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Thinking about service encounters boosts talking about them

An examination of antecedents to word-of-mouth in a service encounter context

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Thinking about something boosts talking about it:
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Abstract:

Purpose This study examines the impact of thinking about an event as an antecedent to subsequent talk about this event with others (i.e., word-of-mouth). Thinking has been a neglected variable in word-of-mouth research, despite the fact that several conceptual arguments indicate that thinking is likely to enhance talking. Here, the thinking–talking association is examined in the context of service encounters.

Methodology Data were collected with a critical incident method, and the main variables were measured with questionnaire items.

Findings Thinking about a service encounter – after it has been completed – had a positive influence on subsequent talk to others about the encounter. The association was mediated by (a) the memorability of the service encounter and (b) the extent to which what had happened had been subject to rehearsal with the purpose of telling others about it. In addition, with respect to antecedents of consumer thinking, the results indicate that service encounter incongruity had a special role in why the consumer thinks about encounters after they have been completed.

Originality The findings should be seen in relation to the dominant position of customer satisfaction as an antecedent to word-of-mouth in the existing literature. The present results, however, indicate that satisfaction's contribution to the variation in talking about the encounter was modest.

Keywords: Service encounters, thinking, word-of-mouth, autobiographical memory, customer satisfaction

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Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) from existing customers is an important marketing variable, because it has the potential to provide credible and persuasive information to new customers without any particular costs for the firm (Raassens and Haans, 2017; Sivadas and Jindal, 2017; Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2015; Söderlund and Mattsson, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that many studies have made attempts to identify antecedents to WOM transmission, such as customer satisfaction (Andersson, 1998; Brown et al., 2005, Verma et al., 2016; Yu et al. 2017), perceived service quality (Danaher and Rust, 1996; Kim et al., 2015), perceived value (Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2015; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001), absorption (Chu et al., 2018), and trust (Gremler et al., 2001; Verma et al., 2016). Several antecedents related to customers' motivation to engage in WOM, such as impression management motives and concern for others, have also been examined (Berger, 2014; Kim, 2017). However, one potential antecedent has been neglected in the existing literature: the extent to which the customer has been thinking about what subsequently becomes the topic in conversations with others.

The focus in the present paper is the service encounter in which the customer is interacting on a face-to-face basis with an employee who represents the firm (Bitner et al., 1990). A service encounter comprises a specific event, bounded in time and space, in which the customer is personally involved as an interacting party. Once an event of this type is completed, and if it is remembered, it becomes an autobiographical memory (Baumgartner et al., 1992; Conway, 2001; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Nelson and Fivush, 2004) to which the customer can return later in terms of thinking activities. Two characteristics of the service encounter make it likely that the customer thinks more about it after its occurrence compared to the thinking generated by many other marketing-related stimuli (e.g., online commercials and in-store displays). First, the social aspect of service encounters (i.e., interaction with another person) enhances the probability that the encounter will be thought about, because social stimuli are particularly influential in stimulating thinking (Morin and Everett, 1990). Second, the self-related aspect of service encounters (i.e., they represent something that has happened to the customer) makes them likely to be recalled and thought about; autobiographical memories are intimately linked to the self (Conway, 2001; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Nelson, 1993), and they are thereby involving, significant, and meaningful for the thinker (Baumgartner et al., 1992; Nelson and Fivush, 2004).

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Given that the customer has indeed been thinking about a service encounter after its completion, it is assumed here that thinking boosts subsequent talking about the encounter. Thinking about the encounter, it is argued, increases the memorability of the encounter and provides opportunities for rehearsing the act of telling others about the encounter, and these two activities enhance talk activities. Thus the relationship between thinking about an event and talking about it is viewed as mediated by memorability and rehearsal. The purpose of the present study is to (a) assess these thinking–talking links in empirical terms, and (b) explore antecedents to customers' thinking about specific service encounters. Our interest in talk behavior means that the focus in the present study is on word-of-mouth in terms of a sender who talks to a receiver in an unmediated face-to-face setting (as opposed to computer-mediated communication activities, such as Facebook likings, comments and sharing activities online). To this end, two empirical studies were conducted.

