Opportunism in Interpersonal Exchange: When Dissatisfaction is Followed by Positive Word-of-Mouth

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, it is assumed that high (low) customer satisfaction leads to positive (negative) word of mouth. However, previous research has ignored that in some situations, consumers will tend to give positive WOM about a recent negative experience, because they feel ashamed or embarrassed about admitting a negative experience or a bad choice. In this paper, we discuss the theoretical background of such opportunistic behavior in consumer-to-consumer exchanges and present the results of an exploratory pilot and a subsequent experimental study which show that such behavior mainly takes place when consumers are communicating to weak ties about high-involvement products.

Key words: Consumer-to-Consumer, Interpersonal Communications, Word of Mouth, Deception, Opportunism
INTRODUCTION

Word of mouth (WOM), defined as oral, person-to-person exchange of information in consumer-to-consumer exchanges (Arndt, 1967), has been extensively researched in the last decades. On the one hand, WOM – both in its positive and negative connotation - has been proven to influence consumer’s attitudes and purchase decisions (e.g., Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Venkatesan, 1966; Weinberger and Dillon, 1980). On the other hand, the variables responsible for consumers’ engagement in WOM conversations have also been the focus of empirical studies (e.g., Dichter, 1996; Richins, 1984; Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster, 1998).

A tacit assumption underlying virtually all studies that investigate the determinants of WOM is that the valence of the information provided is triggered by the level of satisfaction of the informant with the referred product or service. In other words, it is assumed that positive WOM is given when satisfaction with the consumed product or service is high, while negative WOM will be given after a dissatisfying experience (e.g. Anderson, 1998; Bowman and Narayandas, 2001). Indeed, this intuitive assumption has been validated in a number of empirical studies, which show that customer satisfaction is positively (negatively) related to positive (negative) WOM (Richins, 1983; Westbrook, 1987).

However, in some situations, WOM may not reflect the informant’s true perception about a consumption experience. For example, some people may be unwilling to publicly admit that they have chosen a “bad” brand or product, because they fear this may reflect on them as not being able to make good choices. Some researchers have already noted that for certain customer groups, appearing as “intelligent consumers” is important (Feick and Price, 1987; Kas-sarjian, 1980). In other cases, consumers may be hesitant to admit negative experiences with a chosen product or service because it may negatively affect other people’s assessment of them.
For example, even a dissatisfied college student will be very careful to speak negatively about his school or program, because the diffusion of negative information about those issues may weaken his opportunities on the job market.

The examination of WOM communications, in which inaccurate consumption information is exchanged, is completely lacking. We will denote to such behavior as opportunistic WOM (OWOM) and define it as consumers lying, cheating, or withholding important market information in order to achieve an end when giving experience-based referral information to other consumers in the marketplace. Achieving an understanding of such behavior is of interest for at least two reasons: First, such behavior might lead to the dissemination and diffusion of imperfect information in the marketplace - a topic widely discussed in economics (e.g., Williamson, 1975), but also of great importance for marketing (Frenzen and Nakamoto, 1993), as WOM has been shown to be an important force in shaping judgements and driving choices (e.g., Bansal and Voyer 2000; Bone 1995). Further, studying this issue contributes to a more exhaustive understanding of the processes that drive WOM exchanges. Therefore, this paper attempts to achieve a first step into the direction of examining OWOM behavior. In particular, we focus on OWOM conversations that are subject to a WOM source’s intention to conceal a purchasing failure by distributing OWOM information after a negative consumption experience.

In the remainder of this paper, we will first develop a conceptual model of opportunistic WOM behavior. Next, we will report on the methodology and findings results of an exploratory study. Results from this exploratory research are discussed against the background of social exchange theory, and used for developing research hypotheses for under which circumstances such OWOM behavior is most likely to occur. Those hypotheses are tested in an ex-
perimental studies. Finally, results are discussed and directions for future research are given.

**THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

Social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964) suggests that the central construct in explaining the exchange of goods or information in interpersonal relationships is reciprocity, which implies that the decision whether or not social exchange takes place is contingent upon an exchange equilibrium, in which costs and benefits are approximately equally distributed between exchange partners. Gatignon and Robertson (1986), building on this assumption, formulate a model of interpersonal information exchange, in which they propose that information is transmitted from a sender to a receiver only if the benefits associated with the information giving outweigh the costs. While a number of benefits associated with WOM giving have been suggested and empirically verified (e.g., Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998; Swan and Oliver, 1989), costs of information giving, that may inhibit the flow of market information, have received much less attention. To our knowledge, the only research investigating this issue is by Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993), who show that when the transmission of information is associated with financial disadvantages, WOM is inhibited. This study is central to our argumentation, as these authors describe one case of opportunism in a consumer-to-consumer exchange situation. In contrast to Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993), though, we are not concerned with an inhibited information flow, but with the transmission of false information. It is therefore necessary to investigate potential benefits of engaging in opportunistic WOM.

**Benefits of OWOM Information Giving**

Gatignon and Robertson (1986) propose that one important motivation for engaging in WOM is the prospect of gaining social status and power. Similarly, Sundaram, Mitra and Webster
identify self-esteem as the most frequent motivation for WOM. Naturally, self-esteem will more likely function as a motivation for positive than for negative WOM, because reporting a dissatisfying or disappointing consumption experience will not help the communicator appear as “smart shopper” or “sophisticated consumer”, who is well able to cope with the difficulty of making choices. In contrast, admitting such a purchase failure, is, in some situations, associated with considerable psychic costs. Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993, p.373), argue that “… consumers may be reluctant to reveal information that bears a social stigma and therefore imposes psychic costs such as embarrassment or shame.” Similarly, Saarni and Lewis (1993) argue that the deception of others occurs in such cases where the cost of shame, humiliation or embarrassment exceeds the cost of deception. Initially, consumers may choose to remain silent about such experiences. However, quite often, a recommendation is sought by others (Mangold 1999), and in such instances, consumers are faced with the decision of revealing the truth about the experience or not.

Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993) refer to two groups of factors that may influence a communicator’s decision to act opportunistically in an exchange situation. First, perceived product category characteristics (such as the perceived value of information about the product category), and second, perceived characteristics of the exchange partner (such as the intensity or the closeness of the relationship). In general, a vast number of both product and exchange characteristics have been identified and studied with regards to WOM behavior (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1989). Therefore, an exploratory study was conducted first to identify the most central variable in each of the two categories.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Method
In summer 2002, 94 graduate and undergraduate students of a Western European university (45 females, mean age ≈ 22 years) participated in a two-page qualitative survey. Critical incident technique was used as a method for this exploratory research. After the introduction of an exemplary OWOM case scenario (a person disseminating false information about a recent consumption experience was described), respondents were asked (a) whether they had already behaved in a similar manner and what they thought were the reasons for such behavior in general, (b) whether they believed that certain product classes or categories were more likely to be subject to such behavior, and (c) whether they believed that certain properties of their exchange partner would influence the decision to engage in such behavior. Note that as the subject of the study was lying and deception, and thus likely to create socially desired response behavior, only the first part of the first question asked – in a very general way - about respondent’s own behavior. The remaining questions were projective questions asking respondents to think about the means that people would potentially achieve in behaving this way.

Responses were analyzed and categorized independently by three experts, one of which was a graduate management student and two of which were business professors. Afterwards, a third professor reviewed the results and identified non-matching categorizations.

