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## Pass it on: A framework for classifying the content of word of mouth



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## ABSTRACT

While word of mouth (WOM) is regarded as a key ingredient in product success, little is known about the content of WOM given. Using an online text-mining approach, we investigated the key themes within electronic WOM (eWOM) in two entertainment categories, television programs and movies. We identify seven key themes within eWOM conversations. These are (in order of prevalence): *Product/Service Characteristic* (26% of comments); *Personal Opinion* (17%); *Distribution Characteristic* (15%); *Categorisation Comparison* (14%); *Description of Purchase/Consumption Activity* (10%); *Advertising/Promotion* (9%) and *In-Market Performance* (4%). There are differences across categories, largely explicable by differences in the purchase/consumption process of movies versus television programs. However, there are only minor differences for new versus returning products. Our findings highlight the value of advertising during the initial stages of a product's launch to enable consumers to form opinions early on. Furthermore, marketing activities should provide information about how people can purchase/consume the product/service, as such details are often sought and passed on via eWOM. Given that eWOM often entails a comparison of a given product against another, providing signals on appropriate comparative offerings may help marketers control the context for consumers' understanding of the new product.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

传递：对口碑内容进行分类的框架

口碑被认为是产品成功的关键因素。但我们对口碑的内容[分类]却知之甚少。透过在线的文本挖掘方法，在两个娱乐类别(电视节目和电影)中我们展开对电子口碑行销关键主题的调查。我们确定电子口碑行销对话中的七个关键主题。根据普遍性的顺序分别为：产品/服务性质(26%评论)；个人意见(17%)；分销特征(15%)；分级比较(14%)；购买/消费活动描述(10%)；广告/宣传(9%)；以及市场表现(4%)。不同类别之间存在着差异，并可主要透过在电影和电视节目的购买/消费过程中的不同进行说明。然而，在新产品和退回的产品之间只存在极小的差异。我们的发现在产品推出的初期阶段突显了广告的价值，让消费者在初期形成消费观念。此外，市场营销活动应该为消费者提供如何购买产品/消费服务的信息，因为这些信息是消费者所关注并会透过电子口碑行销传递下去。考虑到电子口碑行销经常会引发现有产品和其他产品的对比，所以在合适的对比产品上标上提示，可能有助于营销人员管理消费者对新产品的认识。

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## 1. Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) occurs when consumers informally discuss products, services and brands (Arndt, 1967b; Charlett et al., 1995). For decades, WOM has been recognised as a key influencer in consumer decision-making, with studies showing its impact on

individuals to be greater than advertising (Day, 1971; East et al., 2013; Hartnett and Romaniuk, 2008; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Receiving WOM is considered to be superior to formal marketing activity due to the unbiased and trustworthy nature of the communication (Buttle, 1998).

In the past, WOM research has generally focused on two distinct ends of the activity: motivations for giving WOM and the outcomes of WOM received (East et al., 2008; Mangold et al., 1999; Nguyen and Romaniuk, 2013; Sundaram et al., 1998). Less often researched is the substance, or content of WOM. The content of WOM forms the lynchpin between WOM givers and receivers; it is what givers are stimulated to say, and what receivers then have to act upon. To

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date, studies explicitly addressing the content of WOM have been narrow in scope (examples include [Dellarocas and Narayan, 2006](#); [Verhaeghe and Van den Berge, 2009](#)). Researching content is important as it allows us to understand the type of information that consumers are likely to pass on, thus enhancing our knowledge of the WOM process. Such insights may also help marketers devise plans to stimulate WOM, allowing them to better provide stimuli that consumers are inclined to talk about.

The context of this study is television programs and movies, two categories known to generate a great deal of conversation ([Eubank and Fay, 2008](#)). TV programs and movies are also major audience sources for the advertisements and brand placements of other non-entertainment categories. Therefore, research helping these industries to better understand their viewing audiences will have a positive flow-on effect on marketers who advertise or place products within such channels ([Godes and Mayzlin, 2004](#)).

There are two major forms of electronic WOM or eWOM content. Viral videos are one, with research into the process ([van der Lans et al., 2010](#)) and the content that facilitates this process ([Nelson-Field et al., 2013](#)). The second, which is the transmission of verbal comments, which is in line with the traditional WOM, is the focus of this paper. To gain insight into the verbal content of WOM, we examine records of WOM posted on the Internet. This way of studying WOM, where the actual behaviour is captured, does not rely on respondent memory for WOM given/received or hypothetical scenarios. As well as identifying the key themes within eWOM, we investigate how the content of discussions differ across two categories, and new and existing products/services. We draw on a thematic and content analysis approach, coding over 13,000 online comments into categories to develop a framework to classify the content of WOM.

