

Antecedents and consequences of word of mouth

Consumer evaluation context, individualism, personality and defense of companies

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Abstract

People often share word of mouth (WOM) with their friends, family, and colleagues, and they increasingly also share WOM with strangers through various Internet channels. Since WOM has been found to have an important impact on consumer behavior, businesses worldwide are eager to understand the intricacies of the phenomenon. In particular, businesses are interested in understanding how positive WOM can be stimulated and how negative WOM can be stopped. This dissertation presents four papers that extend the current knowledge on these two issues. The first paper aims to enhance the understanding of the relationship between consumer evaluations and WOM, while papers 2 and 3 are related to the issue of how individual difference factors affect WOM transmission. The fourth paper examines how some consumers defend companies or brands from negative WOM.

Several different methods were used to accomplish the aims of this dissertation. Papers 1 and 3 employed surveys, whereas paper 2 used an experimental method. Paper 4 employed the qualitative method netnography.

The first paper tests the effects of perceived quality and satisfaction on positive WOM intentions in both transaction-specific and cumulative evaluative contexts. Results reveal that different factors drive positive WOM intentions, depending on the context of the study. When consumers' evaluations are related to a specific transaction, perceived quality is the dominating predictor of positive WOM intentions. When the evaluations are cumulative, satisfaction is the dominating predictor of positive WOM intentions.

The second paper examines the relationship between individualism and WOM and factors moderating this relationship. The results reveal that high-individualism consumers are more willing than low-individualism consumers to transmit WOM in relation to satisfactory (versus unsatisfactory) consumption experiences, when WOM is unsolicited (versus solicited) and when the context involves high perceived social risk (versus low perceived social risk). These moderating effects may indicate that self-enhancement is the underlying motive in the relationship between individualism and WOM.

The third paper tests a model of personality trait predictors of WOM tendency. The model includes two situational personality traits: social and personal consumer confidence, and two

fundamental personality traits: extraversion and neuroticism. The results show that higher levels of extraversion result in greater social consumer confidence, which again has a positive effect on WOM tendency. Moreover, higher levels of neuroticism result in lower personal consumer confidence, which again has a negative effect on the tendency to engage in WOM. The results also show that social consumer confidence partially mediates the relationship between extraversion and WOM, whereas personal consumer confidence fully mediates the relationship between neuroticism and WOM.

The fourth paper explores consumer responses to negative WOM on the Internet. The objective was to test an a priori belief that many consumers defend companies in response to an initial negative WOM utterance. Results of a netnographic study confirm that the online defense phenomenon does exist. A typology of six defensive styles (advocating, justifying, vouching, stalling, trivializing, and doubting) was developed and the characteristics of each defense described. Furthermore, factors influencing consumers' choices of defense styles were identified. The study also highlights the different outcomes of the various defense styles and illustrates that this consumer phenomenon can be effective in preventing the spread of negative WOM or in mitigating its impact.

This dissertation provides valuable insights for marketing practitioners. First, companies that want to stimulate positive WOM should strive for positive evaluations of perceived quality and satisfaction. However, these two WOM indicators vary in their predictive strength depending on the context, so marketers should be cautious when collecting consumer feedback intended to predict the occurrence of positive WOM. Second, this dissertation provides knowledge of self-enhancement as a central WOM motive that could help companies in their efforts to stimulate WOM. This motive is especially prominent among individualistic consumers. Thus, by appealing to these consumers' need for self-enhancement, the chances of WOM occurring subsequently are likely going to increase. For instance, marketers could use advertising messages that appeal to the self-concept of the receiver such as, "This brand makes you stand out from the crowd" or "This product shows that you are a connoisseur." Third, this dissertation provides companies with useful insights regarding the targeting of consumers for their WOM campaigns. It has been shown that certain personality traits can play an important role in the production of WOM, which provides a richer picture of potential target groups for WOM campaigns than previous research suggests. For instance, by identifying consumers who are extraverts or possess social consumer confidence traits (for

example, through brief online questionnaires), companies may be able to establish contact with attractive “seeds” for use in their WOM campaigns. Fourth, this dissertation shows that consumers often defend companies and brands against negative WOM in online channels. While many companies are concerned about how to handle negative WOM online, this dissertation suggests that companies should remain calm when negative WOM discussions arise and restrain themselves from entering into these discussions too quickly. Consumers often defend them anyway.

Future research should further explore the mechanisms underlying WOM communication. This could involve examining other moderators that could provide additional explanations for the effects seen in this dissertation. Future research should also investigate the issues studied in this dissertation in relation to other aspects of the WOM phenomenon, such as the valence of WOM. Finally, as more WOM today occurs on the Internet, future research should examine some of the issues addressed in this dissertation in relation to the electronic forms of WOM.

Keywords: Consumer evaluation context, individualism, personality, defense of companies

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PART 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and purpose

The aim of this dissertation is to further the understanding of the word of mouth (WOM) phenomenon. The increasing interest in WOM among marketers over the past decade has raised questions about how WOM works and how it can be utilized for marketing purposes. This dissertation is intended to add to that emerging body of research.

Consumers often share opinions, news, and information with others (Berger, 2014; King et al., 2014). They talk about their travels, recommend new food products, or complain about a restaurant. They debate about TV shows and discuss which mobile phone brand is better. Such interpersonal communication can be described as word of mouth, or “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers,” (Westbrook, 1987, 261). WOM includes product discussions (e.g., I think the new TV from Samsung has some interesting features), direct recommendations (e.g., I really recommend this restaurant), and mere mentions (e.g., We were watching this movie yesterday). It includes face-to-face discussions as well as written communication in various online channels. It can occur in one-on-one interactions and in larger groups.

When researchers began to study WOM more than 50 years ago, they quickly established it as a powerful marketing force with a huge impact on consumer behavior (Brooks, 1957; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Subsequent research shows that WOM impacts the likelihood of adopting products (Arndt, 1967), product judgments (Bone, 1995), brand attitudes (Herr et al., 1991), brand choice (East et al., 2005), and purchase intentions (Sundaram and Webster, 1999). Today, WOM is also an Internet phenomenon, which has made WOM more rapid and pervasive, and, consequently, even more powerful (Yeh and Choi, 2011). Some recent studies suggests WOM has become more effective than traditional marketing channels such as advertising or PR (Stephen and Galak, 2012; Trusov et al., 2009).

But while it is clear WOM plays an important role in influencing consumers, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the individual and psychological mechanisms that underlie WOM from the perspectives of both the communicator and receiver of WOM. This dissertation considers three research questions addressed by four separate papers that deal with some of the issues

that are highly relevant in the literature: (1) When do consumers' evaluations of a product experience translate into giving positive WOM? (2) How are consumers' individual differences related to personality and motives influencing their WOM tendencies? (3) How do consumers defend companies or brands from negative WOM in online channels? Considering the vast attention WOM gets from companies (Keller and Fay, 2012), and the simultaneous struggles of companies trying to master WOM marketing (WOMMA and AMA, 2014), these questions are all important. The first two research questions are more concerned with how businesses can utilize the power of WOM to their advantage (Dichter, 1966), while the third question is concerned with how businesses can defend themselves from WOM that could work to their disadvantage (Richins, 1983). This dissertation will hopefully contribute by presenting an important new understanding of these two central issues in the WOM literature.

