



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

Facebook – the Social Newspaper that Never Sleeps
A study of Facebook eWOM's persuasiveness on the receivers

Ann Svensson

Graduate School
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Supervisor: Eva Ossiansson

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Ann E. C. Svensson

Facebook is the largest social networking site in existence, providing its users with a series of tools that facilitate the spread of eWOM to their Facebook friends. This paper describes how consumers are being influenced by, and perceive, Facebook eWOM. The findings show that Facebook has the potential of being an ideal channel for eWOM, combining the benefits of reach and trustworthiness since the sender has the possibility to influence a large number of people in one's social circle. Facebook creates a feeling of 'knowing' which takes acquaintances' trustworthiness to new levels, making them more influential than achieved in reality. Furthermore, eWOM is not always being logically evaluated instead factors such as the sender's attractiveness and frequency of the same message can lead to persuasiveness.

"I see Facebook as a newspaper, but instead of real news of the war in Libya, big brother and those things, news feed is a newspaper about my friends, my life." /Frank

Frank is a dedicated Facebook user. To him Facebook brings new possibilities of receiving information, to the extent where he considers the news feed¹ to be a personalized newspaper. Frank is not alone. Facebook users all over the world are interacting as never before and some even say that if you are not on Facebook, you do not exist. Social networking sites² (SNS), such as Facebook, have outpaced email by being today's most popular online activity (Keenan & Shiri, 2009). Nowadays people actually spend more time socializing and getting information on Facebook than looking at profiles, which was the main usage when Facebook was launched (Wise, Albahash & Park, 2010). Facebook, the largest SNS existing, provides the users with several tools facilitating the sharing of information

to their Facebook friends³. In fact, 30 billion pieces of content are being shared on Facebook each month (Facebook: Statistics 2011). Some of that information is about brands and products, whose existence interestingly shows all the signs of becoming an increased phenomenon on SNS (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011, Jansen, Zhang & Sobel, 2009).

Consumers spreading information about brands and products to other consumers is generally referred to as word of mouth (WOM). WOM's effectiveness in influencing consumers' brand perceptions and decision making process has long been known since it is consumer-generated rather than firm-generated, meaning that people put more trust in what friends or other consumers say about a product than information from the company. WOM is regarded as having high trustworthiness since it is an independent source of information coming from one's friend, which is why many marketing researchers claim its effectiveness in leading to behavior or attitude change. (Prendergast, Ko & Siu, 2010, Lee & Youn, 2009, Wood & Salomon, 2009, Cooke & Buckley, 2008)

¹ List of updates on one's Facebook homepage (Webopedia: Definition news feed, 2011)

² "websites that encourage social interaction through profile-based user accounts" (Keenan & Shiri, 2009 p.439)

³ Someone whom is added to one's Facebook network, often people one have met IRL. (Shear social media: Definition of Facebook Friend)

The emergence of eWOM

The advent of Internet has revolutionized the potential of WOM since it enables accessibility and reach at a completely different level than traditional WOM could have ever achieved. Consumers can now share their opinions of brands and products to a large number of people on different online platforms, Facebook being one of them. WOM occurring on the Internet is generally being referred to as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) which will be used hereafter. (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011, Kozinets et al., 2010, Thackery, Neiger, Hanson & McKenzie, 2008).

Facebook might be the ideal channel for spreading eWOM since it enables a combination of WOM and eWOM's main benefits; reaching a larger audience while maintaining the trustworthiness of your social circle. In addition, Facebook is an emerging venue for consumers spreading eWOM (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011). Sparked by this, I believe that marketing practitioners are waking up to the importance of understanding the effect of peers' communicating about brands and products on Facebook.

Many researchers (e.g. Casteleyn, Mottart & Rutten, 2009, Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009) have studied why people spread eWOM on Facebook. While this research is indeed important, I argue that it is equally important to understand how eWOM is perceived by the recipients since it will determine its persuasiveness (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011). In this article I am aiming to address how consumers perceive, and are influenced by Facebook eWOM. This is made in an attempt to identify the different determinants affecting Facebook eWOM's persuasiveness, i.e. effectiveness in influencing the receivers' attitudes and behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to study Facebook eWOM's persuasiveness, one must first understand eWOM as a phenomenon in the Facebook context and the process of persuasive communication. These two will therefore be addressed in this section.

