

Different Word-of-Mouth Styles: A Cluster Analysis of Positive Senders

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Abstract

Despite WOM's recognition as an important means of communication, little research has examined WOM content or delivery. A recent exception is Sweeney et al. (2008), who conceptualised a three dimensional WOM construct, including content and delivery descriptors and developed a 12-item scale to measure these dimensions. The multidimensionality of the scale raises questions as to patterns in WOM messages (e.g. are some messages higher in rationality rather than emotionality or the reverse?). When people were asked to about a WOM message they had given, four distinct message groupings were uncovered. Differences in the groups' various motivations, situational and demographic characteristics were found that are likely to assist managers understanding how customers generate different types of WOM.

Keywords: Cluster Analysis; WOM motivations

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Introduction and Literature Review

Word-of-mouth's (WOM) impact on consumer behaviour has long been recognised. Indeed, forty years ago, Bass (1969) argued WOM was crucial to a new product's success. Positive WOM seems to be effective for several reasons. First, it is personal to the receiver, as the sender provides information in an individual way. Second, it reduces the receiver's effort when looking for appropriate information. Third, it is seen as more credible information as the provider does not have a vested interest in the potential transaction, which means, WOM is generally viewed with less scepticism than firm-initiated promotional efforts (Herr et al., 1991).

As Sweeney et al. (2008), pointed out, despite WOM's importance, very little research has examined the style and composition of WOM messages, despite previous researchers raising the importance of these characteristics (Anderson 1998; Eliashberg et al. 2000). This apparent gap, led them to explore WOM message characteristics, developing a twelve-item three-factor scale to measure these characteristics that were consistent with previous research (e.g. Mazzarol et al. 2007). These dimensions were:

- 'Cognitive content', which reflected the nature of the WOM content, such as the extent to which the message is reliable, clear and informative.
- The 'richness' of the WOM content, reflecting the extent to which a message is vivid, elaborate and reinforcing.
- 'Strength of delivery', which reflected the way in which a message was delivered (e.g. with strong words or powerfully).

However, are there different ways in which people give WOM in terms of message emphasis? We know from as far back as Aristotle (1924) that there are three 'artistic proofs' (1,2,3) under the control of a communicator and, thus, there may be different emphases in different messages. An interest in communication style has been evident in a variety of areas, including education and health (e.g. Sabol 2009; Sladek et al. 2008; Vance et al. 2008). De Vries et al. (2009), for example, explored communication styles through an analysis of the semantic meaning of dictionary words and identified seven themes under which words could be classified (rationality, pleasantness, dominance and emotional content among other aspects) and this is relevant to WOM researchers, perhaps explaining why Sweeney et al. (2008) found three dimensions. However, this multidimensional nature of WOM message raises a question as to whether there are different styles of WOM giving based on message characteristics, such as the cognitive content, richness of content and the strength of delivery of the message suggested by Sweeney et al. (2008).

The purpose of this study was to extend Sweeney et al.'s (2008) study by cluster analysing their scales to see whether there are sub-groups of people who deliver different types of WOM messages. The identification of such subgroups who behave differently would be useful in enhancing our understanding of the WOM phenomenon itself, as well as helping managers understand the heterogeneous nature of their marketplaces (Soutar & Sweeney, 2003). Previous research has also suggested a number of relationships that may be more usefully examined at a segment level, namely:

- The relationship between WOM and its antecedents, such as service quality, perceived value and satisfaction (e.g. Harrison-Walker 2001; Hartline and Jones 1996), may differ across segments. Research has shown the content of WOM messages is often related to a service evaluation and, thus, giving WOM can be described as the translation of a customer experience into a message.
- The motivations for giving WOM (e.g. being asked for an opinion, feeling strongly about giving an opinion, raised the topic because of seeing recent promotion of the service), described as the 'triggers' for giving WOM by Mazarol et al. (2007), may also differ across segments.
- Situational factors that facilitate WOM giving (e.g. serendipity (just came up in conversation; closeness of the relationship between the giver and receiver) may also differ across segments (Mazarol et al. 2007).
- Background variables (e.g. education, age and gender) may differ across segments. Some researchers, for example have suggested WOM is more common among women than men (Berner 2006; Bush et al. 2005).

Given space limitations, only WOM from a giver's perspective in a services context was examined in the present study, which is discussed in the next section. A services context was chosen as services are intangible, difficult to evaluate before purchase, not covered by guarantee and non-standardised and, hence, are often perceived as high risk (e.g. Murray 1991), which means WOM communication is likely to be more important as it acts as a risk reliever in such situations (Ennew et al. 2000; File, Cermak and Prince 1994).

