

Reconsidering WoM activity in the context of the customer journey: empirical evidence from an innovative, high-involvement product

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Abstract

Word-of-Mouth (WoM) has been studied mainly as an activity at the late stages of a buying process and, separately, as an information source in the pre-purchase stage. Using the customer journey framework, the paper brings a deeper understanding of WoM activities that happen along the customer journey. It reports findings from two consecutive qualitative studies during the introduction stage of an innovative e-cigarette device*. Study 1 mapped the journey and revealed intense WoM activity occurring in several stages of it (“WoM moments”). Study 2 focused on validating the WoM moments of study 1 and further understanding the who, when, where, how much and the emotional impact of this WoM activity. Results confirmed 6 WoM moments having different impact along the journey. Implications for research and managers are discussed.

Keywords: customer journey, Word of Mouth, e-diaries

*The name of the product is omitted for confidentiality reasons. Findings are reported anonymously with the consent of the company.

1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WoM), typically described as person-to-person informal non-commercial communications about a brand, a product, or a service (Arndt 1967; Westbrook, 1987) has been extensively studied as an activity at the post-purchase stage. Such communication is seen from the sender point of view as a deliberate action initiated by the customer who has experienced the product.

A different stream of research has studied WoM as a source of information at the prepurchase stage. In this case the person considering a purchase looks actively, among other sources, for information (opinions, comments, recommendations, ratings etc) coming from customers that have already bought the product s/he is interested in (e.g. Bettman, Luce and Payne 1998; Jang, Prasad and Ratchford, 2012). This WoM, studied from the receiver's point of view as a deliberate action (initiated by him/her), has been found to be a very influential source of information for the purchase decision.

However, these two perspectives seem to provide an artificially fragmented view, because pre- and post-purchase WoM are the two sides of the same coin and are forming a loop: a (un)happy customer actively sharing positive (negative) recommendations becomes a source of information for a potential customer who might or might *not* have started his/her buying journey. In fact, a customer by spontaneously expressing his/her positive experience with a product, may trigger the curiosity of a friend who was not considering the product in the first place. Reversely, a prospect engaged in the early stage of his/her buying process and looking actively for product information, may ask his/her friends that have already bought the product for their opinion, thus initiating the WoM of these current or past consumers of the product.

Recently, researchers have suggested that consumers search for and share information as they move along the buying process and recognized the gaps of knowledge surrounding the use of WoM in different stages of the consumer journey (Lee et al., 2018; Bartschat, Cziehso, and Hennig-Thurau, 2022; Pizzutti, Gonçalves, and Ferreira, 2022).

Thus, it appears a need to capture WoM activities in a more systematic and integrated way. The present research tries to fill this gap by reporting evidence from two qualitative studies examining the 'who', 'when', 'where', 'how much', the role and the emotional impact of this WoM activity along the stages of the customer journey, in the case of an innovative e-cigarette device.

2. Literature Review

As mentioned in the introduction, literature examined WoM mainly – and independently – at two stages of the buying process, the pre- or post-purchase stages. In this section we briefly review these two approaches and present the objectives of the study.

2.1. Post-purchase WoM

In the marketing literature WoM is defined as informal communications by a perceived non-commercial communicator directed at other consumers about the experience, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers (Westbrook 1987; Arndt, 1967; de Matos and Rossi, 2008). Typical motives for this WoM behaviour are consumers' desire to socialize, to express themselves, to help others understand a service or a product before its

consumption (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009; Wang and Yu, 2017).

Numerous studies have confirmed the positive links between WoM and satisfaction, loyalty, commitment, and repeated purchases (Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst, 2005; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler, 2002; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007; Gounaris and Stathakopoulos, 2004). Thus, WoM is a well-established key factor for product success and business results and its effect has grown with the development of internet and social media (Hennig-Thurau, Walsh and Walsh, 2003; Ngarmwongnoi, Oliveira, AbedRabbo and Mousavi, 2020).

