

Self Determination Theory and Word of Mouth

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Abstract

This paper explores the role self-determination (SD) plays in generating sustainable reductions in energy consumption. SD theory suggests the success of goal pursuit and attainment is reflected in the satisfaction of psychological needs. We argue these needs, as well as consequent self-determined motivation, energise word of mouth. We also argue that giving WOM increases the autonomy, competence and relatedness of the recipient and that the giver's autonomy, competence and relatedness also increase as a result of giving WOM. These suggestions led to a model that can be used to increase our understanding of the role marketing communications and education can play in shaping these factors, which, in turn, help determine consumers' behaviour (i.e. saving energy in this case).

Keywords: self-determination theory, word of mouth, consumer behaviour, marketing.

Introduction

There has been a significant interest in the increasing role consumers can play in the provider-consumer relationship (Urban, 2004). Related research streams include consumer empowerment (e.g., Ouschan *et al.* 2006), customer voluntary performance (Bettencourt, 1997) and service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Much of the change of balance of power in the organization-customer relationship is due to consumer's increased knowledge and greater use of technology platforms, i.e., websites, blogs, and social networking sites.

Highly relevant to the customer's role is Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 2000), a macro theory of human motivation that focuses on how autonomy affects choice. SDT suggests "to be autonomously motivated involves feeling a sense of choice and volition as a person fully endorses his or her own actions or decisions" (Ryan 1995 quoted in Moller, Ryan and Deci, 2006, p.104).

A substantial body of research has been undertaken to investigate how organisations can develop and maintain desired new behaviours. More than a decade of research suggests self-determination is core to such changes. SDT suggests fully autonomous behaviours that involve choice and are ones in which a person feels competent and a sense of relatedness to others are most likely to be sustained in the long-term (Green-Demers *et al.* 1997; Moller *et al.* 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2000). A number of studies have found SDT predicts behaviour well. For example, Green-Demers *et al.* (1997) and Pelletier *et al.* (1998) offered support for the effects self-determined motivation can have on the pro-environmental behaviours of recycling, purchasing environmentally-friendly products and educating oneself about what can be done for the environment. Other positive behaviours predicted by SDT include sport (Chatzisarantis *et al.* 2008) and education (Reeve, 2002).

Word of mouth (WOM) may be a catalyst for such changes in behaviour. Specifically we suggest autonomy, competence and relatedness increase people's motivation to give WOM. We also argue that these constructs enhance a receiver's autonomy, competence and

relatedness, as well as reinforcing those of the sender at the same time. These arguments are elaborated in subsequent sections.

The study context - Energy usage in Western Australia

In order to provide a context to the argument, we focus on energy saving when examining the relationship between WOM and SDT. In Australia the energy sector is largely dependent on carbon intensive energy sources highlighting the need for new approaches to energy management. However, from a consumer perspective, discussions on climate change and energy reduction are often met with feelings of helplessness, as individual or household actions are not seen to make a difference (Sustainable Energy Future, 2009). While a government may wish to reduce household energy consumption, their ability to achieve sustainable reductions is dependent on consumers' willingness to change their behaviours. In part this depends on marketing communications and education. SDT suggests a person who merely complies with energy saving activities is less likely to maintain such behaviours in the long run than a person who engages in such activities of their own volition. Further, the latter person requires less in the way of communication to maintain such behaviours, implying lower costs for organisations that are trying to reduce energy use.

Self Determination Theory and Behaviour

SDT suggests autonomous motivation and choice, rather than controlled motivation and choice, lead to positive behaviour change, effective performance and psychological well-being (Moller *et al.* 2006). When people feel more autonomous about their behaviour, they are likely to find a particular issue to be more interesting or personally important. The power of autonomy (volition) in making a choice to change behaviour is significantly greater than coercion. Indeed, such autonomous (intrinsic) motivation is frequently undermined by offering extrinsic rewards (Moller *et al.* 2006). Core to SDT are three psychological need constructs or 'motivation variables' (Williams *et al.* 2007):

Competence: The need for competence reflects a "human desire to efficiently interact with one's environment to feel competent in achieving desired outcomes" (Vallerand and Ratelle, 2002, p.48). Competence extends beyond self-efficacy, as it is not only a measure of confidence in ability but also represents a need, the fulfilment of which, is "a source of satisfaction and a contributor to well-being over and above any satisfaction resulting from the outcomes that competence might yield" (Deci and Ryan 2000, p.257). Initial qualitative research has shown that in an energy saving context, factors enhancing competence include access to and knowledge about energy saving products, education, such as through dedicated websites, pamphlets and other support material from energy product suppliers.

Autonomy: The need for autonomy reflects volitional control and a desire to self-organise experience and behaviour to be consistent with one's self (Deci and Ryan, 2000). The concept of autonomy is most consistent with intrinsic motivation, the prototype of self-determined activity. Autonomy reflects choice and control. In an energy saving context, autonomy supportive approaches might include self-monitoring, such as through online energy calculators, as well as the accessibility and availability of energy saving devices.

