

FORUM

Word of mouse

An assessment of electronic word-of-mouth research

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Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has received a great deal of attention from marketing academics and practitioners alike. Widespread use of the internet for shopping, information gathering and entertainment purposes has changed not only the ways that WOM can be studied and manipulated but also the very nature of the phenomenon. Published research into electronic WOM (eWOM) first appeared in the top-level marketing journals only about ten years ago. Since that time, there has been a great deal of research but no synthesis of the knowledge that would allow one to draw conclusions regarding the evolving nature of WOM and to extend the theory applied to this topic. This paper will address that gap, applying the paradigm funnel technique suggested by Nairn *et al.* (IJMR, 49, 2), and will suggest some future research directions.

‘It is the customer who determines what a business is. For it is the customer, and he alone, who through being willing to pay for a good or service, converts economic resources into wealth, things into goods. What the business thinks it produces is not of first importance – especially not to the future of the business and its success.’

Peter Drucker (1954)

Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has been defined as ‘oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom

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the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service' (Arndt 1967). Additionally, its nature has been described as fleeting because it 'vanishes as soon as it is uttered, for it occurs in a spontaneous manner and then disappears' (Stern 1994). In the age of the internet, however, that caveat no longer applies. WOM no longer vanishes instantly and it is not necessarily spontaneous. There may also be a reduced perception that the communicator is in fact non-commercial or even an actual consumer at all. From firm-moderated discussion boards to consumer-created complaint sites, the internet has changed the very definition of WOM, as well as the ways that marketers perceive and manage this important component of the marketing mix. The ramifications of electronic WOM (eWOM) have been a subject of discussion since the first user-friendly web browser, NCSA Mosaic, was introduced in 1993 (Zwass 1996). It has only been in the last ten or so years, however, that the topic has been addressed in top-level marketing journals. Because this research is relatively new, there has not yet been a thorough synthesis of the articles, nor has there been an analysis of the direction the research has taken. This paper will address that deficiency, utilising a technique known as the paradigm funnel. This technique allows researchers to reconcile the observed and the assumed while assessing the methods and implicit assumptions underlying a particular stream of literature (Nairn *et al.* 2007).

The paper is structured as follows: a brief WOM research timeline will describe the evolution of WOM thought; the 'Method' section will discuss the appropriateness of the paradigm funnel technique for this review, and will then explain the selection of articles for review and the review process; each category of research is then described, and representative articles discussed; the paper concludes with a discussion of the author's perceptions regarding gaps in the research and possible future directions for this stream of research.

A brief WOM research timeline

A topic of concern for consumer behaviour researchers since the late 1960s (Arndt 1967), it has long been believed that WOM can be even more influential in consumer decision making than any marketer-controlled source of information (Day 1971; Sheth 1971; Buttle 1998). Due to perceived source reliability and the flexibility of interpersonal communication, WOM has a unique ability to influence consumer decisions (Engel *et al.* 1969; Day 1971; Tybout *et al.* 1981; Richins 1983;

Bolfing 1989). Even though positive WOM has been proven to have a significant impact on consumer decision making (Engel *et al.* 1969; Richins 1983), research has shown that negative WOM can be even more influential (Bolfing 1989; Tybout *et al.* 1981), due to the fact that dissatisfied customers tend to tell more people about their experience than those who are satisfied or even delighted (Arndt 1967). Other consumers who find the information helpful in decision making can perceive even negative WOM as positive (Buttle 1998).

During the 1990s, marketing research experienced a shift from a primary focus on consumer behaviour to strategy (Horsky 1990; Hahn *et al.* 1994; Allenby & Ginter 1995; Buttle 1998; Price & Arnould 1999). A review of A-level journals for the past several years reveals that interest in the strategic implications of WOM has not dwindled since then (Maxham & Netemeyer 2002, 2003; Jones & Reynolds 2006; Voorhees *et al.* 2006; Allsop *et al.* 2007; Walsh & Beatty 2007; Wangenheim & Bayon 2007; Villanueva *et al.* 2008).

