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Understanding Word of Mouth Communication:
A Theoretical Review of Literature

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Abstract:
This research paper presents a theoretical review of literature about the understanding of Word of mouth communication. It is a brief survey based of readings on "word of mouth communication" and it tries to address related research topics, challenges ahead and possible applications. Lastly this research paper shows that word of mouth communication is very powerful force in the Marketing field.

Key words: WOMC – word of mouth communication, PWOMC – positive WOMC, NWOMC- negative WOMCC, tie strength, source credibility, homophily

1. Introduction
Communication is an important facet of life. Be it personal life or corporate life, communication plays a very vital role. The success of any venture largely depends on the ability to communicate effectively with its audience.

In marketing context also communication plays a very important role and here also it is of two types formal and informal. Formal communication refers to communication between company and its customers or one company to another company or between company and its sales employee or between company and its supply chain intermediaries. Hence, company communicate with varieties of audience including customer through varieties of means such as advertising, personal selling etc. Informal communication also exists amongst these entities more importantly among customers. Customer talk to each other about their experiences, this informal communication among customer in marketing has come to be known as word of mouth communication (WOMC).

WOMC has been defined differently by different authors. Arndt (1967), for instance, define it as "... oral person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service."

1.1. Significant of Study
Understanding WOMC communication is essential in marketing communication because of the shift that took place in consumer's behaviour that is, building a shield against traditional methods of marketing communications.

Over the past decade, WOMC became a topic to be studied most frequently in the field of marketing. Researchers have associated this concept with personal recommendations, interpersonal relationships (Arndt, 1967), interpersonal communication (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004), informal communication (Silverman, 2001), personal and interpersonal influence (Arndt, 1967) (Brown & Reingen, 1987) and even with an informal form of advertising (Arndt, 1967).

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that consumer-to-consumer communication using WOMC has a strong influence on their buying decision process of goods and services (Richins, 1983). Moreover, in the Consumer Behaviour field it was concluded that WOMC communication plays an important role and that it has a huge impact during the consumers' shaping process of attitudes (Bone, 1995) and, at the same time, their behaviours (Bansal & Voyer, 2000).

1.2. Objective
The main objective of the study is to understand word of mouth communication. The other objectives of the study are as under:
- To gain an understanding of meaning and effect of WOMC communication,
- To identify major factors that in the past studies have been found to influence WOMC process and influence on consumer decision making process.

1.3. Section Scheme
The study has been organized into five sections. The present section is introductory in nature tracing background of study. It highlights the objectives and need of the study. The second section covers the literature part. Third section discusses research

methodology used in the study while the forth section presents findings of the study. And finally the last section summarizes the findings of the study and discusses its research implications.

2. Review of Literature
This section provides a review of the relevant literature. The literature addresses the framework. WOMC concept was defined several times as being an informal and non-commercial form of person-to-person conversation between a communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service (Anderson, 1998) (Arndt J. , 1968) (Crocker, 1986) or/and between the actual or potential consumer and other people such as product/service providers, independent experts, family and friends (Helm & Schlei, 1998) and occasionally, as a post-purchase cause. The term *informal* suggests that the WOMC communication is not a form of manipulation and, at the same time, independent of certain organizations (Silverman, 2001) and, in addition, is not organized in an official manner. Still, there is a single author (Haywood, 1989) who considered WOMC a formal method of communication. WOMC communication usually takes the shape of face-to-face or by phone methods of communications (Silverman, 2001) and, respectively, is classified depending on the means the consumers are using, into impersonal and personal sources. Friends, family, acquaintances, colleagues are considered to be personal sources of recommendations (Brown & Reingen, 1987) (D.F.Duhan, S.D.Johnson, J.B.Wilcox, & Harrell., 1997) while, columns, articles and commentary made by journalists, columnists, consumers, experts found in newspapers, magazines, on-topic publications, online discussion forums and expert systems [63] are recognized as being impersonal sources of recommendations.

2.1. Definitions
Some of the well known definition of WOMC Communication.

Auther(/s)	Year	Definition
Dichter	1966	"… talk which is mainly stimulated by the way the product is presented through advertisements, commercials, or public relations, and are not necessarily based on the speaker's experience with the product. In addition, consumers perceive word of mouth communication to be unbiased and more credible."
Arndt	1967	"... oral person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service."
Richins	1983	"The WOMC Communication is the act of telling at least one friend or acquaintance about the dissatisfaction ."
Reingen & Kernan	1986	"Marketplace information dissemination mechanism in which customer's opinions concerning identified organizations, product offerings, and specific purchase experiences are verbally communicated in informal interpersonal interaction processes."
Westbrook	1987	"Word of mouth as the opinion which consumers communicate to others in an unofficial way after they have used a product or taken a service.

