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Sharing My Experience or Yours: The Differential Influence of Self, Social and Social Intention Needs in Stimulating Positive Word of Mouth

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Abstract

Previous research on word of mouth (hereafter, WOM) distinguishes between two types of WOM senders; (a) WOM Generators who are likely to articulate recommendations based on their own consumption experience and (b) WOM Transmitters who are likely to engage in recommendations derived via other people consumption experience. However, while extant literature has extensively examined multiple drivers or stimulants of positive WOM intentions (hereafter, PWOM), such literature has overlooked the possibility that drivers of PWOM may depend on the nature of individual's consumption experience i.e. customers recommendations based on their own first-hand consumption experience with a product/service or someone else's consumption experience. This study contributes to the WOM literature by offering insights that psychological antecedents of PWOM differ between WOM Generators and Transmitters. Thus, future research must take into account the type of WOM sender when investigating the antecedents of PWOM and also extend the examination to the antecedents of negative word of mouth for Generators and Transmitters.

Keywords*: WOM Generators; WOM Transmitters; Word of Mouth; Self*

Track: *Marketing and Retail*

1. Introduction

There is evidence that most consumers all over the world trust recommendations or word of mouth (hereafter, WOM) from friends and family when making a purchase decision (Nielsen, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that WOM conversations or social talk between individuals should generate higher sales than paid media impressions such as advertising (Saleh, 2019). Indeed there is also evidence that WOM not only influences the purchase behaviour of recipients (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Woisetschlager, Lentz and Evanschitzky, 2011), but also the purchase behaviour of the sender itself (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015). Consequently, it is important for firms to understand what drives current or prospective customers to engage in positive social talk or positive WOM (hereafter, PWOM) before they can attempt to stimulate such behaviour.

Prior research has examined multiple psychological drivers of WOM (Ferguson, Paulin and Bergeron, 2010; Wien and Olsen, 2014). Typically, in these studies there is an implicit assumption that WOM senders are engaging in WOM behaviour or have strong intentions to engage in WOM behaviour as a direct outcome of their consumption experience. Past research has largely failed to take into account the possibility that WOM senders can also communicate PWOM based on consumption experience of others. For instance, parents can recommend (or not) a higher education institution or a specific programme of study not only as an outcome of their own children's experience but also on the basis of hearing the positive/negative experiences of their friends or acquaintances children. Understanding the drivers of WOM behaviour based on second-hand consumption experiences of individuals is a neglected area in WOM research. In fact, except for the study of De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker and Costabile (2012) who distinguished between WOM senders sharing their own positive consumption experience (the Generators) from those sharing the consumption experiences of others (the Transmitters) there is little WOM research making such distinction.

Following a call given by De Angelis *et al*. (2012) to further investigate the differential nature of WOM Generators and Transmitters, we investigate if internal psychological drivers of positive WOM differ for WOM Generators and Transmitters. Specifically, we examine whether the expected satisfaction of self, social and social intentions needs are stimulants of positive WOM. Extant WOM Literature has primarily focused on understanding firm related factors (e.g. customer satisfaction, trust, commitment, loyalty) as principal antecedents of PWOM (de Matos and Rossi, 2008) with internal psychological drivers of PWOM receiving less research attention. This study addresses this imbalance by investigating internal psychological drivers as stimulants of PWOM. In this study PWOM is the traditional offline natural WOM.

We contribute to the WOM literature by providing the first known insights on how antecedents of PWOM differ for WOM Generators and Transmitters. Such insights suggest that it would be a mistake to focus solely on understanding the drivers of PWOM behaviour of a WOM sender without taking into consideration the nature of their consumption experience (i.e. direct/first-hand or indirect/second-hand).