Recent strategy research has explored such issues as the role of WOM in customer acquisition (Kumar & Krishnan 2002; Brown *et al.* 2005; Ryu & Feick 2007; Wangenheim & Bayon 2007), in maintaining customers (Maxham & Netemeyer 2002, 2003; Jones & Reynolds 2006; Gremler & Gwinner 2008) and in increasing firm value (Luo 2007; Luo & Homburg 2007; Villanueva *et al.* 2008). Another stream of recent WOM research has examined consumers' perceptions of WOM providers and the impact of those perceptions on the consumers' decision making (Allsop *et al.* 2007; Gershoff *et al.* 2007).

Examined holistically, the body of WOM research indicates not only a strong interest on the part of researchers but also a strong belief by both academics and practitioners in the ability of consumer-generated WOM to influence the marketing efforts of firms. Additionally, the proliferation of the internet changes the nature of WOM by increasing the average consumer's ability to make their voice heard by more people and for an extended period. These changes affect firms as they attempt to manage and sometimes manipulate WOM. The articles reviewed in this paper discuss the evolution of WOM research as academics and practitioners respond to the phenomenon of eWOM.

Method

The search for articles began with an EBSCO search for those peer-reviewed articles with keywords that came from the following list: electronic word

of mouth, internet word of mouth, online word of mouth, word of mouse and eWOM. This search yielded 125 articles. This list was filtered further by selecting only those articles from a list of A- and B-ranked business journals, because these journals represent the highest level of research and are the source most utilised by academics and practitioners for acquiring and disseminating new findings. (A list of the included journals can be found in Table 1.) Any articles that were editorials or introductions to special issues were then removed, resulting in 53 reviewed articles. These articles were examined utilising the paradigm funnel suggested by Nairn *et al.* (2007).

The paradigm funnel serves to reconcile the observed and the assumed within a stream of literature. This technique examines the forces at work within a paradigm that cause shifts, or rejections of one paradigm and replacement with another. The funnel supposes four levels of paradigmatic research ranging from the 'explicit, observable' to the 'implicit, unobservable' (Nairn *et al.* 2007). The shifts occur between levels of the funnel with the determination of significant fact, the matching of a fact with theory, or the articulation of theory (Kuhn 1970). Essentially,

Table 1 Journals represented in this review (alphabetical)

Journal	Number of articles	Journal impact rating
Communications of the ACM	2	1.509
Electronic Markets	3	*
IEEE Micro	1	*
Information & Management	1	1.631
International Journal of Electronic Commerce	6	1.186
International Journal of Market Research	7	0.371
International Journal of Research in Marketing	1	1.071
Journal of Advertising Research	7	0.395
Journal of Applied Business Research	1	*
Journal of Business Research	3	0.815
Journal of Consumer Research	1	2.043
Journal of Interactive Marketing	5	1.027
Journal of Management Information Systems	4	1.818
Journal of Marketing	2	4.831
Journal of Marketing Education	1	*
Journal of Retailing	2	1.196
Management Science	2	1.687
Marketing Management	1	*
Marketing Management Journal	1	*
Marketing Science	2	3.977
Psychology and Marketing	1	0.948

*No impact rating listed in the 2007 ISI Web of Science Journal Citation Reports

when the facts of one paradigm do not agree with a specific theory, researchers evaluate the way that data are interpreted. If reinterpretation fails to reconcile theory with fact, then the underlying assumptions of those theories are questioned and an eventual shift to a new paradigm results. (An illustration of the paradigm funnel can be found in Figure 1.) For the purposes of this paper, the author employed criteria implied by this technique to place the reviewed articles into one of five categories (four of which represent levels of the paradigm funnel) based on the primary objective of each paper. The primary objective of each paper was determined by examining the authors' explicit intentions, the content and the research methodology.

Funnel level 1 represents those articles that employed empirical observation to catalogue and identify gaps in existing literature. The purpose of these articles was to determine significant fact. Funnel level 2 contains those articles that primarily address analytical methods in an attempt to analyse current views on methodology. Funnel level 3 consists of those articles that investigate specific theories and those authors who have participated in theory building. Funnel level 4 represents the few articles that challenge core ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological assumptions, and confront suppositions that have been