The Present Study

A survey was undertaken that asked respondents about positive WOM they had sent. A total of 500 respondents who had been randomly selected from the member database of an industry partner who assisted in the study were interviewed by phone and asked to recall a situation in which they had given *positive WOM* about any service provider in the last 6 months (i.e. respondents were asked to think broadly across a range of services and were not restricted to the partner's industry, so results could be generalised). They were asked to describe the incident using the twelve item WOM scale developed by Sweeney et al. (2008) on a Likert-type scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The descriptive statistics obtained in this case when the relevant items were summed to obtain sub-scale scores are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the Table, all of the scales were reliable. Respondents felt they provided more cognitive content than they did content richness and that they were not so strong in their message delivery, although on average, respondents reported an above mid-point score on this scale. The differences between the three means were supported by a series of t-tests, all of which were significant well beyond the 1% level. The correlations between the sub-scales were all moderately positive (ranging from 0.45 to 0.67), but not so high as to prevent their use in the subsequent cluster analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

WOM Sub-Scale	Mean	S.D.	Coefficient Alpha	Coefficient Beta	Correlations
Cognitive Content	4.23	0.59	0.79		
Content Richness	3.50	0.82	0.79		0.55
Strength of Delivery	3.39	0.89	0.81		0.45 0.67

As the purpose of the present study was to see if there were sub-groups of people who delivered WOM in different ways, a cluster analysis was undertaken. In this case, the two-step procedure contained in SPSS was used to group respondents as it “is particularly appropriate for samples above 200” (Salimath et al. 2008, p. 368), which was the case here. Further, simulation research has suggested the two-step procedure is very good at reproducing “true” clusters (SPSS Technical Report, 2007). While the analysis suggested a two cluster solution may be appropriate when the ratio of distance measure criterion was used, the BIC change criterion suggested a four cluster solution was appropriate. Consequently, the point-biserial correlation, which Milligan and Mahajan (1980) have argued is a useful way to determine the appropriate number of clusters, was computed for a range of solutions (2 to 8 groups). The correlations ranged from 0.39 to 0.52 and supported the four cluster solution as this solution had the highest correlation. Consequently, the four group solution was accepted and used in the subsequent analysis.

The descriptive statistics for each of the clusters are shown in Table 2. As can be seen from the Table, all of the clusters were of reasonable size, ranging from 19% to 30% of the total sample. The first cluster had the highest scores on each of the three sub-scales, suggesting members could be termed ‘intense’ WOM providers. The second cluster felt they provided primarily cognitive content, suggesting members could be termed ‘realistic’ WOM providers, while the third cluster had the lowest scores on each of the clusters, suggesting members could be termed ‘uninvolved’ WOM providers. The final cluster had a lower mean for cognitive content than two of the other clusters, but was higher on content richness and delivery strength than all but the first cluster and was named ‘emotional’. An examination of the t-statistics computed within the two-step clustering procedure supported this view, suggesting cluster members could be termed emotional WOM providers.

It seems that there are sub-groups of people who deliver WOM in very different ways, which raises a question as to whether there are differences in the people who provide WOM in these ways. As was noted earlier, four separate groups of factors were seen as likely to impact on the nature of the WOM people provide and these were all examined as respondents had been asked questions that asked about their assessment of the service, their interactions with the service provider about whom the WOM had been given, their relationship with the person to whom the WOM had been given, their possible motivations for giving WOM, situational circumstances when the WOM was delivered and their background information.

Table 2: Mean Scores (standard deviation in parentheses)

Cluster	Number of Respondents	Cognitive Content	Richness of Content	Strength of Delivery
Involved	134	4.85 (0.19)	4.38 (0.49)	4.32 (0.54)
Objective	123	4.34 (0.35)	2.81 (0.42)	2.58 (0.77)
Uninvolved	95	3.44 (0.59)	2.80 (0.81)	2.88 (0.48)
Emotional	148	4.14 (0.27)	3.71 (0.39)	3.55 (0.49)
Average	500	4.24 (0.59)	3.50 (0.82)	3.39 (0.89)

As there were more than two groups and a large number of potential differentiating factors, discriminant analysis was used to examine group differences (Soutar & Sweeney 2003). The analysis found two significant functions, which the I-squared statistic (Peterson and Mahajan 1976) suggested explained 46% of the variation between the groups. Consequently, the two functions were retained and the results obtained are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. Following Soutar and McNeil's (1995) approach, the larger structural correlations (greater than 0.40) between the discriminant functions and the relevant survey items were drawn as vectors. The lengths of the vectors indicate their relative importance, while their direction shows the nature of their relationship with the estimated discriminant functions. The group centroids were also placed in the space, as their positions provide insight into the differences between the clusters.