This paper is structured as follows: First, we review the literature and develop the hypotheses; this is followed by discussion of the methodology adopted and presentation of results for this research. Next, we discuss the findings and theoretical contributions of this study. Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this research and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review and hypotheses development

Past research has examined individual personality traits (Ferguson *et al.*, 2010; Wien and Olsen, 2014), self-enhancement (hereafter, SE) (De Angelis *et al.*, 2012), image impairment (Zhang, Feick and Mittal, 2014) and customer confusion (Walsh and Mitchell, 2010) as psychological drivers of PWOM. De Angelis *et al.* (2012) found that WOM Generators created a positive impression on others or satisfied their need to self-enhance by articulating or sharing positive WOM about their own consumption experiences, whereas WOM Transmitters satisfied their needs to self-enhance by sharing negative consumption stories of others. These findings enriched the WOM literature by establishing the differential nature of WOM senders. The focus of De Angelis *et al*'s. (2012) study was to understand WOM as a two stage process whereby individuals may give PWOM or negative WOM (hereafter, NWOM) depending on the WOM stage (generation vs. transmission). Consideration of WOM as a two-stage process may potentially explain contradictory findings in the literature pertaining to the prevalence of WOM; PWOM would most likely occur at the generation stage and NWOM would most likely occur during the transmission stage. However, it is unclear if internal psychological drivers of an individual will play out differently depending on what consumption experience they are sharing with others; their first-hand direct consumption experience or the second-hand indirect consumption experience derived from others.

A study by Alexandrov, Lilly and Babkus (2013) found that expected satisfaction of the need for SE, social comparison (hereafter, SC) and social bonding (hereafter, SB) are antecedents of PWOM. On the other hand, expected satisfaction of the need for self-affirmation (hereafter, SA), intention to share social information (hereafter, SSI) and intentions to help others (hereafter, IHO) are unrelated to stimulation of PWOM. However, Alexandrov *et al.* (2013) discounted the possibility that these psychological drivers may function differentially depending on the type of WOM sender (generators vs. transmitters). The issue of whether expected satisfaction of self, social and social intention needs operate differentially for WOM Generators and Transmitters is the focus of the current research Following Alexandrov *et al.* (2013) this study categorises; (a) SE and SA needs as self-needs; (b) SC and SB as social needs and (c) SSI and IHO as social intentions needs.

2.1 Hypotheses development

First, we will develop the hypotheses for self-enhancement (SE) and self-affirmation (SA) needs, followed by hypotheses for social and social intentions needs.

2.1.1. Self-Needs: Self-Enhancement and Self-Affirmation

Self-enhancement is defined as "the degree to which a person expects that projecting a good image to others can be accomplished by sharing information about brands" (Alexandrov *et al.*, 2013, p.533).

Fiske (2001) notes that inclination to SE is one of the fundamental human motivations and a well-established antecedent (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013; De Angelis *et al*., 2012; Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler, 2004; Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998) and outcome (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015) of PWOM.

However, prior research (except De Angelis *et al*., 2012) makes no distinction between types of WOM senders and implicitly assumes that senders of WOM communication are underpinning their recommendations to others on their own direct consumption experience. Thus based on prior literature, we posit that expected satisfaction of the need to SE is more likely to stimulate PWOM intentions in the generators than transmitters.

H1$_a$: Expected satisfaction of the need to self-enhance is more likely to stimulate PWOM of Generators than Transmitters.

Self-affirmation is an under-researched construct in the WOM literature with only one known study examining its relationship with WOM (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013). Theory of SA proposes the existence of a self-system that serves to maintain a global image of self-integrity through frequent explanations and rationalisations to the self (Heine and Lehman, 1997). This self-affirming, image-maintaining process is activated when an individual encounters information that threatens his or her positive views of self (Heine and Lehman, 1997). Thus, SA is viewed as a defensive or protective mechanism which individuals may adopt to maintain or affirm their perceived integrity and self-worth when the self is threatened especially after encountering negative experiences (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013; Sherman and Cohen, 2006). It is unlikely that one's self and integrity will be threatened by someone else's consumption experience, thus we propose that there will be negative relationship between SA and PWOM intentions of generators but not transmitters. Therefore, guided by extant literature we propose the following hypotheses:-

H1$_b$: Expected satisfaction of the need to self-affirm is more likely to impede PWOM of Generators than Transmitters.