**Results**

Categorizations of the three experts were very similar. All three analyzers agreed that 96% of the respondents admitted having given OWOM in the past, suggesting that such behavior indeed occurs in the marketplace, and is relevant for understanding WOM exchanges. Indeed, self-esteem or the avoidance of shame acted as main influencers of opportunistic WOM behavior (between 67.5 and 72.1% of all given responses, with all three experts agreeing on the
same 67.5%), which confirms our general approach to analyzing opportunistic WOM behavior. Concerning the influencing character of the social context, results suggested that to a vast majority, people with whom a strong relationship is shared are less likely to be deceived or betrayed (83.2-85.7% of all answers, with all three experts agreeing on 81.4%). Regarding product class characteristics, it became apparent that especially product categories that are important for a respondent’s self-perception, among them many high-priced or luxury product categories were named (≈ 51.5 to 59.2% of all given answers, with all three experts agreeing on 51.5% on the respondents). All three experts agreed that all mentioned product categories were likely to create high purchase involvement in decision situations. No other product or exchange partner characteristic was named more often than 16%.

From this exploratory study, we derived product involvement as the key product-category level variable (e.g., Celsi and Olson, 1988) and tie strength (e.g., Granovetter, 1973) as the key exchange partner characteristic that should be related to OWOM behavior. In the next section, we will add theoretical substance to these exploratory, empirically derived findings regarding the relationship between those two variables and OWOM behavior.

**Product Involvement**

Product involvement has been described as one of the key constructs in consumer research (Richins and Bloch, 1991). The product involvement construct refers to the personal relevance of a product for a consumer: “... a consumer’s level of involvement with an object, situation or action is determined by the degree to which s/he perceives that concept to be personally relevant” (Celsi and Olson 1988, S.211). This personal relevance is reflected in the interrelation of the product with individual values and goals (Zaichkowsky, 1985). People who are highly involved in a product category are also more likely to talk to others about
these products. Giving advice to others in the form of positive WOM is often done for self-enhancement reasons, especially in high-involvement product categories (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998).

Because of their fit with the inner value system, high involvement products are often perceived as being important for consumer’s self-image, and consumption of high involvement products is seen to be instrumental for achieving self-related goals, such as self-esteem (Solomon, 2002). Therefore, the psychic costs of admitting a “false” purchase or a negative consumption experience in such product-categories will be extremely high. Eventually, this will increase the likelihood that the psychic costs of admitting a negative experience exceed the costs of deception. Hence, we expect that:

$$H_1: \text{Everything else being equal, opportunistic WOM is more likely to be transmitted in the presence of high as compared to low product involvement.}$$

**Tie Strength**

Tie strength can be defined as the degree of closeness between two actors in a social network (e.g., Brown and Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973). For example, good friends or close relatives are considered strong ties, while weak ties are thought to exist between casual acquaintances. Previous research has shown that weak ties often function as bridges in transmitting WOM across social networks (Brown and Reingen, 1987) and “normal” information is equally likely to be transmitted via strong or weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Hence, under low involvement conditions, where the psychic costs of admitting a purchase failure are not particularly high, we do not expect tie strength to play a role in determining OWOM behavior.

However, Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993) show that information that is especially valuable or for which transmission is associated with high psychic costs, is more likely to be disclosed to
people with whom a strong tie relationship is shared. Findings from their qualitative motivational analysis suggest that this is because the primary motivation for engaging in social exchanges with weak ties is self-interest, whereas strong tie exchanges are based on generalized, long term exchanges and mutual trust. Hence, the cost of deceiving a weak tie will be lower than the cost of deceiving a strong tie. It is therefore more likely that false information on recent product experiences is given to weak ties. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H₂: When product involvement is high, opportunistic WOM is more likely to be transmitted to weak as compared to strong ties.

**EXPERIMENTAL STUDY**

**Method**

In order to test our hypotheses, an experimental study was conducted. 123 undergraduate students from a large central European university were interviewed. Students did not receive credit for taking part in the study, but a small monetary incentive for taking part in the study was given.

Our hypotheses suggest a 2x2 experimental design, in which product involvement and tie strength are manipulated across groups. Respondents are randomly assigned to one of four possible scenarios and are confronted with a situation in which a person makes a negative consumption experience. Because the topic of opportunistic behavior may be perceived as a rather sensitive topic, we avoided asking people about their own reactions in a certain situation. Instead, a role-play scenario is used, which has frequently been the case in studies on interpersonal communications (e.g., Price, Feick and Higie, 1989).

