

INFLUENCING ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION:
GETTING BEYOND THE SKEPTICISM OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the uneasiness that public relations (PR) professionals are experiencing regarding word-of-mouth (WOM) communication and the growing phenomenon of electronic WOM. That uneasiness is based on the notion that companies and brands no longer control their message. Instead, consumers, who communicate with other consumers, have seized control. However, this study indicates that companies and brands can retain some control of the message if they properly engage their consumers. While eWOM communication is growing and evolving, this study finds that consumers remain skeptical about eWOM messages. They crave supporting information before deciding how to act or behave. This is where PR professionals come into play. If they can successfully engage their consumers and interact with them through avenues such as social media, they can be effective in influencing eWOM communication. The study finds that persuasive eWOM communication requires supporting evidence. It is the PR professional's responsibility to provide information that can influence the eWOM communication about their product. Several tactics outlined in this study can help PR professionals accomplish this objective.

Introduction

The growth of the Internet and development of social media have brought increased power to word-of-mouth (WOM) communication and have led to electronic WOM (eWOM). WOM communication—along with its ever-growing electronic form—is causing anxiety levels of public relations (PR) professionals to rise. That uneasiness comes from the perceived inability to control the message. In the old PR model, companies were in control of their brand and messaging as PR professionals developed a message and transmitted it to potential consumers through various controlled means (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Now, companies cannot ignore the phenomenon of social media, blogs and Internet forums, which have rapidly become the preferred method for consumers to disseminate information on products and services (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The growth in these digital media areas has shifted primary control of the message from the company to the consumer. WOM communication has taken on increased influence in large part due to this shift where platforms such as social media have made society more connected than ever before. This new paradigm calls on PR managers to recognize the power of discussions between consumers online.

As Mangold and Faulds (2009) suggest, PR managers “must accept the reality that a vast amount of information about their products and services is being communicated by individual consumers to other consumers” (p. 360). However, PR and marketing professionals must not view this shift in power negatively. With the growth of technology comes a multitude of avenues to engage the public. If utilized correctly, those

expanded choices offer a great opportunity to develop relationships with consumers and influence the messages carried through eWOM communication.

Research Problem

Research into eWOM is fragmented and few studies have measured the influence strategic communication and marketing tactics have on eWOM communication. In addition, with technological advances happening at a rapid pace, current research quickly becomes outdated. This warrants research to identify successful methods for engaging consumers and to understand the amount of influence engagement has on eWOM communication.

Previous studies regarding eWOM communication have centered on the reach and influence of eWOM messages. According to Nielsen, 92 percent of consumers trust recommendations from friends, family, colleagues and peers over all other forms of advertising (Whitler, 2014). Studies have found that when making purchase decisions, online reviews posted by unknown consumers are more trusted than traditional media (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). What is missing from prior research is how communications professionals deal with the phenomenon of WOM, and more specifically, eWOM.

This thesis delves into the views of one particular group of consumers—undergraduate college students—towards eWOM communication and examines the amount of influence that comes from eWOM conversations that happen in social media. This study then goes a step further by exploring how PR and marketing professionals can use that information to inform strategy that can influence the dialogue between consumers.

Undergraduate students are the source for this study because of the high involvement that group has with social media. In 2015, the Pew Research Center found that 90 percent of young adults (ages 18-29) use social media, which is up 78 percent from 2005 (Perrin, 2015). This research focuses primarily on eWOM communication that takes place through social media and examines how the attitudes and behaviors of undergraduate students are affected as a result of eWOM and how PR professionals' involvement in the conversation impacts that change.

Purpose of Study

With the persuasiveness of eWOM communication, it is imperative that PR professionals realize its effects. The purpose of this research is to understand how consumers create, share and respond to eWOM communications in social media, so that PR professionals can implement tactics that can influence the conversations that take place between consumers. Specifically, this research explores college undergraduate students—how they create, share and respond to eWOM communication that takes place through social media.

Creating products and services that address the wants and needs of the audience is the first step in creating positive eWOM. After that, there are several ways to approach consumer engagement. Some tactics have been successful; many have failed. Gaining a better understanding of eWOM communication effects is advantageous for PR professionals as they create integrated marketing plans and communication tactics. The “loss of control” unease comes about because it stands in contrast to the old communications model in which the organization held a high level of control. However, integrated strategic communications and marketing campaigns should involve social

media and other non-traditional forms of media with a goal of provoking consumer involvement in the message. This study shows that careful strategic planning can help brands retain some level of control over the messages.

Explication of Concepts

Word-of-mouth communication has been defined as “a form of interpersonal non-commercial communication among acquaintances” (Cheung & Lee, 2012, p. 219). It “transforms commercial information into cultural stories that are relevant to members of a particular community” (Kozients, de Valck, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010, p. 86). While eWOM communication shares some common characteristics with traditional WOM communication, it also involves unprecedented scalability and there is no need for all communicators to be present when the information is exchanged (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Electronic WOM communication, which includes social media, blogs and Internet forums, is more voluminous, persistent and accessible than traditional WOM, and typically involves no familiarity between senders and receivers (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Gupta & Harris, 2010).

For this study, PR professionals refers to anyone in the fields of public relations, marketing, advertising and strategic communications. The role of these individuals is to promote and market particular products or services to consumers. These professionals are the intended audience for the findings and recommendations of this research.

Literature Review

Research into the effects of mass media reveals that the media can and do affect the public's attitudes and behaviors. Although the extent of those effects remains unclear, this literature review will show that WOM communication is often viewed as the most effective. With the emergence of eWOM communication and its ability to be persuasive, it is imperative for PR professionals to realize the effects of eWOM communication and understand strategies that can influence the conversations that are taking place between consumers.

In eWOM, consumers view information from fellow consumers who share similar interests as more credible than marketer-driven information. The Cheung and Thadani (2012) research indicating that consumers trust recommendations from unknown consumers more than traditional marketing is supported by a study conducted by Bickart and Schindler (2001). Participants in that study were asked to look at either corporate webpages or online discussions, then questioned about their purchase intentions, knowledge, thoughts and interest concerning a number of activities. The survey found that exposure to online discussions generated more product interest than exposure to marketer-generated sources of information, such as corporate websites (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

This literature review examines previous findings on the effects of eWOM. The review outlines a framework established by Cheung & Thadani for studying eWOM communication, then explains in detail the five essential components of the framework. Finally, methods for strategically influencing eWOM communication is explored,

including a look at tactics that attempt to engage consumers, encourage dialogue, create positive eWOM and prevent negative eWOM.

The Power of Consumers

WOM communication has taken on increased influence in large part due to a shift to a new public relations/marketing paradigm in which avenues such as social media have made society more connected than ever before and moved primary control of the message from the marketer to the consumer. The digital age provides avenues for eWOM marketing to thrive as the advent of the Internet has facilitated consumer-to-consumer sharing of information across time and space (Graham & Havlena, 2007). The new PR model calls on managers to recognize the power of discussions between consumers online. There exists a multitude of platforms and avenues to engage the public and, if utilized correctly, those expanded choices offer a great opportunity.

Before considering techniques that can influence eWOM communication, we must ask: What makes eWOM communication effective? What compels individuals to share product information with fellow consumers? What type of eWOM communication resonates most with consumers? Once those questions are answered, the question of how PR professionals can strategically manage eWOM messaging can be addressed.

Framework for Studying eWOM

In studying eWOM communication, Cheung and Thadani (2012) identify an integrative framework that consists of five essential components: communicators, stimuli, receivers, responses and contextual factors (p. 468). Research of eWOM involves looking at the impact (responses) of eWOM communication, which represents sharing of messages (stimuli) involving both the information-seeking customers (receivers) and

information-sharing customers (communicators) (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Contextual factors, then, refer to a variety of cues that are present in a review that receivers look for when determining the quality of the communication (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

With Cheung and Thadani's framework serving as a guide, this section of the review looks closely at elements that make eWOM communication effective.

The communicators. What makes one WOM communicator more credible than another? In discussing persuasion, Miller and Levine (2009) identify source effects, which make a source more or less influential. They contend that credible sources hold a persuasive advantage and that trustworthiness is commonly recognized as contributing to a source's credibility (Miller & Levine, 2009). Furthermore, the authors believe people are more likely persuaded by sources they see as likable or similar to them (Miller & Levine, 2009). Those concepts are what make WOM and eWOM communication so persuasive, as these types of communication take place either between acquaintances or between people of similar interests and attitudes.

The Vazquez-Casielles, Suarez-Alvarez and Del Rio-Lanza (2013) study argues that the sender's strength of expression has great influence on eWOM, as does how actively eWOM is sought. When the strength of expression is high and when recommendations are actively pursued, eWOM has a significant influence on the receiver's purchase probability (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013). When a sender is perceived as knowledgeable, the receiver is motivated to actively seek information, thus a positive relation exists between the two (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013). This indicates a need to direct eWOM campaigns at senders with strength of expression who can communicate with receivers who are motivated to seek information.

In examining how a firm can create an eWOM campaign, Godes and Mayzlin (2009) discuss the idea of “opinion leaders” and explore how a firm can identify those customers who will most likely create impactful eWOM, while also considering the extent of that impact. The findings point to less loyal customers as providing greater influence in an eWOM campaign because their recommendations are more likely to be received by people who are less experienced with or less informed about the products (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). Godes and Mayzlin (2009) contend that because loyal customers’ networks have probably been informed about the product for some time, the incremental eWOM created by a campaign may have little impact (p. 17). Furthermore, loyal customers’ opinions are seen as less reliable because their views become clouded due to the relationship they have developed with the company and the product or service.

So, why does someone choose to be a communicator of eWOM messages? In studying an online community in which members share information on restaurants, Cheung and Lee (2012) find that a sense of belonging had the most impact on motivating consumers to share eWOM, while the enjoyment of helping others and the opportunity to improve one’s reputation (being seen as an expert) also serve as motivation. Other factors such as reciprocity and moral obligation do not produce significant motivation (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

Cheung and Lee (2012) also discuss self-efficacy, which they define as “a personal judgement of one’s capabilities to execute actions required for designated types of performance” (p. 221). The authors believe that a higher knowledge self-efficacy about purchasing experience, leads to a higher tendency to spread eWOM (p. 221).