An examination of the thinking–talking association contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, copious theories and models of customer behavior comprise cognitive variables, thus implying that customers are capable of thinking. However, the majority of these variables represent *outcomes* of thinking activities (e.g., value perceptions, attitudes, and intentions) rather than the act of thinking itself. Thus surprisingly little marketing-related research deals with thinking *per se*. One exception is some studies dealing with the experience construct, in the sense that they acknowledge thinking as one of several brand experience components and thus that brands can stimulate thinking (Brakus et al., 2009). It may also be noted that a large share of the existing literature on customers' cognitive activities deals with pre-purchase information processing, meaning that post-purchase phases of customer thinking (such as thinking about a service encounter once it has been completed) have received limited attention. This is indeed unfortunate, because a unique human characteristic is that much time is spent on thinking about things that have already happened (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010).

Second, and specifically related to WOM research, customer satisfaction is a dominant antecedent to WOM in the existing literature (Brown et al., 2005; von Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007), and many studies have shown that customer satisfaction is positively associated with WOM transmission (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Balaji et al., 2017; Duarte et al., 2018; Eisingerich et al., 2014; Fuentes-Blasco et al., 2017; Han et al., 2016; Nam et al., 2018; Sirakaya-Turk et al., 2015; Sivadas and Jindal, 2017; Verma et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2017). However, this literature rarely articulates *why* this association exist, and with respect to such literature an attempt is made

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here to make a contribution by exploring what an explicit account of customer thinking as a predictor variable can add to our knowledge of why customers transmit WOM.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Thinking about a service encounter after it has occurred

After a service encounter, and when the customer thinks about it, what does this thinking comprise? The core thinking activity in this situation is about remembering. Remembering an event that has happened in the past consists of reconstructive processes that demand cognitive activity in several associated brain regions (Hassabis and Maguire, 2007; Hassabis et al., 2007). More specifically, remembering an event is a creative process in which bits of information are pieced together, rather than simply retrieving an off-the-shelf reproduction of the event (Schacter and Addis, 2007). Therefore, in the present study, a customer who has been thinking about a service encounter in which he or she has been involved is seen as having been engaged in an imaginative reconstruction of what happened (Schacter, 2012); the customer is actively "re-living" the encounter (Baumgartner at al., 1992) or "re-experiencing" it (Nelson, 2003).

It is assumed here that the reconstruction process involves several distinct activities. First, it involves organizing material in terms of a narrative format. Thus remembering is about constructing a "self-story" (Nelson, 2003) or a "mini-narrative" (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Morin, 2009; Tourangeau, 2000). This is consonant with the notion that we humans use a story format as the organizing principle when we are engaged in information processing (Bruner, 1986; Schank, 1990). Second, it involves inner speech (i.e., talking silently to oneself about oneself), because such speech is an important part of thinking about oneself (Morin and Everett, 1990). Inner speech about oneself is assumed to have a story format (Morin, 2009), yet it is likely to be more fragmented, disconnected and incomplete (Ericsson and Simon, 1998) than, say, a mediated story paid for and consumed for entertainment purposes. Third, it involves visual imagery, which is another important part of thinking about oneself in the past (Baumgartner et al., 1992; Conway, 2001; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Morin, 2009). Taken together, then, it is assumed that thinking about a service encounter that has occurred in the past involves constructing a story comprising visual imagery and the silent speech of the thinker as a "voice-over".

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Thinking about a service encounter and talking about it with others

If the customer has indeed been thinking about a service encounter, in terms of developing an autobiographic memory related to the encounter, it is expected here that such thinking will stimulate subsequent talk with others about the encounter. One general reason is that talking about autobiographical memories serves to develop, maintain and enhance social bonds (Alea and Bluck, 2003; Bluck and Alea, 2009), and such bonds represent a fundamental need for humans. Moreover, two specific mechanisms are assumed to foster a thinking–talking link.

First, thinking about an event – particularly repeated thinking – makes it easier to remember the event later on (Nelson, 1993). This makes it more likely that the event can be reconstructed when the thinker is involved in a conversation with another person. And the easier it is to reconstruct the event, the more likely it is that it would be talked about.