As a product category for which different degrees of product involvement can be expected, cars seem to be appropriate. The dependent variable in our research was a one-item measure
of the likelihood of transmission of the true information on a scale from 0 to 100, which is a similar measure as employed by Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993). For checking manipulation, seven-point, multi-item instruments suggested by Zaichkowsky (1985) for measuring product involvement and by Brown and Reingen (1987) and Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993) for measuring tie strength were employed. In particular, the six-item measure for checking product involvement and the four-item measure for measuring tie strength each loaded on one factor (average explained variance 67.5% for involvement and 68.1% for tie strength) and showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$ for involvement and .84 for tie strength.

As confound measures, we checked for group differences with regard to demographics (age, gender), the respondent’s own involvement with cars (using the same six-item scale as described above, $\alpha = .84$) and their usage experience, using a one-item measure adopted from Price, Feick and Higie (1989). Also, one-item measures were employed for testing how well individuals could imagine the situation described, how difficult they found it to relate to Pete’s situation and whether Pete seemed to them being a nice person. Finally, they were asked to indicate what they thought the purpose of the experiment was.

Respondents were first confronted with the general description, then either the high or the low involvement scenario, followed by either the high or the low tie strength scenario and had then to respond to the described measures. The described situation and scenario descriptions including independent variable manipulations can be seen in box 1 in the appendix. The dependent variable measure and manipulation and confound check measures are displayed in box 2.

**Manipulation and Confound Checks**

Manipulation checks showed that the scenario descriptions resulted in the intended differ-
ences regarding the manipulated variables ($X_{HI} = 5.26$ for the high and $X_{LI} = 2.16$ for the low involvement scenario, $F = 486.18, p = .00$, and $X_{HTS} = 5.11$ for the high and $X_{LTS} = 2.44$ for the low tie strength scenario, $F = 224.42, p = .00$). There were no statistically significant associations between the dependent variable and neither the demographics age ($r = -.006, p = .95$) and gender ($X_M = 54.88$ for male and $X_F = 59.08$ for female respondents, $F = .54, p = .42$) nor the confound measures product involvement in cars ($r = .047, p = .63$) and experience with cars ($r = .076, p = .42$). There was also no statistically significant relationship between the degree to which respondents found the person facing the decision to transmit true information likeable and the likelihood of transmitting the true ($r = .075, p = .44$).

All respondents rated as being easily imaginable ($X = 5.88$) with no statistically significant differences between the scenarios ($X_{HI} = 5.82$ for high and $X_{LI} = 5.95$ for low involvement, $F = .25, p = .62$, and $X_{HTS} = 6.07$ for high and $X_{LTS} = 5.70$ for low tie strength, $F = 2.21, p = .14$). Finally, respondents indicated they could well relate to the situation that the decision maker is confronted with ($X = 5.01$), again with no statistically significant differences between the scenarios ($X_{HI} = 5.28$ for high and $X_{LI} = 4.74$ for low involvement, $F = 2.65, p = .12$, and $X_{HTS} = 4.91$ for high and $X_{LTS} = 5.11$ for low tie strength, $F = .33, p = .57$). The means of the last two questions indicate that respondents found the scenario realistic and felt comfortable making a judgement about human behavior in an OWOM exchange situation. The qualitative, open-end question regarding the purpose of the experiment was mostly answered with responses similar to “want to know whether we are able to predict the person’s behavior”. 18 individuals, however, guessed correctly that the
experiment was about “whether the person lies to the other” (or similar), but did not know that different scenarios were tested. No statistically significant differences were to be observed between the response behavior of those individuals and the other participants of the study, and they were not more likely to be found in any of the four manipulation groups (six in the “high involvement, high tie strength (HI-HTS), four in the HI-LTS, two in the LI-HTS and six in the LI-LTS groups, respectively).