The receivers. Readers often share similar interest or attitudes with eWOM communicators and therefore view the information exchanged as more relevant to the reader. Social comparison theory, which will be discussed more in depth later in this review, suggests that “similarity ought to be positively related to persuasiveness of information being communicated and to behavioral intentions as well” (Prendergast, Ko & Yuen, 2009, p. 692-93).

Online communities that offer consumers the ability to exchange product information and develop relationships with others who share similar interests have the potential to generate greater interest. One participant in the Metzger, Flanagin & Medders (2010) study visits online forums that have others with similar views, stating: “You’ll hook up with people that you’re most like, so you’ll respect their opinions” (p. 423).

Another factor in the influence of eWOM communication is the reader’s view of the forum. If an individual has a positive attitude towards the forum, the intensity of the relationship between the individual and the forum is likely to increase (Prendergast et al., 2009). User attitudes towards the forum strongly predict purchase intentions as well as having an indirect effect in determining the forum’s persuasiveness (Prendergast et al., 2009).

In addition, consumer loyalty is an important variable. As the receiver’s level of loyalty toward a brand increases, eWOM communication has less of an impact (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013). Previous experience with the product or service can reduce the influence of WOM communication, although this effect has been found to be very small (Sweeny, Soutar & Mazzarol 2014). However, the more knowledgeable people are or the more experiences they have with a product or service, the less likely they are to actively

seek information. Vazquez-Casielles et al. (2013) contend that companies “should pay particular attention to consumers who are most motivated to actively seek advice to maximize their exposure to positive communication from senders perceived as knowledgeable and with whom they have strong ties” (p. 55).

The motivation level of the reader also plays a large role in determining the influence of eWOM communication. Consumers with more motivation to process information usually spend more time shopping and go through careful consideration about the product. Therefore, they use eWOM as an argument instead of solely basing their decisions on eWOM recommendations (Gupta & Harris, 2010). Those with lower motivation tend to include the recommended product as part of a limited search and thus, eWOM recommendations redirect their consideration often leading to suboptimal decision making (Gupta & Harris, 2010). Either way, there is evidence that limited amounts of eWOM communication may influence choice. Even highly-motivated consumers, although they continue to make optimal choices, can be influenced to sacrifice their own preferences based on the recommendations of others (Gupta & Harris, 2010).

The stimuli. The ideal eWOM communication will only happen if the brand is credible, the firm’s products or services are reliable and its marketing activities are believable (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013). Companies can keep communicators satisfied by providing a good product or service and creating eWOM programs that generate experiences for consumers and convey information that encourages influential individuals or groups to talk freely, authoritatively and credibly with others (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013).

Research suggests that by disseminating brand messages in media, advertisers can stimulate consumers to talk about and say good things about their products (Graham & Havlena, 2007). Godes and Mayzlin (2009) investigated whether a firm can orchestrate an eWOM campaign that drives sales and found that in some cases, purely exogenous eWOM is associated with higher sales.

A focus group convened as part of a study by Metzger et al. (2010) indicated that tips provided by real people are highly useful and help “personalize” the information. “Knowledge derived from individuals’ actual use or practice was often more reliable than information provided by a company or manufacturer, which might be biased” (Metzger et al., 2010).

Saxon and Waters (2014) find that the public prefers dialogue to information. Efforts to build relationships, networks and communities through messages that promote interactivity are more favorable (Saxon & Waters, 2014). Through a content analysis of 1,000 social media updates from a variety of organizations, Saxon and Waters (2014) conclude that the public is much more likely to engage with organizations when they use community-building updates. The Saxon and Waters (2014) study also points to the fact that more attention should be paid to call-to-action message and other messages that ask stakeholders to do something, rather than say something to the organization.

The response. Graham and Havlena (2007) found evidence that advertising can stimulate positive WOM communication through a two-step flow where mass persuasion drives person-to-person influence. They found that advertising stimulates significantly higher levels of brand advocacy and that eWOM plays a significant role in generating

offline brand advocacy independent of advertising's influence. The study also indicates that WOM significantly adds to advertising's effect (Graham & Havlena, 2007).

Contextual factors. It is clear that some recommendations are more persuasive than others are and several factors add to—or subtract from—the persuasiveness of each recommendation. Bickart & Schindler's (2001) study of Internet forums identifies three characteristics that give a platform greater influence: credibility—the opinions and accounts are from trustworthy sources with the authors being fellow consumers with no vested interest in the product and no intent on manipulating the reader; relevancy—the information is expected to reflect typical product performance; and empathy—the information recounts personal experiences which are not found in marketer-generated information (p. 32-33).

Levy and Gvili (2015) found that during the process of receiving eWOM messages, audiences look for signals that indicate message credibility. The study found that receivers' judgement of eWOM communication stems from three key channel properties: social capital, information richness and interactivity (Levy & Gvili, 2015). Specifically, information richness was highly related to eWOM channel credibility. The study suggests that the higher the richness and volume of information available to receivers, the higher the credibility of the channel (Levy & Gvili, 2015).

Multiple studies conclude that positive eWOM has significantly more impact than negative eWOM (Vazquez-Casielles et al, 2013; Sweeney et al., 2014). Sweeney et al., (2014) found that strength of eWOM is less important in terms of delivering a positive message than a negative message. Companies must develop strategies to encourage

positive eWOM, while making efforts to avoid negative eWOM (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013).

Zhang, Craciun and Shin (2010) examine the issue of positive vs. negative eWOM from the consumer's mindset. They categorize consumers as having either a "promotional focus"—more concerned with advancement and achievement through product consumption—or a "prevention focus"—more concerned with the avoidance of negative outcomes (Zhang et al., 2010). In studying consumers of a software program, a positive bias (readers find positive reviews more useful than negative reviews) was found for products associated with "promotion" consumption goals and a negative bias for products associated with "prevention" goals (Zhang et al., 2010).

A study conducted by Sen and Lerman (2007) found that a negative bias exists toward reviews for utilitarian products—products purchased to accomplish a functional or practical task such as a dishwasher—and a positive bias towards reviews of hedonic products—items that are characterized by an affective and sensory experience, pleasure or fun such as music, art and movies. They contend that readers are more likely to attribute external or product-related motivation when reviewers write negative reviews about utilitarian products, and internal or non-product related motivations when reviewers give negative reviews for hedonic products (Sen & Lerman, 2007). This suggests that marketers of hedonic products need not be as concerned about negative reviews as marketers of utilitarian products.

Theoretical Perspective

As previously mentioned, social comparison theory can help explain the persuasiveness of WOM and eWOM. The theory suggests that people tend to compare

their attitudes and capabilities with those of others as a way to satisfy a need for self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). Festinger (1954) hypothesizes that people evaluate their opinions and abilities through comparisons to other people. That tendency to compare oneself with another person increases as that person is seen to be similar because individuals assume that similar people have similar needs and preferences (Prendergast, et al., 2009).

When searching for recommendations, a communicator who is perceived to be like the receiver is more persuasive; if someone is seen as similar—such as a fellow consumer—then the views of that person are seen as more relevant. Electronic WOM is effective because people are often referred by someone they trust. Even if the communicator is not someone the receiver knows personally, a connection may be drawn if the communicator is a fellow consumer with similar interests. Social comparison theory suggests that people view fellow consumers as credible recommenders, and information shared from these people is more trustworthy than traditional marketing material, which may be biased (Prendergast et al., 2009). Electronic WOM is instigated by motives of both communicators and receivers. By comparing themselves with others, receivers develop connections with communicators with whom they identify.

An examination of Internet forums will find that the participants have many commonalities and share similar interests. Both communicators and receivers go to these forums looking to connect with people similar to them. Electronic WOM communications that offer consumers the ability to exchange information and develop relationships with others who share similar interests have the potential to generate greater interest.

Social learning theory, also referred to as social cognitive theory, is also relevant in studying eWOM. Albert Bandura developed the theory when he studied the learning process that occurs in interpersonal contexts and conducted research on the acquisition of behaviors through social observation (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory views learning as a cognitive process that take place in a social context (Bandura, 1977). The theory holds that portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences and outside influences (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory is useful in explaining how people acquire knowledge and develop new behaviors or opinions by observing other people. It stresses the role of imitation and modeling behavior of others (Bandura, 1977). When people observe others performing a behavior, and see the consequences of that behavior, they use that information to guide subsequent behaviors.

Chen, Wang and Xie (2011) found links between WOM and observational learning and contend that the two social interactions jointly influence consumers. Observational learning can be connected with Bandura's study of social learning as people observe actions of others in order to shape their own beliefs (Chen et al., 2011). While actions are not 'observed' in eWOM communication, behaviors and attitudes are communicated from one individual to another individual or to numerous individuals. Those behaviors and actions are therefore learned by receivers based on experiences of the eWOM communicators. Through eWOM messages, actions are communicated to people, who use the learned information to influence their beliefs, actions and attitudes.

Electronic WOM communication includes avenues such as social media, blogs and Internet forums. Receivers of eWOM messages go to these platforms looking for

information. For instance, consumers often search for recommendations from blogs or product reviews before making purchases. This is an effort to learn more about the product or service they are considering. Electronic WOM receivers take the information conveyed through those platforms by eWOM communicators and use that information to shape their attitudes and behaviors.

Strategically Managing eWOM Communication

While the level of control marketers once held over their message has declined, it is important to recognize that control is not completely lost as eWOM provides greater opportunity to engage consumers. If engagement is effective, dialogue can be influenced and a limited amount of control over the message can be maintained. Levy and Gvili (2015) suggest that interactivity allows users to take advantage of richer information when considering eWOM messages. It is essential for public relations to include two-way communication, interactivity and dialogue.

