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## **AN OVERVIEW ON TRADITIONAL AND ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH COMMUNICATION (WOM)**

### **Abstract**

*WOM is an informal communication way occurring between consumers about a product, a service or an organization in order to pass their opinion, mostly their delight or dissatisfaction through other people. Customers of some special categories of products and especially services feel obligatory to apply WOM to be wised during pre-purchase period. As WOM importance has been increasing and it has been becoming a critical issue affecting performance of organizations, different studies took their place in the literature .Technological developments boosted the means of WOM communications and introduced online WOM, making it keep its actuality. Although the definition of WOM is quite simple, unfortunately its context does no. Roles of WOM parties such as sender and receiver, power and retention of the transmitted message, how it affects costumer purchasing process ,how a negative WOM could be transformed to a second chance to augment consumer satisfaction and to improve the quality of the product.*

*The aim of this study is to overview different topics that have been already observed related to both traditional and online WOM communications and to consolidate the key, critical and actual belonging issues. Finally, subjects for the future WOM researches will be suggested.*

**Keywords:***traditional wom, e-wom, market maven, opinion leader, information seeker, information provider.*

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## **MAKALE GEÇMİŞİ**

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# **GELENEKSEL VE ELEKTRONİK AĞIZDAN AĞIZA İLETİŞİM YÖNTEMLERİNE GENEL BİR BAKIŞ**

## **Öz**

*Ağızdan ağıza iletişim (WOM-word of mouth); tüketicilerin, bir ürün, hizmet veya kurumla ilgili çoğunlukla memnun kalmadıkları veya beğendikleri hususları diğer kişilere iletme üzere kullandıkları resmi olmayan bir iletişim yoludur.*

*Bazı özel ürün kategorilerinde ve özellikle de hizmet sektöründe, müşterilerin satın alım öncesi WOM'dan etkilenip karar verdikleri düşünülmektedir. Globalleşen ve gelişen iletişim teknolojileri neticesinde WOM'un gittikçe artan önemi ve kurumların performansını etkileyen kritik bir konu haline gelmesine bağlı olarak, bu konuda literatürde farklı çalışmalara yer verilmiştir. Teknolojik gelişmeler, WOM iletişim mecralarını artırmış ve elektronik WOM(e-WOM) geliştirilerek, önemi bir kez daha ortaya konmuştur. WOM'un oldukça basit olan tanımının aksine içeriği önemlidir. WOM'u gönderen ve alan taraflarının rolü, iletilen mesajın gücü ve akılda tutulma süresi, müşterinin satın alma sürecini nasıl etkilediği, olumsuz bir WOM'un tüketicinin memnuniyetini artırmak ve ürünün kalitesini iyileştirmek için ikinci bir şans olarak değerlendirilmesi gerektiği hususları dahil olmak üzere, bu çalışmanın amacı hem geleneksel hem de elektronik WOM/e-WOM ile ilgili olarak gözlemlenen farklı konuları gözden geçirmek ve anahtar, kritik ve güncel konularını pekiştirmektir. Son bölümde de gelecekteki WOM araştırmaları için önerilerde bulunulacaktır.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *geleneksel wom, e-wom, pazarda engin bilgi sahibi, lider görüşlü, bilgi arayan, bilgi sağlayan.*

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## Increasing Importance of WOM in Marketing

WOM activities were arisen in the literature by Whyte in 1954 emphasizing WOM communications for both marketing and consumer behavior disciplines. Katz and Lazarfeld (1955) continued by declaring that “WOM is the most important source of influence in the purchase of household goods and food products”. They (1955) also emphasized the effectiveness of WOM in influencing consumers to switch brand; as “seven times more than newspapers and magazines, four times more than personal selling and twice more than radio advertising” (cited in Brown and Reingen, 1987, p.350).

In the following years, other studies have been appeared in order to clarify different impacts of WOM and to provide key inputs to organizations make them able to manage WOM communications strategically within their marketing mix.

Dramatic increase in internet created a new form of WOM that is called as e-WOM in a written-online format. Consequently, studies directed through online WOM and its comparison with the traditional one.

### Two Key Components of Traditional WOM: Opinion Leaders and Market Mavens

Opinion leaders and market mavens are two important terms to explain the significance of WOM in consumer behavior and pre purchase decision-making.