In the beginning of the Internet era the expression e-tribalization was introduced, describing the formation of groups based on interest instead of geography (Kozinets, 1998). The consumers could now come together and make their voices heard. Consumers became active creators of information instead of passive recipients. As a result, the power shifted from companies to consumers (ibid). Notably, the consumers' ability to influence shows no signs of decreasing since they are being provided with more and more tools that facilitate the spread of eWOM. (Thackery et al., 2008)

The most common definition of what eWOM actually means is provided by Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004, p. 39) stating that eWOM is "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet". Therefore, all online statements about products, brands or even a certain lifestyle can be regarded as eWOM between consumers. Companies must be prepared to utilize this opportunity to their advantages as well as be prepared for the devastating brand consequences eWOM can cause. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009)

The consequences of eWOM are actually more likely to be devastating than beneficial since it has been proven that unfavorable eWOM is more effective in its influence than brand favorable content. People tend to be more suspicious towards positive information, whereas negative information is easier to quantify and relate to. Furthermore, consumers perceive the likelihood of the sender having personal gain to be greater when eWOM is positive. This is a notion that can be derived from the well known occurrence of bloggers being bribed to spread positive eWOM. (Lee & Youn, 2009)

The differences between WOM and eWOM

The relationship between the communicator and the receiver appears to be the most distinct difference between eWOM and WOM. WOM is restricted to communication between friends, which is not the case of eWOM since Internet allows WOM to reach many unknown people. Consequently, eWOM has the possibility to reach a large audience at the expense of personal relationships (Kozinets et al., 2010, Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Furthermore, eWOM is more likely to contain references to advertising than traditional WOM since the web facilitates sharing of links, pictures and information. This makes it easier for consumers to pass along marketing messages (Keller & Fay, 2009).

It has been argued that the likelihood of finding expert statements online is greater than in real life. At the same time the relationship between peers online is often weakened by the need to trust strangers' opinions and reviews. As a result, consumers often find it difficult to determine the quality and trustworthiness of eWOM since they do not know the communicator's true intentions; an issue WOM does not struggle with. Also the communicator of eWOM does not need to take any responsibility for the consequences of posted statements. (Lee & Youn, 2009, Steffes & Burgee, 2009)

Facebook eWOM

Facebook offers several possibilities for eWOM to be influential. Firstly, the profile-based user accounts make Facebook non-anonymous (Keenan & Shiri, 2009). Members of one's network are in most cases being perceived as more credible than strangers, indicating that the platform is an important source of product information, facilitating and accelerating eWOM. Secondly, although eWOM on Facebook does not have access to all Internet users since it is a closed network, it reaches many more real friends than what one can communicate with in real life. Opinion passing behavior is also more likely to occur in an online social context such as Facebook suggesting that

once eWOM is set in motion it can easily be spread from one friend's network to another. It is common for consumers to engage in social interactions by commenting, liking or passing along eWOM to their social connections. When doing this they are voluntarily displaying their brand preferences. (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011)

Due to the possibilities for eWOM that Facebook offers, I find it highly relevant to look into which therefore provides the basis of this study. The tendency of spreading eWOM on Facebook can, in my opinion, be considered a new marketing arena. A study conducted in 2009 investigating where people share influence online, revealed that Facebook takes 62% of the share of influence impressions (eWOM) within SNS. This figure is notable considering that MySpace, being second takes 18% followed by Twitter having 10% (North American netnographics: where people share influence online 2011).

On Facebook, the focus is on the identity of the user in comparison to forums and virtual communities where a specific topic or interest is in focus. As an additional value to the user profiles, a variety of interactive services are being provided. These facilitate information sharing, for instance post status updates, upload pictures and check in with the Facebook-places application⁴ (Keenan & Shiri, 2009). These information sharing tools are essential in this study, since they allow people to spread eWOM that appears on all their Facebook friends' news feed. Posting status updates, i.e. sharing thoughts in short messages, is a common phenomenon on Facebook allowing the users to easily spread eWOM.

'Facebook places' was recently launched in Sweden and provides an additional possibility of eWOM to occur on Facebook. The application allows the users to check-in to various places that mainly come with commercial information such as a restaurant, a nightclub or a gym. Swedish companies are starting to realize the potential of this

⁴ A location based service allowing Facebook users to share their location with their friends (Facebook-Places: definition 2011)

and encourage consumers to check-in at their stores in exchange for vouchers or other benefits (Sjöden, 2011). It can be seen as a win-win situation where consumers are getting financial benefits in exchange to spread eWOM about the company to their Facebook friends. Financial incentives are still quite rare, yet people are frequently checking in to various places. This proves that motives in play for checking in.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) Facebook usage comes with high self-presentation, meaning that in any type of social interaction people want to control the impression others form of them. It is used for two reasons, firstly to gain positive rewards, for instance being likeable, and secondly to create an image that is consistent with one's personal identity. The communicated information therefore enables the creation of a desired identity. As a result, people appear to be more concerned of what they communicate on Facebook than on anonymous forums and other interactive websites. (ibid)