1.2. Conceptual framework discussion and research issues

This chapter provides an overview of past research in marketing and related fields that has examined WOM. Most studies dealing with WOM focus either on the communicator or the receiver side of the interaction (Berger, 2014; King et al., 2014). The traditional WOM literature can also be systematized based on studies that investigate antecedents or consequences of a concept. Based on these two dichotomies, Nyilasy (2005) developed a framework that organizes the WOM literature into four key issues (figure 1). The research that focuses on the antecedents of the receiver investigates "why do people listen?" while research focusing on the consequences of the receiver investigates "the power of WOM." Studies that focus on the antecedents of the communicator investigate the issue of "what makes people talk?" while studies focusing on consequences of the communicator investigate "what happens to the communicator after the WOM event?"

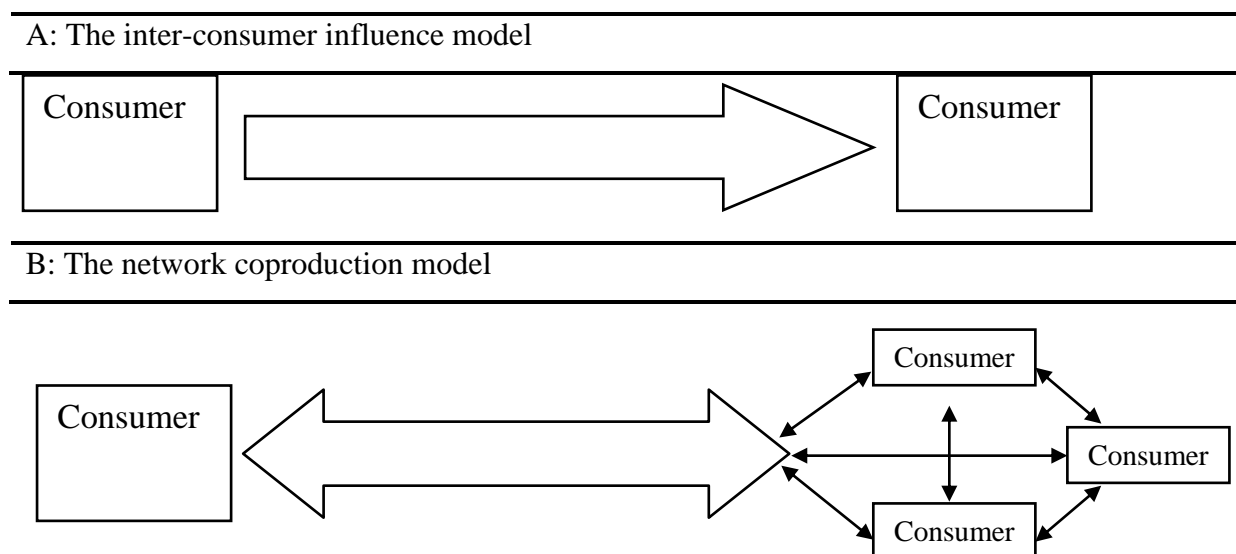
Figure 1: Four areas of WOM literature

Unit of analysis	Main focus of study	
	Antecedents of WOM	Consequences of WOM
Receiver of communication	Q1: "Why do people listen?"	Q2: "The power of WOM" <i>Paper #4</i>
Communicator	Q3: "What makes people talk?" <i>Papers #1, #2, and #3</i>	Q4: "What happens to the communicator after the WOM event?"

The first three papers in this dissertation are related to the issue of “what makes people talk?” Hence, a major part of the following literature review is concerned with the antecedents of WOM from the communicator’s perspective. The first paper attempts to answer research question 1 concerning the relationship between consumer evaluations and positive WOM. The theoretical foundation for this paper is drawn mainly from the literature on satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., Lam et al., 2004; Olsen, 2002), which has studied WOM extensively as a behavioral intention among consumers. Papers 2 and 3 are related to research question 2 on how individual difference factors affect WOM transmission. These papers are based on theories about personality predictors of WOM (e.g., Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Mowen et al., 2007) and consumers’ WOM motives (e.g., Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998).

The fourth paper in this dissertation investigates WOM discussions in which the receiver of WOM later becomes the communicator, and the primary focus is on the content of WOM, rather than its drivers or consequences. Thus, that study does not fit accurately into either of the issues highlighted in the traditional WOM literature. Rather, it adopts its approach from a relatively new research stream especially adapted to how WOM works in the online environment (Kozinets et al., 2010). For instance, whereas the previous perspectives of WOM conceptualize WOM as unidirectional transmission of information from one individual to another, the new perspective views WOM as something consumers co-produce in many-to-many discussions (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The evolution of WOM theory (adapted from Kozinets et al., 2010)



Research adopting this new perspective includes, amongst others, the investigation by Kozinets et al. (2010) that examines how online WOM messages produced by different bloggers evolve into different WOM discussions among consumers, depending on the communication strategies used by the bloggers. Other researchers who have adopted the new perspective report how the dynamics of online WOM discussions might be driven by a need for reciprocity (Chan and Li, 2010), by brand rivalry (Ewing et al., 2013), or by the intellectual, social, and cultural values consumers attach to being members of a brand community (Seraj, 2012). All of these studies examine WOM discussions in online communities (Kozinets, 1999) based on the premise that discussants have interchanging roles as communicators and receivers of WOM. While this is also an underlying premise for paper 4, the paper’s focal interest is on the behavioral reaction of the receivers of negative WOM. Thus, for the purpose of placing this paper in relation to the traditional WOM literature, paper 4 is viewed as a study of the consequences of WOM from the receiver’s perspective. In other words, it is related to the issue of “The power of WOM” (Nyilasi 2005).