Wright and Hinson (2008) conducted a global sample of public relations practitioners and found the advantages of two-way communication plentiful, specifically in the use of social media. One participant said that social media has “opened a new group of stakeholders with which to engage, as well as new vehicles for reaching them” (p. 18). Among the benefits of this type of communication was offering a low-cost way to developing relationships with various publics (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Another participant in the Wright and Hinson (2008) study found that two-way communication allows for immediate feedback and another said it enhances and facilitates a mutual understanding (p. 17). In their study, Saffer, Sommerfeldt & Taylor (2012) found that the

amount an organization communicates with its social media followers positively affects the perceived organization-public relationship.

Distaso, McCorkindale & Wright (2011) maintain that in order to communicate effectively, organizations must go to where the stakeholders are located. One participant in the Distaso et al. (2011) study identified the greatest risk being to “ignore social media and to allow conversations to happen without awareness or participation” (p. 326). Saffer et al. (2012) hypothesize that “higher levels of interactivity on the part of a message sender—the organization—can lead to better quality relationships with the message recipient—the public” (p. 213). Marketers can maintain some control—as limited as it may be—of the message if they are present and active. However, if they ignore eWOM, all control is lost.

The power of the discussions that take place online is great. Unfortunately, many PR professionals lack an understanding of how to engage consumers. In interviews with communications and public relations professionals, Distaso et al. (2011) found that most understood the importance of social media, but had many unanswered questions. Today’s PR practitioners must realize that consumers want to be engaged; interactivity must be part of a marketing campaign. It is no longer just about getting the consumers’ attention; to be successful, campaigns need consumers to be active participants. Saffer et al. (2012) place the responsibility of relationship building on the organization—further underscoring the need for managing and maintaining eWOM to interact with the public.

Strategically developed integrated marketing campaigns should involve social media and other non-traditional forms of media with a goal of provoking consumer involvement in the message. The emergence of eWOM has made it possible for one

person to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of people about products and the companies that provide those products. Marketers can achieve “dialogic outcomes” if they actively seek conversation through the messages they are sending (Saxton & Waters, 2014).

Enabling consumers to co-create brand meaning and tell stories is essential to eWOM. Sweeny et al. (2014) refer to this as the “partial employee” strategy (p. 353). Social media can—and should—be used to strategically build relationships with the public. One study states that social media has “provided an opportunity to truly put the ‘public’ back into public relations by providing a mechanism for organizations to engage in real-time, one-on-one conversations with stakeholders” (Wright & Hinson, 2008, p. 19). Customers who are more satisfied and more knowledgeable about the company are more likely to view the quality in a positive way, leading to more influential (positive) WOM communication. (Sweeny et al., 2014). Nevertheless, most brands only use social media to spread their promotional messages instead of connecting with their customers and the public. Social media should not be just an advertising platform to promote products or services.

Distaso et al. (2011) recognized that social media opens an organization up to both internal (leaks, criticism of management, embarrassing employee behavior) and external (criticism, false information) difficulties. The “loss of control” unease comes about because it stands in contrast to the old communications model in which the organization held a high level of control. However, careful strategic planning can help avoid negative outcomes.

Methods for Influencing eWOM

In order to shape online conversations, Mangold and Faulds (2009) outline methods that can influence online discussions. They suggest corporations: (1) provide network platforms for like-minded individuals; (2) use blogs and social media to engage consumers, offering the opportunity for them to submit feedback; and (3) use traditional and Internet-based promotional tools to engage consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 361-364). In one example from the Mangold and Faulds (2009) study, Swiffer challenged customers to create short videos describing “how they left their old cleaning method for a new romance with Swiffer” (p. 362). The contest drew a large amount of positive attention for the company.

The Mangold and Faulds (2009) study also suggests that consumers are more likely to talk about companies and products if they know a lot about them, so providing information can sway the conversation. Mattel accomplishes that by including a “Grown-Ups & Parents” blog on its website with valuable information about the company’s toy products (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Companies should target the most connected groups by analyzing social media, cliques or groups that create and identify the most influential people in these groups (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013). Furthermore, companies can stimulate the desire in the receiver to obtain advice about the product or service by using market research to identify consumers with a moderate purchase probability or loyalty (Vazquez-Casielles et al., 2013).

The results of the Prendergast et al. (2009) study indicate that marketers wanting to initiate positive eWOM communication on online forums should ensure that the

group's interests closely match those of their product's users. That can be accomplished by first conducting research to identify specific common interests among intended users and then monitoring discussion topics to identify which discussions appear to be of most interest to the target consumers (Prendergast et al., 2009).

Cheung & Lee (2012), who established sense of belonging, reputation and enjoyment of helping others as factors that motivate eWOM communicators to share information, recommend allowing users to set-up personal profiles, publically recognizing membership status and providing mechanisms to identify members who have helped others as ways to achieve those motivational factors. In addition, "connecting contributors and readers via person-to-person messaging and chat functions enable readers to show their appreciation for reviews received" (Cheung & Lee, 2012, p. 224).

Saxton and Waters (2014) urge public relations and marketing professionals to adapt their concepts, theories and methods to the new reality and Saffer et al. (2012) recommend that social media be used to strategically build relationships with publics. Online polls or chat rooms allow consumers to feel engaged, and Mangold and Faulds (2009) contend that people are more likely to communicate through word-of-mouth and social media when they are engaged with the product, service or idea (p. 362). Community-building and dialogue messages—those dealing with organizations' efforts to build relationships, networks and communities by promoting interactivity and dialogue—are perceived more favorably and attract significantly more likes and comments than informational messages (Saxton & Waters, 2014). "Call-to-action messages—those with a clear goal of soliciting the public's help in lobbying, advocacy or volunteering efforts—elicited the highest level of engagement from the public" (Saxton

& Waters, 2014, p. 294). Meanwhile, messages designed to promote the organization's upcoming events, as well as those aimed at soliciting donations and sales, were found least likely to be viewed favorably or boost engagement (Saxton and Waters, 2014).

Kozinets et al. (2010) examine seeding campaigns, which are efforts to place a product among influential consumers so that they can communicate favorably about it to other consumers. In the study, 90 influential bloggers were chosen to receive new mobile phones based on the lifestyle-related relevance of their blog content and traffic in the hope that they would share positive reviews of the phone with their readers and followers. There are general rules and ethical implications to consider with seeding campaigns and Kozinets et al. (2010) found that the bloggers were simultaneously flattered and threatened when selected. There is also no guarantee that the bloggers' reviews will be positive, so seeding campaigns should be carefully conducted.

Creating products and services that address the wants and needs of the audience is the first step in creating positive WOM and eWOM. After that, there are several ways to approach consumer engagement. Some tactics have been successful; many have failed. Marketers need to remember that forums and social media are consumer generated and as soon as a discussion moves from being consumer-controlled to marketer-controlled, the forum can easily lose credibility and users (Prendergast et al., 2009). However, engaging and interacting with consumers on these platforms is not only needed, but has become expected.

Methodology

This thesis looks at consumers’—specifically college undergraduate students—views of eWOM communication that happens in social media as compared to traditional marketing material, and examines the amount of influence that comes from eWOM conversations. The research explores how the students’ attitudes and behaviors change because of social media dialogue and how PR professionals’ involvement in that dialogue affects those changes.

Research Questions

The first research question focuses on what makes certain eWOM communication more effective. After gathering an understanding of which characteristics of eWOM communicators, receivers and messages lead to persuasive eWOM recommendations, the next research question, which examines consumer engagement, is addressed.

RQ 1: What characteristics of eWOM communicators, receivers and messages make a recommendation persuasive?

RQ 2: What effects does social media engagement by a university resource with undergraduate students have on the students’ social media conversations about that resource?

Method

Much of the previous research into WOM and eWOM communication has been concerned with determining *if* these particular types of communication are effective. With the knowledge that eWOM communication does play a role in consumer habits, it has become imperative for PR professionals to engage consumers. Prior research shows that many in the field of PR are unclear how to do that. This study sets out to identify

how to approach consumer engagement by discovering why certain eWOM messages are more influential than others. This research looks into the factors that make social media eWOM messages persuasive in order to help PR professionals engage and interact effectively with their consumers. The research aims to find out what makes a message influential, what leads an eWOM communicator to share information about a product or service in social media and what makes a receiver receptive to information shared by a communicator.

In order to do that, it was imperative to talk to consumers, both potential communicators and receivers of eWOM messages. To do this, a qualitative study using focus groups consisting of a specific group of consumers—college undergraduate students—was conducted. The goal of the focus groups was to gauge the students' views of eWOM communications. Consumers is a large group, so to narrow that down, this study concentrated on undergraduate students. The reason for selecting this group is that undergraduate students are heavy users of social media (Perrin, 2015). Therefore, this group is likely to engage in social media conversations and to encounter eWOM on a frequent basis.

Electronic WOM messaging can include conversations on every type of product or service, and how the product or service is being discussed can play into how consumers use eWOM. Since this research identified undergraduate students as the participants, eWOM communication related specifically to university resources was studied. Examining how undergraduate students create, share and use eWOM communication about campus resources is the focus of this study.

Two Midwestern universities were selected for this study. In following proper procedures, the Principal Investigator (PI) contacted officials at both institutions to gain permission for conducting this study on these campuses. Once that permission was obtained, the PI contacted the schools' Registrar's Offices in order to secure students' email addresses. Both universities provided the email addresses upon request.

A total of 1,690 emails were sent out with a link to a three-question survey. The survey included a Consent to Participate, outlining the purpose of the research study and the survey, explaining any risks and ensuring confidentiality.

The short quantitative survey, which yielded a six-percent response rate, was used to identify students invited to participate in one of the focus groups in order to have productive and beneficial focus groups conversations. The survey included three questions. Students could provide their email address at the end of the survey if they were interested in participating in a focus group. It was important to identify participants who use social media and are familiar with eWOM messages in order for the focus groups to be productive. It was best if all participants were able to provide valuable insights and share experiences on eWOM communication. After reviewing the survey responses and considering the students who indicated an interest in being involved in a focus group, the PI created a list of possible focus group participants.