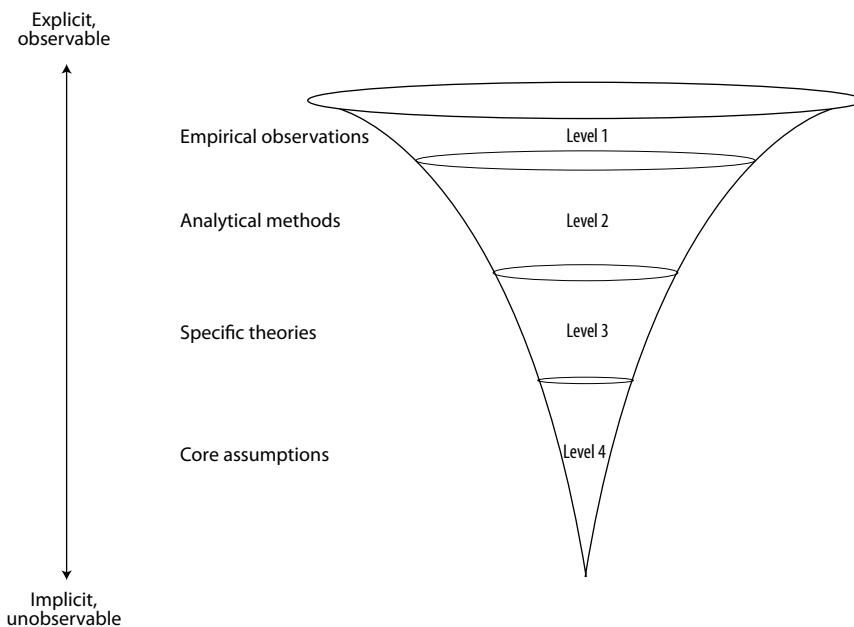


Figure 1 The paradigm funnel (adapted from Nairn *et al.* 2007)

made about the topic of eWOM. Finally, an additional ‘overview level’ is utilised to contain those articles that have attempted to describe the overall state of eWOM research as it pertains to a specific topic such as viral marketing or the travel and tourism industry.

Level 1: empirical research

An examination of the articles that comprise level 1 provides the reader with an idea about why the funnel is an appropriate metaphor for this type of review. A total of 51% of the 53 articles reviewed reside in this largest part of the funnel. Each of these articles employs empirical methods to determine the facts about eWOM. Several themes permeated the empirical articles. Some researchers explored the various motivations of consumers to participate as disseminators of eWOM (Moore & Moore 2004; Phelps *et al.* 2004; Do-Hyung *et al.* 2007; Amblee & Bui 2008). The same topic was examined from a cross-cultural perspective (Hung & Li 2007; Fong & Burton 2008), and one article specifically addressed the motivation of consumers to pay attention to eWOM (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003). Another group of articles written from a consumer behaviour perspective considered the effect of gender on propensity to engage in eWOM (Garbarino & Strahilevitz 2004; Awad & Ragowsky 2008). A couple of articles also examined the potential consumer outcomes of engaging in eWOM (Bickart & Schindler 2001; Sen & Lerman 2007).

Some empirical researchers studied eWOM from a strategic perspective. Overall, strategic implications of consumer-generated eWOM were a popular topic (Stauss 1997; Gruen *et al.* 2006; Graham & Havlena 2007;

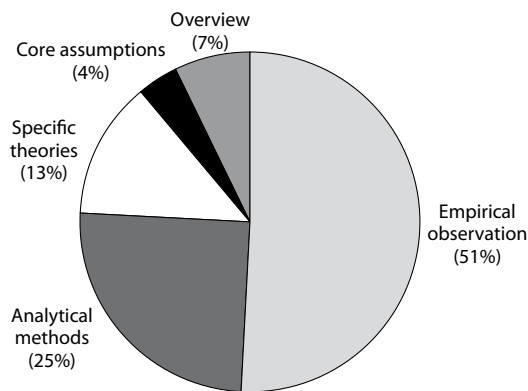


Figure 2 Percentage of articles in each research level

Niederhoffer *et al.* 2007; Gauri *et al.* 2008). The impact of eWOM on sales was examined in a number of contexts – online book sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin 2006), box office receipts (Liu 2006; Duan *et al.* 2008), online education participants (Peltier *et al.* 2003) – and in general (Davis & Khazanchi 2008). One article examined not only the impact of eWOM on sales but also the role of sales in generating more eWOM (Duan *et al.* 2008). The impact of eWOM on customer loyalty received some research attention (Srinivasan *et al.* 2002; Gruen *et al.* 2006; Mithas *et al.* 2006), and its role in building consumer trust was studied as well (Kuan & Bock 2007; Awad & Ragowsky 2008). Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) were the only researchers to create a typology of eWOM communications.