Second, given that thinking about an event is about "replaying" what has happened (in terms of reconstructing the event), replaying an event serves as a rehearsal opportunity before the thinker talks to others about what has happened. And it is assumed here that rehearsal is positively associated with telling others about what happened, because prior research has shown that speakers monitor their inner speech before they speak (Morin, 2009). More specifically, the expectation of a discussion is an internal motivation that can increase thinking before the discussion takes place (Eveland, 2004). Indeed, the purpose of talking to others about one's memories appears to be a main motive behind rehearsal (Bluck et al., 2005; Skowronski and Walker, 2004; Walker et al., 2009). Given that memories told to others in a conversation have several social functions (Nelson, 1993), and given that social norms govern what is said in conversations (e.g., the telling of a memory should be relevant, brief, and understandable; Skowronski and Walker 2004), it is also assumed that most people would feel more comfortable with telling stories that have been rehearsed. In other words, individuals want to be prepared before something is discussed with others (Eveland, 2004). It may be noted that remembering an event and rehearsing how it should be told to others are likely to be associated; rehearsal is likely to improve recall (Skowronski and Walker, 2004).

Taken together, then, it is assumed that thinking about a service encounter enhances its memorability and provides rehearsal opportunities regarding what to tell others about the encounter, and that these two aspects have a positive influence on talking about the encounter

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with others. It should be noted that these assumptions do not comprise predictions about the content of thinking and talking (and no predictions about the correspondence of content between the two activities). The concern here is with the intensity of the customer's thinking and talking and the link between these two activities. The same intensity-based word-of-mouth variable appears, for example, in Fuentes-Blasco et al. (2017). In any event, the following is hypothesized:

H1: Thinking about a service encounter has a positive influence on talking about
    the encounter with others

H2: The thinking–talking association is mediated by the memorability of the encounter
    and the extent to which it has been subject to rehearsal

These hypotheses should be seen in relation to a frequent prior empirical finding, namely that customer satisfaction is a main antecedent of WOM. Although conceptual reasons behind a strong and positive association between customer satisfaction and WOM are rarely articulated, the dominant role of customer satisfaction in the existing literature needs to be addressed in any attempt to propose additional antecedents to WOM (such as customers' thinking). The approach here, in empirical terms, is to assess the thinking–talking link by taking customer satisfaction into account as a potential antecedent to both WOM (Study 1 and Study 2) and thinking (Study 2).

Study 1

Research approach

To test Hypothesis 1 and 2, a critical incident approach (described by, e.g., Bitner et al., 1990 and Gremler, 2004) was used to generate data about customers' reactions and behaviors after specific service encounters. The participants were asked to (a) select either one particularly dissatisfying or satisfying service encounter in the past when they – as consumers – had been interacting with an employee of a firm, and to (b) summarize what happened in this encounter. This is basically the same approach as in Bitner et al. (1990) who used the resulting stories as a point of departure for identifying causes of dissatisfaction and satisfaction. In the present study, however, the specific content of such stories is not in focus; the selected encounters were used as a point of departure for asking questions about thinking and talking.

Data collection and participants

The data were collected with a questionnaire, which existed in two versions: one asked for selecting a very dissatisfying encounter and the other for selecting a very satisfying encounter. This approach was used for the purpose of creating variation in the service encounters. The participants were asked to respond to all subsequent questions with respect to the specific encounter they had selected. The participants ($n = 89$, 50 men and 39 women, $M_{age} = 24.12$), which were recruited from undergraduate students in a marketing course, were randomly allocated to one of the two questionnaire versions.