Relatedness: The need for relatedness is a core construct to attachment theory (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978; Deci and Ryan, 2000) and is related to a person's desire to feel related to significant others, to care for others and to feel cared for (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Indeed, Baard (2002,

p.266) suggested relatedness “is about feeling connected, sharing a mutual goal and being in a relationship for the long-haul.” Relatedness in an energy saving context can be seen in beliefs that others are also trying to save energy. This includes government initiatives, such as solar panel rebates, as well as community initiatives, such as the local council turning off street and office lighting at night. Discussions with friends, relatives and work colleagues also enhance relatedness. However, relatedness is reduced when a government is seen to take advantage of the consumer (perceived loss of autonomy impacting on relatedness), such as encouraging the use of solar panels and a grid feedback system and then, after a large investment has been made, reducing the feedback tariff. The relevance of these three motivational needs varies across context and cultures (Deci and Ryan, 2000), as well as across goals. For example, relatedness may play a lesser role in more individual activities i.e., education, than in activities requiring successful relationships i.e., team sports (Vallerand, 2000).

Vallerand and Ratelle (2002) and Vallerand (1997) used cognitive evaluation theory (CET), a sub-theory of SDT (Deci 1975), to examine the impact antecedent social factors (including experiences associated with the social environment and the physical environment), mediated by perceptions of autonomy, competence, relatedness, had on self-determined motivation. CET suggests enhanced perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are more closely associated with intrinsic motivation (greater self-determination) than extrinsic non-self-determined types of motivation (Deci *et al.* 1991). According to Deci and Ryan (2000), motivational types can be ordered on a self-determination continuum represented at the highest level by intrinsic motivation (behaviours carried out for pleasure and freedom) and at the lowest by amotivation (lack of intention to behave, efficacy or control).

The Role of Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM), which is informal communications between private parties in which products or services are evaluated (Anderson, 1998), seems likely to play a significant role in these types of contexts. An important feature of WOM is that it is a two-stage process requiring both the giving of WOM by one person (sender) and the acceptance of WOM by another person (receiver) if it is to be effective (Sweeney *et al.* 2008). Through this two-stage process, interpersonal communications between a sender and a receiver can change a receiver’s behaviour or attitudes (Merton, 1968). Research has shown a variety of personal and situational factors enhance WOM’s occurrence (e.g. Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Gilly *et al.* 1998; Mazzarol *et al.* 2007). Specific motivations have also been examined by Dichter (1966) Sundaram *et al.* (1998) and Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004). Such motivations include positive self enhancement, social factors, advice seeking and helping the company. Consequently, a series of propositions can be suggested.

Rationale for proposition 1: Autonomy suggests people who are confident in their ability to have choice and control want to express their individuality and share their experiences. This can be seen in the social and self-enhancement motivations that lead to WOM (Sundaram *et al.* 1998; Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004). Researchers have also argued that, when people feel autonomous, they also feel competent about their ability to attain important outcomes (Williams *et al.* 2009). A WOM sender’s expertise, which reflects an aspect of competence, also increases the likelihood of giving WOM (e.g. Gilly *et al.* 1998).

Competence, the second component, concerns the desire to interact with one’s environment in order to feel competent in generating desired outcomes. WOM motivations, such as wishing to help an organisation, wishing to help or warn other consumers and wanting vengeance,

support the effect competence can have on giving WOM (Sundaram *et al.* 1998; Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004).

Finally, the desire to feel related to others resonates with motivations associated with the sharing of WOM (e.g. other-involvement (Dichter, 1966), such as altruism (Sundaram *et al.* 1998) and a concern for other consumers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004). Thus we suggest relatedness increases the likelihood of offering WOM.

- *Proposition 1: The greater a person's autonomy, competence and relatedness with respect to a behaviour; the more likely that person is to give WOM about that behaviour.*

Rationale for proposition 2: The effect autonomy, competence and relatedness have on self-determined motivation is well established (e.g. Vallerand and Ratelle, 2002). As was noted earlier, CET suggests autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance self-determined types of motivation and reduce non self-determined types of motivation (Deci *et al.* 1991). A key distinction among the set of motivations recognized by SDT is that of autonomous versus controlled motivation (Shahar *et al.* 2003). The more people experience a sense of choice in regulating their actions, the more self-determined they will be. Intrinsic motivation implies engaging in an activity for the pleasure and satisfaction inherent in the activity (Vallerand and Ratelle, 2002). This suggests consumers who are intrinsically motivated towards a behaviour (energy saving in the present context) are also likely to be motivated to share their experiences and knowledge. Thus we argue that product involvement, self-involvement, extraversion and self-enhancement motivations impact on people's willingness to give WOM (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram *et al.* 1998; Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004).