This assumption is being further strengthened by a study conducted by Casteleyn et al. (2009) revealing that Facebook is being used to communicate one's desired personality to the Facebook friends. The user profile and what is communicated is being carefully constructed by the users since they are representing one's identity. Interestingly, these pages do not provide correct illustrations of who people actually are but rather how they would like to be perceived. Thus, performing actions on Facebook can be compared to acting on a stage. (ibid)

This suggests that some, not all, of the information one chooses to spread is carefully considered since it is connected to one's identity construction. Thus, according to Gabriel and Lang (2006) consumers have created a 'material culture' where people constantly try to create or maintain identities through the use of different brands. Brands have become an extension of oneself boosting both identity as well as one's self esteem. Material objects help people express who they are and shopping is not just the acquisition of things anymore, it is buying an identity (ibid). Spreading

eWOM can therefore be a means to construct identity. If Facebook users are using eWOM to market themselves in a desired way, perhaps without them reflecting upon it, they are simultaneously marketing brands, lifestyles and products.

CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF eWOM

As the aim of this study is to address how Facebook eWOM is perceived by the receivers, consumer perceptions of the phenomenon are central. A general theory of how consumer attitudes change is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of persuasion, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). It is a general framework for understanding the basic processes of persuasive communication, leading to attitude change.

The model proposes two routes to attitude change; the central and the peripheral. The central route builds on the notion that the consumer finds the message relevant. The content is being logically considered, involving careful and thoughtful consideration of the qualities of the argument. The peripheral route emphasizes characteristics besides the message, i.e. the consumer relies on plausible evidence and do not put much effort in the information process. The information is being processed based on simple cues such as how it is presented or the source attractiveness rather than the actual content. The source attractiveness can make the receivers embrace the information although if reflecting upon it more thoroughly, it is not relevant to them. Therefore, the peripheral route suggests that other less logical factors may lead to persuasion and attitude change, when there is an absence of argument processing. (ibid)

Which of the routes that is taken is determined by the degree of elaboration of each message since the likelihood of elaboration varies in any situation. The peripheral route is taken when the consumer puts low elaboration of the message. In this case, other cues than the quality of the message cause attitude change. The central route is taken when the message and arguments that come with it are being carefully processed by the receiver and thereby cause attitude change. (ibid)

METHODOLOGY

The learning from the ELM of persuasive communication appears to be that the receivers are likely to judge eWOM based on several factors. When consumers are just surfing the net they can freely select their exposure to certain topics. This is not the case on Facebook since the users share eWOM to all their contacts although the network consists of strong and weak ties (between people). This means that a great number of acquaintances (weak ties) receive the information instead of just close friends (strong ties) which is the scenario of WOM (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011). Steffes and Burgee (2009) claim that for eWOM to be effective it always relies heavily on the altruistic nature that the sender communicates something s/he finds relevant to the receiver. This is line with the central route of ELM (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), suggesting that if they find eWOM relevant, the Facebook friends will carefully process eWOM.

ELM's other route to persuasion, the peripheral, suggests that Facebook eWOM can be judged on other factors, the sender's attractiveness is brought up in the model as one important factor (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). The fact that the sender on Facebook is known to generally have high trustworthiness since the receiver can evaluate the sender's competence within the subject (Prendergast et al., 2010). On the other hand, Richardsson and Hessey (2009) found in their study that many of the Facebook friends are not really friends at all; most of them are just acquaintances that the user does not actively communicate with. Therefore one cannot assume that all Facebook friends are trustworthy (ibid).

Furthermore, Facebook users' tendency to communicate an idealized version of themselves (Casteleyn et al., 2009) might put the sender's trustworthiness in jeopardy since Labrecque, Markos and Milne's (2010) have identified authenticity as a key factor on Facebook. If one does not communicate the same person on Facebook as one is in real life, it often has negative consequences for how the receivers perceive the sender and what he/she communicates (ibid).

The phenomenon of Facebook eWOM is being explored with the aim of indentifying the determinants affecting its persuasiveness on the receivers. The study is explorative since it is conducted without having previous studies to emanate from in how eWOM is perceived in the chosen context, Facebook. Also, I wanted to collect as much knowledge within my subject as possible without, beforehand, having a specific root to take to collect versatile data, which makes this approach most suitable (Hair, Bush & Ortianu, 2006). Due to this, my research approach is qualitative since the research problem requires discussions to understand people's perceptions and experiences (Patel & Davidson, 2003). Consumer perceptions cannot be captured by short or preselected questions, instead rich and versatile data is being acquired through long and thorough discussions (Patel & Davidson, 2003, Silverman, 2007).