## 2. Background and research questions

We begin our literature review by exploring existing studies on WOM antecedents. Drawing on this stream of literature provides context to the factors that may inform what is said when WOM is given, and allows us to anticipate effects that new versus more familiar offerings may have on the content generated. Our focus is on eWOM by the broad audience, rather than that transmitted specifically by experts or critics (as per [Eliashberg and Shugan, 1997](#)).

One of the major topics for WOM antecedents is satisfaction/dissatisfaction ([Anderson, 1998](#); [Hu et al., 2006](#)). [Sundaram et al. \(1998\)](#) found that one-third of positive WOM (PWOM) is given due to feelings of extreme superior product performance, while 37% of negative WOM (NWOM) is driven by respondents' desire to retaliate against a company associated with a negative experience. In another study, [Dellarocas and Narayan \(2006\)](#) found a polarisation in online consumer ratings; half of the ratings about new release movies are equal to the highest score, and a fifth are equal to the lowest score, which suggests those posting comments have extreme views. The authors conclude that extreme dis/satisfaction associated with a product is a key motivation for giving eWOM. Such findings suggest that the content of WOM may be directly related to the product experience and evaluations of the brand based on that experience.

Another antecedent of WOM commonly discussed within the literature is altruism, or the intention to help others ([Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004](#); [Mangold et al., 1999](#)). [Mangold et al.'s \(1999\)](#) research in 77 service categories found that half of the time, the catalyst for giving WOM is the receiver's felt need for information or advice (see also [Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004](#); [Nguyen, 2009](#)). However, the type of information that people consider as being helpful to others has not been documented in the marketing liter-

ature. Our investigation into the content of eWOM should aid in understanding this issue.

Research by [Berger and Milkman \(2011\)](#) on the drivers of sharing news stories reveals that rather than being the front-page headlines, it is the quirky and interesting stories that are most commonly shared via Email. This is due to the combination of it being novel to the receiver, and as it is considered to be entertaining and may reflect positively on them. Therefore, we might expect to see a great deal of WOM about topical and novel features of a product, which may be perceived conversation worthy.

WOM also provides the potential for self-enhancement, particularly for market mavens (as per [Feick and Price, 1987](#)) and opinion leaders (e.g. [Robertson and Myers, 1969](#)), where the need to give an opinion is an important contributor to self worth. This might result in WOM content that is grounded in an opinion of the brand/product in question.

The numerous antecedents of WOM would suggest that the topics that arise within WOM conversations might also vary extensively. However such components of WOM conversation have not yet been established in the literature, and researchers lack a framework for investigating WOM conversation content. To address this gap, this research aims to uncover the themes and quantify their presence in the content of discussions, similar to how the motivations and triggers of WOM have been quantified (as per [Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004](#); [Mangold et al., 1999](#)). As such, our first research question is:

RQ1: What are the key themes underpinning the content of eWOM?

Our investigation of WOM content is conducted in the entertainment domain. This is a category that stimulates considerable discussion and has frequent launches of new products, therefore providing a wide scope for investigating themes. Past WOM studies on entertainment products suggest that people might discuss different elements when talking about TV programs versus movies. [Liu \(2006\)](#) found that the star power of movies had no effect on WOM generated, suggesting that either talent does not stimulate much conversation, or that the volume of WOM related to talent does not vary across different movies. In contrast, [Verhaeghe and Van den Berge \(2009\)](#) examined the content of online conversations about two Dutch reality TV series and found that talent generates a great deal of conversation. [Verhaeghe and Van den Berge's \(2009\)](#) research objective was to test a particular method of analysing eWOM, therefore, the relative incidence of content categories was not included as part of the results. However, based on these prior studies, it is possible that the content of conversation may differ between the categories investigated in our research.

Our second research objective is to investigate how WOM content differs for new versus existing or extensions of products/brands. WOM is thought to make an important contribution, particularly in the context of very new products and innovations. [Arndt \(1967a\)](#) found that WOM has more impact than advertising in a new product context, while the Bass model ([Bass, 1969](#)) includes a WOM parameter as one of the two key influences on the rate of new product adoption. However, it is not known whether the content of discussions would differ for new products/brands versus existing products/brands.

Each year television broadcasters place two types of TV programs into their schedule: new and returning series. Similarly, new movies can be launched as an original or non-original production (such as a sequel, remake or adaptation). One of the key elements that distinguish new/original entertainment products from returning/non-original is the absence of prior experience for viewers to draw upon when commenting. This may lead to differences in the content of eWOM generated for returning or non-original versus brand new productions. As such, our second research question is as follows:

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