The PI worked with the each participating institution to reserve a space for holding the focus groups. Invitations were sent to 14 students from one of the participating institutions and 15 students from the other for the focus groups, one being held on each campus.

Focus groups are advantageous when conducting studies on habits or usage. Greenbaum (1993) states that focus groups are often conducted to collect information about how target consumers feel about different products, services and programs (p. 12). This method can help PR professionals understand consumers' habits and attitudes so that they can approach their consumer engagement in ways that will be more effective. Allowing participants of focus groups to play off one another is an element that would not present itself in interviews. In addition, the interaction of the group can remind participants of experiences.

One focus group took place at each of the two selected universities. Finding students who were willing to take part in the focus groups and were also available at the times the groups were scheduled became an issue. A snowball recruitment tactic was initiated in which students who agreed to participate were encouraged to ask other students to come with them to the focus group. In the end, six students participated at in the first focus group and eight took part at the second. One disadvantage of focus groups is the small sample size and that was an issue for this research, although a minor one. While the number of participants was low, it was enough to have a fruitful conversation. Valuable insight into consumer habits is possible as long as participants are able to share freely. Both participating campuses have limited student enrollment. Because of that, in each focus group, most of the participants knew each other. This made for productive discussions, as the students were more willing to share openly.

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour, and was semi-structured and recorded. The PI acted as the moderator, serving as a guide rather than an interviewer and allowing the participants to do most of the talking. Remaining unbiased throughout this

research process was something of which the PI had to be cognizant. Being a PR professional, the PI has experiences, knowledge and views pertaining to eWOM communication and consumer engagement. In order to limit the impact of any bias, it was vital that the focus group participants lead the conversation and not be influenced in any way by the PI.

The moderator offered prompts, but let the group lead the discussion as much as possible. A good moderator is crucial to any focus group as he or she is charged with keeping the discussion on track, without leading the conversation in any one direction. The moderator must make members of the group feel at ease and draw people out as much as possible. The moderator also ensures that one person or a few people do not dominate the discussion and make certain to avoid ‘group think’—when a viewpoint of one or a few participants becomes an accepted viewpoint by everyone in the group.

At the start of each focus group discussion, a consent form was given to each participant and the PI asked if the participants agreed with the consent form before moving forward with the focus groups.

In an effort to yield responses that would best address the research questions of this study, the moderator used a crowdsourcing technique, offering prompts that closely resembled the research questions. This is an unconventional tactic. It is most common to ask participants in a study questions that differ from the study’s research questions, but produce responses that will inform the research questions.

After an introduction of the research, the first portion of the focus groups examined the persuasive qualities of eWOM communicators, receivers and messages, which address the first research question of this study. The first two prompts were used to

understand how the students evaluate a recommendation from a peer (friend, classmate, fellow student) that is shared online. The goal was to identify what factors (depth of knowledge, strength of expression, etc.) make a communicator more persuasive and what types of messages (positive vs. negative, for example) are more influential. This portion of the focus groups also provided an understanding of what types of message lead the students to respond and which messages they are likely to share in social media.

The next portion of the focus groups looked at the involvement of PR professionals in the conversation, gauging how engagement and interaction affects social media dialogue. This portion of the conversation provided examples of how students have engaged with campus resources through social media and whether that interaction led to any changes in attitudes or behaviors. The aim was to find out students' overall feelings of social media engagement and whether they find benefits from that interaction.

The respondents were encouraged to reply at length and to engage with the others in the group. As Berger (1998) states, group dynamics work so that respondents often become caught up in the discussion and stimulate others to contribute, sometimes offering information that is useful. The moderator provided a guide the discussion, following up on answers given until the discussion had exhausted or a pattern of consensus appeared.

To conclude the discussion, the moderator summed up the major points of the conversation and asked the participants if they agreed with those points. Focus groups produce a large amount of data. Each group conversation was transcribed and key topics and ideas from each focus group were noted. Analyzing the findings included pinpointing common characteristics of effective communicators, persuadable receivers and influential

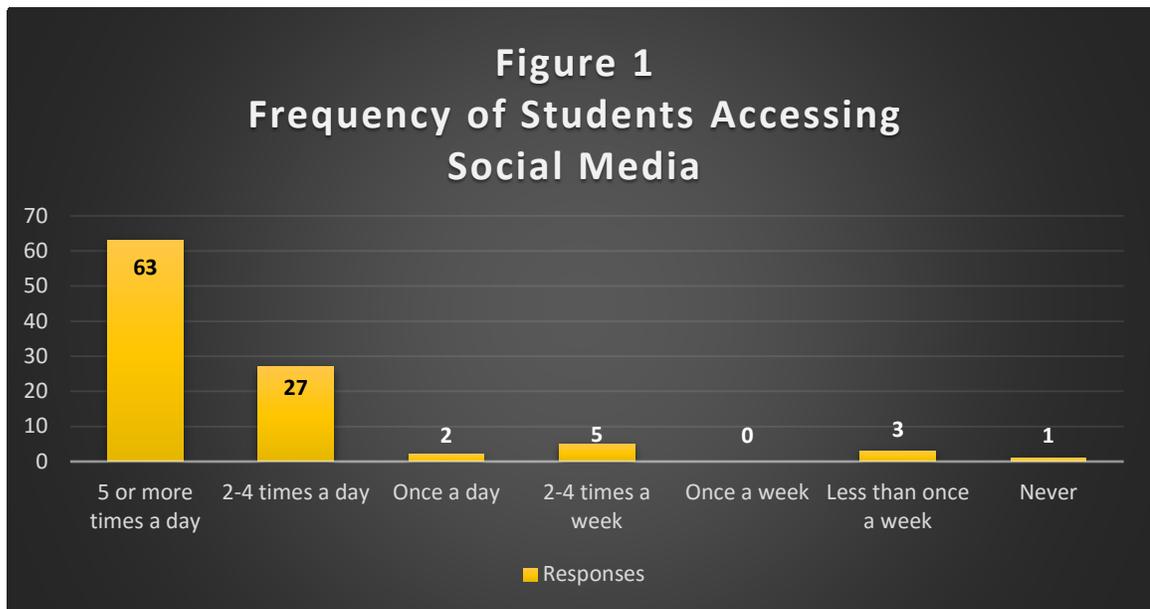
messages. The analysis also examined strategies to engage consumers, getting them to be active participants sharing a company's messages. The conversations from each focus group was compared with the other group and common themes were identified. Those themes were used to address the research questions of this study and interpretations were made, with a basis grounded in the theory of social learning and the theory of social comparison, to detail what makes eWOM communication persuasive and develop recommendations for PR professionals when attempting to influence eWOM communication.

This research further examines what makes eWOM messages persuasive. The study explores the role of eWOM communicators and receivers and looks at the messages—how they are worded and delivered—to determine their effects on the communication. By investigating the factors that make this type of communications so persuasive, this study suggests tactics PR professionals can take in order to affect eWOM messages.

Results

Social Media Behavior

The Pew Research Center's study (Perrin, 2015) that found that 90% of young adults regularly use social media mirrored results of a survey of students in this study (Table 1). When asked how often they access social media, 92 of the 101 students (91%) who responded reported being on social media every day, with 90 (89.1%) accessing social media multiple times a day. Sixty-three students (62.4%) stated that they check social media five or more times a day.



While the survey pointed to general trends of social media use, the focus groups aided in understanding why students behave the way they do in regards to social media and eWOM communication. The first portion of each focus group examined how the students use social media, gauging their frequency of use, the social networks most regularly accessed, general social media habits and the students' overall views towards social media. For many of the students, social media is a way to pass time.

Most of the student reported accessing social media several times a day, but mostly scrolling through their newsfeeds and timelines while in between class or doing other activities such as watching television. “Often it is when I don’t want to think about homework,” one participants said. Students claimed to sometimes checking social media absent mindedly, but then staying on for an extended amount of time. “It’s like a trap,” one student stated. Students found that social media can be a distraction—which they agreed can be good at times and bad at others times.

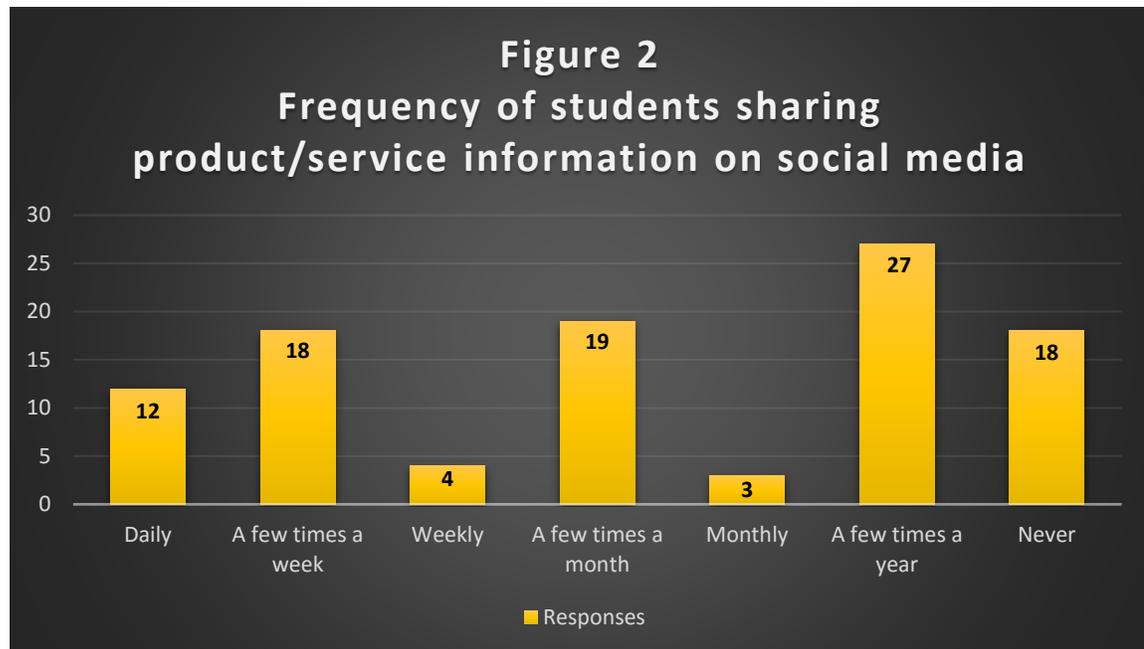
Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat were the most commonly referenced forms of social media used by the focus group participants, with each platform serving different purposes for students. The most effective platforms when it comes to eWOM communication seems to be Twitter and Facebook, and to a lesser extent, Instagram.