When selecting interviewees the set criterion was that they should be 'active Facebook users' with at least 130 friends since that is the average number of friends one has on Facebook according to Facebook Statistics (2011). I have chosen to define an active user with guidance from Facebook's provided statistics stating that 50% of its active users log on to Facebook on any given day. This was made to secure that they are being exposed to eWOM on a daily basis which also is more likely when having many friends motivating the second requirement. The study aimed to include both male and female participants in various age intervals to make it more representative. The interviewees were recruited on Facebook by using my Facebook networks' network to identify potential interviewees. The participating interviewees are between 21 and 54 years old. In total, 10 people participated in the study. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour since I find Facebook usage to be of routine nature and wanted to avoid rationalized reflections (Jacobsen, 2002).

At the outset, I had a few ideas regarding what might influence eWOM on Facebook which was inspired by the identified benefits of both traditional WOM and eWOM. A pilot study with two

individuals was conducted to test these assumptions and thereafter a more thorough hypothetical system was created for the questionnaire, guiding the

following interviews as recommended by Patel and Davidson (2003) and Kvale (1997).

Table 1. Description of the interviewees

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEWEES			
<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Number of Facebook friends</i>	<i>Estimated online frequency</i>
Adam	21	270	2-3 times/day
Anna	25	277	3-5 times/day
Eric	23	443	2 times/day
Frank	26	662	6-7 times/day
Johnny	30	506	3-4 times/day
Nina	26	433	constantly online
Sarah	24	331	3-5 times/day
Tommy	54	204	1-2 times/day
Tina	46	625	4-5 times/day
Victor	33	298	3-4 times/day

Note: Participant names have been changed to ensure confidentiality

Table 2. The chosen eWOM status updates used in the interviews

eWOM IN THE SHAPE OF STATUS UPDATES		
Positive eWOM	1	<i>“To all nerdy golf players: download Golfshot: Golf GPS. Awesome golf-gps for your iPhone”</i>
	2	<i>“Could have had a worse Sunday.. Took a walk along the sea and then had brunch at egg & Milk.”</i>
Negative eWOM	3	<i>“Still no Internet at home..it’s been over a month NOW. Bahnhof is worthless. I swear to god I’m gonna call Plus soon!!! :p”</i>
	4	<i>“Frustrated at my HTC, only 3 weeks old and already stone-dead and on reparation at 3! Gah!”</i>

The interviews were divided in two parts: (1) semi-structured questions and (2) discussion around provided examples of status updates. The examples were used to create a more tangible context for the interviewees to relate to and express how they experience different updates (see table 2). I as a researcher was limited to selecting the Facebook material to be discussed, and also keeping the interviewees focused on discussing how they

perceive eWOM.

The chosen status updates presented in table 2, were real examples of eWOM found on Facebook and used to facilitate the discussions and analysis. Four examples were chosen, two positive and two negative where the aim was to have one statement being more intentional (encourage usage or actively encourage non-usage) and one being less intentional, just mentioning brands. These

classifications were made by me as a researcher and were chosen from the theoretical findings that negative and positive eWOM are being perceived differently, i.e. people being more reluctant to positive eWOM than negative (Lee & Youn, 2009).

All interviews were being transcribed to facilitate the analysis and increase the accuracy of the study since it provides richer data than if the analysis is based on just notes (Jacobsen, 2002). Continuous analysis of the interviews was made during the data collection by writing down my reflections of interesting findings after each interview. These were thereafter tested in the upcoming interviews. Hence, when I found that no more new information was discovered I settled for ten interviews. Two individuals participated in the pilot study and eight were interviewed for the main study, however all participants were included in the analysis since they provided useful information. As an initial step in the analysis possible themes and patterns were identified for each interview. The data material was thereafter being categorized according to the theoretical areas of Facebook eWOM and the routes of the ELM.

Many researchers, for instance Kvale (1997), Patel and Davidson (2003) and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), state that qualitative research is struggling with objectivity of the researcher and thereby the accuracy of the study. I am aware of the fact that I am risking the generalizability of the study since it is inevitable to not be affected by my own ideas and notions in my analysis. Although I am aware of this problematic circumstance I still find subjective interpretations to be unavoidable as stated by Moisander and Valtonen (2006) when conducting qualitative studies. In an attempt to reduce this effect, eWOM was evaluated based on the identified categories in the literature review of eWOM and WOM and the two routes to persuasion.

FINDINGS: eWOM'S PERSUASIVENESS

The findings are divided into two areas; firstly whether Facebook is an ideal channel for eWOM. Facebook was beforehand believed to be a

beneficial context for eWOM shared between consumers since it has the possibility to unite the benefits of WOM and eWOM. Secondly, the determinants of Facebook eWOM's persuasiveness according to the two routes of the ELM. The empirical findings of Facebook eWOM are simultaneously being presented and analyzed.

FACEBOOK – AN IDEAL CHANNEL FOR eWOM COMMUNICATION?

