Psychosocial and Contextual Determinants of Word-of-Mouth Transmission: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Our understanding of what makes content go viral is still developing. Previous literature has examined the influence of emotion, impression management, and communication context. However, there is still much we do not know about how these factors interact to determine the transmission of brand-related content in complex real-world environments. This paper provides an overview of the current literature, and a conceptual framework for future research into the psychological and contextual determinants of this type of word-of-mouth activity. Exploring the pathways outlined in the conceptual framework proposed in this paper will inform theory, as well as facilitate viral campaign design.

Keywords: word-of-mouth, viral marketing, social transmission

Track: Consumer Behaviour

1.0 Introduction

When Canadian musician Dave Carroll had his guitar damaged on a trip he wrote a song about it. Entitled "United breaks guitars" it went viral leaving United Airlines with a PR disaster and propelling Carroll and his music into the spotlight: over 15 million people to date have viewed the song online. While the benefits of viral marketing have been demonstrated (Dobele, Toleman, & Beverland, 2005), designing such campaigns remains a challenging endeavour that generally requires marketing managers to do much more than pen a catchy tune.

Viral marketing relies on of word-of-mouth (WOM) transmission, which is the propagation of marketing messages or brand-related content by individual consumers, to other consumers (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). This transmission can occur through a variety of channels and in a variety of contexts, including face-to-face WOM, and computer mediated, electronic WOM (eWOM). Understanding what drives WOM transmission will refine viral and social marketing approaches. That is, understanding what people will share, as well as what determines how, where, and with whom they will share will inform viral campaign design, and assist marketers to create *shareable* content.

Previous research has shown that emotional arousal, impression management, and communication context are implicated in the WOM transmission process. However, the literature in this area remains disjointed: how these antecedents interact to influence WOM

transmission is unknown, and the factors which lead to communication context selection (i.e., where, how, and to whom individuals will transmit WOM) remain unclear. This paper provides a review of the relevant literature, with a focus on directions for future research. A conceptual model is also provided which outlines the state of the literature, and highlights areas which require further work.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Arousal and WOM Transmission

Successful viral marketing often triggers an emotional response (Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & Van Wijk, 2007), and emotional arousal has been implicated in this process (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Emotional arousal (hereafter arousal) involves changes to functioning, such as heart-rate and blood pressure fluctuations, in response to emotion-eliciting stimuli (McCraty, Atkinson, Tiller, Rein, & Watkins, 1995). Some emotions (e.g., anger, surprise, joy) lead to high levels of physiological arousal, while other emotions produce a decrease in arousal (e.g., sadness, contentment; Thayer, 1986). Arousal influences WOM transmission: messages that produce high levels of physiological arousal are more likely to be shared than messages that produce low levels of arousal (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Two mechanisms could potentially explain the relationship between arousal and WOM transmission. Firstly, it has been speculated that arousal produces a "readiness for action" which may facilitate sharing behaviour (Berger, 2013, p. 108). Alternatively, the arousal produced by the message may be misattributed, leading to more positive evaluations of the message itself (Berger, 2014). That is, arousing messages may be perceived as more interesting, or worthy of sharing than non-arousing messages. However, neither of these mechanisms have been empirically investigated, which leads to the following questions:

RQ 1. What mediates the relationship between arousal and WOM transmission?
RQ 1a. Does readiness for action mediate the relationship between arousal and WOM transmission?
RQ 1b. Does the misattribution of arousal mediate the relationship between arousal and WOM transmission?

2.2 Impression Management and Word of Mouth

While arousal has been shown to increase the likelihood of WOM transmission, the social landscape of online environments may also determine what people share. Individuals are inherently motivated to manage others' impressions of them, and this concern is evident both in face-to-face and online communications (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). When engaging in impression management, individuals will present themselves in a way that is congruent with their self-concept (self-verification), and/or in a way that is designed to produce a favourable impression from others (self-enhancement; Banaji & Prentice, 1994). The impact of self-verification on WOM transmission remains unclear. However, self-enhancement motivation has been shown to influence the generation and transmission of WOM (De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, 2012): people are likely to share WOM that casts them in a positive light, and avoid sharing WOM that would lead to others forming negative impressions of them (De Angelis et al., 2012).

In addition to the uncertainty regarding the role of self-verification, how impression management interacts with arousal to determine sharing behaviour is unknown. Also, impression management may not only influence *what* individuals will share, but *how*, *where*, and *with whom* they will share. Once an individual has decided to transmit the message, she may then *select* an appropriate communication context in which to transmit the message (e.g., face-to-face vs. emailing it to one friend vs. sharing with a large group of friends on Facebook). Given that the context of the communication may have an influence on (a) what people are willing to share, and (b) impression management concerns (Berger, 2014), further work is needed to understand how impression management influences communication context choice when transmitting WOM . Therefore, future research should address the following questions:

RQ 2. Does self-verification influence WOM transmission?
RQ 3. Does impression management moderate the relationship between arousal and WOM transmission?
RQ 4. Does impression management determine WOM transmission across different communication contexts?

