THE EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF ONLINE WORD-OF-MOUTH (EWOM) RESEARCH: A STRUCTURED REVIEW AND INTEGRATED MODEL

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INTRODUCTION

Consumers today face many informational benefits and challenges owing to the Internet. However, with information being seamless, limitless, and often anonymous, what is noise and what is valuable information? This information overload is one of the reasons why understanding online word of mouth (eWOM) becomes pivotal to consumers for their decision making as well as essential to marketers to know where to focus their efforts.

eWOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004) The growing importance of eWOM has spurred increasing amounts of research that has covered several important topics. For instance, the primary topic of interest was to understand factors that drive the incidence of eWOM. Studies in this realm (e.g., Dholakia et al., 2004; Dellaracos, 2003; DeBruyn and Lilien, 2008; Wang and Fesenmaier, 2003) examine both the socio-psychological as well as consumption related characteristics that motivate consumers to express their opinions online. The second topic that continues to receive focus is the impact of eWOM on consumers' trust in ecommerce websites, purchase intention, satisfaction and organizational profitability. Research on this topic (e.g., Ba and Pavlou, 2002; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Luo, 2009; Pavlou and Dimoka, 2006) suggests that appropriate feedback mechanisms and collective reputation systems induce a perception of credibility and trust in the products as well the sellers by reducing information asymmetry and perceived risk, and enhance the overall value of online transactions. Put together, extant research has explored several fascinating aspects of online WOM that enhance our understanding of this unique phenomenon.

The Need for a Systematic Review

Increasing interest in topics related to online WOM and the explosion of social media marketing in the past decade has lead to extensive research exploring various aspects of eWOM. However, the broad range of platforms and types of eWOM, coupled with myriad methods/approaches used to examine them has led to a fragmentation in extant literature. However, to the best of our knowledge, there is yet an attempt to consolidate the vast literature on an emerging phenomenon that almost everyone agrees has transformed the way business and marketing are practiced. Previous attempts to consolidate the findings in the eWOM literature (e.g., Dellarocas, 2003) have examined only specific instances of the phenomenon (e.g., reputation systems in eBay) and focused on a small sample of studies. Of course, when these studies were conducted, the literature wasn't as vast and mature as it is now; all the more the need for a systematic review.

This poses a risk to the accumulation of knowledge and the integration of findings among researchers (Rousseau et al., 2008). Rousseau et al. (2008) suggest that systematic reviews are necessary to overcome the fragmentation in the literature, and determine whether differences within a domain are reflective of different starting points or assumptions or whether they represent authentic differences within that domain. Systematic reviews "summarize in an explicit way what is known and not known about a specific practice-related question" (Briner et al., 2009, p.19), and help in overcoming the "research-practice gap" (Rousseau, 2006). A greater understanding of how eWOM is generated and consumed and how it affects both consumers and businesses is necessary given the sheer explosion of online WOM activity and supporting platforms. Further, a better understanding of this phenomenon can aid managers to better focus their marketing resources and realize the power of WOM in online market places. Therefore, a thorough structured review of this research stream should benefit both research and practice. The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To conduct a comprehensive search of contemporary cutting edge research articles related to online WOM, viral marketing, and online non-marketer generated information.
2. To conduct a thorough structured review of these studies and identify the various antecedents and consequences of online WOM.
3. To integrate the findings into an integrated model of online WOM incidence, evolution and impact.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we follow an adaptation of two structured review methods proposed by Webster and Watson (2002) and David and Han (2004). We perform an extensive search of published journal articles spanning several disciplines including marketing, psychology, management information systems (MIS) and others. In order to build the initial literature database, we employed literary searches in the databases of Academic Search Premier, ABI/INFORM Global, Social Science Citation Index, Science Citation Index and Emerald Insights. To ensure relevance, the search terms that should be present in either the articles' titles or abstracts include"eWOM", "EWOM", "online reviews", "online recommendations", "marketing buzz", "online viral marketing", and "online consumer reviews". After this search, we built a corpus of 241 peer review journal articles. In an effort to broaden the search beyond the original set of journals, we noted works of potential interest cited in the articles we reviewed (Webster and Watson 2002). An additional set of 26 articles, from journals other than those formally searched, was collected and a subset of 20 articles was read in full and coded.

