DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

WORD-OF-MOUTH AND FORMS OF CONVERSATIONS: WHAT PEOPLE SHARE.

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Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM), or the "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers" (Westbrook 1987, 261), is one of the most interesting and pervasive topics for today's marketing practitioners as well as scholars (Berger 2014). The relevance of this phenomenon is explained on the hand by the frequency with which consumers engage in informal conversations about products and services, and on other hand by the huge impact that such conversations have on consumer decision making. To illustrate, according to Keller Fay Group (2007), about 3.4 billion conversations about brands occur every day. Moreover, opinions, recommendations, news, and information shared by consumers have been shown to be the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of buying decisions (McKinsey and Company 2010). A research conducted by Nielsen has shown that 92% of consumers find suggestions received from other consumers to be the most reliable form of communication about products (Nielsen Global Survey 2012).

The analysis of literature suggests that scholars have recently been devoting a good deal of attention to the behavioral processes underlying WOM communications, although much still needs to be investigated (Berger 2014). More specifically, scholars have mostly focused on such aspects of WOM communications as the valence of the messages shared (e.g., Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Naylor and Kleiser, 2000), the stage at which WOM occurs (generation versus transmission; e.g., De Angelis et al. 2012), the form WOM may take (for instance, opinions versus recommendations; e.g., Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Gershoff, Broniarczyk and West 2001; Gino and Moore 2007; Zhao and Xie 2011), and the time horizons of WOM messages (for instance,

immediate versus ongoing WOM; e.g., Berger and Schwartz 2011).

Although these studies have shed light on very important aspects of WOM communications, less attention has been devoted to another relevant aspect of WOM, i.e., the content of the message that consumers use to convey their messages about products and services. Content is a key factor in WOM communications for different reasons. First, anecdotal evidence as well as some research efforts have shown that content used by consumers in WOM communications tends to vary greatly (Schellekens, Verlegh, Smidts 2010). Second, different types of content used may differentially influence the behavior of the WOM receiver (Douglas and McGarty 2001; Douglas and Sutton 2003). Third, understanding the content that consumers adopt in different situations and with different individuals allows companies to establish more fruitful conversations with their customers. Whereas some past research has tried to investigate what type of language consumers might be more likely to use in different conditions (Moore 2012; Schellekens et al. 2010), little is known about the effect of content on the persuasiveness of the WOM messages. In other words, there seems to be a lack of investigations on the effect of the content of the message in WOM and what are the effect both on the senders' and recipients' behavior.

Filling this gap, I will focus on the role of the content used in WOM communications as a driver of consumer behaviour through different theorises and approaches. The entire elaboration of my dissertation tries to emphasize how communication among peers vary and provoke different behaviours. Mainly, I want to prove how WOM cannot be understood as a dyadic and unidirectional exchange of information. Whereas, I want to prove how communication is flexible and multi-dimensional phenomena.

Word of Mouth (WOM)

Language is the means through which consumers share information in every context of life. In particular, language importantly shapes communications among consumers about products,

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services, companies and brands. The interpersonal and social behavior has been deeply studied in the socio-psychology context proving the impact that individuals have on others, and how individuals may engage in certain behaviors due to the influence of others (van Eck, Jager and Leeflang, 2011; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010; Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). In this vein, interpersonal communications, and particularly WOM, play a key role as a means to convince others to undertake an action. WOM is defined as "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987 pp. 261). Several studies have been carried out to understand the antecedents of WOM (see DeMatos and Rossi, 2008 for a review), yet little attention has been paid to such an important aspect as the language employed when conveying WOM messages.

An important antecedent of WOM that emerged from the literature is the relationship between consumers and products and how products due to their physical characteristics, performances and a more general level of satisfaction encouraged consumers in publicize their purchasing (see Ditcher, 1966). The antecedents that refer this category are named as transactional due to they are based on the direct purchase and consumption. Afterwards, the WOM perspective moved from the product-orientation to the self-orientation. The perspectives were refocused on the consumer's activities and how their belongings influenced the contents of their conversations due to a self-enhancement, a sense of concerning about others and as a way for reducing their cognitive dissonance in front of serious purchase and hence interpersonal factors (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993). In this case, the focus is on the relationship that is established among the interlocutors of the conversation and the social connection that they institute (Bristor, 1990). In this stream of literature several concepts are borrowed from social science and notions such as: tie strength, homophyly and demographic similarities (De Angelis, 2012).