While most of the students check social media at least a few times a day, they are less likely to post, respond or share on social media. There was a consensus among participants in both focus groups that social media is a good way to keep up with news and relevant information. Many students reported keeping up on their interest in things such as politics, movies and food through social media by following accounts related to those interests. Overall, students see social media as a useful way to keep in touch with friends and family and keep up-to-date on information on topics that are of importance to them.

Students as eWOM Communicators

The responses to Question 2 of the survey, which gauged how students share information about products or services, varied (Table 2). Only 12 respondents (11.8%) indicated that they share product or service information daily. Eighteen students (17.8%)

said they share information a few times a week with four students sharing this type of material once a week. The most common response was “A few times a year” with 27 students (26.7%) selecting that answer, while 18 respondents (17.8%) indicated that they never share information about products or services. Therefore, nearly 45% of the students share eWOM communication never or only a few times a year.



Although it may be rare, most of the focus group participants recalled sharing an eWOM recommendation. When the focus group conversation moved to eWOM communication specifically, the first subject dealt with the type of topic that lead students to share eWOM communication. Relevancy and level of interest in the topic were the main reasons students reported sharing eWOM. Students are more likely to share information if the material is interesting and concerns a topic relevant to them and their followers. There was consensus that if it was something they were involved in or related to, it was much more likely that they share the information. For example, one student—a theater major—regularly shares information about the theater department at her

university because it is interesting to her, but also because she knows that many of her friends or followers on social media share her interest in theater. It is not a surprise that students are more likely to communicate on topics about which they are passionate. “I have to care about it to want to give my side of the story,” one participant said.

If others are discussing or sharing information about a certain topic on social media, students will often follow along. Similarly, if there is little to no conversation online about a particular subject, the respondents indicated they did not want to get into it—even if it was something they are passionate about—because they believed that the topic is either “not cool to discuss,” or “not interesting enough.” Some students claimed that sharing a recommendation is a way to bond with others and start a discussion. If the topic was unlikely to start a dialogue, then they were less likely to share their views. However, one participant felt differently and was not concerned with how much conversation was already taking place on the topic, stating, “if it is something I enjoy, I want my friends to try it.”

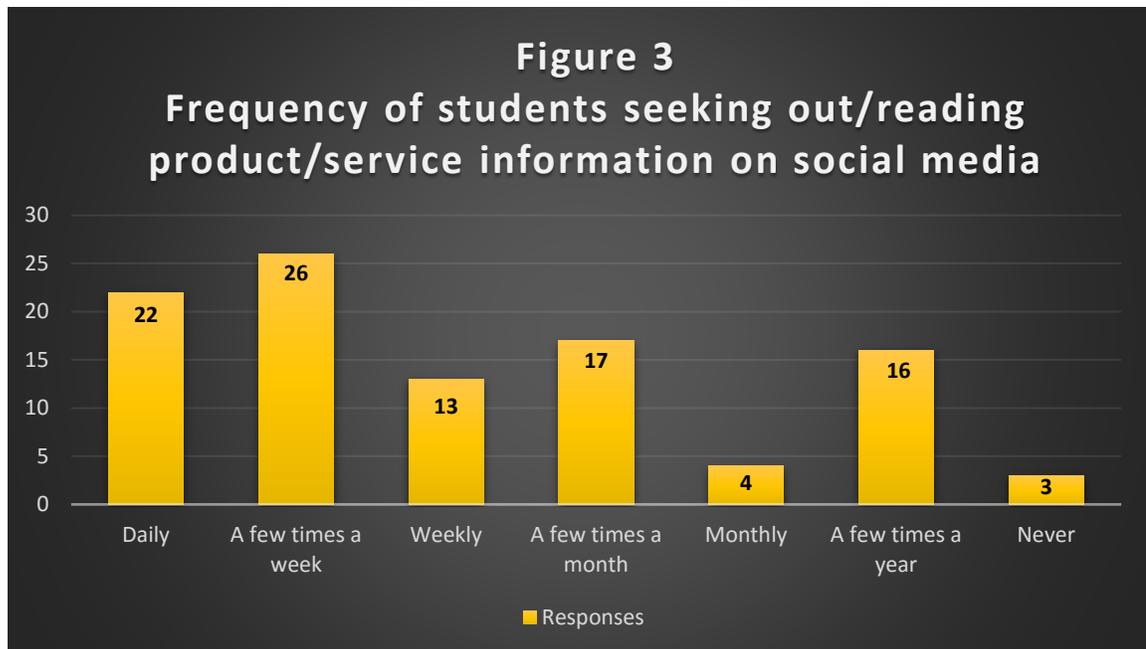
Students are more likely to share information if they are asked for their opinion. “I’ll have a friend ask where the best place to go for XYZ is and I’ll usually respond if I have knowledge of something,” one participant said. There was agreement from others participants that this would significantly increase the likelihood of them sharing recommendations.

Supporting the survey findings, the focus group respondents said they are not very likely to share specific recommendations online. They do, however, post whether they like or dislike something, but stop short of making a specific suggestion as to how their followers should act or think. In most instances, these communications take place when

students have an exceptionally good or exceptionally bad experience. Thus, while the students do not often share actual eWOM recommendations, unless asked for their opinion, they frequently offer positive or negative reviews. This indicates a need to make sure the experience is good and meets the level of “exceptional,” leading the participants to share a positive review.

Students as eWOM Receivers

The survey’s final question put the student in the position of an eWOM receiver, asking how often they seek or read information about a product or service (Table 3). While the responses to the previous question signal that students rarely share eWOM, answers to this question indicate students do seek out or read information about products or services. Twenty-two students (21.8%) reported seeking out or reading product or service information daily, while 26 (25.7%) indicated that they do it few times a week and 13 (12.8%) said they do it at least weekly. That means that 61 respondents (60.3%) are looking for and/or viewing eWOM at least once a week. Only three students (3%) said they never act as an eWOM receiver, while 16 (15.8%) reported seeking or reading product or service information only a few times a year.



A potential hypothesis is that those who access social media more often are more likely to engage in eWOM activities. Digging deeper into the survey, that does not appear to be a given in regards to being an eWOM communicator, but it is more likely those students will be an eWOM receiver.

Of the students who reported accessing social media five or more times a day, there is a wide range of answers to Q2. Nine of 63 (14.3%) students who are on social media five or more times a day say they share eWOM daily, with 12 (19%) reporting that they do it a few times a week. Fifteen students (23.8%) in this group report sharing product or service information a few times a month. The most popular answer was “A few times a year,” with 16 responses (25.4%), while eight (12.7%) said they never share this type of information.

Those students who check social media 2-4 times a day also ranged in how often they share eWOM. Twelve of the 27 respondents (44.4%) in this group said they either

never share information on products or services or do it only a few times a year, while only 10 (37%) do it at least once a week.

Students who reported accessing social media more often were more likely to seek out or read eWOM than less active users of social media. Of those who indicated that they access social media at least five times a day, 15 (23.8%) seek or view eWOM daily, 13 (20.6%) a few times a week, 10 (15.9%) at least once a week and 11 (17.5%) a few times a month. Thus, 49 students (77.8%) in this group view product or service information at least a few times a month. When the group that reports accessing social media 2-4 times a day is factored in, 74 out of 90 respondents (82.2%) reported viewing eWOM at least a few times a month.

The survey indicates that increased social media access leads to a greater chance students will see an eWOM recommendation, but is not an indicator that they will share eWOM communications. With students demonstrating more experience with receiving rather than communicating eWOM, most of the focus group conversations was spent on examining this topic from the point-of-view of an eWOM receiver.

A key finding from the focus group is that students are skeptical of eWOM communication. In fact, they are *very* skeptical. “When I see something posted,” one participant stated, “my first response is ‘OK, are you sure?’” Usually, an eWOM recommendation alone does not change a student’s attitude or behavior. However, it may lead students to do further research into the subject. Students want more information and require proof or supporting evidence before forming their own opinion.

As social learning theory suggests, people conduct research on the acquisition of behaviors through social observation (Bandura, 1977). The theory explains that people

guide their behaviors by observing the behavior of others. In the case of eWOM, people want to hear about the behaviors and experiences of those communicating instead of just a recommendation. People are interested in learning why eWOM recommendations are made, then determining for themselves how to act.

Evaluating the communicator. When asked to identify factors used in evaluating the credibility of an eWOM recommendation, a key element was who is doing the communicating. Students want to understand what attachment or involvement communicators have with the product or service they are discussing. Students are also interested in how the communicators are getting their information. “I want to know their sources,” one student said.

The characteristics of the communicator plays a factor as to how much convincing students need. “If we agree on a lot of things, I am more likely to agree with them with less explanation,” one student said. “But, people I disagree with will have to apply a lot more logic to persuade me.” The theory of social comparison supports this finding, as students compare themselves to the communicator while considering the credibility of the message.

The students agreed that they trust their friends’ opinions more compared to the opinions of strangers. One student recalled a Facebook debate between her friends about the merits of a certain movie. The student noticed that those who had a fine arts background—like that of this particular student—felt one way, while those who did not have a fine arts background felt another way. “I tend to agree more with my friends that do have a background in fine arts,” the student said.