Figure 3: Conceptual framework

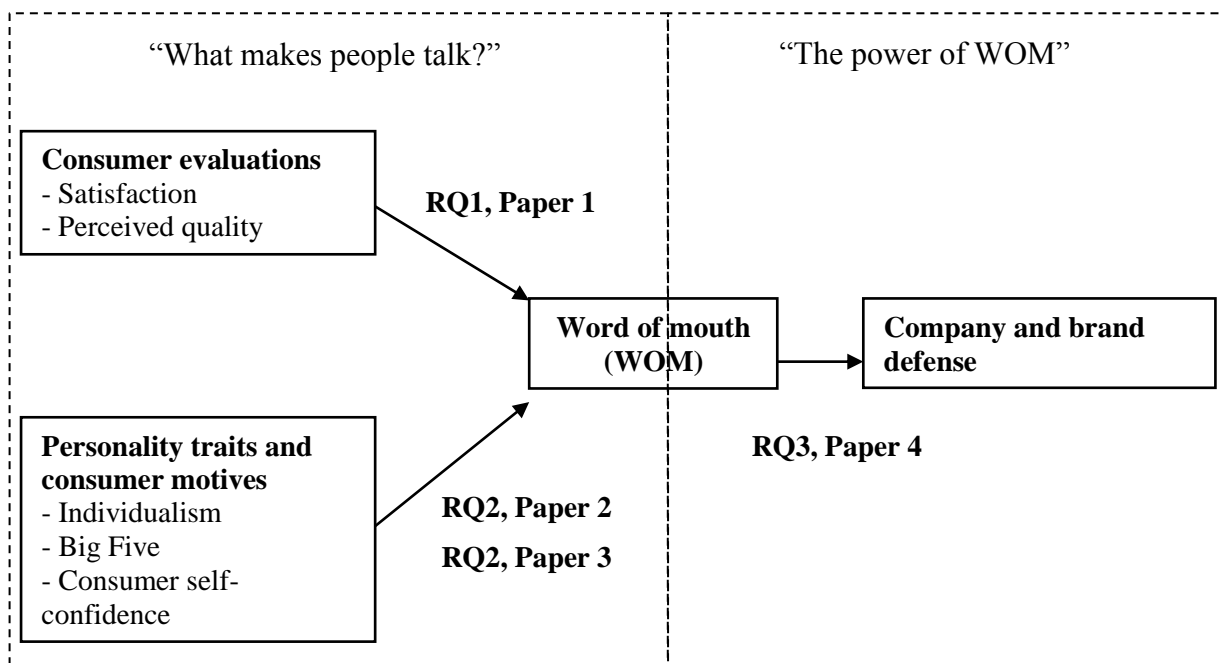


Figure 3 presents a conceptual framework for this dissertation, which shows the main variables or concepts studied in each of the four papers. These variables and concepts are discussed in more detail below as the theoretical foundation and research questions for each of the four studies are elucidated.

1.3. What makes people talk?

1.3.1. Consumer evaluations

Consumer evaluations such as satisfaction, perceived quality, perceived value, trust, and commitment have been studied extensively as antecedents of WOM (de Matos and Rossi, 2008). These evaluations capture consumers' knowledge of and experiences with a product, service, or firm, and guide consumers' subsequent actions (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). This dissertation focuses on the evaluation of satisfaction and perceived quality, and contributes to the knowledge of how these consumer evaluations relate to WOM.

Satisfaction is an evaluation construct believed to have both cognitive and affective components (Oliver, 1993). The dominant position in the marketing literature is that satisfaction is a function of expectation-disconfirmation (Szymanski and Henard, 2001), which is mainly a cognitive view of satisfaction. However, in more recent literature, the affective and emotional view of satisfaction is becoming more prevalent (Martin et al., 2008). This is reflected in Oliver's (2010) definition of satisfaction as consumers' degree of pleasantness derived from a consumption experience.

Perceived quality is defined as consumers' evaluations of the physical attributes of the product (Churchill and Surprenant, 1982). The attributes that are included in the quality judgment would depend on the product – for instance, taste, appearance, and texture would be central attributes of food products (Aikman and Crites, 2007; Olsen, 2002). The evaluation of quality is a cognitive form of consumer evaluation (Parasuraman et al., 1988), which contrasts with the more affective conceptualization of satisfaction (Giese and Cote, 2002). Oliver (1999) makes a distinction between cognitive loyalty (quality evaluation) and affective loyalty (satisfaction) in his model of the satisfaction-loyalty relationship.

The WOM literature consists of several investigations of satisfaction and perceived quality as antecedents of WOM, and most investigations indicate that both of these evaluation constructs are positively related to WOM (Brown et al., 2005; Cronin Jr et al., 2000; Fullerton and Taylor, 2002; Harrison-Walker, 2001a; Hartline and Jones, 1996; Ladhari, 2007; de Matos and Rossi, 2008; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007). However, the literature is still not unequivocal in its conclusions regarding the relationship between consumer evaluation

constructs and WOM. For instance, it has raised questions about the small effect sizes in the relationship between satisfaction, perceived quality and WOM (de Matos and Rossi, 2008). In other words, even though a consumer is very satisfied with a product purchase, he or she might not tell others about it through WOM.

This finding corresponds with research on the attitude-behavior link, which shows that attitudes only account for a small portion of the variance in behavior (Kraus, 1995). To enhance the understanding of the attitude-behavior relationship, several researchers are studying potential moderators of the relationship (Cooke and Sheeran, 2004). This line of research is designed to identify factors that could strengthen the consistency between attitudes and behavior. Thus, it could also be appropriate for identifying factors that may influence the strength of the relationship between satisfaction and WOM and perceived quality and WOM (Gremler and Brown, 1999; Mazzarol et al., 2007).

Previous research identifies, among others, attitude accessibility, direct experience, certainty, and ambivalence as moderators of the attitudes-behavior relationship (Cooke and Sheeran, 2004). Studies that focus specifically on the satisfaction-WOM relationship identify consumers' product involvement, situational involvement, and marketplace involvement (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007), the presence of an incentive for giving WOM (Wirtz and Chew, 2002), and other people's opinion about a product (Ryu and Han, 2009) as factors that may moderate the relationship. A qualitative study suggests that tie-strength, perceived risk, and self-confidence are also potential moderators of this relationship (Mazzarol et al., 2007).

In paper 1, consumers' evaluation context is identified as another moderator of the relationship between satisfaction and WOM and the relationship between perceived quality and WOM. Consumers' evaluation context is either transaction-specific, involving consumers' evaluations based on specific product experiences and limited to a given occasion or period (Jones and Suh, 2000), or cumulative, based on consumers' overall evaluation of a product on the basis of every single experience with that particular product (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994). The distinction between these different evaluation contexts is often discussed when researchers are defining evaluation constructs, but how the different evaluative contexts may influence the relationship between consumer evaluations and behavioral outcomes such as WOM remains uninvestigated. Paper 1 attempts to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, this paper's aim is to test the simultaneous effects of perceived quality and

satisfaction on positive WOM intentions, and test these relationships in both transaction-specific and cumulative evaluative contexts.

1.3.2. Motivational forces of WOM

Motivation is commonly viewed as a force that directs individuals toward goals, and marketing research commonly examines ways customers can be motivated to engage in behaviors, make decisions, and/or process information (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989).

Several motivational forces underlying WOM have been identified in the literature. In an early study, Dichter (1966) shows that people give WOM because of various self-oriented needs or for altruistic purposes. Various subsequent studies have confirmed this, showing that WOM givers, for instance, might be driven by self-oriented motives such as self-enhancement (Sundaram et al., 1998), identity signaling (Chung and Darke, 2006), and filling conversational space (Berger, 2014), as well as altruistic motives, such as concern for other consumers (Sundaram et al., 1998) and support for business organizations (Cheung et al., 2007).

Another category of WOM motives identified in the literature is emotional regulation (Berger, 2014), which includes motives such as cognitive dissonance (Engel et al., 1969), psychological arousal (Berger and Milkman, 2012), venting (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and vengeance (Sundaram et al., 1998). People also give WOM to seek advice from other consumers (Sundaram et al., 1998) or to obtain some social benefits (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) such as social belonging and social comparison (Alexandrov et al., 2013).

The understanding of what motivates WOM provides a fruitful foundation for researching other aspects of the WOM phenomenon. WOM motives have helped explain what kind of WOM people give (De Angelis et al., 2012; Berger and Milkman, 2012; Berger, 2014), and in what situations people give WOM (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Cheema and Kaikati, 2010; Wojnicki and Godes, 2008). For instance, consumers who are motivated by self-enhancement give more interesting WOM in an online setting than offline (Berger and Iyengar, 2013).