Implications for eWOM's main benefit: high reach

The network's importance in the interviewees' lives could not be missed during the interviews. Foremost reading the information on news feed is a given activity of the day. The interviewees were therefore no exception to the findings of Wise et al. (2010) that Facebook news feed has become a phenomenon in itself, i.e. the users actually spend more time social browsing on news feed than social searching by looking at profiles. It was even indicated by for instance Sarah, cited below, that the users have a need to be updated.

"How often I log in.. every day ,once or twice.. or maybe three times. It's actually pretty hysteric, I mean it is addictive. If I have not been logged in for a while I feel that something is missing." /Sarah

Facebook has created a need of being constantly updated of what happens in one's social network's lives; a need we did not have before. The greatest advantage of eWOM, to potentially reach a large audience (Kozinets et al., 2010) can therefore be assumed to be upheld within the network due to the strong need of being updated.

Naturally, a question that immediately comes to mind is; why news feed is as addictive as Sarah states. The general notion among the interviewees was that news feed is like a newspaper that is constantly updated and you have to be online to not miss out on the 'big news'. It is perceived as relevant and interesting since it is news about their social network and again they want to know what their friends are doing, saying and posting, which motivates them to continually log in.

"I usually do not look at older posts, it is not that interesting. I only want to read the newest stuff. It is like news, what happened yesterday is old news." /Anna

A common behavior according to Chuan and Yoojung (2011) is that consumers engage in social interactions by commenting, liking or passing along eWOM to their social connections. When doing this they are voluntarily displaying their brand preferences (ibid). As the interviewees continually logging in to get the 'news' right away as Anna states, they are more likely to also notice their friend's brand preferences as well. I therefore argue that Facebook eWOM is being delivered on a silver plate since one's friends' brand preferences are being visible to the consumers. An opportunity only a SNS such as Facebook can offer. As it seems, the cravings for news make Facebook an effective channel for eWOM to reach the potential audience within the network.

The findings of Richardsson and Hessey (2009) showed that many of one's Facebook friends are just acquaintances and thereby less relevant. It is therefore vital to know whether the cravings regard all Facebook friends or just a selected few. How logical it might seem beforehand, during the interviews it actually turned out that this was not the case. The interviewees wanted information from everyone even though they confirmed that most of their Facebook friends are just acquaintances. The feeling of otherwise missing out on interesting information is found to be the reason for them not just wanting to receive information from their closest friends. Their 'social newspaper' should include news from everyone although information from the closer friends has an even higher news-value according to the majority of the interviewees.

This notion further strengthens the belief that posted eWOM's reaches most of one's Facebook friends. Considering that once eWOM is set in motion it can easily be spread from one friend's network to another (Chuan & Yoojung, 2011). When that happens, Facebook eWOM is indeed upholding the benefit of reach.

Implications for WOM's main benefit: trustworthiness

The known sender is the reason for WOM being perceived as trustworthy, an issue eWOM is struggling with on anonymous online platforms (Prendergast et al., 2010, Lee & Youn, 2009). On Facebook, on the other hand, the sender is in most cases known (Keenan & Shiri, 2009), suggesting that Facebook eWOM can uphold the benefits of high trustworthiness as well.

According to Richardsson and Hessey (2009) one must remember that many of the Facebook friends are acquaintances which they therefore claim to be a threat against trustworthiness. Interestingly though, it was revealed during the interviews that Facebook brings new opportunities in terms of how to get to know friends and acquaintances.

"Facebook has created a need I didn't have before: to know what all Facebook friends are doing. I even think I know them even though, if thinking critically about it, I don't. If Facebook hadn't existed then I wouldn't have known all these things, where they live, what they do..." /Adam

What Facebook does that reality cannot is to provide the users with much more information about their friends than what they can access in real life. Being Facebook friends seems to create a feeling of 'knowing' since the interviewees are being updated of what happens in their friends' lives; their new haircut, where they work, what they think about etcetera. Even acquaintances are therefore, to a larger extent than in real life, regarded as trustworthy when spreading eWOM. It is indeed a unique benefit that Facebook provides, taking trustworthiness to new levels.

The common belief among the interviewees' is that Facebook is not an arena where marketing messages are expected. The common view is that there is no reason for personal gain when someone is praising or rejecting a certain product or brand on Facebook. This is why Facebook content is believed to be reliable and authentic. The interviewees stressed that they are more skeptical towards information on various websites and blogs in particular, in line with the findings of Lee and Youn (2009).

As a result, not many of the interviewees reflected upon the mentioning of brands when it was included as a part of a personal message. eWOM can therefore be cleverly spread without any criticism that bloggers often come up against. When the example of positive brand mentioning of the brunch café Egg & Milk was shown (see table 2, no 2), the common interpretation was that the sender's main objective was to boost herself rather than Egg&Milk. Therefore, none of the interviewees perceived the status update as marketing.