Even in cases of close similarity, students still held some level of skepticism of an eWOM suggestion. “People are always going to just give their side of things,” one participant said. “I want to know the other side as well.” Similarity to someone makes students more likely to find the recommendation credible, but does not automatically persuade them. In all cases, even when the communicator is a close acquaintance, students crave more information and want to understand why a communicator feels the way they do.

Reasons for skepticism. Why are students skeptical of social media recommendations? One reason has to do with a general suspicion towards social media and the Internet. “You shouldn’t take anything you read on social media as undeniably true and accurate,” one participant pointed out. Students are more cynical about what they read online, and specifically on social media, than ever before. They explained that people say anything they want on social media without having to back it up. “People sometimes just spit words out or try to get an argument going,” one student commented. “Sometimes it is just for show. Sometimes people just throw stuff out there and you have to pick and choose what to believe.”

Another reason for the skepticism are individual biases. Students recognized that all people have biases. “You have to judge if and how a person is attached to the recommendation,” one student said. This goes back to evaluating the communicator. When in the role of an eWOM receiver, students attempt to identify reasons why the communicator would share the recommendation. Does the communicator have a personal connection to the product or service? Will the communicator benefit in some way if the

actions they recommend are taken? Students try to identify what biases may be in play before determining the trustworthiness of an eWOM recommendation

Pre-existing opinions. A key factor into how much influence eWOM has is whether the receiver already holds a strong opinion on the subject. This appears to be one of the significant—if not the most significant—factor in determining a student’s response to eWOM. Has the receiver already made up his or her mind on the subject or is he or she open to other people’s opinions? The influence of an eWOM suggestion is much greater if the receiver does not already have an opinion on the subject matter. If they do, the stronger their opinion is, the less influential the recommendation will be.

Another factor is how much students care about the subject. The less they care, the more open they are to other opinions. The level of importance of the topic is also at play in considering the extent to which an eWOM recommendation will influence one’s thinking. For instance, people are likely more open to considering other people’s opinions about a movie than they are about a political candidate. The more divisive the topic, the less likely people are to change their views. “You can’t just change a belief system immediately,” one student said. If students have already formed an opinion, they are more likely to follow a viewpoint that agrees with theirs, while disagreeing with an opinion that does not.

At the very least, the skepticism the students have increases if they had a pre-existing opinion on the topic and the eWOM differs from that beliefs. However, in most cases, the students claim they are open to hearing other opinions and viewpoints, but they do not want to get into an argument.

Comparing Positive eWOM and Negative eWOM

An interesting facet that came out of both focus group discussions was the difference in how students view positive eWOM compared to negative eWOM. The focus group participants reported rarely sharing negative suggestions on social media. One reason for that is that the students felt there is already too much negativity on social media. In addition, students preferred to avoid a combative discussion, which they feel is more probable with a negative posting.

From an eWOM receiver perspective, students find negative comments less credible, often seeing them as “just a rant” and not well-thought out. One student explained that negative post often seem made in a moment of anger, “especially the ones done in all caps and with lots of exclamation points.” In regards to those types of posts, students wondered if the communicator was just an angry person.

The students believe that there is more at play with negative comments and emotions have a greater impact on negative views than positive ones. One student claimed—and others agreed—that many negative post are initiated from nitpicking: one minor issue about a product or service turns the person completely off. There are also habitual complainers who find fault with everything and constantly have negative experiences. “I can’t help but wonder,” one participant said in regards to those instances, “who is actually the problem.”

As this thesis has addressed, students want supporting information with eWOM communication. The focus groups participants felt they were less likely to get that information with negative eWOM. “If someone likes something they might give reasons

why,” one participant said. “But if they don’t, they just say ‘it sucked’ and that is the end of the story.”

The majority of students found the most useful reviews to be the middle-of-the-road analysis. Students try to extract useful information from those evaluations, ignoring the reviews that are extremely positive or extremely negative.

Interaction with University Social Media Accounts

The focus group discussions shifted to how students view social media accounts of university resources. Students are active in sharing and retweeting friends’ and family members’ posts, but less likely to do that with information posted by a campus service’s account. When they do share or retweet information from these entities, it is usually because they have a personal connection. For instance, the theater major who was part of one of the focus group conversations often shares items posted by the theater department.

Skepticism remains, and in some cases is heightened, with posts from campus social media accounts. “Of course the office is going to brag about itself and tell everyone how great it is,” one student commented. As with other material on social media, students need more evidence. This is the case for all marketing-type posts, not just those related to campus accounts. Students want to see posts that tell a story or show evidence of success, not a general post boasting about some success. A post that simply recommends a campus resource will not move the needle. The post need to include why. What has that office done to warrant such a recommendation? Specifically, how will that office help other students? The students require answers to those types of questions before considering the recommendation. Again, students crave evidence to back up claims.

Getting attention. The first mission of any social media account is to get viewers' attention. Students enjoy campus accounts that have fun with their social media postings and involve students. One student noted how the music department posts a funny cartoon related to upcoming recitals. These types of posts are unique, get more attention and are more likely to be shared, not because of the information that is being conveyed, but because the posts are interesting and fun. While students are not intentionally partaking in eWOM when they share or retweet a post like this, they are sharing information about the music department's recitals, and therefore, participating in eWOM messaging. The awareness of the recitals increases with each share or retweet. Even if the students sharing the message does not intend to go to the recital, sharing the information may lead others to attend. It can also increase awareness of and interest in the music department. Occasionally, being an eWOM communicator is unintentional. In both discussions, students found that they had shared eWOM messages more than they had realized. If they were to take the survey again, after the focus group discussion about eWOM, it is possible that their answers to Q2 would be different.

The consensus is that students share what they think their followers will find interesting or funny. In order to get students to share the information, posts must first draw their attention. "I don't really follow things that I am not passionate about because I don't want things to clog up my newsfeed," one student said. "I want something that will grab my attention." If accounts regularly post things that do not interest students, the students either stop following the accounts or quickly scan past the information. "If it doesn't immediately grab my attention, then I'll just keep scrolling," one participant said. "If it does, then I may click on it." Quality matters a lot more than quantity. Even if the

topic is of interest to students, posting too much frustrates students and leads them to unfollow or ignore the account. “Over-posting dulls your senses,” one participant explained.

Participants found that Facebook Groups or Facebook Events increased the likelihood of student interaction with campus accounts. Creating a Facebook group and inviting students with common interest to participate works well in creating a connection and a community. This also allows for interaction among peers. Students are more likely to share experiences within those groups and trust the opinions of the other group members.

The theater student recounted an effort by the theater department to develop an alumni Facebook Group. When planning an event, the department posted questions on the group page asking who was attending and what suggestions alumni had for the event. There was also an invitation to share photos on the page. More than 100 people responded, which was a huge difference over when the department posted a general announcement on the department’s Facebook page. “We’ve had alumni that we had never heard from write and say they were glad we were doing this,” the student said. “Seeing the comments and photos from others got them more excited for the event. It is cool to make those connections.”

Similarly, a Facebook Event inviting students to an event is more likely to get a response from a student. “If you just post it to Facebook, I might not even see it,” one participant said. “But if you invite me through a Facebook Event, I am much more likely to see it and then go.” The students found that this tactic showed a level of personal interest and made it easier to interact with the organizers of the event, as well as others

who are planning to attend. Both Facebook Groups and Facebook Events allow students to connect with others they find similar, reinforcing the theory of social comparison.

Role of Word-of-Mouth Marketing

In contrast to what most previous research found, the participants in the two focus groups convened for this study found that eWOM is not as effective as traditional WOM because of the distrust students have with what they read on social media. This cynicism has grown in recent years. However, WOM—traditional or electronic—remains important. As one focus group participant states, “the customer’s opinion matters more than the marketing person’s opinion.” Students note that the best way to get positive eWOM and avoid negative eWOM is to concentrate on pleasing the customer. As was noted in the literature review, creating a quality product or service is the first step in gaining positive eWOM. Nevertheless, eWOM marketing should be part of an overall branding strategy. Students stated that seeing traditional marketing items, such as flyers or posters, that mirrored social media posts helped create a connection. “If I see an image on social media that is the same as a flyer I’ve seen on campus, then that resonates with me,” one participant said.

Discussion

The key discovery of this study is the high level of skepticism eWOM receivers hold toward eWOM messages. As the focus group participants indicated, people do not trust what they read on the Internet, and specifically on social media. A simple recommendation communicated through social media is not effective; there must be sufficient—oftentimes extensive—evidence to back up the message. Consumers are interested in the reasoning behind an eWOM suggestion before being convinced.

Persuasive eWOM Characteristics

The purpose of this study is to understand how PR professionals can influence social media dialogue between consumers. To do that, this thesis first explores the characteristics of persuasive and credible eWOM communicators, receivers and messages.

Communicators. For many people, their first response to an eWOM message is to ask why the communicator is sharing the viewpoint. This research found that the most credible eWOM communicators are transparent; producing a clear understanding of why they hold and are sharing the opinions. The communicators must show that their recommendations are based on more than just personal connections or biases. The further removed from the product the communicators are, the more persuasive the messages. However, that can be difficult as the research found that people rarely share eWOM recommendations unless they have a connection to the product or service being discussed. Therefore, having someone who is not, at least moderately, connected to the product share an eWOM message is less likely. This points to a need to reach out to

people not connected to a product instead of focusing on loyal consumers, whose affinity toward the product may skew their opinions.

A common practice in marketing is to utilize influencers, who are key consumers that are seen to have influence over potential consumers. Companies focus their marketing efforts on these individuals hoping they will do the work of persuading other consumers. As previously mentioned, the students in this study first identify the communicator and try to understand the motives behind sharing the eWOM suggestion before acting. In order to be most persuasive, becoming an eWOM communicator must happen organically, meaning it is more difficult for an influencer to have an effect on an eWOM receiver.