However, the literature provides little knowledge about how motives could be used to understand how personality traits influence the production of WOM. The concepts of motives and traits have usually lived separate lives in the WOM literature; the first focusing on *why* consumers transmit WOM (Sundaram et al., 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and the latter on *who* transmits WOM (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Sun et al., 2006). However, some researchers suggest these concepts work in interaction and that considering them simultaneously provides a more complete picture of personality-behavior relationships (Winter et al., 1998). For instance, motives could explain why certain personality types give more WOM than others (Wojnicki and Godes, 2008), as well as an understanding of the conditions in which the personality-WOM relationship would be more or less pronounced (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010). Paper 2 in this dissertation presents a study on the relationship between individualism and WOM, which illuminates these issues. More specifically, I study how the relationship between individualism and WOM could be explained by the self-enhancement motive. Self-enhancement is a motivational factor associated with self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). Previous research indicates that self-enhancement is associated with individualism (Kitayama et al., 1997), but none has tested this motive as a driver for individualistic consumers to give WOM.

To examine the role of self-enhancement in the individualism-WOM relationship, paper 2 assumes that consumers would change their willingness to provide WOM based on the perceived opportunity for self-enhancement provided by different contexts. It is suggested that satisfactory (vs. unsatisfactory) consumption experiences, the opportunity to give WOM unsolicited (vs. solicited), and high perceived social risk (vs. low perceived social risk) are contextual factors that provide self-enhancement opportunities and thus would moderate the individualism-WOM relationship. In the following, these concepts and their proposed effects on the individualism-WOM relationship are discussed.

Perceived risk is defined in terms of uncertainty and consequences, with increasing levels of uncertainty and/or an increasing chance of greater associated negative consequences leading to higher perceived risk (Oglethorpe and Monroe, 1987). It is a multidimensional concept, which can be separated into six different forms of risk including performance, financial, physical, convenience, social, and psychological (Murray, 1991). Perceived risk could be examined as a product category characteristic, where products in some categories might be perceived as risky purchases, whereas products in other categories are associated with much

lower risk (Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). Others have studied it as a factor associated with various consumption situations (Campbell and Goodstein, 2001).

Research shows that perceived risk associated with a purchase motivates consumers to seek WOM (Arndt, 1967; Murray, 1991). However, the relationship between perceived risk and WOM giving is not that clear. Gatignon and Robertson (1986) identify perceived risk as a cost associated with giving WOM, implicitly suggesting that perceived risk would decrease WOM. Mazzarol et al. (2007) find similarly that consumers may be reluctant to transmit WOM in risky situations, such as in relation to a high-cost product, in case the receiver finds the advice to be poor. However, a few studies also find the opposite effect; that perceived risk would increase consumers' willingness to give WOM. Wangenheim (2005) shows that perceived risk increases negative WOM about a dropped service provider, and suggests this is due to cognitive dissonance that often emerges when consumers perceive a purchase as risky. Lin and Fang (2006) find that two dimensions of perceived risk, social and psychological risk, have a positive effect on WOM giving. They propose that this positive effect of perceived risk might occur because risk gives people an opportunity to enhance their image and gain recognition. However, this explanation has not been empirically tested, and there is generally little understanding of the mechanisms that might underlie a positive relationship between perceived risk and WOM.

Paper 2 examines perceived social risk as a contextual factor that could provide consumers with an opportunity for self-enhancement, and thus be a positive catalyst in the individualism-WOM relationship. Simultaneously, this study also addresses the issue of the uncertain relationship between perceived risk and giving WOM.

Solicitation of WOM refers to a question by another consumer that would trigger a consumer to give WOM (Mazzarol et al., 2007). This would typically occur when a consumer has a need for information regarding a purchase and asks another consumer for help (Mangold et al., 1999). In other words, WOM is solicited by the receiver and not initiated by the communicator. Research suggests that approximately 50% of all WOM is solicited (East et al., 2005).

Some researchers have studied WOM solicitation from the receiver's perspective by investigating the relative effectiveness of WOM that is solicited versus WOM that is

unsolicited. Most evidence suggests that solicited WOM is relatively more effective. For instance, East et al. (2005) find that the impact of solicited WOM on brand choice was 1.5 to 2 times the effect of unsolicited WOM. Bansal and Voyer (2000) find that when WOM is solicited it strengthens the impact of WOM on the receiver purchase decision in a service context.

However, little is known about the difference between solicited and unsolicited WOM from the perspective of the WOM giver. For instance, would consumers be more willing to give WOM when it is solicited or unsolicited, and what could potentially explain either effect? By conceptualizing unsolicited WOM as proactive behavior and solicited WOM as reactive behavior (Kiecker and Cowles, 2002), paper 2 assumes that the unsolicited context would be a motivator for individualistic consumers to give WOM due to the opportunity residing in proactive communication for self-enhancement (Godfrey et al., 1986).

Satisfaction is often found to have a positive effect on WOM giving (Ladhari, 2007; de Matos and Rossi, 2008), but research shows that dissatisfaction also leads to WOM communication (Nyer and Gopinath, 2005; Richins, 1983). This has spurred an interest in the question of whether it is satisfaction or dissatisfaction that is the dominating motivator of WOM (Anderson, 1998; East et al., 2007).

A study suggesting that dissatisfied customers are likely to tell twice as many people as satisfied customers (Technical Assistance Research Programs, 1986) has led to a widespread belief that dissatisfaction is the main cause of WOM (Naylor and Kleiser, 2000). In contrast, a more recent study shows that most WOM is positive rather than negative (East et al., 2007), indicating that satisfaction dominates over dissatisfaction as a cause of WOM.

Self-enhancement is suggested as a motive that could explain why people would rather give WOM when satisfied rather than dissatisfied (Wojnicki and Godes, 2008). By highlighting positive information in conversation with others, people can maintain a positive self-concept and enhance their self-image (Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster, 1998). Paper 2 builds on this idea as it suggests that satisfactory experiences (rather than unsatisfactory ones) are stronger motivators of WOM for consumers scoring high on the individualism trait (Kitayama et al., 1997).

1.3.3. Personality traits and WOM

Personality traits are defined as “temporally and situationally invariant personal characteristics (i.e., dispositions) that distinguish different individuals and lead to consistencies in behavior across situations and over time” (Baumgartner 2002: 286). This definition encompasses fundamental personality traits such as the Big Five traits (Costa and McCrae, 1992), which do not change depending on the context. However, the personality literature also suggests that individuals could have traits that are more situational in nature, for instance related to contexts in which individuals are in a consumer mode (Mowen et al., 2007).

Several researchers of WOM have studied consumers’ personality traits and found they constitute an important aspect that may affect WOM transmission (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Mowen et al., 2007). For instance, previous research shows that WOM is related to public individuation (Chan and Misra, 1990), consumers’ self-confidence (Chelminski and Coulter, 2007), susceptibility to normative influence (Clark and Goldsmith, 2005), need for uniqueness (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010), innovativeness (Sun et al., 2006), and need for information (Mowen et al., 2007). Paper 2 in this dissertation focuses on individualism, and contributes to the knowledge of how this personality trait relates to WOM.