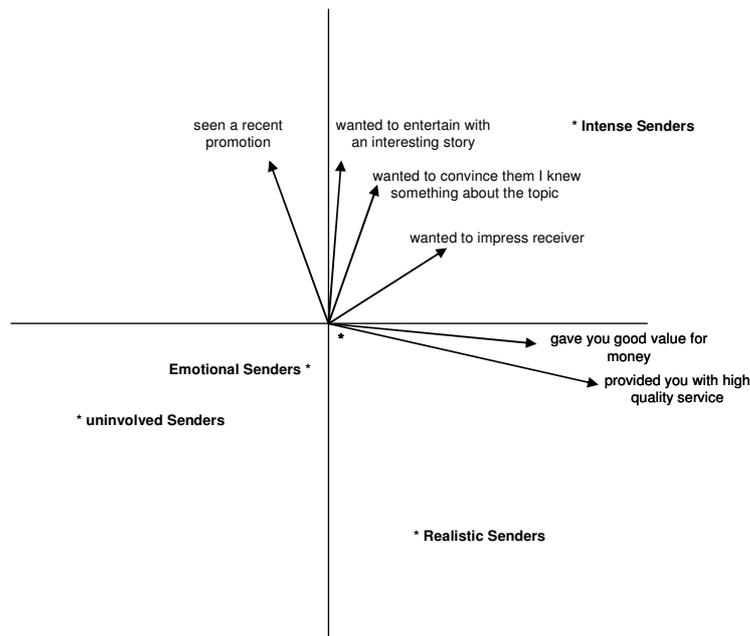


Figure 1: Cluster Differences on the Survey Items

An examination of the structural correlations suggested the first function was positively related to senders' assessments of their interactions with the service provider (e.g. the provider gave me high quality service, I was satisfied with my interaction with the provider), while the second was positively related to the senders' motivations for giving the WOM (e.g. I had seen a recent promotion, I wanted to convince them I knew something about the topic). Consequently, the functions were named in this way. As can also be seen in the Figure, the intense senders were more likely to have had a positive interaction with the service provider,

but were also more likely to be personally motivated to provide the WOM. This group was also more motivated to give WOM due to viewing a recent promotion for the service. As none of the other groups differed greatly in their motivation to provide the WOM this is an important differentiator. Interestingly, the realistic senders were more likely to have had a positive interaction with the service provider than the emotional senders and, especially, the uninvolved senders. What is also clear is that the background variables and the interpersonal relationship variables did not impact on the nature of the WOM provided.

Discussion

This study highlights that there are different types of WOM communication that vary across given messages. Importantly, while research has identified a favourable view of a service encounter translates to WOM, the present research shows there are two key differentiators of groups giving different styles of WOM content and delivery. First the intense group had a particularly favourable service interaction and was also personally motivated in terms of providing a personal contribution to the conversation in which WOM was given. Realistic group members had a high quality interaction, but were less personally motivated, while emotional group members perceived themselves as substantially higher than average in terms of motivation, but had a lower than average service interaction. The uninvolved segment, on the other hand, was less motivated and less impressed with their service interaction. To obtain WOM that is strong on the three dimensions may require both excellent service delivery and promotion to create the motivations that encourage positive WOM. Managers should not overlook the fact that service delivery does not create WOM by itself. Rather, it comes from a combination of a high standard of service delivery and a motivation on the part of the customer and both aspects need to be addressed if positive WOM is to be obtained.

Future research

As the unit in analysis in the present study was an individual message, the findings indicate that the emphasis in WOM communication varies across messages. However, to what extent is this a characteristic of the person, rather than of the message or situation? Future research is needed to see how people give messages and the consistency of their delivery across messages. Secondly, this research was restricted to the giving of positive WOM. Future research should examine message styles when negative WOM is given as it is possible emotional elements, such as venting, may lead to different patterns across the three WOM dimensions. Finally, it is also important to measure WOM from a receiver's perspective, as the effectiveness of WOM giving is determined by receivers' acceptance and use of such communication and future research should see whether WOM received from the four sender segments has a different impact on its effectiveness.

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