"The person wants to say that she has a good life and I guess I get happy reading about it. Taking a walk along the sea and Egg & Milk are good stuff." /Tommy

This suggests that eWOM is not questioned when communicated this way. Although, it is important to point out that the interviewees are not naive in their belief; in fact they stated that they are immediately reacting when messages deviate from normality. Again, authenticity is a key factor for attaining trustworthiness as stated by Labrecque et al. (2010), which is very evident in Anna's statement.

"If someone systematically would start to boost certain brands, it wouldn't take long before I'd notice. But if it just happens once in a while, I probably wouldn't react on it." /Anna

I therefore find a marketing strategy similar to how bloggers are being courted by companies to be very difficult to pull off while the sender attains credibility and authenticity. Then again, if done discretely eWOM's trustworthiness is most likely not questioned. Overall, Facebook eWOM come with high trustworthiness, indeed beneficial for its persuasiveness.

DETERMINANTS OF FACEBOOK eWOM'S PERSUASIVENESS

The identified determinants affecting Facebook eWOM's persuasiveness will below be presented. The empirical material is being applied to the two routes of the ELM model to understand how consumers' are being influenced by Facebook eWOM.

The central route

The central route of the ELM builds on the notion that the consumer finds the message relevant. The content is being logically processed and the quality of the arguments is being carefully considered before leading to attitude change (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

The message's relevancy

The actual message's relevancy was brought up by all interviewees as an important factor for whether they choose to embrace the message or not. As Petty and Cacioppo (1986) state when the message is relevant, the receiver will consider it more carefully which also leads to a long lasting attitude change. The importance of the actual content for eWOM to be effective is nothing new, Steffes and Burgee (2009) found in their study of Facebook that eWOM always relies on being perceived as relevant to the receiver.

The importance of the content for how eWOM is being processed was evident when the eWOM example with the golf application (see table 2, no 1) was shown. All interviewees playing golf thought this was a terrific update and even statements as "this is how Facebook should be used" were given. The interviewees not interested in golf immediately ignored the eWOM message and did not process it at all. As it seems, when eWOM is perceived as relevant it can easily be influential since it is being embraced. It therefore gets through the buzz easier and when that happens it is indeed influential as Nina states.

"At the moment, I think I am tremendously recipient towards updates like "I cannot live without my iPad". My cravings for an iPad increase every time." /Nina

An update that Nina in this case would have appreciated could by others be perceived as completely uninteresting, just like the golf application. Although eWOM does not appeal to everyone, the ones who do find it relevant are carefully processing eWOM which thereafter can lead to attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The danger of subjectivity

"It is very important how it is written. If someone writes McDonalds sucks, well than I would not care. But if they wrote McDonalds sucks because they dropped a hamburger on the floor and put it back in the shelf, than it would affect me. Or for that matter if they say the new 'tacomaco' taste fantastic, they have no personal gain in stating that which would make me trust it and wanna try."/Frank

The quality of the argument is an important determinant for the interviewees to evaluate eWOM, in line with Petty and Cacioppo (1986). The interviewees are skeptical towards eWOM of a subjective nature, as Frank states. Therefore, some kind of argument is necessary to convince them in different matters. This was evident when the two negative brand statements shown during the interviews were perceived differently by the interviewees. The example of negative eWOM (table 2, no 4) with the HTC mobile phone being stone-dead after three weeks was not questioned at all by most interviewees. They found it reliable since it was an objective argument as the quote from Johnny illustrates.

"When reading this I associate HTC with being a bad telephone. And it doesn't matter if it comes from my best friend or someone I haven't seen in 15 years, that's not interesting cause it doesn't have anything to do with what they write about. It's a fact."/Johnny

The other example where a broadband company was criticized (table 2, no 3) was not perceived as reliable and influential. Instead it was found to be too subjective and as a result they questioned the credibility of the sender's competence. As it seems, the distinction between subjective and objective eWOM is a key for anyone to be influential. When eWOM is of subjective nature, the sender's trustworthiness or social status determines how it is perceived which is being addressed more thoroughly later on in this analysis. Consequently, a rather small number of friends will be successful in spreading subjective eWOM. This is not the case for eWOM of a more objective nature; instead a strong and credible argument determines eWOM's persuasiveness – not the sender. Thus, marketers should strive to encourage objective eWOM if possible.