2.3 Communication Context

Three dimensions that may drive the effect of communication context on WOM transmission are communication synchronicity, audience type, and audience size (Berger, 2014). Different types of interaction involve different combinations of these dimensions. For example, face-to-face WOM transmission is synchronous (it happens in real time), it may be directed toward a large or small audience, and the audience may consist of close friends, acquaintances, or strangers.

The asynchronous nature of written communication (vs. the synchronous, real-time nature of face-to-face communication) allows individuals to be more considered about the messages they share. Berger and Iyengar (2013) found that communication synchronicity determined sharing behaviour and that this effect was stronger when there was a need to self-enhance. When communication was asynchronous, individuals were able to more carefully craft a message that led participants to share more interesting (and therefore self-enhancing) WOM (Berger & Iyengar, 2013).

While Berger and Iyengar (2013) demonstrate the importance of *how* individuals communicate in determining WOM transmission, *who* an individual is communicating with may also have an effect on what they will share. Audience type may determine WOM activity as a function of social ties (Berger, 2014; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). The social tie between two individuals may be strong, weak, or non-existent, depending on the nature of the relationship (Granovetter, 1973). Audience type is important in determining WOM activity because individuals tailor what they share to match the closeness of their relationship to the receiver (Stutzman & Kramer-Duffield, 2010). This message-tailoring is particularly relevant to eWOM transmission as online platforms facilitate broadcasting to large, heterogeneous audiences (e.g. Facebook).

When sharing WOM, individuals may either narrowcast information to a small audience (e.g., sending an email to one receiver), or broadcast a message to a large audience (e.g., sharing to a Facebook newsfeed). Broadcasting, compared to narrowcasting, is more likely to lead to the transmission of a message that is self-enhancing (Barasch & Berger,

2014). Barasch and Berger (2014) found that participants who were asked to broadcast WOM were more likely to engage in protective self-enhancement than those who were asked to narrowcast. That is, participants in the broadcasting condition avoided sharing content that would cast them in a negative light to a greater extent than those in the narrowcasting condition. Broadcasting increased participants' self-focus, which in turn increased their motivation to engage in protective self-enhancement (Barasch & Berger, 2014). However, there was no relationship between audience size and acquisitive self-enhancement (i.e., sharing WOM to facilitate positive impressions) in this study, a finding that is inconsistent with other research in this area (e.g., De Angelis et al., 2012)

An alternate explanation for the effect of audience size on communication is provided by Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia, and Bell (2015). Eisingerich et al. found that broadcasting, compared to narrowcasting, involved greater perceived social risk. That is, participants felt that engaging in broadcasted eWOM activity, compared to narrowcasted face-to-face WOM activity, was riskier in regard to the potential for audience disapproval and potential embarrassment. As a result of this perceived social risk, participants reported less likelihood to engage in broadcasted eWOM, rather than narrowcasted, face-to-face WOM. Therefore, the difference in WOM activity due to audience size is also mediated by perceived social risk.

Interestingly, Eisingerich et al. (2015) also found that when there was a high need to self-enhance, the effect of perceived social risk on WOM activity was reversed. Participants with a chronically high need to self-enhance reported being more likely to broadcast eWOM than they were to narrowcast face-to-face WOM. These findings are somewhat inconsistent with those of Barasch and Berger (2014). While both studies provide support for the notion that broadcasting increases the importance of self-enhancement motivation in determining what people will share, Barasch and Berger's findings suggest that broadcasting results in protective, rather than acquisitive, self-enhancement activity. However, if there is indeed increased perceived social risk associated with broadcasting (as the results of Eisingerich et al. suggest) a need to engage in protective self-enhancement (as demonstrated by Barasch & Berger, 2014) would decrease the likelihood to broadcast WOM.

Unlike participants in Barasch and Berger's (2014) study, participants in the study reported by Eisingerich et al. did not engage in protective self-enhancement; rather, their increased likelihood to broadcast WOM was driven by acquisitive self-enhancement (i.e., sharing WOM in order to facilitate positive impressions). That is, participants wanted to cast themselves in a positive light by sharing WOM. Broadcasting, rather than narrowcasting, may have provided a more salient opportunity to do this as it allowed them to engage in impression management with many people at one time. Therefore, in addition to greater perceived social risk, broadcasting may also involve greater perceived social benefits than narrowcasting, which leads to the following research question:

> RQ 5. Does perceived social benefit mediate the relationship between audience size and WOM transmission?

Previous literature in this area has examined the impact of synchronicity, audience size, and audience type on WOM activity when the communication context is fixed. That is, participants have been allocated to a particular communication context, and then the impact of that context on WOM behaviour has been measured. However communication context is not always fixed in the real world. Individuals can be selective regarding where, when, and

with whom they share WOM. As individuals engage in WOM to achieve social goals such as impression management (De Angelis et al., 2012), communication context choice may be due to how efficiently the context will facilitate the individual's goals. Accordingly, perceived social risk, and perceived social benefit of each communication context may influence individuals' choice. This possibility is summarised in the following research questions:

RQ 6. Is the relationship between impression management and WOM transmission driven by perceived social risk and perceived social benefit?