2.1.2. Social-Needs: Social Comparison and Social Bonding

Social Comparison (SC) is the internal drive to compare a person's abilities and opinions with others in the society (Festinger, 1954). In the marketing literature it is argued that the need to compare one's opinions about a brand or ability to make a purchase decision can be accomplished by sharing information about brands via WOM (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013). For instance, Alexandrov *et al*. (2013) did find that the expected satisfaction of SC needs does stimulate PWOM. However, it is less clear if these results will produce a different pattern of result depending on the type of WOM sender. In this study we argue that expected satisfaction of SC needs will stimulate PWOM intentions of generators but not transmitters. This is because theory of SC is a self-evaluation theory where an individual is likely to engage in the social comparison process to make sense of themselves by evaluating one's own abilities (e.g. purchase decision) and opinions about brands based on their own direct consumption experience with others in the society (Buunk and Gibbons, 2007) and is less likely to compare the abilities and opinions based on indirect consumption experiences of someone's else with third parties.

Thus based on theory of SC and prior literature we posit:-

H2$_a$: Expected satisfaction of the need for social comparison is most likely to stimulate PWOM of Generators than Transmitters.

Need to belong and maintain bonds with others in the society is one of the fundamental needs of humans (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). A key function of WOM or social communication is to connect with others and satisfy the need for Social Bonding (Henning-Thurau *et al*., 2004; Rime, 2009). However, SB or connecting with others remains a relatively under-researched construct in WOM literature. Expected satisfaction of SB needs has been defined as "the degree to which a person expects his need for bonding to be fulfilled by sharing information about brands" (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013, p. 533). SB does drive PWOM intentions (Alexandrov *et al.,* 2013). However, it is unclear if people bond with others by sharing their own consumption experience or that of others. Guided by previous research, we argue that expected satisfaction of SB needs is more likely to stimulate PWOM intentions of generators than transmitters because people are more likely to bond with others in society via their own first-hand consumption experiences instead of second-hand consumption experiences of others. Thus we posit:-

H2$_b$: Expected satisfaction of the need for social bonding is most likely to stimulate PWOM of Generators than Transmitters.

2.1.3. Social Intention Needs: intention to Share Social Information and Intentions to Help Others

Intention to Share Social Information (SSI) is defined as "the degree to which a person intends to convey information about social norms and values by sharing information about brands" (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013, p. 534). Alexandrov *et al.* (2013) found no relationship between SSI and PWOM intentions. The impression management literature argues that people tend to share interesting and entertaining consumption stories which make the WOM communicator look interesting (Berger, 2014). Therefore, sharing moral stories and values related to consumption experiences may not be interesting or entertaining to fuel intentions to engage in PWOM. Thus, we hypothesise that there is a negative relationship between PWOM intentions and SSI especially for generators who may want to share interesting and entertaining personal consumption experiences with others. Therefore based on impression management literature we postulate:-

H3$_a$: Expected satisfaction of intention to share social information needs will more likely to impede PWOM of Generators than Transmitters

Intention to Help Others (IHO) or altruism is an antecedent of PWOM (Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau *et al*., 2004; Sundaram *et al*., 1998) primarily to help others make good purchase decisions. On the other hand, Alexandrov *et al*. (2013) found no relationship between IHO and PWOM intentions. However, the weight of evidence in the extant WOM literature suggest that altruism is a driver of PWOM intentions. Following, Alexandrov *et al*. (2013, p. 534) we define IHO as the "degree to which a person intends to assist others by sharing information about brands".