We first examined the titles and abstracts of each article for substantive context and empirical content to evaluate whether inclusion was warranted (i.e., the article appeared to be concerned with, or relevant to, the topic). After this, we read all remaining articles in their entirety for substantive context and adequate empirical content leaving our database with 148 articles that could be used for the analysis. We use several criteria to filter the studies and arrive at the final list of studies used for the analysis: a) Published in a peer reviewed journal, b) The focus of the paper has to be on the various forms of eWOM or at least a subset of variables in the study concerned eWOM, c) Recommendations in the form of electronic agents were not considered for this study although it can be argued that electronic recommendation agents do consider larger consumer preferences to calculate individual suggestions, d) The research has to have a defined sample and an empirical methodology; cannot be purely conceptual/theoretical in nature, and e) the publication has to address consumers' perceptions of or impacts of eWOM

Our systematic review was concept-driven (Webster and Watson 2002). The concept-driven approach looks at the literature from the concepts presented by all authors rather than the author-driven approach that looks at how the individual author(s) have analyzed multiple concepts in several articles. The benefits to using this concept-driven method are: since it is a relatively new topic eWOM lacks the deep history that allows a small number of authors to have heavy research streams on the topic, in focusing on the concepts it allows our analysis to include all relevant research even if the author has only produced one article and lastly it allows our research to create a concept matrix that focuses on where the research has focused and what directions are ripe for development. For each article, we noted the key antecedents or consequences that the authors have identified and/or tested. The findings/concepts that we identified were organized around a framework we adapted from Nyilasy (2006) (See Fig 1).

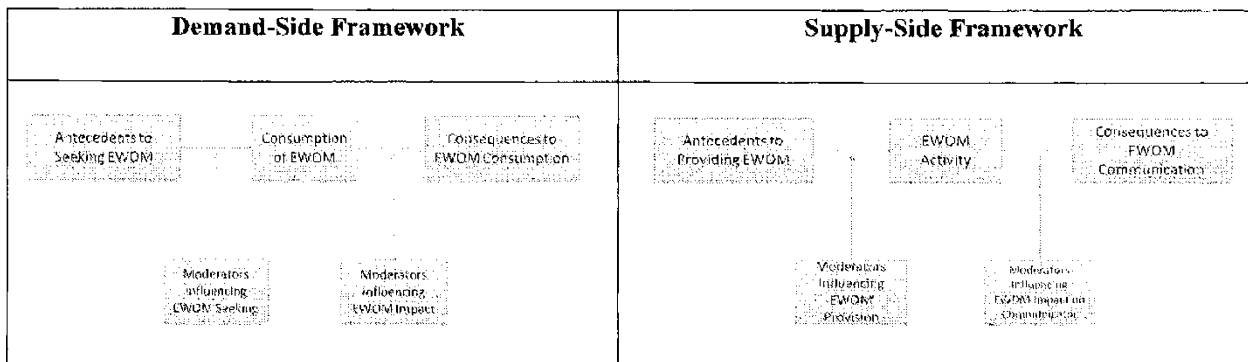| Unit of Analysis	Antecedents of WOM (Causes)	Consequences of WOM (Effect)
Receiver of WOM (Input)	Q1. Why do people listen? Key variables identified in previous literature on traditional WOM include external information search, product category risk, type of relationship with the source (tie-strength)	Q2. The power of WOM Key variables from previous literature include key communication effectiveness, awareness, attitude change, behavioral intention, purchase behavior.
Sender of WOM (Output)	Q3. Why do people talk? Key variables from previous literature include opinion leadership, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, promotional activities, direct influence of advertiser.	Q4. What happens to the communicator after the WOM? Key variables from previous literature include reduction in cognitive dissonance and ego enhancement

Figure 1: Multiple Dimensions of WOM Communication Episodes (Adapted from Nyilasy, 2006)

Nyilasy (2006) conducts a comprehensive assessment of about 150 articles on WOM (including a few articles on eWOM) and developed a framework that organizes the issues surrounding WOM communication episodes. The framework is based on the fundamental assumption that every WOM episode has two parties: the receiver and the communicator. Further, WOM episodes have several antecedents and consequences for both the senders and receivers. It is valuable to distinguish the two

areas since the communication channels between sender and receiver can often be flawed of have issues with the exchange (Lin, Geng and Whinston 2005). Without looking at the two sides of the communication, there will most definitely be gaps in the understanding of how eWOM is perceived and decoded. Nyilasy's framework brings both sides of the WOM episodes together in a single framework. However, it is important to note that while the above characteristics also apply to eWOM, there is usually a temporal gap between the point when the sender provides the information and the receiver consumes it.

Following the analysis, we integrate the key factors into two separate frameworks that organize the antecedents and consequences of both demand and supply-side of eWOM (see Table 1). The first framework termed as 'demand-side' framework organizes the key factors that motivate consumers to seek WOM and the resultant consequences of seeking the WOM (i.e., the power of WOM). The second framework termed the 'supply-side' framework organizes the key factors explaining why people engage in WOM and consequences of engaging in online WOM. Subsequently, we reconcile these two frameworks to build an integrated framework of eWOM, discuss the potential gaps in this important stream of research and point to interesting areas of future research.

Table 1: Key organizing frameworks for studying the antecedents and consequences of eWOM

Demand-Side Framework			Supply-Side Framework		
Antecedents to Seeking EWOM	Consumption of EWOM	Consequences to EWOM Consumption	Antecedents to Providing EWOM	EWOM Activity	Consequences to EWOM Communication
	Moderators influencing EWOM Seeking	Moderators influencing EWOM Impact		Moderators Influencing EWOM Provision	Moderators influencing EWOM Impact on Communication

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this structured abstract, we present key descriptive statistics of our vast data set. We intend to present our results and integrated models in the conference.