Table 1: Definitions of WOMCC

2.2. Meaning of WOMC
Word of mouth is passing of information by verbal means, not only recommendations, but also general information, in an informal, person-to-person manner. It is typically considered as a face-to-face spoken communication, although phone conversations, text messages sent via SMS and web dialogue, such as online profile pages, blog posts, message board threads, instant messages and emails are often now included in the definition of word of mouth (Havalder et., al. 2009)
From marketing point of view, WOMC can be negative as well as positive. In the case of negative WOMCC (NWOMC), consumers convey information on poor performance, lack of service, high prices or rude sales personnel while in positive WOMCC(PWOMC), consumer convey information that give a positive feeling in order to help others, a desire to appeal well informed or smart, ego defence and reduction of dissonance. Assael (1992) notes that dissatisfied consumers complain to approximately three times as many friends and relatives as when they are satisfied. Additionally, Mizerski (1982) indicates that a consumer is more likely to pay attention to negative than to positive information. A study by Heath (1996), however, shows that people do not display a simple preference for bad news. Instead, they pass along information that matches the emotional valence of the conversation topic.
WOMC can be expressed at before or after a decision-making process.
- Input WOMC.
- Output WOMC.

WOMC that operates as an important source of pre-purchase information is referred to as input WOMCC while Output WOMC, on the other hand, is uttered after the purchase or the consumption experience (Buttle, 1998).

This research is focussed on the input WOMC that affect the purchaser. Not all WOMC communication is customer-initiated. WOMC may be offered with or without solicitation; it may be offered even though it is not sought. If authoritative information is thought, however, the consumer may see the input of an influential or opinion leader (Buttle, 1998).

2.3. Element of WOMCC

The literature on WOMC communication has addressed a wide range of issues relating to WOMC. These aspects are summarised by Kamil et al (2010) in the form of "Element of WOMC" which are as follows:

- Receiver's expertise
- Tie strength between sender and receiver
- Sender's characteristics.

This sub-section has been explained in the following pages.

2.3.1. Receiver's Expertise

The seeker's expertise appears to have a direct negative effect on the seeker's preference for WOMC information when consumer durables are involved (Bansal &Voyer, 2000). It appears that seeker expertise does not lessen the influence of a source when non-durables and services are included in the analysis. This finding supports the idea that lower financial risk for purchasing many of these non-durable products may lead to more variety seeking, which increases source influence, even when the seeker possesses expertise. (Gilly et al., 1998). Mei-zhi Zhang (2006) states that receiver's expertise and the influence of the sender word of mouth have no relationship in hair salon industry (for both *Thailand and Taiwan* respondents).

Result 1: The greater the receiver's expertise, the less is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.

2.3.2. Tie Strength between Sender and Receiver.

The tie strength of a relationship is defined as strong if the sources of someone who knows the decision maker personally (Duhan et al., 1997). "Tie strength is a multidimensional construct that represents the strength of the dyadic interpersonal relationships in the context of social networks (Money et al., 1998). Tie strength has been found to be one of the most significant factors explaining the influence of WOMC communications (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). It is indicated by several variables such as the importance attached to the social relation, frequency of social contact, and type of social relation, e.g., close friend, acquaintance (Brown & Reingen, 1987). The research of Brown & Reingen (1987) indicates that strong ties bear greater influence on the receiver's behaviour than weaker ties. Bansal & Voyer (2000) concludes that the greater the strength of the tie between the sender and the receiver, the greater the influence of the sender's WOMC on the receiver's purchase decision. Mei-zhi Zhang (2006) investigates that when the WOMC sender who has the strong tie with the receiver, provide the positive information about the hair salon shop, this information may lead to the result in receiver's switch to new service provider. This strong tie relationship could lead to friends and relative, marketer could learn to use this tie in developing market strategies. De Bruyn & Lilien, (2008) find that characteristics of the social tie influences recipients' behaviours, but have different effects at different stages (stages are awareness, interest, and final decision): tie strength facilitates awareness, perceptual affinity triggers recipients' interest, and demographic similarity has a negative influence on each stage of the decision-making process. Tie Strength significantly influences the decision of the recipient to open the e-mail he or she received, hence facilitating awareness.