Only one researcher specifically studied the effects of a firm's decision to manipulate eWOM surreptitiously (Mayzlin 2006). This study considered the impact of this strategy on consumer trust as well as whether firms eventually use more resources promoting their products, both superior and inferior. In this case, consumers, uncertain about the products' quality, read messages online that help them to determine which product is superior. There was a unique equilibrium where online WOM was persuasive despite competing messages from competitor firms. In this equilibrium, firms spent more promoting inferior products, a striking contrast to existing advertising strategies. Consideration of the public policy implications of firm-generated and manipulated eWOM would seem to be an issue ripe for further research.

(A list of the articles that were grouped in level 1 can be found in Table 2.)

Table 2 Level 1 articles: empirical observations

Article	Purpose of the article
Amblee & Bui (2008)	Longitudinal study of the impact of brand and pooled reputation on the odds of additional reviews being posted
Awad & Ragowsky (2008)	Assesses whether the effect of online trust on intention to shop online is moderated by gender
Bickart & Schindler (2001)	Studies attitudinal and behavioural outcomes of consumers' online information gathering
Chevalier & Mayzlin (2006)	Investigates the impact of online book reviews on online book sales
Davis & Khazanchi (2008)	Evaluates the impact of online WOM attributes, product views, promotion, and category on e-commerce sales

(continued)

Table 2 Level 1 articles: empirical observations (continued)

Article	Purpose of the article
Do-Hyung <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Uses the elaboration likelihood model to explain how level of involvement with a product moderates the relationships between quality and quantity of online consumer reviews and purchase
Duan <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Separates the effects of eWOM as a precursor and an outcome of box office performance
Fong & Burton (2008)	Examines the differences between US and Chinese posters of online opinion forums
Garbarino & Strahilevitz (2004)	Examines the differences between men and women in their perceptions of risk when shopping online and the effect of receiving a recommendation from a friend
Gauri <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Compares the importance of e-ratings to that of site design, clarity of information, order-tracking, on-time delivery, and customer service in online businesses
Graham & Havlena (2007)	Attempts to show the link between eWOM and purchase decisions
Gruen <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Investigates the effects of online C2C know-how exchange on customer perceptions of value and customer loyalty intentions
Hennig-Thurau & Walsh (2003)	Describes several motives that explain why customers utilise eWOM in making purchase decisions
Hennig-Thurau <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Creates a typology of eWOM articulation in a virtual communities setting
Hung & Li (2007)	Develops four reasons why Chinese consumers participate in online opinion forums
Kassim & Abdullah (2008)	Investigates the impact of individual dimensions of service quality on customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty in an e-commerce setting
Kuan & Bock (2007)	Examines which factors contribute to trust in an online retailer
Liu (2006)	Explores the role of eWOM in explaining box office revenue
Mayzlin (2006)	Investigates whether eWOM remains credible if consumers know that firms are generating some of it themselves and whether firms choose to devote more resources promoting their inferior or superior products
Mithas <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Develops a theoretical model for understanding the effect of site design elements on customer loyalty to a website
Moore & Moore (2004)	Investigates how elements of the communication environment influence a consumer's attitude and intentions
Niederhoffer <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Utilises existing databases to describe the evolving role of eWOM in the consumer packaged goods sector
Peltier <i>et al.</i> (2003)	Examines the impact of eWOM in an online education setting
Phelps <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Reports the results of three studies that examine consumer responses and motivation to pass along eWOM e-mails
Sen & Lerman (2007)	Investigates the existence of a negativity effect on consumers' interpretation of eWOM communications
Srinivasan <i>et al.</i> (2002)	Investigates the antecedents and consequences of customer loyalty in an online setting/finds that loyalty impacts WOM promotion and willingness to pay more
Stauss (1997)	Qualitatively examines the phenomenon of eWOM and discusses the importance in relation to overall marketing strategy