Individualism was originally a variable describing cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980), but has been adopted in studies on individual differences or as a facet of personality (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Individualism is a trait that characterizes individuals who define themselves as being highly separate from others (Triandis, 1995). Individualistic people value uniqueness, tend to present themselves as distinctive and self-reliant, and emphasize being direct in communication (Singelis, 1994).

The literature indicates that the individualism trait is associated with increased WOM activity (Barnes and Pressey, 2012; Chelminski and Coulter, 2007). However, the literature gives few explanations for why individualism might be linked with WOM. Chelminski and Coulter (2007) suggest individualists have high consumer self-confidence and thus have a higher tendency to give WOM. Paper 2 in this dissertation investigates the self-enhancement motive for giving WOM as another explanatory factor for the individualism-WOM relationship.

In the personality-WOM literature it is common to study selected personality traits without integrating them into a general framework of personality (e.g., Cheema and Kaikati, 2010; Chelminski and Coulter, 2007). However, some suggest that constructing a personality framework, including both abstract personality traits and more situation-specific traits, could provide a richer understanding of personality trait predictors of WOM (Mowen et al., 2007). The latter approach adopts the idea that traits reside in a hierarchical structure in which more abstract, cross-situational traits influence narrower situation-specific traits, which in turn influence behavior (Mowen 2000). By organizing traits in a hierarchy, this approach could, for instance, help bring insights into mediating factors of the relationship between Big Five traits and WOM (Gnamb and Batinic, 2012; Mooradian, 1996). Furthermore, this approach may overcome the limited ability of abstract personality traits to predict concrete behaviors (Paunonen and Ashton, 2001). Situation-specific traits would be more closely linked to the behavior in question, and could thus work as a link between fundamental traits and concrete behaviors. Despite the advantages of this approach, only the study by Gnamb and Batinic (2012) has adopted it to study personality trait predictors of WOM. Paper 3 in this dissertation adopts this approach to study the relationship between extraversion and neuroticism at the abstract trait level, personal and social consumer self-confidence at the situation-specific trait level, and WOM tendency.

Consumer self-confidence (Bearden et al., 2001) reflects consumers' evaluations of their ability to generate positive experiences for themselves in the marketplace. This is a trait consisting of several sub-dimensions that have shown different effects on WOM (Clark et al., 2008; Paridon et al., 2006). *Personal consumer confidence* concerns consumers' confidence in their ability to make purchase decisions that are personally satisfying (Bearden et al., 2001). Previous research shows that this dimension of consumer self-confidence has a negative effect on WOM (Paridon et al., 2006). *Social consumer confidence* concerns consumers' confidence in their ability to make purchase decisions that generate positive outcomes with respect to the reactions of others (Bearden et al., 2001). In contrast to personal consumer confidence, this trait has been found to have a strong effect on WOM in previous studies (Clark et al., 2008; Paridon et al., 2006). According to the evidence from previous research, I hypothesize that personal consumer confidence has a negative effect on WOM tendency and that social consumer confidence has a positive effect on WOM tendency. In addition, I test these two variables as mediators between more abstract personality traits and WOM.

The abstract personality traits in the model are adopted from the Big Five personality traits (Costa and McCrae, 1992), which are generally agreed upon as the fundamental traits that describe individuals' personality (Yeo, 2012). These traits consist of extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Relevant for this study are extraversion and neuroticism.

Extraversion is a personality trait related to the preference for social interaction (e.g., Costa and McCrae, 1992). Previous research shows that extraversion is positively related to WOM tendency (Mooradian, 1996; Gnambs and Batanic, 2012). Accordingly, it is proposed that extraversion has a positive effect on WOM in this study. Extraversion is also found to have a positive effect on a person's confidence in handling social interactions (Cheng and Furnham, 2002); hence it is proposed that extraversion has a positive effect on social consumer confidence.

Neuroticism refers to an individual's tendency to experience psychological distress and chronic negative emotions and to display related behavioral and cognitive characteristics (Costa and McCrae, 1992). Since consumers who feel regret, frustration, or anger often transmit WOM to unburden themselves of those negative feelings (de Matos and Rossi, 2008; Sundaram et al., 1998), it is proposed that a higher level of neuroticism increases individuals' WOM tendency as WOM can help them cope with negative feelings. As some researchers show, though, neuroticism might have a negative effect on personal consumer confidence (Cheng and Furnham, 2002). Thus, it is proposed that neuroticism negatively affects personal consumer confidence.

To summarize, the aim of paper 3 was to test a model which suggests that greater social consumer confidence leads to a higher tendency to engage in WOM, which can be traced to a more extraverted personality, and that lower personal consumer confidence leads to a higher tendency to engage in WOM, which can be traced to a more neurotic personality. It is also suggested that extraversion and neuroticism have direct effects on WOM tendency.

1.4. The defending power of WOM

A large body of academic studies has investigated the consequences of receiving WOM. These studies show that WOM has an effect on numerous consumer outcomes, confirming the

influential role of WOM in the marketplace. For instance, WOM influences product adoption likelihood (Arndt, 1967), product judgments (Bone, 1995), brand attitudes (Herr et al., 1991), purchase intentions (Sundaram et al., 1999), service quality perceptions (Wang, 2011), and product category involvement (Giese et al., 1996).

The WOM literature also includes various studies on the relative effects of WOM compared to different commercial sources of information such as advertising, selling, and company websites. For instance, East et al. (2005) find that WOM recommendation is responsible for 31% of consumers' brand choices, which is over twice the amount attributable to advertising (14%). A study on electronic WOM finds that product information gathered from online WOM discussions has a stronger impact on consumers' product interest than product information acquired from a corporate webpage (Bickart and Schindler, 2001).

A common finding in studies investigating "the power of WOM" is that the reaction of the individual who receives WOM would correspond with the valence of WOM. This means if WOM is positive, consumers usually react positively towards the product or brand that is the object of WOM. For instance, consumers receiving positive WOM report higher product judgments (Bone 1995), brand attitudes (Herr et al. 1991), and purchase intentions (Sundaram et al., 1999). Conversely, when WOM is negative, consumers usually react negatively towards the product or brand that is the object of WOM. For instance, consumers receiving negative WOM report lower likelihood of purchasing the product (Arndt, 1967) and attitudes toward the product (Herr et al., 1991).

However, consumers' reactions are not always in accordance with the valence of WOM, and sometimes they even go in the opposite direction. Fitzsimons and Lehmann (2004) find that in certain circumstances, the receiver of a product recommendation may enter a reactant state that leads to a choice that is in contradiction of the recommendation. Other researchers find that receivers of negative WOM may take the criticized company into "defense," for instance, when they attribute the negative WOM to the communicator rather than the company (Laczniak et al., 2001), or when they are highly committed to the company (Ahluwalia et al., 2000).