Feick and Price (1987) stated different definitions of *opinion leaders* that were identified by several scholars, as follows (p.84):

First Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) identified opinion leaders as individuals who act as information brokers intervening between mass media sources and opinions and choices of the population. Then Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) emphasized the

existence and importance of opinion leaders. Montgomery and Silk (1971) concluded in opinion leadership’s product class specification. There is evidence that interest in a number of products can lead to opinion leadership in more than one product category. Midley (1976) had contributed this approach by claiming that product involvement remains the predominant explanation for opinion leaders’ conversation about products. Jacoby and Hoyer (1981) pointed out that in some products categories, opinion leaders appear to be more knowledgeable about and involve with the product class. The implicit assumption in examining the personal influence of opinion leaders is that they are motivated to talk about the product because of their involvement with it.

The researchers had been continuing to consider this sight and described another group as *early purchasers*. The common characteristic of this group is to exert either “a passive or active influence on later purchasers” (Feick and Price, 1987, p.84). This is relevant especially for visible products such as automobiles, that much information can be transmitted simply by product use. In contrast, the active diffusion of information by early adopters is generally thought of as occurring through product-related conversation as opinion leaders and they are also product specific and there is no general early adopter. Consequently, the product specific knowledge or expertise of opinion leaders and early adopters influence other consumers. These two characteristics can be summed up as; knowledge or expertise of the opinion leaders are viewed as arising from involvement with a product or product class while expertise of the early adopters arises from product usage or purchase experience.

*Market mavens* are the other influencer group of the traditional approach and explained by Feick and Price(1987) as “general marketplace expertise” who “have information about many kinds of products, places to shop and other facets or markets and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to request from

consumers for market information”(p.85). Market maven differs from opinion leader and early adopter in terms of having more general knowledge of markets instead of the product specific expertise. The maven’s acquisition of market information may be related to marketplace involvement. Feick and Price (1987) also referred Kasarjian (1981) in their research, who had suggested that “some individuals may feel as their obligation to become knowledgeable consumers” (p.85). Certain individuals may feel obligated to be informed about the marketplace and that purchasing is particularly relevant for these individuals. This involvement or interest is not tied to a particular product class for these individuals but represents a more general marketplace or purchasing interest. Market mavens are aware of new products earlier, provide information to other consumers across product categories, and engage in general market information seeking and exhibit general market interest and consideration. They enjoy shopping, paying attention to advertising and using sales advantages.

Allsop and Bassett (2007) added that as to special roles, mavens, connectors and salesmen are not usually separated individuals. Furthermore, any particular individual may play a different role (giver and receiver of WOM) in the social network, depending on the topic under consideration. It should be clarified well how the specific social network in the related product category operates and particularly which individuals are most active in creating and spreading messages about this product category to others, within that social network.

### **A Look over WOM Communication at Micro and Macro Levels**

Another consideration came from Brown and Reingen (1987) also analyzed WOM effects at macro and micro levels as follows (p. 350):

First Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) identified opinion leaders as individuals who act as information

At macro level, WOM interaction in dyads or small groups aggregates to form large scale patterns in the diffusion of information and influence. Weak ties displayed an important bridging function, allowing information to travel from one distinct subgroup of referral actors to another subgroup in the broader social system. At the micro level, interpersonal (strong) ties are more likely to be activated for the flow of information and which activated ties are more influential in consumers’ decision-making. Strong and homophilous - explaining the composition of a group in terms of the similarity of members’ characteristics such as gender, age, education or lifestyle (Brown et al, 2007) -ties were more likely to be activated for the flow of referral information.

They also added that, tie strength is indicated by several variables such as importance attached to the social relation, frequency of social contact and type of social relation. They differed relational content (*referral communication*) and relational form (*tie strength*) concepts and also identified that consumers with joint membership in a subgroup of referral actors for one good are more likely to prefer the same brand for other goods than are those consumers who belong to a different or to no subgroup.

*Strong ties* referring to relationships with friends, family members and partners with whom can connect actively whereas *weak ties* include relationships with acquaintances, ex-colleagues and others with whom one may connect passively. Accordingly, strong ties are perceived to be more influential than weak ties in shaping the WOM communication process (Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn, 2006).

To complete the displayed studies on social ties, it would better to mention some findings from Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox and Harrell (1997) study that was held 10 years later than Brown’s. They specifically explained that choosing strong-tie sources is influenced by task difficulty(the number of product alternatives or the number of attributes to each product) and

prior knowledge whereas the weak ones are influenced by the importance of instrumental cues (technical or performance oriented aspects of the product) and subjective knowledge thus they feel themselves able to evaluate instrumental information. Consumers with a perception of great difficulty in the decision task feel themselves less confident to make a good judgment so they apply to strong-ties recommendations.