Measures

Thinking intensity was captured with the items "I have been thinking about this encounter after it was completed", "I have indeed thought about what happened in the encounter", and "More than once, I have been contemplating what happened". These items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (agree completely). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .88. To assess if this measure would capture the activities involved in remembering events in the past as outlined above, the participants were asked about the extent to which their encounter-related thinking had (a) taken the form of replaying a story, (b) involved visualization in terms of mental images, and (c) comprised talking silently to oneself about what happened. Each aspect was captured with an item scored on a 10-point scale (1 = do not agree at all, 10 agree completely). The response to each item was positively and significantly associated with the thinking intensity variable; $r = .61$ ($p < .01$) for replaying a story, $r = .52$ ($p < .01$) for visualizing, and $r = .46$ ($p < .01$) for silent talk, thus suggesting that the thinking intensity variable was able to tap into the theoretical notions of what goes on when an individual is thinking about an event in the past. As an additional validity check, and given that previous research indicates that women are more likely than men to reflect on their personal past (Alea and Bluck, 2003; Bluck and Alea, 2009), the level of the thinking intensity variable was compared between men and women in the sample. The result was that women scored higher ($M = 7.79$) than men ($M = 6.44$), and this difference was significant ($t = 2.44$, $p < .05$).

For *talk intensity*, the following items were used: "I have talked to other people about what happened in the encounter", "I have discussed the encounter with my family and friends", and "I have told others about this encounter". A scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (agree

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completely) was used to capture the responses (alpha = .90). To assess the validity of this measure, the question "I believe I have talked to ___ persons about the encounter" was used. The zero-order correlation between the rating scale-based measure (which is used in the hypothesis testing below) and the open-ended measure was .53 ($p < .01$), thus suggesting that a reasonable level of concurrent validity was at hand. It should be noted that the use of verbs such as "talking", "discussing" and "telling" in the measurement items were used to tap into participants' offline word-of-mouth in face-to-face settings. It is possible, however, for a participant to interpret such verbs as including also activities that occur online (e.g., in terms of commenting and sharing activities), which is something we return to in the limitation section. It should also be noted that the talk intensity variable comprises (self-reported) talk behavior rather than intentions to talk. This behavioral aspect of word-of-mouth in the present study is the same as in for example, in Duarte et al. (2018), Eisingerich et al. (2014), Fuentes-Blasco et al. (2017), Han et al., (2016), and Yu et al. (2017). In the marketing literature, however, word-of-mouth intentions, particularly intentions related to recommendations, represent another talk indicator. Word-of-mouth operationalizations with a focus on intentions rather than behavior have been used by, for example, Balaji et al. (2017), Kim et al. (2015), and Sirakaya-Turk et al. (2015). To be able to make contact with the literature dealing with customers' talk in terms of recommendation intentions, an additional talk indicator of the type advocated by Reichheld (2003) was used: "How likely is it that you would recommend the firm to people you know?". It was scored on a 10-point scale (1 = very unlikely, 10 = very likely). It may be noted that many companies use this question as *the* corporate metric (Raassens and Haans, 2017). The two alternative talk indicators (i.e., talk intensity and recommendation intentions) were basically unrelated ($r = .05$, $p = .62$) in the present data.

As for the mediating variables, a single-item measure was used to capture the extent to which the selected encounter was *memorable*; this measure comprised the adjective pair "difficult to remember-easy to remember", which was scored on a 10-point scale. A single item measure was also used for measuring *rehearsal*. The question was "I have been rehearsing my view of what happened so that I can talk about it with others", scored on a 10-point scale (1 = do not agree at all, 10 = agree completely). This question was formulated in these terms to clarify that rehearsal (in the present study) refers to an internal mental activity rather than overt talk. This distinction is not always present in the existing literature, in which rehearsal is sometimes operationalized as talk with others (cf. Berntsen, 1998).

Finally, given that *customer satisfaction* appears frequently as an antecedent to WOM in the literature, a satisfaction measure was included. The three satisfaction items employed in several national satisfaction barometers (Fornell, 1992; Johnson et al., 2001) were used. The items, following the question "What is your overall view of the firm after this encounter?", were as follows: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the firm?" (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied), "To what extent did this firm meet your expectations?" (1 = not at all, 10 = totally), and "Imagine a firm that is perfect in every respect. How near or far from this ideal do you find this firm?" (1 = very far from, 10 = cannot get any closer). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .94.