The defensive reactions examined in these previous studies involve consumers that cognitively counter argue negative information; in other words, the reactions are attitudinal in

nature. Relevant for paper 4 in this dissertation is defensive reactions towards negative WOM that are behavioral in nature. This involves consumers who speak up against negative WOM and defend a company or brand that has been criticized, actively using different defense styles. From observing WOM discussions in online forums, it seemed plausible that this indeed is an existing phenomenon. Yet, the previous WOM literature stops short of addressing it. The object of paper 4 was to extend the current knowledge regarding the consequences of receiving negative WOM by investigating consumers' behavioral response of defending companies and brands vocally. Further objectives were to classify the various styles of defending and identify the factors and mechanisms that underlie the different defense styles. Additionally, this study examined how the various defensive styles affected the outcomes of the WOM discussions.

1.5. Methodological considerations

Several different methods were used to work towards the aims of this dissertation. Papers 1 and 3 employed surveys, whereas paper 2 used an experimental method. In paper 4, the qualitative method netnography was employed. In the following paragraphs I present these methods briefly and discuss some of their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, I give a short description of the data collection procedure in the various studies.

1.5.1. Survey

The survey approach employed in papers 1 and 3 is a widely used method to study WOM (e.g., Babin et al., 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Ladhari, 2007). By collecting data via carefully designed questionnaires, this method can generate extensive, quantifiable insights that could be generalized to a wider population. However, it has some weaknesses related to the cross-sectional survey data collected in both papers. With such data, it is difficult to establish the direction of causality between variables. Another problem with surveys when it comes to studying WOM is that they cannot capture actual WOM conversations, so they rely on participants' prediction of future WOM intentions or the recollections of past WOM behavior. The benefit of measuring WOM intentions, as done in paper 1, is that it normally shows a stronger correlation with attitudinal measures such as satisfaction and loyalty (de Matos and Rossi, 2008). The problem with WOM intentions, however, is that its correspondence with actual WOM behavior is quite low. Kumar et al. (2007) present a study in which over 50% of the consumers who said they would recommend a particular product or

service, did not. Measuring previous WOM behavior, as was done in paper 3, would also involve a potential source of error as respondents might fail to accurately recall information, but it still would be a better predictor of actual WOM than the intention measure (de Matos and Rossi, 2008).

In paper 1, survey data were collected from two different groups of Spanish food consumers, resulting in two separate data sets. The first data set consisted of 457 responses and comprised questions about consumers' evaluation of a seafood product based on a recent consumption experience (transaction-specific context). The second data set consisted of 800 responses and comprised questions about consumers' overall evaluation of the same seafood product (cumulative context). The measures used in the questionnaires were adopted from previous studies on satisfaction (Olsen, 2002) and WOM (Hartline and Jones, 1996). The analysis involved a structural equation procedure using Amos 16.0.

In paper 3, an online survey was conducted among members of a Norwegian consumer panel. A total of 574 useful responses was collected from a nationwide representative sample. Measures of extraversion and neuroticism were adopted from the short form of the Big Five Inventory (Lang et al., 2011), while the two dimensions of consumer self-confidence were operationalized with items developed by Bearden et al. (2001). WOM tendency was operationalized with items based on Mowen et al. (2007) and Lam (2009). The analysis involved a structural equation procedure using Amos 20.0.

1.5.2. Experiment

In paper 2, a scenario-based experimental study was conducted. This method involves running an experiment with different groups of participants who are asked to read and envision themselves in different scenarios related to hypothetical consumption situations. Then, based on the information in the scenarios, participants are asked to indicate their likely reactions to the situations, for instance their WOM likelihood. This is a method employed by several studies in the WOM literature (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010; Frenzen and Nakamoto, 1993; Ryu and Han, 2009). A general benefit of experiments versus surveys is that they allow for enhanced internal validity and for a deeper understanding of causal relationships. The scenario-based experimental approach is especially suited to the study of WOM behavior as it can be used to overcome the difficulties of studying actual WOM conversations (Wirtz and

Chew, 2002). Additionally, scenarios reduce the issues that may be associated with recall-based methods, such as biases from memory lapses and rationalization tendencies (Smith et al., 1999). A weakness associated with experiments is the limited opportunity to generalize their findings.

The experimental design employed in paper 2 involved a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects design. Perceived social risk, satisfaction, and WOM solicitation were manipulated using scenarios, while individualism was measured using a shortened individualism scale adapted from Singelis (1994). The operationalization of WOM likelihood was adopted from Ladhari (2007). 554 participants recruited among students at a Norwegian university completed the study. ANOVA tests were performed to test the hypotheses.

1.5.3. Netnography

In paper 4, an online ethnography, known as a netnography (Kozinets, 2002) was employed. Netnography is a relatively new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study online communities. It has been used mostly in investigations of the culture and practices of various online consumer communities (e.g., Muñiz Jr and Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009; Seraj, 2012) where the role of WOM is studied only implicitly, but it has also been used in more explicit investigations of WOM (Andreassen and Streukens, 2009; Fong and Burton, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2010). In short, the method involves observing conversations in online forums, and then analyzing the conversations for patterns that are eventually synthesized into a cohesive theory around an issue. A benefit of using netnography as opposed to surveys and experiments is that netnography does not force consumers to choose from predetermined researcher assumptions. Rather, netnography provides large amounts of unsolicited and bottom-up generated information about the content of WOM (Kozinets, 2006). This method gives insight into more of the nuances of WOM that are not captured in the existing literature, and thus lets researchers look beyond commonly used measures of WOM such as frequency and valence (Kozinets et al., 2010). Netnography is also faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups and interviews. As a consequence, there is no error as a result of respondents anticipating the “right” answer or failing to accurately recall information (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2004). A limitation of netnography, as with all qualitative research, concerns the difficulty of generalizing the knowledge produced to other people or

other settings. For netnography this limitation is particular prominent as it is difficult to identify the informants in the online context (Kozinets, 2002).

The first step of the data collection procedure in paper 4 involved choosing online forums for the netnographic investigation. The researchers chose four large online forums (one webmaster forum, one family forum, one travel forum, and one photography forum). Using the search function in these forums, various threads that contained brand or company criticism were identified. Following a grounded theory approach, analysis was performed on 53 forum threads containing 1074 posts.

PART 2. MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this dissertation was to further the understanding of the WOM phenomenon. Questions on how businesses can use the power of WOM to their advantage and how they can defend themselves from WOM that could work to their disadvantage have been studied for decades (Dichter, 1966; Richins, 1983). Still, many businesses today seem unable to answer these questions. This dissertation contributes by providing knowledge that could help businesses find answers to these questions. More specifically, this dissertation considers the following three research questions: (1) When do consumers' evaluations of a product experience translate into giving positive WOM? (2) How are consumers' individual differences related to personality and motives influencing their WOM tendencies? (3) How do consumers defend companies or brands from negative WOM in online channels? The findings from the four papers in this dissertation provide answers to these questions. These findings are presented and discussed in the following.

2.1. Evaluation context's role in driving positive WOM intentions

Paper 1 addressed the first research question of this dissertation concerning when consumers' evaluations of a product experience translate into giving positive WOM. Perceived quality and satisfaction were examined as antecedents of positive WOM intentions, and transaction-specific vs. cumulative evaluation context was examined as a moderator in this relationship. The findings reveal that perceived quality is the dominating predictor of positive WOM intentions in the transaction-specific context, while satisfaction is the dominating predictor of positive WOM intentions in the cumulative evaluation context.