For eWOM, the issue of subjectivity suggests that being mentioned on Facebook can be both beneficial and negative. Being mentioned does not automatically mean that it will have an impact due to some of the interviewees' requirement of a considered argument. Negative eWOM such as "McDonalds is crap" will therefore not be particularly devastating for the brand since a reason is not provided. On the other hand when just stating "McDonalds is fantastic", I have reason to believe that it will not have a tremendous impact either since the argument is weak suggesting it to be difficult to be persuasive (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986)

The danger of over boosting

Besides the lack of a strong argument, it was evident during the interviews that eWOM can fall short when communicated for intended reasons. The interviewees were very skeptical towards these types of messages. One reason for this could be the findings of Casteleyn et al. (2009), that a desired personality often is being communicated on Facebook rather than reality. To communicate a picture of oneself being 'too good' makes the status update less relevant since it loses credibility according to the interviewees. That is in line with the finding of authenticity being a key factor for successful branding on Facebook (Labrecque et al., 2010). It even turned out that this behavior can be more harmful than helpful for one's personal brand.

"I do trust what people say on Facebook but with one reservation, sometimes I get the feeling that it is too idealized. I actually find that a bit frustrating, I mean people can be so damn perfect, always cooking delicious food or whatever it is."/Eric

Eric is not the only one skeptical towards these types of messages. To provide an idealized version of oneself on Facebook can therefore make the message less reliable or even rejected since it often creates suspiciousness. It does not seem real, as Tina's statement demonstrate.

"Some people use status updates to boost themselves, to show off their fantastic life. It is like when someone is house styling

before selling it. I like it much better when people are complaining and use Facebook to hate the world.” /Tina

Several of the interviewees indicated that many of their Facebook friends are communicating an idealized version of themselves by bragging and checking in to places they want to be associated with. When something is perceived as too good, it is often seen through and therefore authenticity must, once again, be achieved for eWOM to be acknowledged. Otherwise the receivers will reject eWOM and not process the actual content which is needed for it to be influential (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The peripheral route

The peripheral route of the ELM is taken by the consumers when they judge eWOM based on simple cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It often seems to occur since the receiver does not have the ability or time to process all information on the news feed, especially since they want all the information. ‘Shortcuts’ that have been identified as influencing the Facebook users to attitude change without carefully process eWOM are presented below.

The sender

The sender’s social attractiveness and credibility is identified by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) to be one of the most important cues for eWOM to be persuasive when there is an absence of arguments. Given that Facebook is centered on the user (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009), it is not very surprisingly that the interviewees also stressed the sender as important when determining what information to read while navigating through news feed. They stated that they often look for certain people, either close friends or people they find interesting for some reason. Therefore, Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) notion of source attractiveness is sometimes critical when determining what eWOM is being prioritized and also how it is perceived. This is explained by Gabriel and Lang (2006) stating that people you admire influence you more. It is important to remember though that this is just one

side of the coin since the interviewees still wanted the possibility to receive information from all friends as stated earlier. The sender’s attractiveness just increases the likelihood of eWOM being processed.

Image-related eWOM, for instance fashion, was brought up by several of the interviewees as a category where the sender’s status is first and last. The importance of the sender’s status was substantial when the participants talked about how they perceive eWOM delivered through Facebook places. At a first glance, many check-ins to a place can seem as very beneficial marketing but whether it is positive is actually found to be twofold due to the importance of the sender. Many times the interviewees tended to associate their Facebook friends with the place being tagged and if it was a friend they admired they indicated that it can trigger them to visit that place. But if the check-in came from someone they felt very different from, it rather made them less motivated to visit that place. In fact, several of the interviewees even stated that they had used the information provided from Facebook places in terms of what places to avoid as exemplified by Sarah.

“If a person checks in to a club where I don’t think he/she fits in, well than I guess that club’s audience has changed, if that ‘type of people’ hangs there nowadays, well than it is nothing for me anymore.” /Sarah

Who checks in or post eWOM is of course impossible for companies to control although it is a bit surprising that many check-in to a place does not have to be positive for the place if it is the ‘wrong’ sender. Furthermore, the interviewees did not always hold the sender’s attractiveness as the most important determinant. In some cases, the sender’s credibility in the subject was the most important factor for the interviewees when judging the quality of eWOM. Often it seems as a combination of attractiveness and credibility must be upheld for eWOM to be persuasive.

Negative eWOM is more easily processed

Whether eWOM is positive or negative seems to determine how easily the interviewees choose to

embrace eWOM. Previous studies of eWOM, in other contexts, indicate that negative eWOM is more easily accepted (Lee & Youn, 2009). During the interviews it turned out that negative eWOM is more accepted within the context of Facebook as well. The interviewees were more easily embraced by negative eWOM when they were shown the different status updates (see table 2), only one participant questioned the content.

Positive eWOM on the other hand, was not as easily embraced by the interviewees, sometimes immediately rejected. As it seems, the interviewees were more suspicious towards positive eWOM since they associated it with the sender having something to gain although they did not seem to believe it is intended marketing. Negative eWOM seems more accepted even when exaggerated which was found to be an issue when consumers evaluate the quality of the argument. Overall, interviewees are not as skeptical towards eWOM when negative. This reason for this was that negative eWOM was believed to be spread when someone actually is dissatisfied, wanting to warn others or just get attention. This tendency can be devastating for a brand since it is hard for companies to control it (Kozinets, 1998). Although both positive and negative eWOM can be influential, it is worth remembering that it is very effective when being negative.