This research also found that people are sometimes eWOM communicators without being aware of it. The students in the focus groups revealed that they share social media posts because they find the material unique, funny or creative. While they are not knowingly endorsing the product that the post is promoting, they do increase the awareness and give added life to the message by sharing it. It is not a new finding to suggest that innovative social media posts get more shares, but this research illustrates that those types of post not only get attention, but also are effective in leading to eWOM communication. Frequently, this results in unintentional eWOM communication.

Receivers. The theory of social comparison aids in explaining the most significant characteristic that opens consumers up to eWOM messages. Receivers that share some similarity with communicators are more likely to follow an eWOM recommendation. As the theory of social comparison states, the tendency to compare oneself with another person increases as that person is seen to be similar because

individuals assume that similar people have similar needs and preferences (Prendergast, et al., 2009). The focus group participants found that identifying the characteristics of the communicator is an important part of determining how much convincing is required. While skepticism often remained in instances of close similarity between receivers and communicators, the amount of convincing needed is much less when the receiver views the communicator as similar.

A second important element found in evaluating eWOM receivers is whether they hold pre-existing opinions on the subject matter discussed. An individual who already holds a strong viewpoint about a topic is less likely to be influenced by an eWOM message. People who have past experiences with a product or service, or already maintain a strong opinion on the subject matter, are much less likely to be convinced to act or think a different way. Even with extensive supporting evidence, it is highly unlikely that strong opinions change.

In the end, eWOM receivers are looking to be convinced. They do not want to be told how to act or think. They need reasons why certain actions or thoughts should be taken and will then decide for themselves how to proceed.

Messages. To be effective, eWOM messages must provide evidence to support the recommendation made. Other factors affect the persuasiveness of the message, but the key element is the presence of information to back up the suggestion. The skeptical nature of people regarding the Internet means that eWOM communicators have more work to do in order to convince others to behave a certain way. Messages must be convincing, provide information to back up claims and put to rest any worries about the communicators' biases.

Relevancy and quality of the information also affect a message's ability to influence eWOM receivers. In order to have an effect on receivers, the message must be relevant to them and provide valuable material. Social media posts that are dull or repeat previous posts only dilute the message. There must be something to grab the attention of the receiver by being creative and unique.

Social Media Engagement

This thesis examines how engagement on social media affects eWOM communications. With the focus groups for this study made up of undergraduate college students, the conversations explored specifically at how students interacted with social media accounts of university resources. The discussions revealed that most students only interact with university accounts with which they have a connection. Students follow accounts associated with their academic departments, organizations in which they are involved or campus office in which they work or volunteer. This creates an issue in regards to the credibility of any eWOM communication they share as the students indicated that when acting as eWOM receivers, they find eWOM messages from individuals closely connected to the topic less credible. Because students have an affinity for these areas, they are more likely to hold biases, which lessens their credibility. This reiterates the importance of eWOM communicators providing clear reasoning behind the messages and supporting their suggestions with additional evidence.

Creativity counts. According to the students, most university social media accounts fail in successfully engaging their followers. Students report the most effective way to create engagement is making post relevant and attention grabbing. Students share only what they find interesting and relevant to themselves and their followers. They

ignore accounts that over post or provide useless information. Students are likely to block or ignore accounts that post more than a couple of times a day. There are times when several posts in one day is accepted—such as a special event—but quality over quantity should be the rule of thumb for social media postings.

As previously mentioned, unintentional sharing of eWOM happens more often than the students realize. People may share information because it is unique or interesting and, even though they do not intend to endorse the post, consumers see shares or retweets as endorsements.

Create connections. Another productive tactic to get social media shares is by initiating connections. As previously mentioned, students often engage in sharing messages if they feel a connection between them and the product. Using tools such as Facebook Groups or Facebook Events proved successful in cases mentioned in the focus group discussions. This strategy draws people of similar interests together and provides a connection for which people are searching. Additionally, Facebook pages and personal posts rely completely on Facebook's newsfeed algorithm for exposure, while Facebook Groups and Events send users a notification every time there is a new post to the Group or on the Event page, thus driving traffic to each posts (Stewart, 2015).

The Mangold and Faulds (2009) study discussed providing network platforms for like-minded individuals. The findings of this thesis support that recommendation. University resources can bring like-minded students together through social media. The ability to share opinions and develop a community must exist and organizations should find opportunities to grow that community. If the goal of eWOM marketing is to attract interest then the reach must go beyond just the like-minded individuals who, most likely,

already have interest in that particular product. As the focus group discussions found, creating communities such as a Facebook Group attracts more people than general posts on social media. It is not enough to connect with students through social media; there must be avenues for students to connect with each other in order for eWOM communication to be most effective. Providing a place for the community to form is the responsibility of the resource and the individuals who manage its social media accounts.

Invite viewpoints. This study reveals that students are more likely to share eWOM messages if they are asked for their viewpoint. The focus group participants report responding to friends and followers request for suggestions. PR professionals who pose questions on the social media outlet of their organization can engender responses from followers. The questions should inspire stories to be shared, not just general approval, since people prefer evidence. Followers should be encouraged to be creative in telling their stories and include videos or photos, as those will garner more attention. The company can promote the most creative posts on their social media accounts, blogs and websites. This type of interaction leads to greater eWOM and including the customer in the storytelling produces more influential eWOM messages.

Combating Skepticism

The goal of eWOM marketing is to have customers tell the story. As one focus group participant points out, social media posts by university resources are, of course, going to say they are the best. This is why word-of-mouth marketing is influential in the first place. People do not trust what a PR person says; they want to hear from customers like them. The problem with eWOM communication is that there is an unfamiliarity between communicator and receiver and therefore, receivers often remain skeptical and

are unsure what to believe. This thesis does not discount the prior research that finds that eWOM communication is highly persuasive. However, in order for the eWOM communication to be effective, it must include more than just an opinion; there must be facts and evidence to support the viewpoints. PR professionals can play a role in prompting effective eWOM messages.

Step one in creating positive eWOM, as previous research has stated, is providing a quality product or services. This should be understood, but it is important to note that if there is failure with this aspect, it is unreasonable to expect positive eWOM, no matter what social media strategies are taken. The students involved in the focus groups for this study share positive reviews if they have an *exceptionally* good experience, further supporting the importance of creating a positive feeling towards the product. A positive review is good, but an influential eWOM message must include more. There must be an explanation of why the experience was positive in order for the message to be effective. Social media posts should encourage stories, not just opinions.

Engagement of customers through social media is necessary and leads to beneficial outcomes. Relationships form as customers feel a connection to a product or service. This, however, can sometimes harm the persuasiveness of eWOM. As the focus groups revealed, people with connections to a product or service are seen as less credible eWOM communicators. As the Godes and Mayzlin (2009) study states, loyal customers' opinions become clouded due to the relationship they have developed with the company and product. Loyal customers are seen as an extension of the company's marketing team because their connections lead to biases, which eWOM receivers believe

affect their viewpoints. However, if communicators can show why they have developed such a close connection, then that may alleviate some of the worries of eWOM receivers.

How can PR professionals stimulate eWOM message that including supporting evidence? PR professionals should educate their customers. Since supporting evidence is needed for an eWOM message to be effective, sufficient information must be provided to customers, especially those who are potential eWOM communicators, so that they are armed with material to back up their claims. PR professionals should identify ways to get additional material to consumers searching for more information. As the Mangold and Faulds (2009) study suggests, consumers are more likely to talk about something they know a lot about them, so providing information can sway the conversation.

While students are skeptical about eWOM communication, they do not disregard it. Messages about products are still transported through social media and, while the amount of influence those messages have can be debated, it cannot be assumed that no influence is taking place. At the very least, what people read online raises awareness, whether the communicator endorses the message or not. In addition, after reading eWOM messages, people often go in search of information that will either support or oppose the claim. Therefore, it is incumbent on PR professionals to have information that supports a positive eWOM message easily available for consumers. There should be material—including facts, data and a sampling of other positive eWOM messages—on websites, social media networks and other platforms.

This supports the Vazquez-Casielles et al. (2013) findings that indicate that messages from communicators perceived as knowledgeable are more persuasive. As social learning theory posits, people are continuously acquiring information on how to

behave or think by learning from others. Individuals learn from others and use the information they gain to inform their actions. This eagerness to gather information from others, process that information and then determine their next move is important to understand when studying the effects of eWOM messages. For PR professionals, this points to a need to make information and resources available and easily accessible to aid people in their information gathering efforts.

Future Research

Growth in technology has placed greater emphasis on the role of eWOM communication. As technology changes, eWOM communication and the ways in which companies interact with consumers changes. That continuing growth means that any research in this area can quickly become outdated. Therefore, research on this topic must continue to take place as technology evolves.

Electronic WOM messages are shared through a multitude of means; consumers are conversing in avenues that include social media, blogs, online reviews and Internet forums. This study examines just one specific medium of message transmission—social media. However, investigating difference in how consumers engage in eWOM through other platforms would complement this study. Behaviors of people on social media likely differ from those in online discussion forums or online customer review sections. Research that delves into the multitude of eWOM areas would provide a comprehensive understanding of consumers' habits regarding eWOM.

This thesis explores social media in a general sense. However, there are several social media networks. Taking a closer look at the behaviors of consumers when using the variety of platforms and identifying the differences would provide added direction to

PR and marketing professionals who are looking to engage their consumers through social media. Offering insight on specific social media networks would be beneficial in creating social media strategies and campaigns.

Finally, this research study concentrated solely on undergraduate students. Future research could expand to consider eWOM behaviors of other age demographics. Furthermore, this can be combined with research that looks at other eWOM venues or specific social media channels to see how different age brackets use different social media networks or online platforms to engage in eWOM communication.

Limitations

The six-percent response rate for the survey that was distributed to the students was not as high as one would prefer, but it was enough in identifying possible participants for the focus groups.

Focus groups are useful in producing insight into a topic. However, they usually involve a small sample size, making it difficult to draw unquestioned conclusions. This is a limitation of this study. Finding students to participate in the focus groups from the two selected institutions—both of which have relatively low enrollment—was troublesome. In the end, 14 students participated in the two focus groups. While all 14 students actively took part in the conversation, it is possible that some viewpoints were not represented.