We posit that expected satisfaction of IHO needs will drive the PWOM intentions of both WOM Generators and Transmitters. Thus, both types of WOM senders will engage in PWOM in order to help others make better decisions about brands and to help them become a better customer. We hypothesise:-

H3$_b$: Expected satisfaction of intention to help others needs will drive PWOM intentions of both Generators and Transmitters

3. Methodology

We collected the data employing a self-reporting survey in United Kingdom via a commercial panel. The total sample size is (n=336) with PWOM$_{Generators}$ (n=170) and PWOM$_{Transmitters}$ (n=166). Respondents were asked to think about a brand that they have recommended as an outcome of their own personal positive experience with the focal brand or a brand for which they shared with others someone else's positive experience. A range of brand categories were mentioned in the survey mitigating any concern pertaining to single brand category effects and thus enhancing the generalisability of the findings (East, Hammond and Wright, 2007). Some of the common brand categories mentioned in the survey were; online retailers (Amazon); brick and mortar retailers (Tesco, Marks & Spencer; Waitrose); automobiles (Nissan, Peugeot, Toyota); banks (Santander); media (BBC); fashion (Fat Face); mobile handsets (Nokia, Apple); mobile services provider (EE, Vodafone), athletic shoes (Nike, Adidas).

3.1 Measures and validation of scales

This study adapted the scales from Alexandrov *et al*. (2013) to measure self, social and social intention needs. PWOM intentions was measured as likelihood with responses ranging from (1- very unlikely) to (7- very likely), whilst the remaining measures were Likert type scale format with responses ranging from (1- strongly disagree) to (7- strongly agree). Specifically, 3-items scale were employed to measure SE; SB, SC and PWOM. 4-items scale were adopted to measure SSI, whilst 5- items scale were used to measure need for SA. During scale purification process, we had to drop 1 item from the IHO scale, thus using a 2 item scale from Alexandrov *et al*'s. (2013) study. All scales demonstrated adequate internal consistency with both Cronbach alpha and Composite Reliability values exceeding the recommended benchmark values of 0.70 (Nunnally and Berstein, 1994). Furthermore, constructs demonstrated satisfactory Convergent Validity with the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) scores above the recommended level of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Overall these results show that measures are unidimensional, reliable and valid. Please see Table 1 on the next page.

Table 1: Psychometric Properties

	PWOM$_{Generators}$	PWOM$_{Transmitters}$
SE	0.915	0.917	0.786	0.920	0.920	0.795
SA	0.948	0.949	0.788	0.931	0.931	0.731
SC	0.945	0.946	0.854	0.932	0.932	0.820
SB	0.862	0.866	0.684	0.884	0.889	0.728
SSI	0.974	0.974	0.905	0.971	0.971	0.893
IHO	0.855	0.855	0.747	0.892	0.893	0.806
PWOM	0.959	0.958	0.884	0.960	0.961	0.891

    a.   The numbers above correspond to |**Cronbach's alpha**|, |**Composite Reliability**|, and |**AVE**|

  b.   *SE* = Self-enhancement; *SA* = Self-affirmation; *SC* = Social Comparison, *SB* = Social Bonding, *SSI* = Intention to Share Social Information, *IHO* = Intention to help others; *PWOM* = Positive word of mouth

4. Results

We test our hypotheses using covariance based SEM and multi-group analysis to test whether the type of WOM sender (Transmitter or Generator) moderates the relationships between PWOM intentions and its antecedents.

4.1 CFA and Measurement invariance

As a first step we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis for the Generators and Transmitters subsamples; the results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: CFA and Measurement Invariance

	Generators	Transmitters	Pooled model
Chi square	408.075	557.326	968.412
df	209	209	18
RMSEA	0.075	0.101	0.063
NFI	0.914	0.880	0.897
NNFI	0.946	0.904	0.925
CFI	0.955	0.921	0.938
n	170	166	336

The fit indexes for both samples are acceptable (albeit with an RMSEA for Transmitters slightly above the usual benchmark), and as such establishes configural invariance. To test for metric invariance we compared a general model with no restrictions with one where loadings are constrained to be equal across the two groups. A chi-squared test found no significant difference between the two models: Chi squared = 31.698, *df* = 23, *p*= 0.107, demonstrating metric invariance.