- Result 2: The greater the strength of the tie between the sender and receiver, the greater is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.

2.3.3. Sender's Characteristics

Especially two source characteristics, expertise and similarity, have been identified and tested in previous research as determining the interpersonal influence, and thus, the effect of WOMC referrals. Both should be positively related to the influence of the message on the receiver.

a) Similarity: Source similarity or homophily refers to the degree to which individuals are similar in terms of certain attributes (Brown and Reingen, 1987). A number of theories can be related to when explaining why perceived sender similarity should increase the influence of the information transmitted. First, the source-attractiveness model suggests that receivers can better identify with sources that are similar to themselves (Kelman, 1961).Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison proposes that people tend to compare their attitudes and capabilities with those of others. The tendency to compare oneself with another person increases as this person is seen to be similar to oneself, because, according to Festinger (1954), individuals implicitly assume that similar people have similar needs and preferences. Finally, the match-up hypothesis (Kamins, 1990) suggests that influence depends on the consistency of then communicator's image with the image of the product and the self-concept of the receiver of the information.

Empirical studies about the effect of source similarity on influence have mostly been conducted in advertising research. These studies consistently support the hypothesis that similar communicators are perceived as being more influential than dissimilar ones (e.g. Feick and Higie, 1992). In the context of WOMC, three studies (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Price *et al.*, 1989; Gilly *et al.*, 1998) confirm that the effect of WOMC on the receiver is increased when similar informants as compared to dissimilar informants give it.

- Result 3: The greater the similarity between sender and receiver, the more is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.

b) *Source credibility* Source credibility is composed by two constructs: source expertise and source bias (Buda & Zhang, 2000) (Birnbaum & Stegner, 1979). Source expertise is the perception upon the competence of the source that provides the information. Source bias refers to the possible incentives that can be observed in the source's information (F.T. DeZoort, D.R. Hermanson, & Huston, 1993). A source is considered credible and perceived as such when it possesses greater expertise and is less biased. The individuals who present positive homophily and tie strength are assumed to be more persuasive when communicating a message When faced with a message, consumers will try to discover whether the message is accurate in representation and credible (Buda, The interactive effect of message framing, presentation order, and source credibility on recruitment practices, 2003).

Expertise: Expertise can be defined as the extend to which the source is perceived as being capable of providing correct information, and expertise is expected to induce persuasion because receivers have little motivation to check the veracity of the source's assertions by retrieving and rehearsing their own thoughts. (Above)Expertise of the source has also frequently been mentioned as affecting the influence of a piece of information (e.g. Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955; Herr *et al.*, 1991; Lascu and Zinkhan, 1999; Yale and Gilly, 1995). It seems obvious that information obtained from an expert should be especially influential. Gilly *et al.* (1998) argue that someone who is an expert in a particular product category should dispose of more product- or purchase-related information in this field and therefore his/her opinion will be sought more often than the opinion of others. Furthermore, the greater knowledge base of experts should enable them to convince others more effectively of their opinion on products and brands.

Empirical studies show that experts are more often opinion leaders in a product category than others (Jacoby and Hoyer, 1981). Others often copy their decisions, because they are perceived to be of higher quality (Gilly*et al.*, 1998). Empirical evidence for the greater influence of expert sources on the receiver is also available (e.g. Bone, 1995; Herr *et al.*, 1991;Feick and Higie, 1992). Hence, we expect that source expertise should be positively related to the influence of WOMC.

- Result 4: The greater the sender's expertise, the more is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.
- Result 5: the greater the source credibility, the more is the influence of WOMCC on receiver's purchase decision.

3. Research Methodology

This section deals with the methodological steps adopted in the present study. The research procedures which we had followed have been described under the following headlines.

Secondary sources of information have been used in this study. Previous studies have been reviewed in order to develop a conceptual framework underlying WOMC communication. Articles published in leading journals, economic dailies, business magazines, newspapers, books, committee reports worldwide including India, empirical studies published in the professional and academic journals and websites have been consulted for developing the theoretical framework for the study. The aim of this article encompasses a description of the WOMC construct from a theoretical perspective. The author's theoretical perspectives on WOMC have been selected from an outstanding literature based on personal choices

4. Findings

4.1. Key Finding of the Study

At first, WOMC occurred mostly only among neighbours exchanging news regarding the offerings of neighbourhood stores (Whyte, 1954). In 1955, Katz and Lazarsfeld, found that WOMC was seven times more effective than newspaper and magazine advertising, four times more effective than personal selling, and twice as effective as radio advertising in influencing consumers in a phase of brand switching. More recently, Day (1971) estimated that WOMC was nine times more effective than advertising in converting negative or neutral attitudes of consumers into positive ones, whereas Morin [1983) showed that "other people's recommendations" were three times more effective in stimulating purchases of over 600 different products compared to advertising.