Specifically, the tie strength is referred to the weight that individuals dedicate to dyadic relationship and it assumes multidimensional aspects such as the type of the relationship and the

frequency of contacts between the parties (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). It is clear as social ties play an important rule in WOM where the pre-existence of social bonds have a direct outcome on the capability to influence the other party. On the same perspective, the impact of homophyly is based on WOM that is generated because the continuous search of information by the individuals and where the research is lead among person that have similar characteristics or they are akin to (De Angelis, 2012). On the basis of homophyly there are correspondences in terms of tastes, values and experiences (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Demographic similarities, whereas, are seen as vehicle for establishing a communicational exchange based, overall, upon likeness in terms of race, age, gender and education (Brown and Reingen, 1987).

Another set of antecedents in WOM can be related to the individual sphere including the self-concept both in terms of cognitive and emotional outlook. One of the major aspect discussed in the literature, related to the cognitive expressions, is the level of involvement accurately divided in different levels (Dichter, 1966). According to De Angelis (2012) the degree of involvement can be distinguished in product-involvement, wherein consumers prove a cognitive attachment with a particular product or brand due to functional features; self-involvement whereas identify consumers who spread out WOM in order to obtain a sort of self-gratification and message-involvement that identify consumers that under certain circumstances (i.e. promotional campaigns) diffuse positive information. Furthermore, others properties have been found in the cognitive view for spreading WOM. On the basis of these further researches, (DeMatos and Rossi, 2008; Sunderam et al., 1998) attributes such as altruism, self-enhancement and the willingness to become helpful have been discovered. These additional aspects may assume different point of view if applied in positive or negative context. For example, the concept of altruism applied in positive setting may be interpreted as the consumers' willingness to render advices to other consumers both for encouraging the consumption and for desisting from that particular product or brand if the experience was negative. Moreover, consumers disseminate information about products or brands for reaching level of

accomplishment in respect the interlocutor and aggrandizement the personal self-concept. On the negative perspective, consumers may profuse unfavourable comments to particular brands for a mere sense of vengeance (Gregoire, Tripp and Legoux, 2009).

Carrying on the evolution of WOM perspective, in the last decade the attention shifted toward more emotional rather than cognitive motives for diffusing WOM. In fact, one of the main outcomes in the analysis of brand love - defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006 pp.81) – is positive WOM. According to Westbrook (1987) who pointed out how emotions have a higher impact in diffusing either positive or negative WOM in respect to satisfaction both in pre-purchase and in post-purchase experiences (Ladhari, 2007).

Therefore, WOM is a communicational exchange among individuals who share or not a series of similarity and where the way of express opinions, thoughts and experiences may follow pre-determinate paths including lexical differences that can contain latent messages, vary in front of the type of interlocutors and have different degree of persuasiveness. Exchange of messages among individuals can be interpreted through lexical techniques and disclose information about consumer behaviour.

Research Questions

In this dissertation I will analyse the role of content in the WOM context by employing frameworks that are commonly used in consumer behaviour research streams. Furthermore, the composition of the dissertation will be based on communication among peers and taking in account also on-line communication.

Building on this model, I will explore the conditions under which a consumer will be more or less likely to share specific piece of information and the conditions under which communication may become a tool in modifying behaviour. Therefore, the role of content will be analyzed by

taking the perspective of consumers who send the message, receivers who heard the message and how external factors and perception may influence the judgment of the message. In other words, by studying WOM with the content perspective, this research aims to understand what type of information is more likely to be used on the one hand, and what type of message is more likely to be shared on the other hand.

To summarize, the questions that this dissertation attempt to answer are:

- *Are many differences in WOM content when people talk?*

- *Why do people share information based on semantic differences?*

- *What and how does increase the likelihood of sharing WOM?*

- *How do people behave in relation to specific form of conversations such as controversial topics and gossip?*

The hypotheses I have developed to address these questions about the role of content are built upon different approaches according to which individuals typically share information. Importantly, I will use theoretical framework in a parsimonious way, as I will predict that content of message affect on the likelihood of sharing information. Thus, while advancing the knowledge on the different aspects of WOM communications by investigating a relevant factor, i.e., language, that has been quite overlooked by scholars so far, this research aims at pursuing high rigor as it uses a unique theoretical framework to develop different predictions. A key contribution of this project is advance the knowledge in WOM and try to understand whether information received can be turn into consumer behaviour. Moreover, the project will shed light on the activated mind-set by different typologies of WOM. This study will permit, also, to understand how consumers select information and which can be perceived fruitful for them and in a given period; how messages may generate different degree of relationship and influence the level of comfort in incoming

information; the language power to activate simultaneously different mind-set; how virtual platform may encourage users in expressing extreme opinions and what form of gossip are spread out easily in conversations. Furthermore, these studies will permit to understand and investigate new form of consumers' involvement.