### **Two Descriptive Characteristics of WOM: Vividness and Pallidness**

Another feature of WOM messages determining its influence is vividness or pallidness. There is no doubt that face-to-face, vividly presented information is more interesting, attractive and thought provoking. Herr, Kardes and Kim (1991) considered the previous findings, claiming that an increase in the information enhances the usage of this knowledge as an input for judgment and resulting in the preference of the product. Additionally, ease of retrieval is an important determinant of information utilization. Accordingly, Herr et al. (1991) found that WOM communications have a strong impact on product judgments, relative to less vivid printed and information accessibility mediates the effects of WOM on persuasion. They (1991) also added that the above strong judgmental impact reduces in the availability of more diagnostic information such as well-defined prior impression of the memory or appearance of extremely negative information.

### **Positive and Negative WOM**

WOM may include positive or negative sense. Buttle pointed out (1998) that “negative WOM which can be conceptualized as an outcome of incongruity between expectations and perceptions” (p.246), has more powerful impact than positive one which is the result of satisfaction and delight. He (1998) also emphasized that “dissatisfied customers are likely to tell twice as many people as satisfied ones” (p.247). He (1998) reviewed “the

Desatnick Report” (1987) had been prepared for the White House and determining that “at least ninety per cent of unsatisfied service customers will not buy again, furthermore each of those unhappy customers will tell his or her story to at least nine other people and thirteen per cent of those will tell more than twenty people” (p.242).

Moreover, consumers like to actively engage WOM communication in case of low service quality. The reason of their attempt may warn others and protect them from experiencing similar problems with the same service provider (Harrison-Walker, 2001a). According to Halstead (2002), the tendency in negative WOM engagement is positively related to severity of problem, external attributions of blame and negative perceptions of retailer responsiveness.

However, effective handling of a problem or consumer complaint with a timely and thoughtful resolution may also have a significant impact on WOM and purchasing behavior and to regain the majority of customers, as a consequence of successful customer relationships management. The ability to manage WOM activity as an integral part of an organization, before the appearance of any negative WOM would also bring the chance of removing the hidden cost of negative WOM accordingly; diminishing marketing costs (Haywood, 1989).

Halstead (2002) recommends considering any consumer complaint as a second chance to improve service quality. Thus, a well understanding of consumers’ dissatisfaction and or/complaint and successfully removing that in congruency would help organizations to retain consumers and keep competitiveness.

When the related literature is overviewed, unfortunately it seems poor in terms of the type and content analysis of specific WOM messages and their relative influence. There is more concentration on the subject of negative WOM rather than the positive WOM (Asuğman, 2000).

Ennew (2000) determined that the relationship between satisfaction and WOM may sometimes asymmetric and also changeable at different levels of satisfaction. He pointed out that the negative asymmetry where consumers with bad experience tell more people than those with good experiences. In a similar way, as a positive asymmetry, positive events may produce a stronger response under certain conditions. Satisfied customers also tend to engage WOM due to the desire of recommendation.

Trust is also another important component of WOM, especially of positive WOM (Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003). It has a significant role in positive WOM communication similar to satisfaction.

As it has been already discussed that WOM communication can be very influential in any purchase decision, being particularly important for services, in what consumers can only obtain information via WOM sources, would be highly critical to convince a customer with a particular service provider. The opportunity for employee-customer relational bonds to influence, consequently satisfy a customer and naturally get positive WOM should not be ignored by companies (Grewal, Gwinner and Brown, 2001).

WOM communication may differ related to the motives behind it. Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004) classified these motives as 3 different groups and reclassified them within those subgroups as follows (pp.40-41):

Product-involvement self involvement, other-involvement and message-involvement are the first group based on Dichter study had occurred in 1966. The second group is the revision of the motives within the first one as involvement, self-enhancement, and concern for others message intrigue and dissonance reduction as a negative WOM creating motive. His categorization is the result of Engel, Blackwell and Miniard work of 1993. The last group contained altruism, product involvement, self-

enhancement, helping the company as positive WOM creating motives and altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking as negative WOM creating ones.

There are also some works to overview WOM communication from early-entrants and followers side. Experiments showed that “the positive WOM enhances the consideration likelihood for the follower and decreases the consideration probability of the early-entrant whereas negative WOM decreases the consideration chances for the follower but not for the early-entrant” (Grewal, Cline and Davies, 2001, paragraph 1st.). Additionally if the early-entrant has a weak position in the market, positive WOM communication will enhance the follower position.