Analysis and results

To test Hypothesis 1, thinking intensity was regressed on talk intensity. This regression (R^2 = 0.30, F = 37.49, p < .01) showed that there was a positive and significant association between the two variables (b = 0.55, p < .01). This provides support for H1. However, when recommendation intent was used as the talk indicator, the association was not significant (b = -0.02, p = .85). Thus H1 was supported only when talk intensity was measured as (self-reported) talk behavior.

For the test of H2, the mediation hypothesis, the Preacher and Hayes approach was used (cf. Zhao et al., 2010). First, the role of memorability was examined in an analysis in which thinking intensity was the independent variable, memorability was the mediator, and talk intensity (captured with the three-item talking behavior measure) was the dependent variable. In this analysis, there was a significant indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis of .06 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits 0.004 and 0.19), which indicates that the effect of thinking intensity on talk intensity was mediated by memorability. The direct effect was significant, too (0.61, p < .01). Mediation was thus of the complementary type (Zhao et al., 2010). Second, the same analysis with rehearsal as the mediating variable showed that there was a significant indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis of .19 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits 0.08 and 0.37), thus suggesting that the effect of thinking intensity on talk intensity was mediated by rehearsal. Also in this case, the direct effect was significant (0.47, p < .01). H2 was thus confirmed for both memorability and rehearsal. It should be observed that there were no significant direct or indirect effects, neither for memorability nor rehearsal, when the same mediation analyses comprised the recommendation intent indicator.

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The role of customer satisfaction?

As indicated earlier, customer satisfaction has a prominent role in existing attempts to identify antecedents to word-of-mouth – particularly when it is operationalized as recommendation intentions. Indeed, in the Study 1 data, as in many existing studies, customer satisfaction was positively and significantly associated with the recommendation intent measure ($r = .75$, $p < .01$). However, the satisfaction–talk association was very weak when talk intensity was used as the talk indicator ($r = -.05$, $p = .61$). Moreover, in a regression on talk intensity with thinking intensity and customer satisfaction as the independent variables ($R^2 = .28$, $F = 18.53$, $p < .01$), thinking was the only significant predictor. On the other hand, however, in a regression on recommendation intentions with the same two predictors ($R^2 = .56$, $F = 57.12$, $p < .01$), customer satisfaction was the only significant predictor. Thus, the impact of thinking about a service encounter on talking about it with others was visible only when talk was conceptualized in terms of talk behavior (not as recommendation intentions).

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to (a) re-test H1 under different conditions and (b) address *why* customers think about a completed service encounter. With respect to the why issue, the point of departure was theory suggesting that, in general, incongruent aspects of an object or an event are particularly likely to demand processing efforts from the customer's point of view (Houston et al. 1987; van Mulken et al. 2005; Sujan et al. 1986). Here, the focus is on incongruence in terms of a gap between what happens during one specific service encounter in relation to the the typical service encounter, because gaps of this type are likely to motivate elaborate processing (Meyer et al. 1997). It should be noted that this gap is not the same type as the performance-expectations gap typically used to define customer satisfaction, because the comparison norm in the incongruency construct used here is not expectations before one particular service encounter (it is the accumulated experience of prior service encounters). Thus, the incongruency construct used here focuses on differences between one particular service encounter and previous service encounters, not if one particular service encounter is subject to higher or lower performance compared to expectations. In any event, given that high levels of processing efforts and elaborate processing indicate higher levels of thinking intensity, the following is hypothesized in Study 2:

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H3: Incongruence involved in a service encounter has as positive influence on

subsequent thinking about the encounter

Data collection and participants

Again, a critical incident approach was employed to generate data. In Study 2, participants were asked to select one particularly memorable service encounter in the past when they had been interacting with an employee of a firm. The Study 2 focus, then, was on encounters that could be easily recalled (rather than satisfying or dissatisfying encounters). The participants ($n = 121$, 45 men and 76 women, $M_{age} = 24.21$) were undergraduate students, and they were asked to respond to a set of questionnaire items with respect to the selected service encounter.