✓ The distribution of articles published by year, from 2001 to 2011, is shown in Figure 2. Research in eWOM increased significantly since 2001. The number of published articles doubled each year (over 80% from 2006 to 2011 and about 40% from 2009 to 2011).

✓ The key levels of analyses are of two types: 64% of the studies focused on the consumer (e.g., Park and Lee (2009) study how the valence of online reviews interacts with the reputation of the hosting website to result in varied outcomes in terms of consumer action/attitude towards products) whereas 35% conducted market analysis (e.g., Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) who studied the key impacts of online reviews on book sales in Amazon.com).

✓ The studies apply a wide range of methodologies that can be broadly categorized as follows (see Fig 3): quantitative methods such as experiments (n=41), archival data (objective data such as review data from popular sites including Amazon or eBay) (n=48) and surveys (n=41), and qualitative methods including focus groups, interviews and critical incident techniques (n=16).

✓ We also classify the articles based on the core subject area of the journal. We used a combination of the journals' aims and scopes with the title to determine the core topical area. The distribution of the articles by the subject area is shown in Figure 4. As can be seen, majority of the articles were published in key marketing journals closely followed by MIS/Information management.
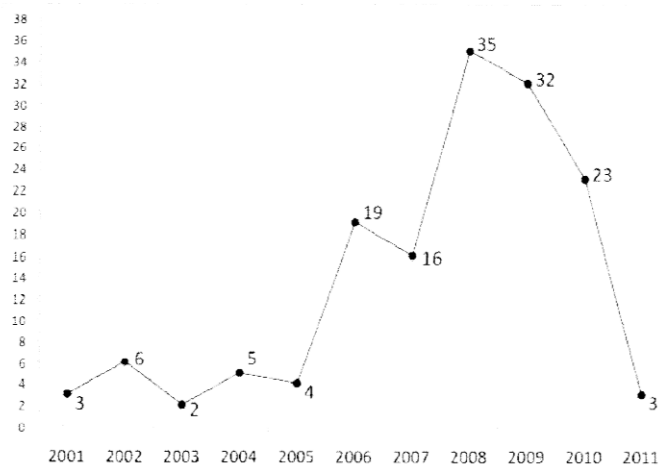
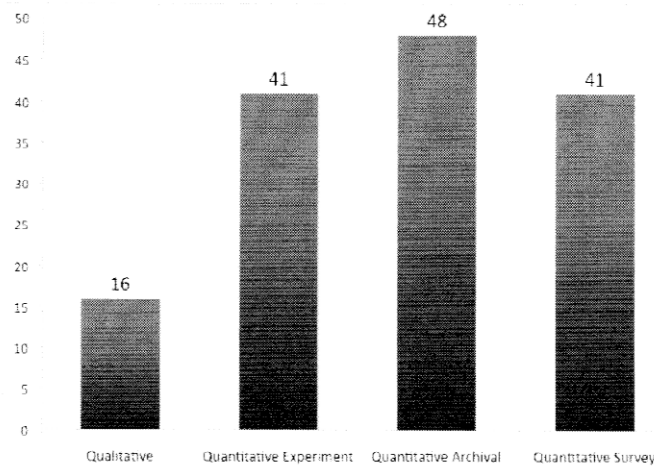**Figure 2: Distribution of articles by year of publication**

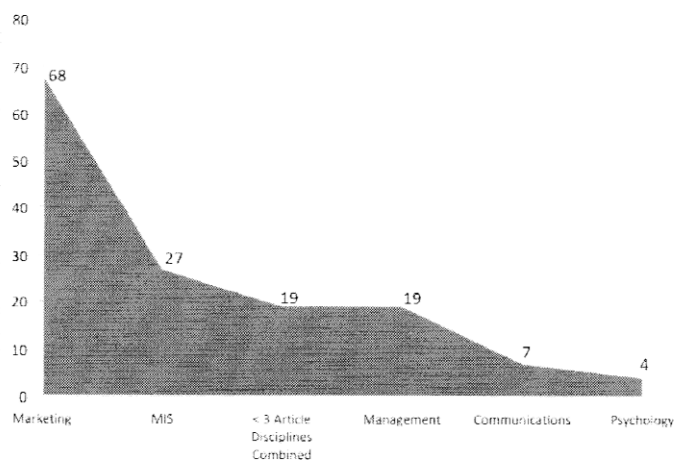**Figure 3: Distribution of article by the central methodology**

Figure 4: Distribution of articles by journal subject area Distribution of articles by journal subject area(*Marketing category also includes advertising related journals such as Journal of Advertising; **'Other' category includes fields such as Economics and Tourism & Hospitality marketing; ***Management category includes both business and management journals such as Journal of Business Research and Management Science)

References Available Upon Request