The power of frequency

The frequency of the same message appeared to be effective in getting the interviewees attention. If several Facebook friends check-in, like, post or claim something, it draws attention and causes curiosity according to the interviewees. In fact several of the interviewees stated that they have looked up or reconsidered places due to many check-ins or posts regarding a certain subject. For instance Anna talked about a well-known place she never visited anymore but now is of interest to her due to the Facebook-places application.

”Actually, there is a bar in Gothenburg called ‘Smaka’ that I had not visited for years since I didn’t have such a good experience from it. But now I have started to notice that more

and more people check in there. I have to go there soon.”

/Anna

Therefore, once eWOM is set in motion it causes curiosity and awareness, causing it to spread rapidly between Facebook networks, as implied by Chuan and Yoojung (2011). Facebook therefore holds the potential of being very influential or if negative, be devastating. As it seems, high frequency can therefore be influential and processed despite the issues of relevancy and source attractiveness (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

How the message is delivered

A forth cue leading to persuasion identified is that how the message is delivered can increase eWOM’s relevancy although the actual content is the same. This is explained by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) as an effect of consumers being ‘seduced’ by the message and therefore put less elaboration on what is actually being communicated. If the update is emotionally appealing, delivered in a humoristic way or standing out, it is more interesting according to the interviewees.

Facebook users therefore have the ability to make Facebook eWOM more appealing by writing it in first person, using one’s own experiences and emotions to ‘seduce’ the receivers. Even when just passing eWOM further, the sender has the ability to add some edginess to it by for instance adding the comment “this is hilarious”. These three simple words can completely change how eWOM is being perceived since the receivers already know that it is hilarious. For that reason, it has the potential to influence the receivers a lot more than traditional advertising. The rhetoric skills of the sender is not to be underestimated when determining eWOM’s persuasiveness since it makes the receiver embrace the message easier and be less skeptical toward the content.

CONCLUSIONS

Facebook was beforehand believed to be an ideal channel for eWOM. As my findings show, Facebook offers possibilities for eWOM to be highly influential within this context. Foremost, all

friends have the possibility to influence since the users want information from 'everyone'. This is a huge advantage when comparing to WOM where people must actively communicate to spread. I argue that no one has the possibility to spread WOM to 130 people in one day, yet on Facebook they do. Although a certain eWOM message is not highly influential to all Facebook friends, it is influencing more people than WOM ever could achieve. However, it is important to remember that although everyone has a possibility to influence, it does not occur on a regular basis since the receivers are very selective and eWOM is often being judged based on other criterion than the message's relevance. It must therefore be concluded that the receivers are not always logical in their evaluation of eWOM.

The Facebook users' cravings for 'news' imply that they are being exposed to a tremendous amount of information, making it hard for eWOM to be thoroughly processed. At the same time, the heavy information flow allows the users to get to know their Facebook friends. This turned out to increase the acquaintances' credibility, and thereby their persuasiveness. An opportunity reality cannot offer. When eWOM is being processed, negative eWOM is more easily embraced. This indicates that Facebook might be an ideal channel for eWOM from the consumers' perspective, not the companies.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study attempted to reveal how eWOM is perceived when delivered in the context of Facebook. I only focused on Facebook eWOM

which limits the findings to not be fully applicable to other social networks, suggesting that the broader picture of eWOM on social networks still can be addressed by future researchers. Facebook was chosen since it is the largest network existing with an intense activity of shared content (Facebook statistics, 2011), still there are other growing networks such as Twitter and LinkedIn with unique features that Facebook does not have, implying other findings beneficial for marketers to have knowledge in.

The findings of this qualitative study was only based on data collected from interviews. Other qualitative methods such as a netnography or observations were not used but could have implied richer data. To approach the same research area with other methods within the spectra of qualitative research as well as taking on a quantitative approach as Lee and Youn (2009) did when studying perceptions in another contexts, would be a task for future research to develop the findings of this study even further. Also, this study's purpose was to map the determinants of Facebook eWOM's persuasiveness, each identified determinant was therefore not looked deeper into through a second round of data collection.

Finally, the interviewees' perceptions were not compared or grouped based on any type of demographics, for instance if there are any differences between different age-ranges. This would be interesting to look into, if wanting to segregate the market and target a specific audience. A task for future researchers would be to study these aspects since I believe it will facilitate the understanding of Facebook eWOM. This is indeed important since the social newspaper shows no signs of going to sleep.

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