Measures

The same measures as in Study 1 were employed for *thinking intensity* (Cronbach's alpha = .91), *talk intensity* (alpha = .91), *recommendation intentions*, and *customer satisfaction* (alpha = .94). Again, the two talk indicators were weakly associated ($r = -.09$, $p = .32$). For *service encounter incongruence*, a three-item scale following the question "How would you describe the encounter that you have selected?" was used. The items were "The outcome was unexpected", "I became surprised", and "I could not have known before exactly what would happen" (alpha = .83). Similar items appear in a perceived novelty scale in Bone (1992), while similar surprise item have been used by Derbaix and Vanhamme (2003) and Meyer et al. (1997).

Analysis and results

To re-test Hypothesis 1 (i.e., thinking about a service encounter has a positive influence on talking about the encounter with others) with the Study 2 data, a regression with thinking intensity as the independent variable and talk intensity (i.e., talk behavior) as the dependent variable was used. This regression ($R^2 = 0.46$, $F = 34.57$, $p < .01$) indicated that thinking intensity was positively associated with talk intensity ($b = 0.68$, $p < .01$). A second regression, on recommendation intentions as an alternative talk indicator, however, produced a non-significant result ($b = -0.11$, $p = 0.50$). This means that H1 was supported for intensity in talk behavior, but not for recommendation intentions. These results are very similar to those obtained in Study 1.

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For the H3 test, a regression with service encounter incongruence as the independent variable and thinking intensity as the dependent variable was used. The resulting regression ($R^2 = 0.19$, $F = 9.36$, $p < .01$) indicated that incongruence had a positive and significant impact on thinking intensity ($b = 0.16$, $p < .01$). H3 was thus supported.

Taken together, H1 and H3 imply a causal chain of the type incongruence–thinking–talking, and to assess this explicitly the Preacher and Hayes approach to mediation analysis was employed (Zhao et al. 2010). This analysis showed that there was a significant indirect effect from the bootstrap analysis of 0.24 (5000 bootstrap samples, 95% CI limits 0.11 and 0.40), which indicates that the effect of service encounter incongruence on talk intensity was mediated by thinking intensity. The direct effect was significant, too (0.22, $p < .05$), indicating that service encounter incongruence is a predictor also of talk intensity. The direct incongruence-talk intensity link is consonant with the findings in Bone (1992) and Derbaix and Vanhamme (2003).

The role of customer satisfaction?

Given that customer satisfaction is often conceptualized as a predictor of WOM in the existing literature, H1 was re-tested with a regression on talk intensity in which both thinking intensity and customer satisfaction were independent variables ($R^2 = 0.41$, $F = 42.53$, $p < .01$). This analysis showed that thinking had a positive impact on talk intensity ($b = 0.61$, $p < .01$) when controlling for customer satisfaction ($b = -0.15$, $p < .05$). This thus provides additional support for H1, and it indicates that thinking intensity was a more potent predictor of talk intensity than customer satisfaction. If talk is conceptualized as recommendation intentions, however, the case is different; the zero-order correlation between satisfaction and recommendation intentions was .73 ($p < .01$). And a regression on recommendation indentations with satisfaction and thinking intensity as independent variables ($R^2 = 0.54$, $F = 70.81$, $p < .01$) showed that satisfaction ($b = 0.74$, $p < .01$) outperformed thinking intensity ($b = 0.10$, $p = .11$) as a predictor.

Moreover, customer satisfaction can be seen as a potential predictor of thinking intensity. For instance, it could be argued that low and high levels of satisfaction, thus representing extreme outcomes, are particularly interesting events (Walker et al., 2009) and such events are likely to encourage thinking. To examine this possibility, H3 was re-tested with a regression on thinking intensity in which both incongruence and customer satisfaction were independent variables ($R^2 = 0.12$, $F = 9.55$, $p < .01$). This analysis showed that incongruence had a positive impact on

thinking ($b = 0.35$, $p < .01$) when controlling for customer satisfaction ($b = -0.14$, $p = .11$). H3 was thus supported also by this analysis, and it shows that satisfaction performed poorly as a predictor of thinking intensity. It may be noted that the incongruency variable and the customer satisfaction variable were subject to a very low correlation ($r = -.06$, $p = .70$), which indicates that they (as intended) captured different constructs.