4.2 Structural model

Results indicate that the model fit is satisfactory with overall fit values for the model: Chi squared = 2.226, df = 2, RMSEA = 0.020, NFI = 0.998, NNFI = 0.996, CFI = 1.000. All the hypotheses with the exception of $H3_b$ are directional. For directional hypotheses results are interpreted based on one-tail t test (Singh, 2000). Results are presented in Table 3 which indicates which hypotheses are supported. Additionally we report two tests of differences in path coefficients: a chi squared test comparing a model where path coefficients are constrained to be equal across groups and a general model and a t test for equivalence of path coefficients.

Table 3: Path Coefficients

	PWOM$_{Generators}$			PWOM$_{Transmitters}$			Tests for path differences	
	β	t value	Sig.	β	t value	Sig.	Sig (Chi squared test of constrained model[a])	Path difference t value [b]
PWOM<---SE	0.073	0.858	0.196	**0.165**	**1.837**	**0.033**	0.460	-0.74
PWOM<---SA	0.015	0.203	0.420	**-0.154**	**-1.968**	**0.025**	0.115	1.59
PWOM<---SC	**0.177**	**2.381**	**0.009**	0.107	1.188	0.118	0.549	0.60
PWOM<---SB	**0.177**	**2.233**	**0.013**	-0.017	-0.195	0.423	0.098	**1.66**
PWOM<---SSI	**-0.103**	**-1.931**	**0.027**	0.070	1.121	0.131	**0.036**	**-2.12**
PWOM<---IHO	**0.169**	**2.372**	**0.009**	**0.466**	**4.895**	**0.001**	**0.013**	**-2.50**

SA = self-affirmation, *SE* = self-enhancement, *SB* = social bonding, *SC* = social comparison, *IHO* = intention to help others, *SSI* = intention to share social information

a. Obtained from a chi squared test comparing a model where the pathways are constrained to be equal with a general model
b. t test for equivalence of path coefficients, based on one tail t test values: $t>1.64$, $p<0.05$ and two tail t test values: $t>1.96$, $p<0.05$
c. Significant results are highlighted in **bold**.

Results suggest that both **H1$_a$ and H1$_b$ are not supported**. In-fact for both the hypotheses we got counter-intuitive results. For instance, the effect of SE on PWOM intentions is supported for PWOM$_{Transmitters}$ but not for PWOM$_{Generators}$. H1$_b$ is also not supported as hypothesised and the negative relationship between SA and PWOM intentions is confirmed for PWOM$_{Transmitters}$ but not for PWOM$_{Generators}$. **H2a and H2b are supported** and are in the intended direction confirming the hypothesised effect of SC and SB on PWOM intentions of Generators but not for Transmitters. Interestingly, the effect of SB needs on PWOM intentions of WOM Generators is significantly different from that of WOM Transmitters Overall, these results reveal that expected satisfaction of social needs are a potent driver of PWOM intentions for WOM Generators. The final set of hypotheses related to social intentions needs; **H3a and H3b are supported**. The effect of SSI on PWOM intentions (H3$_a$) is supported and is in the intended direction for Generators but there is no relationship between SSI and PWOM intentions of Transmitters. Finally the effect of IHO on PWOM intentions (H3$_b$) is supported for both Generators and Transmitters but the effect of expected satisfaction of IHO needs is much stronger for Transmitters than Generators.

5. Discussion and theoretical contributions

Overall**,** findings of this research suggest that expected satisfaction of self, social and social intentions needs can stimulate PWOM intentions of both WOM Generators and Transmitters. We contribute to the WOM literature by providing insights that psychological drivers of PWOM intentions vary for individuals depending on the type of consumption experience they are sharing with others. Thus, it will be a mistake not to take into account types of WOM senders when understanding drivers of PWOM intentions.

Findings pertaining to expected satisfaction of SE needs being a driver of PWOM intentions were unexpected and contrary to the widely accepted notions in both WOM and impression management literature that individuals self-enhance based on their own consumption experience (see De Angelis *et al*., 2012). We found this effect for WOM Transmitters but not Generators. It is well established in the impression management literature that individuals associate themselves with successful others even those with whom they have a minimal connection as a form of their own positive self-presentation (Cialdini and DeNicholas, 1989). Therefore, this contrarian result can be explained by "Basking in Reflected Glory" phenomenon where individuals may associate themselves with successful second-hand consumption experiences of others by transmitting these positive consumption experiences within their social networks. (Spinda, 2011).