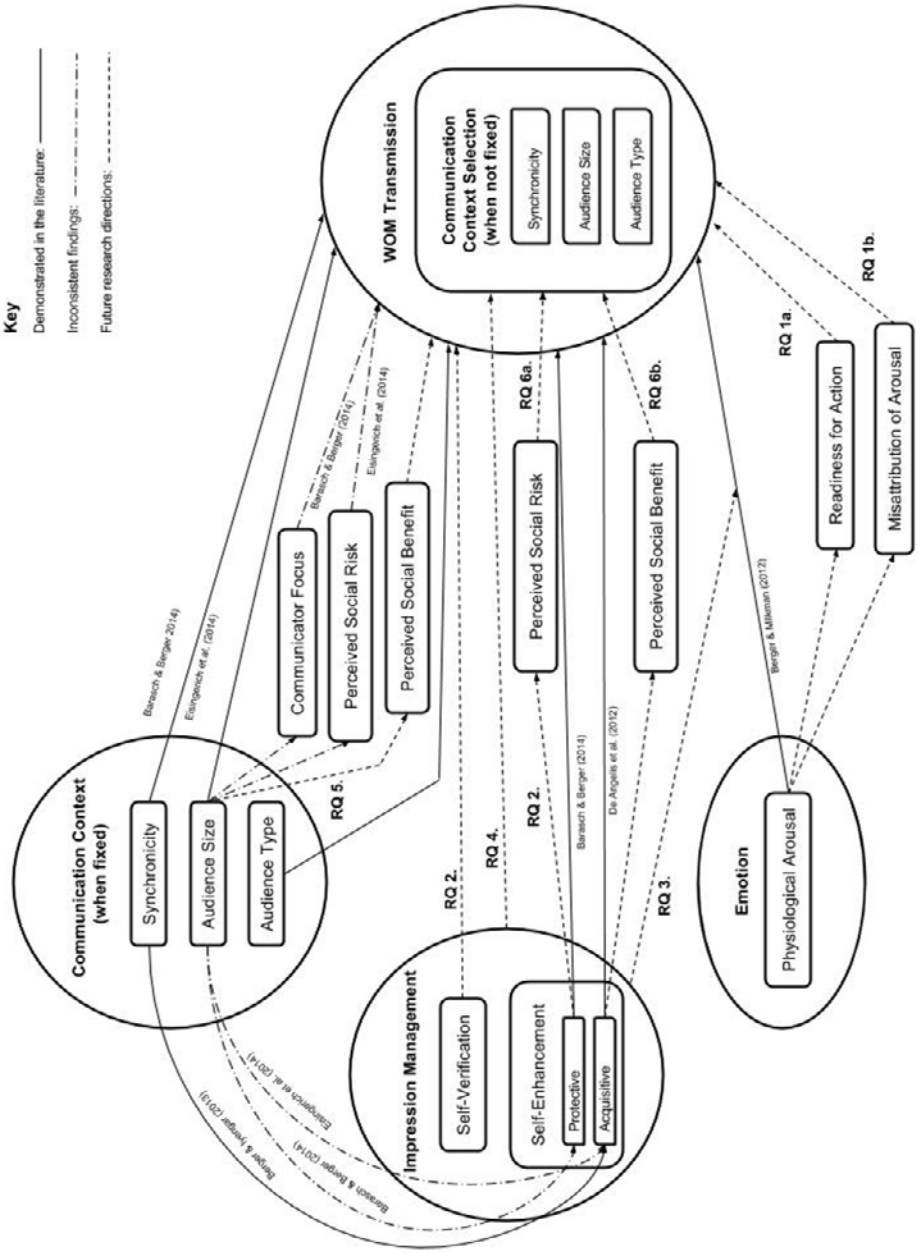
RQ 6a. Does perceived social risk mediate the relationship between protective self-enhancement and communication context selection?

RQ 6b. Does perceived social benefit mediate the relationship between acquisitive self-enhancement and communication context selection?

3.0 Future Directions and Managerial Implications

Arousal, self-concept, and communication context are likely to influence WOM transmission. What is not clear is the relative strength of each of these factors in determining what people will share, how these factors influence communication context selection, and how these factors interact. As outlined in Figure 1, future research should determine what mediates the relationship between arousal and WOM transmission (RQ 1). Further work is needed to understand the role of self-verification, how impression management interacts with arousal, and how this factor may determine communication context selection (research questions 2, 3, and 4). The potential mediating roles of perceived social benefit and perceived social risk should be clarified, both in regard to the relationship between audience size and WOM transmission (RQ 5) and the relationship (if one does exist) between impression management and communication context selection (RQ 6).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Impression Management, Arousal, Communication Context and WOM Transmission



Understanding how emotion and impression management interact to motivate sharing behaviour would inform the development of messages intended to spread via word-of-mouth. Further, WOM communication context may determine the consequences of transmission. For example, broadcasted WOM facilitates brand awareness, while narrowcasted WOM can be more effective at generating engagement with, and acceptance of the message (Ang, 2014; Aral & Walker, 2011). Understanding how individuals select WOM transmission context may therefore assist marketers to develop messages that will not only be likely to spread, but be likely to spread via the desired communication context.

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