This research dissertation is structured as collection of papers where specific and *ad hoc* research questions and hypotheses are presented. The first paper tries to investigate WOM under the perspective of the language and how different semantic structures may activate specific mind-set and become more persuasive in the sector of services. The second paper is focused on virtual setting and examines what are the main drivers that encourage users in sharing extreme versus moderate opinion regard topics that are perceived as controversial. The third paper, instead, tries to understand whether there are differences in sharing valenced form of gossip among peers and if there are effects based on the target of the gossip and on receivers' capacity of verifying the information. All studies used experimental design for testing empirically the hypotheses. Finally, in every study I discuss theoretical and managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research.

Language and WOM

In this paper, I investigate how a well-known dimension of language—its degree of concreteness/abstractness—affects service-related WOM. In particular, I apply the well-established Linguistic Category Model (hereafter LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991) and examine the conditions under which consumers' service-purchasing decisions are affected by other consumers' use of abstract versus concrete language. I propose that the impact of abstract versus concrete WOM language on consumers' behavior depends crucially on the receiver's prior knowledge about the service in question (i.e., consumers' personal information about the WOM topic based on work experience, education or other means; Shepherd & DeTienne, 2005). Specifically, I predict that

abstract language will be more persuasive for consumers with a higher level of prior knowledge, while concrete language will be more persuasive for consumers with a lower level of prior knowledge. I also shed light on the mechanism underlying this effect by demonstrating that abstract language is more likely to stimulate mental imagery processing (e.g., Bone & Ellen, 1992) in consumers with higher prior knowledge, thus rendering the message more persuasive for such consumers compared to consumers with low prior knowledge

Overall, my research offers several contributions. First and foremost, it contributes to the literature about language in services by exploring the role played by the type of language in consumers' peer-to-peer conversations. Second, it contributes to research about the role of language abstractness in WOM, represented in particular by the work of. Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts (2010), who have studied what drives consumers to use a concrete versus abstract language in their WOM communications. I differentiate from this work in the following ways. First, our study is about service, while Schellekens et al. (2010) focused on products. Second, I investigate the differential persuasiveness of concrete versus abstract language, while Schellekens et al. (2010) mainly investigated the likelihood that WOM senders use either type of language in their communication. In other words, I focus on the recipient of WOM, while they mainly focused on the sender of WOM. Third, and consistent with our focus, I analyze the moderating role of a WOM recipient-related factor (prior knowledge), while Schellekens et al. (2010) analyzed the moderating role of a WOM sender-related factor (pre-established product attitude). Finally, I explore the mental processes stimulated in recipients with high prior knowledge when they receive a message delivered in abstract versus concrete language. From a managerial standpoint, my research aims to provide interesting insights for service companies about how to effectively tailor the language used in social communications to the type of audience. Specifically, companies could not only use different types of the language in their direct communication (e.g., conventional or digital advertising) with customers having different levels of service-related prior knowledge, but they can also suggest

influencers (e.g., bloggers) how to strategically adapt their language to the audience they address, thus potentially improving service company's performance.

Extremity Position in Controversial Conversations

The second paper deals with a specific form of WOM. Today's proliferation of websites and social media platforms where consumers freely create and share information about companies, products, services and brands has substantially increased the pervasiveness of peer-to-peer communications, leading to the emergence of a very lively stream of research about electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter eWOM; e.g., Blazevic et al. 2013; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; King, Racherla, and Bush 2014; Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol 2014), defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual of former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39).

In this research, I investigate the sharing of information about topics that are controversial in nature with the objective to shed light on what drives people's decision to share their opinions about controversial topics through different online platforms. Controversial topics are those topics on which people tend to take polarizing opinions (Chen and Berger 2013). Conversations about topics that are controversial in nature, such as abortion, immigration, and politics are more likely to be characterized by people's expression of opposing views than conversations about topics that are less controversial in nature, such as increasing the level of security in the cities, lowering taxes or punishing those who bribe public officials. Like topics, also products and brands typically vary in how controversial they are. Consumers are more likely to have opposing (i.e., strongly positive versus strongly negative) opinions about Viagra or McDonald's rather than about Tide or Intel.

Based on the common knowledge that would predict that highly controversial topics tend to be talked about more than lowly controversial topics, research in marketing, psychology and consumer

behaviour has long neglected to investigate the ways in which controversy might spark discussion. A notable exception is represented by a recent study by Chen and Berger (2013) that has shown that the relationship between the degree of a topic's controversy and WOM tendency, i.e., the likelihood that people engage in conversations about that topic, is curvilinear. Specifically, controversy increases WOM up to moderate levels of topic controversy, but when the level of topic controversy becomes higher WOM decreases.