Discussion

Contributions

In general, it has been claimed that that individuals verbalize only a fraction of their thoughts (Ericsson and Simon, 1998). That is to say, people think about the past more often than they talk about it (Bluck and Alea, 2009), suggesting a relatively weak thinking-talking link. For specific service encounters, however, the present results suggest that there is indeed a link. In relation to the existing literature on customers' word-of mouth activities, then, this finding adds a hitherto not examined factor to the list of word-of-mouth antecedents. It should also be noted that the thinking intensity factor outperformed the customer satisfaction factor – a particularly common antecedent to word-of-mouth in the existing literature – in predicting talk intensity. This part of the findings thus questions the value of attempts to explain word-of-mouth activity with customer satisfaction as the only predictor variable. One possible reason for a weak satisfaction–talk intensity link is that the satisfaction *per se* of a talker would not be very interesting for a listener; excessive talk about how satisfied or dissatisfied one became during one particular event is likely to violate conversational norms of the type discussed by Skowronski and Walter (2004). Presumably, what actually happened during an event is more interesting for a listener, and thinking intensity may capture this content better than what satisfaction is capable of.

The findings also indicate that the way in which customers' word-of-mouth activity is conceptualized and operationalized affects correlations with other variables – and thus this part of the findings calls on researchers to be mindful about their word-of-mouth constructs and measures. Basically, the results show that the thinking–talking association was at hand only for talk intensity and not for recommendation intentions. This difference may stem from the temporal difference between the two indicators; talk intensity has to do with behavior that has happened in the past, while recommendation intent is about what is likely to happen in the future. Previous research suggests that imagining a future event comprises greater neural activity than

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remembering the same event in the past, which indicates that more intensive constructive processing is required by imagining future events relative to retrieving past events (Addis et al., 2008). One main reason is that people draw on past experiences in order to simulate future events (Schacter and Addis, 2007), whereas past experiences do not require attention to material beyond the experience itself. In other words, it is more cognitively demanding to imagine the future than remembering the past (Addis et al., 2008). Given that people in general are cognitive misers (Garbarino and Edell, 1997), the stronger link in the present data between thinking and talk intensity in terms of behavior (in the past) may therefore reflect participants' desire to avoid the extra cognitive effort required to contemplate the future, and this in turn could have resulted in future talk becoming less accessible than talk in the past. Moreover, remembering an event in the past is associated with richer details, clearer perceptions, and more sensory components than imaging a future event (D'Argembeau and van der Linden, 2004; De Brigard and Giovanello, 2012). Such differences can make an event in the past more accessible than a future event. And accessibility is likely to affect correlations with other variables in such a way that that a higher level of accessibility boosts these correlations.

Another possible reason for the difference in the thinking–talking association given different talk indicators has to do with the extent to which a particular talk construct imposes restrictions with respect to what is talked about. And the talk intensity construct in the present study imposed few such restrictions; this talk construct is consonant with the view that word-of-mouth is about informal communication between customers regarding commercial experiences (Anderson, 1998; Nam et al., 2018; Sivadas and Jindal, 2015). In other words, whatever is said by one customer to another *is* communication. A talk construct explicitly dealing with recommendations, however, represents a more restricted view of the content of word-of-mouth, because speakers can talk about many other things, too. In addition, providing explicit recommendations appears to be a relatively rare activity in everyday conversations (Dunbar et al., 1997). Similarly, most customer-to-customer conversations about commercial experiences do not comprise explicit recommendations (Söderlund and Mattsson, 2009). Given that people in general offer few recommendations when they engage in word-of-mouth behavior, one may suspect that relatively little thinking activity is devoted to recommendations. If this is indeed the case, one would assume that this results in a weak link between thinking intensity and recommendation intent (as in the present data).