Level 2: analytical methods

The number of articles in this part of the funnel decreases dramatically to 24% of the total. The primary focus of these is the selection of appropriate methodology for study of eWOM. The comparative value of various analytical methods' abilities to order, structure and manipulate data is discussed. One article assesses the ability of survey data to describe an appropriate marketing mix that includes an eWOM component (Schimmel & Nicholls 2005). Another develops a stylometric analysis that is designed to identify eWOM posters who are attempting to conceal their identities. The authors elaborate on the implications for firms who would then be able to spot mercenary customers and for consumers who might wish to distinguish firm-generated posts from those of actual consumers. The role of eWOM in each stage of a viral marketing message recipient's decision process is modelled in one article that also proposes a new methodology for collecting online conversation data unobtrusively in real time as they naturally occur (De Bruyn & Lilien 2008). Also introducing a new metric, Dwyer (2007) describes adapted PageRank (APR) for measuring the value that an online community places on each occurrence of eWOM, as well as the value that the community assigns to the posters who create them. Another article in this level assesses various methods of eWOM data collection in the context of online discussion boards for a new television season. The remaining and most recent articles in this level of the funnel assess various methods for collecting and analysing data utilising Web 2.0 communities and various forms of user-generated content (Riegner 2007; Shimp *et al.* 2007; Beer 2008; Cape 2008; Comley 2008; Cooke 2008; Ewing 2008; Verhaeghe *et al.* 2008). Most of these articles appeared in this very journal in a special issue devoted to the topic of Web 2.0.

The lack of articles in this part of the funnel is probably reflective of the relative novelty of this research stream. One would expect further research to explore the numerous quantitative and qualitative methods that researchers could apply to such a phenomenon. The evolution of Web 2.0 should provide researchers with even more opportunities to access eWOM data.

(A list of the articles that were grouped in level 2 can be found in Table 3.)

Level 3: specific theory

A mere 13% of the articles reviewed are representative of this level of research. Their primary purpose was to investigate specific theories as

Table 3 Level 2 articles: analytical methods

Article	Purpose of the article
Abbasi <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Develops a stylometric analysis technique to identify posters trying to hide their identities
Beer (2008)	Discusses the research implications of online discussion groups and the broad range of data that can be collected
Cape (2008)	Examines the impact that consumers who join multiple online discussion panels can have on research outcomes
Comley (2008)	Discusses the optimal way to manage eWOM in the form of online research panels
Cooke (2008)	Discusses trends in online eWOM research and the need for quality assurance standards
De Bruyn & Lilien (2008)	Develops a model of the role eWOM plays during each stage of a viral marketing recipient's decision process and presents a new methodology for collecting data unobtrusively and in real time
Dwyer (2007)	Introduces a new metric to measure the value a community places on eWOM and on its disseminators
Ewing (2008)	Employs a case study of a successful firm-created web community to provide insights regarding the type of market information that can be uncovered
Godes & Mayzlin (2004)	Assesses methods of gathering data in eWOM research in the context of a new TV season
Riegner (2007)	Discusses the ways that consumer adoption of Web 2.0 can be used to examine the impact that eWOM has on purchase decisions
Schimmel & Nicholls (2005)	Provides an example of utilising survey data to develop an appropriate media/method promotional mix, including advertising, promotion, interactive media, and WOM
Shimp <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Explores online testimonial writing as a method to enhance brand evaluations and considers whether consumers' tendency to exaggerate impacts their believability
Verhaeghe <i>et al.</i> (2008)	Studies the dynamics of online discussion communities in a research context

they apply to eWOM. While they each included an empirical component, the authors sought to test empirical propositions as they relate to existing theory. One such article analysed the way that consumers evaluate the effectiveness of firms' product differentiation strategies utilising online reviews (Clemons *et al.* 2006). The authors applied theories of hyperdifferentiation and resonance marketing. These theories explain the fact that mass customisation allows unprecedented product variety (hyperdifferentiation) and that consumers tend to respond most strongly to those products that most closely meet their particular desires (resonance