Finally, a web-based opinion platform which is the most widely used format of e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) should be reviewed in this part. These platforms give consumers the possibility of following other customers’ consumption opinions and experiences and also their contribution in a written format. E-complaining may bring either opportunity or threat to related companies. As Harrison-Walker suggested (2001a), companies should work to turn complaints on internet to their advantage instead of defending themselves. They should organize well to monitor and to facilitate consumers’ complaints, particularly through internet. Their staff should be well educated to meet complaining and to calm down angry consumers with the authority of quick and effective problems solving. Management should analyze the aggregated feedback from customers on an ongoing basis and review the marketing strategies to improve problematic and weak points, therefore to gain and maintain a competitive edge. In the meantime, the company should declare its responsive actions to its web site visitors, as well as to the public.

### WOM Influence across Product Categories

It has been also explored that the influence of WOM varies across product categories. Compared to tangible goods, Murray (1991) found that service consumers were more confident in personal sources of information that has a higher impact on service purchase decision. Services are information driven and customers are reliable on others' opinions to evaluate prior to purchase and use because of characteristics of services such as intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption and no standardization (Haywood, 1989). In many instances WOM appears to be the major source of information that people use in making purchase decision about services which are generally difficult to evaluate before buying or consuming (Harrison-Walker, 2001b).

As a sum up, WOM influence becomes a key component for goods and services that require experience and credence properties.

### WOM Measurement

There are two parties in the WOM communication as provider and receiver. Perception and comprehension of messages by receiver since it has been sent by provider, is critical during WOM communication for two reasons. First, WOM information affects the receiver's attitude and purchasing behavior. Secondly, receivers generally retransmit this information.

WOM is a communication process being affected from encoding and decoding of a message. *Encoding* occurs when the sender tries "to put into words the actions, feelings and emotions of an experience with a product or a retailer whereas decoding occurs when the listener receives and interprets the message" (Christiansen and Tax, 2000, p.188).

The receivers may understand the message in a different sense related to characteristics of message, situation and individual. Complexity or trustworthiness of messages, time or physical

environment, message owner's gender or source credibility affect the understanding and even may be leading to a subjective comprehension. The intense of the effect also varies during time. Both impacts of positive and negative evaluations tend to regress over time. Therefore encouragement or discouragement of purchasing attitude will also be affected from this variation.

### Electronic (Online) WOM Communication

Advances in communication technologies extend the communication media WOM, especially the internet which provides more information and enables consumers to reach/share any experience about products or services quickly, easily being accessible all the time and from anywhere.

Fluctuation in internet usage for the last decade enhanced WOM activities due to one towards many communication opportunities. Thus internet WOM became a critical subject for company managements to be followed and kept under control.

Finally, the terms "internet w-o-m", "word of modem" or "word of mouse", have emerged in the related literature. Internet based WOM sources include consumer comments and complaints published on shopping sites, on consumer complaint sites or e-mails (Uray, Burnaz and Eldas, 2005).

Despite the verbal attribute of traditional WOM communication, electronic WOM/e-WOM communication occurs in a written format (Hennig-Thurau et al.2004). Bickarrdt and Shindler (2001) found out *vividness* and effectiveness of internet communication, contrary to Herr's, Kardes' and Kim's (1991) traditional approach that had been arguing more persuasiveness of face-to-face, vivid communication than the written format.

Hennig-Thurau (2004) also reviewed the motives behind e-WOM which have been mostly differentiated from the traditional ones as;

platform assistance, venting negative feelings, concern for other consumers, extraversion/positive self-enhancement, social benefits, economic incentives, helping the company and advice seeking.

**Online communication has created “viral marketing” concept which is also called as “electronic WOM advertising”.**

Jurvetson and Draper introduced the term viral marketing in 1997(cited in Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry and Raman, 2004). Phelps et al.(2004) explained viral marketing as “having customers who will initiate and pass along positive e-mail messages concerning your product or service” by stating that “discussions of viral marketing and examples of companies attempting to use viral marketing are becoming more common among practitioners” (2nd paragraph). E-mail marketing is growing day by day related to having lower marketing cost, ability of targeting messages selectively and showing high response rate relative to other communication methods.

**Viral mavens and infrequent senders have been introduced representing two of the main characters in the pass along e-mail process.**

Phelps’ et al. (2004) content analysis resulted in the following findings (paragraphs 6-7):

Viral mavens send more than two and a half times as many messages as infrequent senders do. Again, mavens’ forwarded mail list is longer than infrequent senders’. Furthermore, mavens like forward e-mails in a selective way. They consider sending messages on that have important and also respectful content by receivers. They also pass along e-mail when they are in the right “mood”. On the other hand, infrequent senders forward seldom e-mails in case of relevance or good quality. They are also selective in choosing people to whom they pass messages.

Therefore, right viral mavens and some infrequent senders who tend to forward all received e-mail despite having a low volume mail box, showing high opportunity for marketing, should be detected correctly by advertisers.

