand...why? I think I simply wanted to make sure I made a wise decision [of switching brands][laugh].” [female, mid-20s].

Affective commitment is another common theme that emerged. Consumers who hold feelings of attachment to a company tend to engage in positive WOM to maintain valued relationships with the company. One participant described:

“The owner is about the same age as me and we always chat on QQ [instant messenger], sometimes on non-product-related stuff. She always throws in a few small items with my purchase, which are not expensive but something she thinks I would need for my son. I feel she’s my friend, and I care about her and her business.” [female, early-40s].

Perceived value is a concept that was extensively discussed across all interviews, including quality, price, emotional and social values. It is clear that most participants tend to view value as a trade-off between quality and price. A few participants indicated pleasure, enjoyment, and social acceptance derived from the product/service they purchased and consumed motivate them to initiate positive WOM. The participants who perceived a high value received from the product or service engaged in WOM and gave recommendations. For example,

“It’s good value for money. This brand has offered top quality ceramic tiles for many years. I’m very proud of my choice. My friends that came to my new apartment were impressed and said I bought good tiles. Every time I walk in, I see it, and think about what my friends said, it makes me very happy.” [female, mid-50s].

“I am a bank manager. My staff expect to see me in ... dresses like this – of quality and reasonably high priced. It’s appropriate for my position. It’s professional and fits my status. [female, early-40s].

Cultural aspects were not explicitly expressed in the interviews. However, personal cultural orientation was found to play a role in consumers’ engagement in online WOM. The following statement is an example of how, in a collectivist culture, negative WOM about a personally unsatisfactory experience may not be expressed if the collective view is generally favourable (Buttle, 1998). There is a motivation to avoid expressing negative WOM in order to preserve social harmony and avoid a display of negative emotions, which is often frowned upon in collectivist cultures.

“I try not to tell people bad things about the products or services I am dissatisfied with, like the coat I bought... I’d rather say ‘I don’t know much about it,’ rather than giving the truth – giving negative comments. I don’t want to criticise because it might be just me.... I’m sure there must be people who like it. As you know, I am a junior in this company. I don’t want to create some kind of discomfort or give people a bad impression of me.” [female, mid-20s].

This tendency to give a favourable impression was also shown when participants were reluctant to use “bad” and “negative” WOM to describe their messages. The preference of using “less positive WOM” or “not very good WOM” would avoid being seen as negative and standing out. This finding is expected due to the existence of strong *face* culture in China. Preserving one’s *face* is considered a typical value for collectivists (Niles, 1998). People feeling socially inferior are hesitant to speak about their dissatisfaction, fearing they might be challenging someone with greater knowledge or social power (Hunt, 1977). Avoiding losing *face* is one of the social factors widely seen in Chinese culture. The interview results also indicated the unwillingness of spreading negative WOM due to the feeling of inferiority and self-image/*face* preserving.

In addition, people in collectivist cultures are more likely to develop strong emotional connections to products and services when there are signs of group membership. They may engage in positive WOM in order to develop strong, trusting relationships with specific suppliers (Buttle, 1998). For example,

“All the girls at work buy accessories from that shop and we bulk purchase whenever they have new arrivals. It’s a kind of thing we do as a group. We even have a group set up on QQ, sharing our pictures of ‘this necklace matching that bracelet’ ... kind of stuff. They are cheap accessories, but everyone at work wears those: ... a kind of dress code.” [female, mid-20s].

Conclusion, Managerial Implication and Future Research

This exploratory research used in-depth interviews to demonstrate that a combination of factors affect consumers’ decisions to engage in word-of-mouth activity. These factors include consumer satisfaction with the purchase or consumption, customer loyalty, affective commitment, and perceived value of the product or brand. The findings generally support the literature conducted in Western contexts, and this study shows them to be true in China as well. This is despite the suspicion of some scholars

that conclusions from studies made under the Western cultural environment may not be able to explain word-of-mouth communication in China (Cheng & Zhou, 2010).

This study suggests that in order to encourage Chinese customers to engage in more word-of-mouth activity, marketers should increase customer satisfaction, build strong customer loyalty, develop affectively committed customer base, and offer high quality, price, emotional and social value in their products or services to customers. Although values are subject to customers' individual perceptions, they can be triggered by a company's efforts regarding the communication of value-based product specifics and advantages. Marketers in China should carefully focus on selecting appropriate quality, price and emotional values to build into a brand and communicate to its target market.

It is suggested that future research is needed to examine the relationships between the antecedents and word-of-mouth in a quantitative manner in order to present more generalisable results. Cultural difference is a critical component in affecting how the product/service consumption is evaluated and what response actions will be taken after evaluation (Au, Law, & Buhalis, 2010). The current study was conducted in a single country. The extent to which the findings can be generalised certainly requires further investigation. Future research should be extended to include participants from different nations as well as cultural contexts to allow for cross-country validation. This will lead to conclusions that can be generalised.

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