marketing). Another article studies consumer intent to participate in negative eWOM in the context of protest framing theory (Ward & Ostrom 2006). The theory explains that consumers who feel that they have been disrespected by firms unresponsive to their complaints feel a need to avenge the perceived assault on their own identity. They do so by attempting to mobilise mass audiences against the firm. An analysis of protest sites revealed that consumers frame their corporate betrayal to the public to demonstrate their power to influence others and gain revenge. The result is a community of discontent in which both individual and social identities are constructed and affirmed (Ward & Ostrom 2006). One article applies a traditional service failure model to eWOM communications to determine whether previous online purchase experience influences service failure and recovery experiences (Holloway *et al.* 2005). Another employs the Elaboration Likelihood Model to examine the impact of product involvement on both the quality and quantity of online reviews (Park *et al.* 2007). Several theories regarding persuasion, consumer value and personality are brought together to describe a persuasive communication model in another recent article (Chiu *et al.* 2007). The most recent article in this level describes eWOM in the context of self-efficacy theory (Yi & Gong 2008). The theory is used to explain the extent to which various dimensions of electronic service quality influence perceptions of overall quality for bricks-and-clicks firms.

The further reduction in the number of articles that attempt this level of research indicates the many opportunities for researchers to shine a theoretical spotlight on eWOM. Theories from other disciplines would provide excellent testing grounds for more detailed research. Theories from the field of psychology, such as theories of attitudinal advocacy or self-persuasion (Chaiken *et al.* 1996), and the theory of goal-directed behaviour (Scheuthle *et al.* 2005), have direct implications for eWOM research. Communications theories such as communication fidelity theory (Powers & Lowry 1984), sociological theories such as culture theory, and theories of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1985) are also natural candidates for this approach.

(A list of the articles that were grouped in level 3 can be found in Table 4.)

Level 4: core assumptions

Two articles, only 4% of the total, were assigned to this level of the funnel. The smallest group, these articles represent challenges to the deepest

Table 4 Level 3 articles: specific theories

Article	Purpose of the article
Chiu <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Employs a persuasive communication model along with theories of consumer value, personality, WOM, and source credibility in the context of a viral campaign
Clemons <i>et al.</i> (2006)	Analyses how online reviews are used to evaluate the effectiveness of product differentiation strategies based on the theories of hyperdifferentiation and resonance marketing
Eccleston & Griseri (2008)	Studies whether Gladwell's (2000) Connectors, Mavens and Salespeople are still relevant in the new Web 2.0 environment
Holloway <i>et al.</i> (2005)	Extends the Model of Service Failure to eWOM attributions and communications
Park <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Employs the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain how level of product involvement impacts the quality and quantity of online reviews
Ward & Ostrom (2006)	Analyses consumer intent in the context of Protest Framing Theory to establish motives for online consumer complaints
Yi & Gong (2008)	Describes eWOM in the context of Self-Efficacy Theory to determine the extent to which electronic service quality dimensions influence perceptions of overall quality

assumptions of eWOM theory. Both articles were from the same author: Chrysanthos Dellarocas. The first article surveyed the most important issues represented in eWOM research and suggested that game theory should be applied to the phenomenon as well as other theory from the economics discipline (Dellarocas 2003). Applying these theories, Dellarocas claimed that eWOM mechanisms have been considered 'a technology for building trust and fostering cooperation in online marketplaces' (2003, p. 1407), yet are poised to have a much wider impact on organisations with implications for a wide range of marketing activities such as brand building, customer acquisition and retention, product development and quality assurance.

The second article provided a theoretical analysis of the impact of online opinion forums on firm profits and consumer surplus considering the temptation to the firm to manipulate the messages in these forums by anonymously posting messages that praise its products or services (Dellarocas 2006). He suggested that this strategy is costly to maintain and has a high cost to society and the firm because the firm becomes locked into the strategy. If a particular firm chooses not to manipulate the opinion messages or ceases to manipulate eWOM in the forums, then consumers may be biased against that firm. He further suggested that firms invest instead in developing 'filtering' technologies that make it more difficult

for all firms to manipulate the medium. He added that firms would be the primary beneficiaries of such technologies as user-contributed online content increases.

(A list of the articles that were grouped in level 4 can be found in Table 5.)