Results

Hypothesis H₁ suggests a negative effect of product involvement on the likelihood to transmitting the truth in an opportunistic exchange situation, while H₂ suggests that this effect is moderated by tie strength. To test those hypotheses, an ANOVA model was computed using product involvement and the interaction of product involvement and tie strength as independent and likelihood of transmitting the truth as dependent variable. To further control for an (unexpected) main effect of tie strength, this variable was also integrated into the analysis.

Results reject H₁, but support H₂. As can be seen from table 1, only the interaction effect of tie strength and product involvement is statistically significant. Further, as is shown in figure 1, the expectation that under conditions of high product involvement and low tie strength, opportunistic WOM is most likely to occur. For all three other scenarios, truth transmission likelihood is generally high. In other words, opportunistic WOM seems only likely to happen in the event that some communicates about a product s/he is highly involved with and talks to a weak tie.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS
The present study offers first insights into the mechanisms of opportunistic WOM. In particular, we show that such behavior, neglected by prior research, will only be likely to occur in situations when product involvement is high and tie strength is low. Thus, the assumption that product involvement alone will explain OWOM behavior was rejected, and a more complex relationship that only when two conditions are satisfied (i.e., high involvement, low tie strength) is suggested. Further, the assumption that the degree of tie strength is only be relevant in low involvement communication situations is confirmed. In sum, this suggests that communication about high vs. low involvement products is subject to different mechanisms and motives, and should therefore be analyzed separately. A similar demand has already been raised by Frenzen and Nakamoto (1993) with regard to research about communication between strong vs. weak ties, but has seemingly so far not been followed.

More generally, this research suggests that when analyzing WOM, one should look at product- and exchange partner-related conditions surrounding interpersonal communications situations simultaneously. Customer satisfaction has been the predominant determinant of WOM dissemination in previous research, but the present study seems to suggest that there may be situations where customer satisfaction is not at all relevant for the decision to transmit positive WOM about a consumption of purchase experience. In addition to focusing on how product quality or satisfaction is judged by the communicator, research should focus on the communication goals of exchange partners, especially when it comes to high involvement product, in which communication is not only a means of expressing joy or anger about the product and/or its characteristics, but also a way of expressing the self, and negative communication may be perceived as questioning the own personality or self-threatening.

What do those results suggest to the manager? We do not propose that product managers of high involvement product will get away with low product quality in the long-run only because
negative WOM is suppressed for opportunist reasons. We believe that eventually, low qual-
ity will become obvious for customers due to reports by independent magazines (such as con-
sumer reports) and negative WOM by lowly involved customers or by those communicating
to strong ties. However, it may be worthwhile for managers to not exclusively focus on satis-
faction and quality, but also on increasing personal significance of products and their meaning
for the self. Research on how to achieve this is beyond the scope of this contribution, but
suggestions on how to increase customer involvement are frequently given in consumer be-
havior textbooks (e.g. Assael 1998). More detailed instructions on how to increase the sig-
ificance of a brand for the self, however, can be taken from the currently growing body of
research on brand personality (e.g., Aaker 1997). In sum, we acknowledge that this research
is too exploratory to give specific directions to managers, but we believe that its findings and
potential extensions are valuable for a more comprehensive understanding of how the flow of
WOM information functions.