Furthermore, opinion leaders of the traditional WOM are introduced as “*e-fluencies*” in the online world. “Increasing internet penetration, higher rate of computer literacy and more user-friendly tools and developing social network have extended the portion of e-fluentials in the society”(Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn, 2006, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph). Sun et al. (2006) also argued that online communicators demonstrate fewer inhibitions, display less social anxiety and exhibit less public self-awareness. Thus, they tend to be more willing to disclose personal information and to be more honest and forthcoming with their viewpoints. The greater anonymity of internet may be the reason of this self-disclosure.

Again to the contrary of Herr’s et al. (1991) traditional view, the advantages of written communication have been underlined in different studies during the development of electronic WOM communication.

Sun et al. (2006) compared both ways of WOM and found that online WOM is more influential in terms of speed, convenience, distribution (one-to-many reach) and psychological aspect (without face-to-face human pressure). Furthermore, internet does not only provide opinion leaders, who present an innovative personality in both ways of WOM communication, in order to efficiently disseminate information, it also greatly facilitates information searches of opinion seekers. “Sometimes, opinion leaders may act as opinion seekers” (Sun et al., 2006, paragraph 41) to get more knowledge or expertise, especially due to their interest in a specific topic or product. “Online WOM is facilitated through a variety of tools such as weblogs, bulletin boards, chat rooms, discussion forums and instant messaging” (Sun et al., 2006, paragraph



42). Therefore, internet skills and proficiency is critical to spread WOM or seek information in a comfortable and safe way. Another valuable result of the study is the importance of sharing similar interests or hobbies with a strong social network relationship for opinion seekers.

Subsequently, Allsop et al. (2007) also stated that most information providers could be accepted as information seekers and large majority of information seekers could be accepted as information providers. The working concept of the social network is to gather opinions from others, incorporate them into the self-knowledge, feel and inspire then pass along to others.

The key role of the strength of social ties in WOM underlined again by Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) in which they emphasized (p.5):

Strong tie supported with homophily whereas heterophilous (contrary to homophilous) communication within no similar individuals such as acquaintances can facilitate the flow of information between diverse segments of a social system. Meanwhile, the shape of social ties may transform in online WOM and actors in online social networks may appear to be individuals who mostly relate to websites rather than other individuals being different than the traditional model.

Another differentiation from the offline WOM may appear in terms of the source credibility. In the traditional approach the credibility of a source is related to possession of greater expertise and be trustworthiness and objectivity. In the online environment, consumers evaluate the credibility of information in relation to the web site from where is sourced, as well as individual contributor of that information.

WOM communication is more credible than mass media or other marketing sources because of being a personal custom-tailored and independent source without serving for the benefit of a company.

Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels (2009) described

referrals and WOM communication as critical factors to gain new customer. Trusoy et al. (2009) also mentioned that the elasticity of WOM is approximately twenty times higher than other marketing events and thirty times higher than media images (p.98). They recommended organizations to consider new customers and to keep in mind that WOM can have larger and longer-lasting impacts than traditional marketing activities.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

This conceptual study raises the importance and effectiveness of verbal and e-WOM within the composition of an organization marketing communication map.

WOM is a consumer-dominated and valuable means to present products and services with non-commercial nature where the sender acts independently from the market. These characteristics make the WOM information more reliable, credible and trustworthy for the consumers compared to firm-imitated communications, especially in service industry in which other opinions are requested for purchasing.

Viral marketing continues to enhance and contribute to classical marketing tools in order to enlarge the business and the performance of organizations.

Satisfaction and trust are two key components of the WOM communication. Congruence level between the actual and expected performances of a good or a service which indicates satisfaction level of a consumer, lead him/her to disseminate positive or negative WOM at the end of consumption experience.

Companies should always consider both positive and negative WOMs to monitor their activities and performances. A management should approach to negative WOM or e-complaints to convert a good chance for the company to regain customer by increasing satisfaction and also to improve the quality and/or features of its

good and/or service production.

Opinion sharing based studies upon diversified product and service categories should be continued by enlarging. Moreover, these studies should also be merged with developing social media and e-retailing activities.

Furthermore, these surveys should not be bounded with retailed products but additionally be driven for industrial products. This will create valuable inputs for industrial marketing side.

We expect future research will likely take on board about new and the available key findings about how individuals interact during the WOM process, especially in the online world. This will not only to expand our knowledge of this important and developing area but also to provide insights for the management. This will help management to gain a greater understanding of how WOM operates in their particular product category. It will also help marketers to make more confident decisions with regard to branding and positioning, segmenting and targeting, media strategy, monitoring programs and to hear the voice of customers in order to improve products or services.

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