While past research has investigated how WOM about a topic is affected by the level of controversy associated with that topic, I investigate how WOM is affected by the extremeness of the opinion about a controversial topic. Specifically, I predict that controversial topics generally increase people's tendency to take extreme opinions and, more importantly, I predict that more extreme opinions about controversial topics are likely to be shared through some electronic platforms, while less extreme opinions are likely to be shared through other electronic platforms. Specifically, my experimental studies demonstrate that people prefer using email to share relatively more extreme opinions on controversial topics, while they prefer using social networks (e.g., Facebook) to share relatively less extreme opinions on controversial topics. Therefore, I claim that the online platform used plays a crucial role in affecting people's decision to share more versus less extreme opinions about controversial topics.

Building on the idea that high levels of controversy increase discomfort, thus reducing people's likelihood to engage in discussions about controversial topic (Chen and Berger 2013), I reason that expressing highly extreme opinions on controversial topics may similarly expose people to the risk of social rejection (Buss 1990; Reiss 2004). Importantly, in the online setting, such a risk might be enhanced or reduced depending on the electronic platform used to convey messages. Specifically, I hypothesize that sharing an extreme opinion about a relatively highly controversial topic via post on one's social network page might carry a higher level of social risk for the sharer than sharing the same opinion via email. The difference between these two communication modes that would

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explain our prediction is given by the extent to which the sharer may select his/her message's recipients, thus exerting a varying degree of control on the audience, which is expected to be lower when communicating via post on social network pages than via email.

Overall, this research advances knowledge about the underexplored area of sharing information about controversial topics by testing how likelihood to engage in WOM about such topics is affected by opinion extremeness and online communication platform. In the remainder of this article, I review previous literature about controversy and controversial topics as well as previous literature about WOM and communication channels. Then, I present our conceptualization for the role of communication channel in which I hypothesize that people share their more versus less extreme opinions about controversial topics through different online platforms. I then present four experimental studies that provide support for our hypotheses. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our results and identify directions for future research.

Gossip and sharing effect

The last paper in the dissertation deal with a type of conversation that is very common in daily-basis conversations: that is the gossip. Data on types of conversations reported that 60% of adult conversations are about absent person (Wert & Salowey, 2004; Emler, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1985) and people spend between 65% of their day-to-day conversations talking about others (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012) although in many cultures and religions is seen as a type of conversations that violate moral norms (Yerkovich, 1977). Moral codes strongly condemn these conversations and frowned as reproachable behaviour (Goodman, 1994). Nevertheless, people gossip. Naïvely, gossip is perceived as a form of mundane conversation with negative stereotypes and with the main scope of entertaining others (Rysman, 1977). Gossip can be clearly connected to a general form of exchange, albeit stereotypical views and false myths surround this type of conversation. Despite the widespread interest in gossip and the attention received from different

fields of research such as gossips' main antecedents (Rosnow & Kimmel 2000; Fayard & Weeks, 2008), cultural differences in gossiping (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Eder & Enke, 1991), gossiping in specific contexts (e.g. Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993), and gossip as a way to strengthen informal relationships within organizations (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Michelson & Mouly, 2004) few studies have tried to understand whether differences in gossip provokes differences in likelihood of sharing. Although it is clear that transmission of gossip is frequent form of conversation, less is known about under which circumstances this form of conversation spread out easily and why sender of the gossip is more inclined to do it.

In this regard, current literature seems to totally neglect three main issues related to gossip: whether exist (i) differences in valenced form of gossip (positive versus negative), the (ii) degree of the valence (malicious versus non-malicious), whether (iii) people broadcast gossip in regard the social membership of the target and (iv) if gossiper consider receivers' possible awareness in the news.

My object is firstly to prove that gossip increases the diffusion on the basis of the nature and the gossip and in respect the involvement that have the two interlocutors with the target of the gossip. Secondly, my intention is to investigate situational processes that underlie gossiping. In so doing, I aim to demonstrate that gossip drives conversations through a content structure of the message and whether the character of the gossip either belong to or not to the discussers network and, finally, to understand whether some contextual factors, such as the capacity of verify the information, can increase the dissemination of gossips.

Experiments are introduced for testing the hypotheses. In this study I demonstrate how individuals display differences in sharing gossip on the basis of alterations formulation (valence) and differences in perception of social ties create differences in the virality of the news. The uniqueness of my approach and the introduction of new theoretical concepts will help to

demonstrate that gossip is a form of conversation highly used in daily basis moment but the diffusion is basis on a counter intuitive pattern.

Overall, the study aims at contributing to increase the understanding of the phenomenon of gossiping, by defining more clearly the concept and measuring the impact of gossiping in conversations. The practical importance of the findings is especially relevant for understanding how information spread out and how the gossip phenomenon can be managed.

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