Table 5 Level 4: core assumptions

Article	Purpose of the article
Dellarocas (2003)	Surveys the most important issues in eWOM research and the roles of game theory and economics in understanding the phenomenon
Dellarocas (2006)	Theoretical analysis of the impact of online opinion forums on firm profits and consumer surplus

Other articles

The final four articles that were reviewed did not fit into the paradigm funnel because of their specific foci. Each of the articles pertained to a subset of eWOM research. One of the earliest articles published in a top journal, by Greenstein (1999), represented an overview of viral marketing from the viewpoint of the firm. Helm (2000) presented a similar discussion of the common features of firms' viral marketing strategies. Werthner and Ricci (2004) discussed eWOM as it relates to the travel and tourism industry. Finally, Keller (2007) illuminated insights gathered from ongoing monitoring of both offline and online WOM discussions. None of these articles addressed theoretical foundations, nor did they include an empirical component, but the fact that they were published in top-level journals would seem to indicate that editors find the topic worthy.

(A list of the articles that were classified as overviews can be found in Table 6.)

Table 6 Overview articles

Article	Purpose of the article
Greenstein (1999)	Overview of viral marketing
Helm (2000)	Describes common features of viral marketing strategies
Keller (2007)	Describes insights gleaned from ongoing monitoring of both offline and online WOM conversations
Werthner & Ricci (2004)	Discusses eWOM in the context of the travel and tourism industry

Discussion and suggestions for future research

This review incorporates the work of the top researchers in the field of eWOM, and the mapping of this research onto the paradigm funnel provides a unique way to examine the status of eWOM theory. The fact that the amount of research published in top business journals is increasing is clearly indicative of the importance of this phenomenon to academics and practitioners alike. The first article on the topic was published in a top-level business journal in 1997 and research has been steadily increasing ever since that time (see Figure 3). The recency of the appearance of articles in the second level of the funnel indicates a current step forward in the evolution of this research stream. The diversity of topics and the calibre of journals publishing this research should also indicate to potential researchers that there are ample opportunities remaining in the area of eWOM (see Table 7).

The varied formats of eWOM provide opportunities for consumers to amplify their voices in an unprecedented fashion. Online feedback mechanisms, discussion boards, customer-created complaint sites and blogs are valid concerns for marketers who did not have to consider this type of consumer response as recently as 15 years ago (Zwass 1996). Consumers who have never met face to face, and who share none of the common characteristics that typically define referent sources (Alon & Brunel 2006), are coming together to form communities centred on firms they love and firms they hate. Sites such as thiscompanysucks.com and hatewalmart.com provide dissatisfied consumers with the opportunity to vent their frustrations with a marketer in a very public forum (Bailey

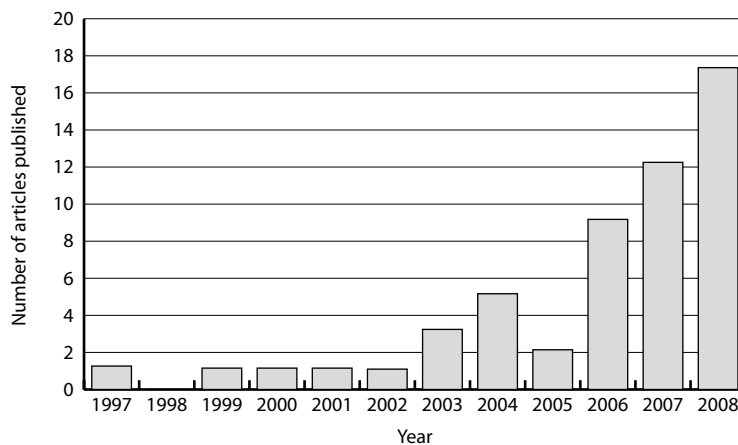


Figure 3 Number of eWOM articles published per year

Table 7 Journals with eWOM articles by year

Journal	Year	Impact rating
Communications of the ACM	2008	1.509
Electronic Markets (2 articles)		*
International Journal of Electronic Commerce (2 articles)		1.429
International Journal of Market Research (8 articles)		0.371
International Journal of Research in Marketing		1.071
Journal of Business Research		0.815
Journal of Management Information Systems (2 articles)		1.818
Journal of Retailing		1.196
Psychology and Marketing		0.948
Information & Management	2007	1.631
International Journal of Electronic Commerce (2 articles)		1.429
Journal of Advertising Research (6 articles)		0.395
Journal of Interactive Marketing (2 articles)		1.027
Journal of Business Research (2 articles)	2006	0.815
Journal of Consumer Research		2.043
Journal of Management Information Systems (2 articles)		1.818
Journal of Marketing (2 articles)		4.831
Management Science		1.687
Marketing Science		3.977
Journal of Applied Business Research		2005
Journal of Interactive Marketing	1.027	
Communications of the ACM	2004	1.509
Journal of Advertising Research		0.395
Journal of Business Research		0.815
Marketing Management Journal		*
Marketing Science		3.977
International Journal of Electronic Commerce	2003	1.429
Journal of Marketing Education		*
Management Science		1.687
Journal of Retailing	2002	1.196
Journal of Interactive Marketing	2001	1.027
Electronic Markets	2000	*
IEEE Micro	1999	*
Marketing Management	1997	*