These findings challenge previous research, which suggests that perceived quality would only have an indirect effect on behavioral intentions through satisfaction (e.g., Gotlieb et al., 1994). Not only does perceived quality show a direct positive effect on positive WOM intentions. In the transaction-specific context, its effect is also stronger than that of satisfaction. Thus, the different evaluation contexts that are included as a moderator in this study contribute with new knowledge about how different consumer evaluation constructs could vary in being the dominant predictor of WOM intentions. An explanation of the differential effects of evaluation contexts might reside in construal level theory (Liberman et al., 2002), which addresses the psychological distance of experiences. Transaction-specific experiences are more psychologically close than cumulative experiences. This corresponds with evaluations of perceived quality, which are more concrete than satisfaction evaluations. Conversely, satisfaction is a more abstract evaluation, which corresponds better with the more psychologically distant cumulative evaluation context. In other words, the correspondence between the psychological distance of the evaluation context and the abstractedness of the evaluation construct could explain when consumers' evaluations translate into giving positive WOM.

2.2. Understanding the relationship between individualism and WOM

Paper 2 addressed the second research question of this dissertation concerning how consumers' individual differences related to personality and motives influence their WOM tendencies. The research question was addressed by examining the symbiosis of personality traits and motives in the production of WOM. Specifically, this paper investigated whether the relationship between the individualism trait and WOM could be explained by the self-enhancement motive. Previous research suggests that consumers who score high on the individualism trait (Singelis, 1994) are more disposed to give WOM (Barnes and Pressey, 2012). Thus, identifying what motivates these types of consumers to give WOM would be important knowledge for marketers. The results of paper 2 reveal that individualism is positively related to WOM in relation to satisfactory consumption experiences, when WOM is unsolicited, and when the context involves high perceived social risk. These are situations that are assumed to provide self-enhancement opportunities for consumers. On the other hand, in situations that presumably offer reduced opportunities to self-enhance, such as when a consumption experience is dissatisfactory, when WOM is solicited and when the context involves low perceived social risk, the effect of individualism on WOM disappears. Based on

these findings, the need for self-enhancement is suggested as a central motive underlying the enhanced WOM propensities of individualistic consumers.

By linking self-enhancement to the relationship between individualism and WOM, this study provides a bridge between the area in the WOM literature that examines why consumers give WOM (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998) and the area looking at who gives more WOM than others (Gnambs and Batinić, 2012; Mowen et al., 2007). Furthermore, by combining these areas, this study contributes with enhanced understanding to both the literature on WOM motives and the literature on individual difference factors associated with WOM.

This study also provides insight about satisfaction as a determinant of WOM. Recent research suggests that satisfaction dominates over dissatisfaction as a cause of WOM (East et al., 2007), but there is little knowledge about the psychological mechanisms that may explain this effect. This study suggests that talking about satisfactory consumer experiences is something consumers seek because it is a route to self-enhancement, while many consumers avoid talking about unsatisfactory experiences because they fear it could lead to negative evaluations from others (Rosen and Tesser, 1972). By showing that the positive effect of individualism on WOM disappears when consumers have experienced dissatisfaction, this theory is supported.

This paper also examines the role of risk as a motivational factor for giving WOM. Whereas previous research mostly views perceived risk as a cost associated with providing WOM (Gatignon and Robertson, 1986; Mazzarol et al., 2007), the current study shows that perceived risk may actually comprise a benefit for individualistic consumers giving WOM because it helps them self-enhance (Lin and Fang, 2006).

WOM solicitation was also identified as a moderator in the relationship between individualism and WOM. This factor has been studied previously in relation to the effects of receiving WOM (Bansal and Voyer, 2000), but it has not been studied as an antecedent of giving WOM. By adopting the idea of unsolicited WOM as proactive behavior and solicited WOM as reactive behavior, the study shows that giving unsolicited WOM is a motivator for individualistic consumers. This finding may be explained by the opportunity for self-enhancement that resides in proactive communication (Godfrey et al., 1986).

2.3. WOM as a function of extraversion, neuroticism, and consumer self-confidence

The second research question of this dissertation concerning how consumers' individual differences related to personality and motives influence their WOM tendencies was also addressed by paper 3. The study involved constructing a model of personality trait predictors of WOM in which more abstract, cross-situational traits (extraversion and neuroticism) influenced narrower situation-specific traits (personal and social consumer confidence), which in turn influenced behavior (WOM tendency). The results of this study show that social consumer confidence and personal consumer confidence are direct predictors of WOM tendency. In addition, the study shows that neuroticism is an indirect predictor of WOM tendency through personal consumer confidence, and that extraversion affects WOM tendency both directly and indirectly through social consumer confidence. In other words, it is demonstrated that the traits at the situation-specific level work as mediators between the fundamental traits and WOM tendency. This finding supports the hierarchical personality theory which arranges personality traits at different levels of abstraction and suggests that the most abstract traits influence behavior through more concrete traits (Mowen, 2000).

This study contributes to the WOM literature by demonstrating how two of the Big Five personality traits are related to WOM. Few previous studies have found a link between these traits and WOM (Gnambs and Batinic, 2012; Mowen et al., 2007), which can be explained by the limited ability of abstract personality traits to predict concrete behaviors (Paunonen and Ashton, 2001). Thus, linking the Big Five traits to WOM through situation-specific traits seems like a fruitful approach for gaining a richer understanding of the personality trait predictors of WOM.

Second, this research enhances the understanding of the link between consumer self-confidence and WOM. Whereas the literature suggests that all dimensions of consumer self-confidence are positively related to WOM (Bearden et al., 2001; Chelminski and Coulter, 2007; Clark et al., 2008), this study provides a theoretical explanation and empirical evidence for a negative effect of personal consumer confidence on WOM. The results suggest that the stronger WOM tendency evident among consumers with lower levels of personal consumer confidence can be traced to neuroticism at the fundamental trait level. Thus, a suggested explanation underlying these consumers' tendency to give WOM is their need to cope with insecurities and negative feelings as consumers (Buttle, 1998; Engel et al., 1969).

2.4. Company and brand defence as a consequence of negative WOM

Paper 4 addressed the third research question of this dissertation concerning how consumers defend companies and brands from negative WOM in online channels. The paper addressed this issue by examining an a priori belief that some consumers who receive negative WOM would defend the criticized company or brand. Results confirmed that the online defense phenomenon does exist. A typology of six defensive styles (advocating, justifying, vouching, stalling, trivializing, and doubting) was developed and the characteristics of each defense described. Furthermore, factors influencing consumers' choices of defense styles were identified. The characteristics of the complainer's message affected the choice of defense style greatly, as did the attribution of guilt by the defender in the specific episode. The self-experience of the defender and his perceptions of justice were also heavily influential in the choice of defense style. A variety of outcomes of defending were identified but in most instances the defense was successful in mitigating the complaints in one way or another.

By revealing that some consumers who encounter negative WOM take the criticized company or brand's side and engage in defensive behavior against the negative WOM, this study contributes to the WOM literature by identifying consumers defending companies and brands as a new form of WOM activity. This extends the concept of WOM beyond complaining (Harrison-Walker, 2001b) or praise (Harrison-Walker, 2001a). This also highlights the usefulness of studying WOM from the co-production perspective of Kozinets et al. (2010), where WOM interactions are considered as a dynamic process that continues long after the initial praise or criticism.