Conclusion

The same technological advances that have transferred control of the message from companies to consumers also provide opportunities for PR professionals to influence those messages, something not present in traditional WOM. This research

identifies a need for PR professionals to participate in the eWOM communication process by using the Internet to engage the consumers and provide useful information that can help them in their decision-making process. Gaining a better understanding of eWOM communication effects is advantageous for PR professionals as they create integrated marketing plans and communication tactics. As it has become possible for one person to communicate with hundreds, thousands or even millions of people about products and the companies that provide those products, it is essential for public relations to include two-way communication, interactivity, dialogue and engagement as part of their communication tactics. The consumers have become empowered and PR professionals no longer drive brand messaging.

The engagement should lead to lessen the skepticism people have of social media. Electronic WOM is persuasive, but only if the receiver is convinced. PR professionals play a role in the eWOM process by providing reliable and easily accessible information to support positive eWOM messages that consumers post. PR professionals can also utilize their own social media channels to distribute eWOM messages and engender consumers to share opinions and recommendations that include supporting material.

If PR professionals are effective in not only reaching consumers, but engaging them and educating them, they can influence the conversations. If those in PR understand how to interact with consumers through avenues such as social media and provide the type of information eWOM communicators need and receivers crave, they can remain part of the conversations, and maintain—as limited as it may be—some control of their messages.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Recruitment Letter & Follow-up Letter

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the effects of word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. Word-of-mouth communication is information shared between friends, families or peers about a product or service. Electronic WOM communication, which includes social media, blogs and Internet forums, is more voluminous, persistent and accessible than traditional WOM, and typically involves no familiarity between senders and receivers.

The purpose of this research is to understand how consumers create, share and respond to eWOM communication in social media. Specifically, this research explores how college undergraduate students use eWOM communication that takes place through social media.

Attached is a brief survey about your attitudes and behaviors regarding eWOM. It should take no longer than three minutes to complete. After analyzing survey answers, you may be invited to participate in a focus group. At the end of the survey is a place for you to provide your name and email address if you are willing to participate in a focus group. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to your name and email address. Your name, email address or any other identifier will not be included in any report of the findings for this research study and will be deleted at the completion of this study.

Before completing the survey, you must first read a consent form and acknowledge that you agree to the terms outlined in that form.

If you have any questions, please contact the Principal Investigator.

Thank you for your consideration.

Josh Murray
Principal Investigator
murrayjos@missouri.edu

Dear Student,

Last week, you received an email inviting you to participate in a research study exploring the effect of word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. I wanted to follow up with you to encourage your participation in this important study.

The purpose of this research is to understand how consumers create, share and respond to eWOM communication in social media. Specifically, this research explores how college undergraduate students use eWOM communication that takes place through social media.

Below is a link to a brief survey about your attitudes and behaviors regarding eWOM. It should take no longer than two minutes to complete. After analyzing survey answers, you may be invited to participate in a focus group. At the end of the survey is a place for you to provide your name and email address if you are willing to participate in a focus group. Only the Principal Investigator will have access to your name and email address. Your name, email address or any other identifier will not be included in any report of the findings for this research study and will be deleted at the completion of this study.

Before completing the survey, please read the consent information at the top of the survey.

If you have any questions, please contact the Principal Investigator.

Thank you for your consideration.

Josh Murray
Principal Investigator
murrayjos@missouri.edu

Appendix B: Survey Consent to Participate

Title of Study: Influencing Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communications

Principal Investigator: Josh Murray (murrayjos@missouri.edu)

Project Faculty Adviser: Amy Simons (simonsa@missouri.edu)

The purpose of this research is to understand how consumers create, share and respond to eWOM communications in social media. The Registrar's Office at your university provided students' email addresses following a request by the Principal Investigator. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey that should take no longer than two minutes. Your participation is voluntary; you do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can choose to answer only some of the questions.

The Principal Investigator will exercise extreme care to limit any risks from being involved in this study. Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. The survey responses will be kept in a secure location and password protected, only accessible by the Principal Investigator. Any identifying information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research study.

You can retain a copy of this consent form. You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints, concerns, you should first contact the Principal Investigator listed at the top of this form. All research conducted at the University of Missouri that involves volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have any questions or concerns or would like to obtain information or offer input, you can contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board at 573-882-3181 or irb@missouri.edu.

Appendix C: Survey

Question 1: How often do you access, post on and/or respond to social media?

- 5 or more times a day
- 2-4 times a day
- Once a day
- 2-4 times a week
- Once a week
- Less than once a week
- Never

*Question 2: How often do you **share** information on a product and/or service on social media?*

- Daily
- A few times a week
- Weekly
- A few times a month
- Monthly
- A few times a year
- Never

*Question 3: How often do you **seek out or read** information on a product and/or services on social media?*

- Daily
- A few times a week
- Weekly
- A few times a month
- Monthly
- A few times a year
- Never

Appendix D: Focus Group Recruitment Letter

Dear Student,

Thank you for completing the survey regarding research into electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. After analyzing the survey responses, you have been selected to participate in a focus group that will further investigate how undergraduate students create, share and respond to eWOM communication in social media.

A focus group will be held on the campus of (*insert institution*) later this month. It will last one hour and consist of 6-10 undergraduate students from (*insert institution*). Pizza and drinks will be provided. The focus group will be (*insert time and date*). **Please reply to this email or email me directly at murrayjos@missouri.edu to confirm your participation in the focus group.**

You were selected for this focus groups based on your answers to the prior survey. Your opinions on this subject will be beneficial in gathering an understanding of how eWOM communication, specifically through social media, is viewed by college undergraduate students. Be assured that anything you say during the focus group will be kept strictly confidential and no information will be released that can be linked to you.

If you have any questions, please contact the Principal Investigator. I hope you will be able to join me for this important discussion.

Josh Murray
Principal Investigator
murrayjos@missouri.edu

Appendix E: Focus Group Consent to Participate

Title of Study: Influencing Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communications

Principal Investigator: Josh Murray (murrayjos@missouri.edu)

Project Faculty Adviser: Amy Simons (simonsa@missouri.edu)

The purpose of this research is to understand how consumers create, share and respond to eWOM communications in social media. Specifically, this research explores how college undergraduate students use eWOM communication that takes place through social media.

If you choose to participate in a focus group, you will join a discussion with other undergraduate students from (*insert institution*). The discussion will last approximately one hour. The Principal Investigator will offer prompts and ask questions to lead the discussion. You can ask for clarification and may ask questions of your own at any time.

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can choose to answer only some of the questions and participate in as much of the discussion as you wish. In addition, you may leave the focus group at any time and for any reason without penalty.

The objective of the research is to gain knowledge that may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in the study.

The Principal Investigator will exercise extreme care to limit any risks from being involved in this study. Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. The focus group will be audio recorded, but the recording will be kept in a secure location and password protected, only accessible by the Principal Investigator. Per University of Missouri policy, all audio recordings will be kept with the research records for seven years following the completion of the research. All handwritten notes will be kept in a secure location, only accessible by the Principal Investigator. Any identifying information noted during the discussion will be deleted.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints, concerns, you should first contact the Principal Investigator listed at the top of this form.

All research conducted at the University of Missouri that involves human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have any questions or concerns or would like to obtain information or offer input, you can contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board at 573-882-3181 or irb@missouri.edu.

Appendix F: Focus Group Protocol

- I. Introduction
 - a. Introduction of Principal Investigator/Moderator
 - b. Introduction of Research Topic
 - i. With the persuasiveness of eWOM communication, it is imperative that PR professionals realize its effects. The purpose of this research is to understand how consumers create, share and respond to eWOM communications in social media, so that PR professionals can implement tactics that can influence the conversations that take place between consumers. Specifically, this research explores how college undergraduate students create, share and respond to eWOM communication through social media.
 - ii. Gaining a better understanding of eWOM communication effects is advantageous for PR and marketing professionals as they create integrated marketing plans and communication tactics.
- II. Focus Group Information
 - a. Review consent form
 - b. Session will be audio recorded, but only PI will have access to audio and there will be not identification of anyone included.
 - c. Duration: 1 hour
 - d. PI will offer prompts/some questions, but participants to lead direction of conversation.
 - e. Please speak freely/honesty, provide insight, share experiences, give opinions, ask questions, add on to other comments, feel free to disagree but be respectful others.
- III. Defining terms
 - a. **Word-of-mouth** communication has been defined as “a form of interpersonal non-commercial communication among acquaintances” It “transforms commercial information into cultural stories that are relevant to members of a particular community”
 - b. **Electronic WOM** communication, which includes social media, blogs and Internet forums, is more voluminous, persistent and accessible than traditional WOM, and typically involves no familiarity between senders and receivers.
 - c. **Campus resources examples:** Library, Academic Support Services, Advising Services, Financial Aid, Study Abroad, Career Services, Residence Hall, Dining Services.
- IV. General Social Media Discussion
 - a. What social media platforms do you utilize?
 - b. How often do you view, post, share, like/favorite, share/retweet?
 - c. What is your opinion of social media: good, bad, helpful, useful, waste of time, etc.?

- V. Examining the persuasive qualities of eWOM
 - a. **Prompt 1:** What reasons do you/would you share recommendations about a product or service in social media?
 - b. **Prompt 2:** What characteristics of a recommendation received through social media draw your attention?

- VI. Examining the involvement of PR professionals
 - a. **Prompt 3:** To what type of social media messages from a campus resource are you most likely to respond to?
 - b. **Prompt 4:** Have you experienced interaction with a university resource through social media? If so, how did that affect the recommendations you share online, your attitude towards the service and your involvement with that resource?
 - c. **Prompt 5:** What could companies/organizations/brands do to enhance their interaction with you as a consumer?

- VII. Conclusion
 - a. Summarize main points/themes of the discussion
 - b. Ask participants if they have anything else to add