Result 1:	The greater the receiver's expertise the less is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.
Result 2:	The greater the strength of the tie between the sender and receiver the greater is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.
Result 3:	The greater the similarity between sender and receiver the more is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.
Result 4:	The greater the sender's expertise the more is the influence of WOMC on receiver's purchase decision.
Result 5:	The greater the source credibility the more is the influence of WOMCC on receiver's purchase decision.

Table 2: Result Table

4.2. Implication of the study

As cited by Havalder et., al (2009), WOMC communication is highly valued by marketers. It is believed that this form of communication has valuable source credibility. Research has shown that individuals are more inclined to believe WOMC communication than more formal forms of promotion methods; the receiver of WOMC referrals tends to believe that the communicator is speaking honestly and is unlikely to have an ulterior motive (i.e. not receiving an incentive for referrals). In order to promote and manage WOMC communications, marketers use publicity techniques to achieve the desired response.

According to File et al. (1994), valence and volume of post-purchase WOMC can be influenced by management policy. More specifically, they cite work that provides evidence for the contention that the handling of the complaints process, services recovery

programmers' and unconditional service guarantees influence the frequency and direction of WOMC. (Richins 1983), for example, shows that if complaints are encouraged, the retailer has the chance to remedy legitimate complaints and win back a customer who may also make positive reports to others, enhancing goodwill.

Majority of researchers suggested that favourable WOMC is considered to be a product success factor (Katona & Muller, 1954) and is the most efficient way of attracting and make customers become loyal (D.F.Duhan, D.F.Johnson, J.B.Wilcox, & ., 1997). As such, one might conclude that it is the world's most effective but the least understood marketing strategy (Misner, 1999), even if it was studied several times in different backgrounds. Marketers are particularly becoming more interested in understanding WOMC because, as it was shown before, traditional forms of communication appear to be losing ground.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

WOMC has long been recognized as an important factor in consumer behaviour. According to Walter J.Carl (2012), WOMC communication is widely seen to be a powerful force in the marketplace. Studies of consumer information search have consistently found WOMC to be particularly powerful in affecting the consumer. (David Stokes, Sameera Ali Syed, Wendy Lomax , 2002).

The power of WOMC has not gone unnoticed. An increasing number of companies are proactively intervening in an effort to stimulate and manage WOMC activity. Some even consider customer WOMC as the most effective marketing tool and also the one with the lowest cost (Wilson, 1994). Specifically, marketers seek to influence opinion leaders directly, stimulate WOMC communication in advertising, through advertising and/or portray communications forms opinion leaders. Additionally, marketers try to curb, channel and control negative communications (Assael, 1992, Engel et al., 1993, Buttle, 1998; Haywood, 1989).

5.1. Future Research

Even if WOMC is known to be a powerful force in the Marketing field and many studies have been conducted on this topic, still there are unclear points that need to be analyzed regarding WOMC communication. Apart from the history and the factors that influence WOMC, it is required to go deeper into the issue. The Internet, as well as the advanced technology, contributed to the changes that took place in consumer's behavior that used to spread offline WOMC. Hence, a new concept evolved and was adopted; electronic WOMC which is similar to offline WOMC but the chosen means of communication are the electronic ones. Further research should focus on electronic WOMC which, in the author's opinion, might be analyzed easily using social media networks such as Facebook, because they have similar characteristics with the offline WOMC process: spreading the word to a known circle of friends, posting reviews and comments or replies within the circle of friends, discuss issues encountered while acquiring a service/product, recommend and even share post-purchase online impressions.

5.2. Unresolved Issues

Despite this, modern marketing text books contain little information on WOMC communications. In over 800 pages on the principles of marketing, Kotler et al. (2001) devote only one third of a page to 'personal communication channels' which includes a one line mention of 'word of mouth influence'. Even in Kotler's 14th edition (2012), WOMCC is been mention in social media and opinion leadership topic but there is not much explanation about the measuring part of WOMCC. It is clear that much additional research needs to be undertaken.

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