- *Proposition 2: The greater a person's self-determined motivation, the more likely that person is to give WOM.*

Rationale for proposition 3: WOM has high credibility because the communicator is not seen as having a vested interest in the product or service that discuss and is likely to depict information in a meaningful way (Herr *et al.* 1991; Murray, 1991; Silverman, 2001). As the impact of a message on a receiver increases with a sender's knowledge (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Gilly *et al.* 1998), WOM is likely to generate a significant degree of consumer autonomy and competence in the receiver with respect to that behaviour. By definition, WOM underlies relationships and the receipt of WOM can reflect a greater sense of community and network. Further, stronger WOM messages are more effective, credible and convincing (Sweeney *et al.* in press). Consequently, a more powerful WOM delivery enhances this relationship.

- *Proposition 3: WOM increases a receiver's autonomy, competence and relatedness and these effects are stronger when messages are powerful.*

Rationale for proposition 4: As well as suggesting WOM impacts on the receiver (Proposition 3), there is likely to be a reinforcing effect on the sender. By giving WOM, a sender makes a public commitment (Cialdini, 2009). The consistency principle suggests that, after making such a commitment, people refine their attitudes and behaviours in the direction of the commitment. While the proposition that WOM reinforces a sender's perceptions is a relatively new idea, Garnefeld *et al.* (2011) found giving positive WOM enhanced the communicator's loyalty.

- *Proposition 4: Giving WOM increases a sender's autonomy, competence and relatedness and these effects are stronger when messages are powerful.*

The various propositions suggest a testable model, which is shown in Figure 1. Further research is needed to examine these propositions empirically. In subsequent testing we expect to derive measures of autonomy, competence and relatedness from e.g., Wilson et al 2006 and Williams et al 2007 and, self-determined motivation from Pelletier et al 1998 and giving and receiving WOM from Sweeney *et al.* (in press).

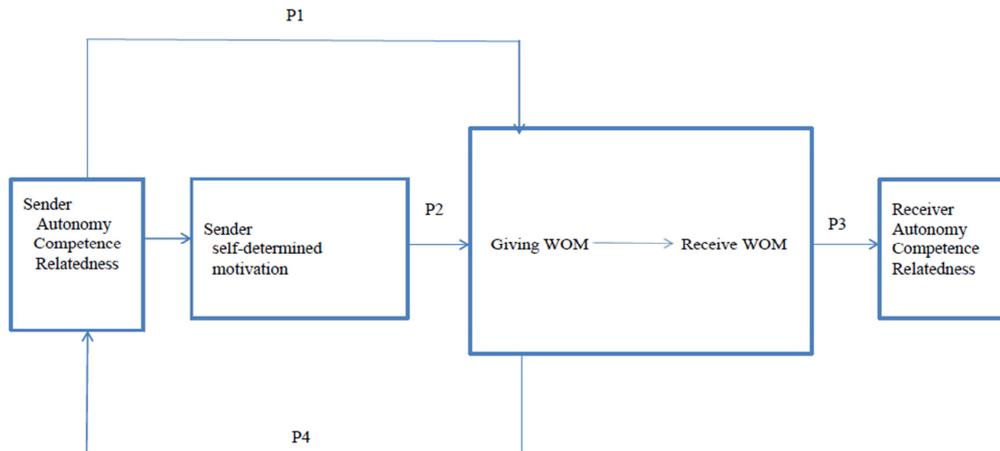


Figure 1: A Conceptual Model Relating Self Determination Theory and Word of Mouth

Conclusions

The present paper suggests WOM can play a powerful role in the sequential development of self-determined motivation among senders and receivers of WOM. We argued that the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness with respect to behaviours, such as saving energy, enhance the likelihood of giving WOM about that behaviour. Further, we argued that the intrinsic motivation resulting from these psychological needs increases the chances of WOM activity. We also suggested that WOM increases the autonomy, competence, and relatedness of receivers and senders. In an energy saving context, it would be expected that a person's feelings of helplessness (Sustainable Energy Future 2009) could be eliminated, or at least reduced, by increasing energy consumers' autonomy, competence and relatedness with respect to saving energy. We suggest these aspects could be increased by facilitating WOM activity among energy consumers.

A number of ways to encourage WOM have been suggested. There has been an exponential increase in social media and consumer-to-consumer communication through online discussion forums, social networking sites, consumer review sites and blogs (Riegner, 2007), and it is likely such sites will enhance autonomy, competence and relatedness among posters and browsers alike. Thus, future research is needed to see whether internet technology can enhance self-determination through the provision of technology-based supportive environments. In other words, can internet technology communication induce change in the area of energy conservation? If so, this would not only reduce energy consumption, but also potentially reduce the promotional expenditures associated with attempts to reduce energy consumption.

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