* No impact rating listed in the 2007 ISI Web of Science Journal Citation Reports

2004). The perception of other consumers that the information presented in this format is unbiased lends it a credibility that might not otherwise exist (Bickart & Schindler 2001). Blogs such as these will provide rich sources of data for future researchers (Mouncey 2008).

It would be a mistake to ignore the social component of eWOM. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) found that consumers read online comments primarily to save decision-making time and to allow them to make more informed buying decisions. They also uncovered a significant value that consumers place on the sense of belonging to a social community that accompanies participation in these forums. Consumers' desire for social interaction and the potential to enhance their own self-worth were deemed the primary factors that lead consumers to participate in eWOM behaviour (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004).

As researchers continue to advance eWOM theory, several factors should be paramount. First, existing research that identifies market opinion leaders should be re-evaluated to determine the ways in which these important individuals differ in the online world. 'Techfluentials' is the name that has been given to this new breed of influential, technology-driven opinion leaders (*Public Relations Tactics* 2005), but little is known about the characteristics of these consumers. Next, the proliferation of consumer opinion sites will surely result in increased awareness by consumers of these types of forum. As these sites become more established, the potential arises that consumers will develop attitudes towards the sites that are independent of their attitudes towards the firms that are the subject of the forums (Thorson & Rodgers 2006). Researchers should examine the possibility of these sites becoming recognisable brands themselves. If that happens, the potential for site owner abuse of this newfound power creates definite social policy implications separate from those that evolve from marketers' ability to manipulate eWOM surreptitiously. Finally, researchers should examine the extent to which consumers discount what they read in the online format. The possibility exists that, just as consumers ignore some traditional WOM, they may mentally compensate for the possibility that a firm is manipulating its own eWOM. This should be examined.

Conclusion

The volume of research concerning eWOM and the relatively short period in which that research stream has evolved indicate the importance of this phenomenon. Researchers, practitioners and consumers will benefit from a better understanding of eWOM. The mapping of the existing research onto the levels of the paradigm funnel should serve to remind marketing academics of the importance of challenging the core assumptions that

underlie eWOM thought in order to understand better the differences between eWOM and its traditional counterpart.

In the past, a company built a reputation, good or bad, over time, and the company itself controlled that reputation. The internet has changed that. Allowing bi-directional communication among masses of people who would never have had the capability of interacting previously, it has changed the way that reputation develops. With minimal cost and almost no regard for distance or time, the power of the consumer is increasing. Consumers themselves are correcting the traditional imbalance of power between the consumer and the firm. Pitt *et al.* (2002) claim that there will be three kinds of companies based on their responses to this power shift. The first type will 'quake with fear' as real consumer power catches them unprepared. The second type will overreact by buying up every domain name possible, spinning their wheels in vain and trying to take back the power they believe they hitherto held. The third type will quake instead with anticipation of the opportunities created by this 'reality of the experience economy' (Pitt *et al.* 2002, p. 12). They will embrace the ability to hear the voice of consumers in a way that was heretofore impossible, and they will understand that this voice is not going away. A prime example of this philosophy at work is DuPont, who in 2006 became the first marketer to endorse a code of ethics for WOM marketing (Krol 2006). Believing that consumers need to trust the seller as much as the product, they have exhibited a willingness to manage responsibly and proactively this essential component of their evolving marketing mix.

Over 50 years ago, Peter Drucker claimed that the consumer has always held the power position in our economy (Drucker 1954). The authors of the articles reviewed in this manuscript seem to realise that the internet and eWOM only enhance that power. This author believes that only the companies who accept this and include an understanding of eWOM in their marketing strategies will be the companies that are still here 50 years from now.

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