Another unexpected result concerned our argument that expected satisfaction of SA needs will impede the PWOM intentions of the WOM Generators as SA is a defensive mechanism which people employ when their self is threatened possibly after a negative experience. However results indicate that whilst there is no relationship between SA and PWOM intentions of the Generators, there was a significant negative relationship between expected satisfaction of SA needs and Transmitters. These results make sense because it is unlikely that one will show intentions to engage in positive social talk based on someone else's experience to restore one's integrity and self-worth. Engaging in negative social talk or NWOM is more likely to restore a damaged self-image (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013) and thus future research can examine the relationship between expected satisfaction of SA needs and NWOM intentions of both WOM Generators and Transmitters. To the best of the author(s) knowledge this is the first study to provide evidence of a negative relationship between SA and PWOM intentions as the extant literature has been either silent on this relationship or found no relationship between SA and PWOM intentions (Alexandrov *et al*., 2013).

As hypothesised**,** this study provides unequivocal evidence that expected satisfaction of social needs are a strong stimulus of PWOM intentions of WOM Generators but not transmitters. This research is the first of its kind to provide empirical evidence that satisfaction of social needs operate differentially for different type of WOM communicators. As expected people bond with others in their social network by sharing their own positive consumption experiences with them. Furthermore, people will engage in a social comparison process with others in their social network by comparing their own abilities (e.g. ability to make a good purchase decision) or opinions about a brand based on their own personal consumption experience.

Finally, we examined the expected satisfaction of social intentions needs as a driver of PWOM intentions. As hypothesized there was a negative relationship between SSI and PWOM intentions of the Generators. This result once again brings in spotlight the importance of WOM content and if the content itself triggers or hinders conversations. Impression management literature contends that people share more interesting and entertaining stories to spark a conversation between individuals (Berger, 2014), thus expectedly in this research people were unlikely to satisfy their need for SSI conceptualised as sharing values and morality based on consumption experience by engaging in positive social talk.

In the extant WOM literature there is lack of clarity, if people help others based on altruistic motives or they have more self-serving reasons such as satisfaction of their SE needs (Berger, 2014). The current research distinguishes between SE and IHO motives wherein expected satisfaction of SE needs is grounded in self-enhancement theory whereby individuals possess a strong desire to make positive impression and seek recognition from others (Jones, 1973). On the other hand, expected satisfaction of IHO needs is based on the conceptual domain of altruism where people have an inherent desire to help others (Pillavin and Chang, 1990). In the present study we examined individuals desire to help others become better customers, provide information to others when requested and help them form opinions about brands. As hypothesised, we found that IHO is indeed a strong catalyst for sparking PWOM intentions of both Generators and Transmitters. Interestingly, the effect is much stronger for Transmitters than Generators implying people are willing to help others even if that means drawing on their indirect consumption experiences.

Taken together these results indicate that it is vital for WOM scholars to make a distinction between types of WOM senders when understanding what motivates someone to engage in positive social talk. Internal psychological drivers that spark PWOM intentions may differ for people sharing their own positive consumption experiences as opposed to that of others. Importantly, this study puts a spotlight on WOM of individuals based on indirect experiences which is an under-researched phenomenon as the extant literature is largely based on the implicit assumption that WOM conversations are an outcome of direct personal consumption experiences.

6. Limitation and Future Research

Findings of this study are limited to PWOM and potentially there can be a different pattern of results for NWOM. Future research can investigate if drivers of NWOM intentions will vary between WOM Generators and Transmitters. Furthermore, there is a tremendous scope to understand WOM based on indirect experiences and the boomerang effect it may have on the WOM Transmitter itself. For instance does sharing positive news about other people's positive experience with a brand influence one's own purchase decision. Another interesting area of future research is in the domain of e-WOM. Do people who post their experience on social media platforms have similar motives than people who share or retweet posts of others?

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