Lastly, as this research is exploratory, we feel obliged to refer to a number of issues that could
not be addressed in this research. They represent limitations of our study, but we also view
them as potentially stimulating further work on this issue. First, a more representative sample
than the student groups should be used in further research. Further, although tie strength and
product involvement were identified as the main drivers of WOM through qualitative research
first, it may be interesting to extend the range of potential covariates. In particular, whether
the brand is well-known or not or whether it is known as a quality-leader or not may be influ-
encing consumer’s willingness to provide OWOM or not, because it might seem easier to the
individual to convince others of the quality of a generally accepted brand, even when s/he her-
himself is dissatisfied. This would suggest adding a third dimension (brand recognition) to
our model of product and exchange-partner-related variables. Lastly, this research should be
extended to include more product categories than the one tested here to be more generalizable.
Introduction
Below you find a scenario description, covering a day-to-day situation of post-purchase consumer behavior. We would appreciate if you read through the scenario and answered the subsequent questions. The results of this research will help to better understand how well people can relate to interpersonal exchange situations as experienced by consumers. The survey is very short, and we ask you for your honest responses. However, do not spend too much time reflecting on the issues. Often, the first, spontaneous answers are the best ones.

General scenario description:
Imagine a person called Pete. Pete has recently bought a new car. Initially, he had been excited about his purchase, but after a few weeks, he feels more and more unsatisfied with the car. Several times now, he had to bring it to the repair service, but it is still not running very well. The driving performance is only mediocre. Also, the seats are not as comfortable as he had expected and the heating does not work properly. Finally, petrol usage is more than he had expected.

High Involvement Scenario:
Pete is very concerned about cars. He regularly reads journals and magazines dedicated to new developments in the automotive sector. Consequently, he knows a lot about new developments, models and sometimes visits car fairs. He sometimes mentions to his friends, only half-joking that “you can tell people apart from the car they own and drive”.

Low Involvement Scenario:
Pete is not very concerned about cars. He views them as necessary, but unexciting component in his daily life. Consequently, he does not know very much about cars. In conversations with friends, he sometimes mentions, “he cannot understand why people make such a fuss about which and what kind of car they drive”.

High Tie Strength Scenario:
Pete, accidentally, meets his friend Paul. Pete and Paul have gone to school together. They have been close friends for quite some time, and still meet regularly. Pete considers Paul one of his closest friends. Of course, Paul knows that Pete has bought a new car.

Low Tie Strength Scenario:
Pete, accidentally, meets Paul. Paul is working for the same company as Pete, but in a different department. They had met in several meetings, but they have never talked to each other in private. By chance, though, Paul has heard that Pete has bought a new car.
Box 2: Measures

**Dependent variable:**
Casually, Paul asks Pete whether he is satisfied with the new car he bought. On a scale from 0-100, how likely would you think is Paul to tell Pete the truth about his dissatisfaction with the car?

**Manipulation Checks** (Seven-point rating scale, strongly agree – strongly disagree):

**Involvement:**
Pete is interested in cars.
For Pete, cars matter.
Cars are an important part of Pete’s life.
For Pete, it is important to make the right choice when buying a car.
From Pete’s perspective, when buying a car, there is a lot to lose.
For Pete, the selection of a car is an important decision.

**Tie Strength Measures:**
Pete is likely to share personal confidence with Paul.
Pete and Paul are likely to spend some free time together.
Pete is likely to perform a LARGE favor for Paul.
Pete and Paul are close friends.

**Confound Measures** (Seven-point rating scale, strongly agree – strongly disagree):

**Own Involvement:**
I am interested in cars.
For me, cars matter.
Cars are an important part of my life.
For me, it is important to make the right choice when buying a car.
From my perspective, when buying a car, there is a lot to lose.
For me, the selection of a car is an important decision.

**Experience:**
I think of myself as experienced with cars.

**Likeability:**
It seems that Pete is a nice person.

**Realism:**
The situation described is easy to imagine

**Empathy:**
Pete is a person I can easily relate to.

**Age**

**Gender**

**Research Question:**
In a few words, what do you think is the purpose of this research?
### Table 1: ANOVA Results for Likelihood of Transmitting Negative Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>F-Value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>.578</td>
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<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tie Strength</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement * Tie Strength</td>
<td>16.445</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Likelihood of Transmitting the Truth as a Function of Involvement and Tie Strength

High Tie Strength

Low Tie Strength

Likelihood of Transmitting The Truth

High Involvement

Low Involvement
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