This research also contributes to the understanding of how consumers react to negative WOM. Previous research suggests that the general reaction of consumers who receive negative WOM is to lower their attitudes toward the criticized company or brand (Arndt, 1967; Bone, 1995). In some instance, certain consumers may, however, take a more defensive stance towards negative WOM by cognitively counter-arguing the negative information (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Laczniak et al., 2001). The current study shows that consumers may also take a more active defensive approach towards negative WOM by employing various rhetorical tactics that could work as a buffer against the negative WOM.

In addition, this study contributes to the literature dealing with motivations for WOM. Previously, consumers who countered negative messages were assumed to be motivated by loyalty and commitment (Ahluwalia et al., 2000; Dawar and Pillutla, 2000). However, our investigation suggests that the motivations behind brand-defending behavior might also include cognitive dissonance (Engel et al., 1969), sense of justice (Konow, 2003), and self-enhancement (Sundaram et al., 1998). Thus, the role of brand loyalty might be exaggerated in existing explanations of the defensive stances consumers adopt against negative, company-specific information.

2.5. Managerial implications

In addition to building on the existing theory on WOM (e.g., de Matos and Rossi, 2008; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; Sun et al., 2006) this dissertation also contributes to marketing practice. Paper 1 confirms previous research which shows that companies seeking positive WOM should strive for high scores on perceived quality and satisfaction evaluations (de Matos and Rossi, 2008). However, this study also suggests that these two evaluation constructs must be used with caution as indicators of WOM. When companies collect feedback from consumers regarding specific product experiences, only the quality evaluation would be a valid predictor of positive WOM intentions. On the other hand, when a company solicits more cumulative product evaluations from consumers, satisfaction would be a better indicator of positive WOM intentions than perceived quality. Companies alert to these varying effects of evaluation contexts can develop more precise measurement tools, which will enable them to predict more accurately when positive WOM would occur.

In addition to shedding light on important predictors of WOM, this dissertation provides knowledge of a central WOM motive that could help companies in their efforts to stimulate WOM. Paper 2 suggests that many consumers give WOM when they see it as an opportunity for self-enhancement. This motive is especially prominent among consumers who score high on the individualism trait. Thus, by appealing to these consumers' need for self-enhancement, for instance through advertising messages, the chances of WOM occurring are likely going to increase. Companies could use this insight, for example, when they try to develop online content they hope gets spread "virally" through social media (Golan and Zaidner, 2008). They could also use this insight to generate WOM related to the introduction of new products, for

instance by positioning the products based on self-enhancement appeals such as “This product shows that you are a connoisseur.”

This dissertation also provides companies with useful insight regarding the targeting of consumers for their WOM campaigns. Such campaigns would often involve identifying particular consumer groups that could be catalysts for spreading marketing messages (Liu-Thompkins, 2012), but the criteria for identifying these consumers are often limited to the category of various “influentials” (Watts and Dodds, 2007), such as opinion leaders, market mavens and innovators. Papers 2 and 3 suggest that personality can play an important role in WOM communication, providing companies with a richer picture of potential target groups than has been suggested in previous research. For instance, when companies look for consumers that could help them disseminate their marketing messages, useful target criteria could be individualism, extraversion, neuroticism, and consumer self-confidence.

Paper 4 has implications for companies’ handling of negative WOM in online channels. Companies are increasingly allocating resources to the monitoring of online conversations so as to be able to respond to criticisms that might surface. However, other consumers frequently respond to these complaints before the companies do and voice their support for the criticized company. This defensive action from consumers is often enough to prevent the spread of negative WOM and mitigate its impact. Thus, companies need not overreact when negative WOM discussions arise in online forums, and they should restrain themselves from entering into these discussions too quickly. Consumers often defend products and their manufacturers anyway, so companies posting on forums could be viewed as an intrusion and serve as a catalyst for discontent.

2.6. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Research on the antecedents and consequences of WOM is still developing, and future research should aim at identifying fruitful avenues for further investigations of the WOM phenomenon (Berger, 2014; de Matos and Rossi, 2008; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004; King et al., 2014). Some of the limitations and unexplored issues related to the studies in this dissertation could be a source for future research ideas on WOM. With regard to the moderating effect of evaluation context in paper 1, construal level theory was used as an explanatory mechanism. However, this theory was not tested explicitly; accordingly, we

cannot be sure about its validity as an explanatory mechanism in paper 1. Hence, future research should conduct more explicit examinations of the role of construal level theory (Liberman et al., 2002) in the relationship between evaluation constructs and WOM.

Self-enhancement as an explanatory factor in the relationship between individualism and WOM, as proposed in paper 2, should also be examined further. In addition, other motives associated with individualism, such as consumers' need for uniqueness (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), should be considered as alternative explanations. The need for uniqueness has been found to diminish some consumers' willingness to give WOM because it can cost them their uniqueness (Cheema and Kaikati, 2010). Thus, this motive could be an alternative explanation for when individualism has no effect on WOM activity.

Another potential avenue for future research is to investigate the issues of paper 1, 2, and 3 in relation to the valence of WOM. This aspect of WOM is concerned with the degree of positivity or negativity of WOM communication (Harrison-Walker, 2001a). For instance, some of the personality traits studied in paper 3 could be more strongly associated with positive rather than negative WOM, and vice versa. One could expect, for example, that neuroticism would have a stronger relationship with negative WOM than with positive WOM. On the other hand, the self-enhancement motive studied in paper 2 would likely be more related to the transmission of positive rather than negative WOM (Alexandrov et al., 2013; Sundaram et al., 1998).

Moreover, it would be interesting to examine the issues addressed in the first three papers of this dissertation in relation to the electronic form of WOM. Electronic WOM differs from traditional WOM in many ways; one reason is that it is asynchronous rather than synchronous (Berger and Iyengar, 2013). Whether such a difference would affect the relationships studied in papers 1, 2, and 3 is an interesting question for future research to consider.

Paper 4 in this dissertation raises several questions for future research. First, since this was a qualitative study, no quantitative measures were employed to properly evaluate the scope and characteristics of the phenomenon of consumers defending companies and brands. Future researchers should work towards developing quantitative instruments for the analysis of this phenomenon. Such instruments could be used to investigate the effectiveness of the various defense styles. In addition, future research should examine the conditions that give rise to the

differential effects of each defense style. For instance, does a defense style's effectiveness depend on the attributes of the product or service (Lim and Chung, 2011) or the receiver's motives (Burton and Khammash, 2010)? At last, future research should address how companies can best stimulate the consumer defense force.

Finally, two of my studies are based on cross-sectional data, which has an inherent weakness related to establishing the direction of causality between variables. In paper 2, I used an experimental design where the direction of causality was regarded as one of its strengths. However, as this study was conducted using scenarios rather than actual consumer situations, some caution should be exercised in generalizing its findings and conclusions. Testing the phenomena investigated in this study in its real natural format is therefore a task left to future researchers.

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PART 3. PAPERS