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Managerial implications

Given a significant thinking–talking link, the implication for firms desiring more word-of-mouth activity is that they should design their offers so that they encourage thinking. The findings suggest that incongruent elements in the service encounter foster thinking (and talking), thus managers need to develop activities that can increase the incongruence charge of service encounters. It should be noted that existing service literature comprises many examples of specific employee activities related to incongruence, particularly in terms of pleasant surprises and providing the customer with positively charged "extras" (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990), meaning that a rich catalogue of such activities already exits (even though, in the typical case, it was developed in the search for antecedents to customer satisfaction rather than customer thinking).

However, it should be underscored that deliberately increasing the level of incongruence is in conflict with the high level of standardization of service encounters and employee behavior desired by many contemporary service firms. In addition, one may question what the long-term result of engineered efforts to increase the level of incongruence means for incongruence perceptions. That is to say, if incongruent experiences are delivered continuously, can they still be incongruent? One may also question if deliberately staged incongruence – if it is indeed perceived as staged by customers – would yield positive effects on customer thinking (and talking). Presumably, such staging may explicate firms' hidden persuasion intent and thereby it may reduce the potential for influence.

Limitations and suggestion for further research

The present study conceptualized thinking about past events in terms of remembering (i.e., reconstructing) them. Once something is remembered, however, additional thinking activities may take place, such as elaborating (Eveland and Thomson, 2006) and making attribution of causes (Weiner, 2000). Such discrete thinking activities may influence subsequent talk differently, however, and this possibility needs to be explored in further research. Moreover, the focus was on the intensity by which people have been thinking about service encounters, not on the valenced charge that is likely to be involved in thinking activities. Yet the valence of one's thoughts in relation to an event is likely to affect the extent to which the event is talked about. The same limitations characterize the talk intensity construct; that is to say, it does not reveal what is said to others and not the valenced charge of what is said. Given that WOM can be both

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negative and positive, and given that it is positively charged talk that managers would want from customers, more research is clearly needed to capture also the valence aspect (and its antecedents). Sivadas and Jindal (2017) is an example of how word-of mouth valence can be captured. In addition, our focus was on talk that takes place in offline, face-to-face settings. Since contemporary consumers can also engage in word-of-mouth online (e.g., in terms of Facebook likings, commenting and sharing), further studies are needed to examine if the thinking-talking association would be replicated in settings in which talk is explicitly defined as activities occurring in online settings. Replication attempts involving such "eWOM" would be particularly merited given that eWOM is assumed to possess unique characteristics in relation to traditional WOM – such as greater persistency and accessibility (Nam et al., 2018).

With respect to variables mediating the impact of thinking on talking, Study 1 showed that both memorability and rehearsal contributed as mediators. The relatively strong direct effects of thinking on talking in these analyses, however, suggest that other mediating variables are likely to be involved, too. For example, thinking about an event is likely to expand the network of associations related to the event, which provides more opportunities to linking the event to what is talked about in a subsequent conversation. In addition, accessing autobiographical memories is effortful (Conway, 2001). One's own mental effort related to remembering an event can enhance the perceived importance of the event, and perceived importance is likely to encourage talking about the event. Factors related to how an encounter is remembered in terms of, for example, narrative coherence (Talarico et al., 2004) and vividness (Rubin and Kozin, 1984) may also affect subsequent talk.

Finally, in terms of the context for the present examination of the thinking–talking association, it should be noted that Study 1 comprised a sample of service encounters that were either dissatisfying or satisfying, while Study 2 involved a sample of memorable service encounters. In both studies, then, the critical incident method generated not only specific encounters but also "critical" encounters, defined as encounters "that contribute to or detract from the general aim of the activity in a significant way" (Bitner et al., 1990). Encounters that are critical in this sense, however, are likely to represent relatively untypical events. Further research is therefore needed to explore if also less untypical events (a) can be subject to thinking and (b) the extent to which such thinking encourages subsequent talk. It should also be observed that the service encounters used as the point of departure in the present study represent events that customers have experienced themselves (in the sense that they participated in them). Word-of-mouth, however,

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can also occur as a result of customers being exposed to marketing activities in a more passive mode (such as watching television commercials), and the role of thinking as a predictor of talk needs to be explored also in this context.

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