Diving deeper into the details of the WoM activity, Harrison-Walker (2001) conceptualized WoM as being composed by the factors of frequency, number of contacts, detail of the shared information, and praise. His study showed two key dimensions of WoM: (a) “WOM activity,” which included aspects of how often the WoM communication takes place, the number of people told, and the quantity of information provided by the sender; and (b) “WOM praise,” reflecting the valence of the WoM communication (positive, negative, or neutral).

2.2. Pre-purchase WoM

Traditional decision-making models consider information search, part of which is WoM, at the initial stages of the process (e.g. Bettman et al., 1998; Moorthy, Ratchford, and Talukdar, 1997). Evidence suggest that WoM is one of the most influential information sources for consumers (Bartschat et al. 2022, de Matos and Rossi, 2008).

Consumers engage in such activities at the pre-purchase stage to make better decisions, reduce uncertainty and risks associated with a choice (Moorthy et al., 1997; Schmidt and Spreng, 1996; Pizzuti et al, 2022). Recent research has added social, functional or emotional motives (Bartschat et al. 2022) and examined different forms/types of WoM as information source by type (e.g., de Matos and Rossi, 2008). Degree of involvement with the product is also supposed to affect WoM sources and search intensity (Bartschat et al., 2022); for instance, face-to-face WoM from friends and family seems to be preferred when consumers perceive great difficulty in the decision task (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox and Harrell, 1997). Also, usage of WoM was found to differ depending on whether customers are receiving content or actively searching for it (Chen and Berger, 2016). More scarce research has differentiated pre-purchase WoM information search in different stages and found that consumers use product reviews more in the consideration set stage and less in the choice stage (Jang, Prasad and Ratchford, 2012).

Interestingly, researchers have also studied consumers’ information search behaviors in the post decision stage. After the purchase, consumers may search for information to confirm a choice, reduce undesirable emotions such as regret or discomfort and improve further decisions (e.g. Schmidt & Spreng, 1996). Recent work focusing on WoM information search in the post-purchase stage differentiated two post-purchase stages, the pre- consumption and post-consumption phases. Empirical evidence revealed that the most-used sources in the pre- and post-consumption phases are (1) talking to friends/relatives about the product, (2) searching online via a search engine, and (3) reading product reviews online. (Pizzuti et al, 2022). Generally, consumers mentioned fewer firm-initiated than consumer-initiated touchpoints as information sources at the post-purchase stage, which indicates that consumer-initiated touchpoints (WoM) are more trusted at this stage.

Summing up the work done so far, while there is growing evidence that WoM can have a strong impact during different stages of the customer journey, no research has explicitly addressed this issue which deserves further attention (King, Racherla and Bush, 2014; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020).

The present study aims to contribute to filling this gap by examining WoM behavior along the entire customer journey. Customer journey is an appropriate framework to study WoM since it allows to map activities and touchpoints during the pre- to post-purchase and consumption process (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Siebert, Gopaladas, Lindridge and Simões, 2020). To this purpose, we adopt the terminology “WoM activity” (Harrison-Walker, 2001) to describe all interpersonal non-commercial communications that share opinions about or experiences with a product, that happen among prospects or current customers of a product, whether they are initiated by a customer or a prospect, in any stage of the customer journey.

The two key research objectives addressed in the present study are: (a) identify the journey stages in which WoM activity occurs, (b) map this WoM activity in terms of who initiates the WoM, the emotional impact, how much activity happens (intensity / importance) and its impact on behaviours. To address the research questions, an exploratory research project was designed in collaboration with a company that had recently introduced to the market an innovative e-cigarette device, considered as a high involvement product (the name of the product is omitted upon request of the company, for confidentiality reasons). The innovative character of the specific product in a newly launched product category, lead to the assumption that WoM activity will play an important role to product introduction and acceptance or rejection, despite any available commercial information. We applied an exploratory research design with two sequential qualitative studies, as explained below, to test this assumption.

3. Study 1

The objective of study 1 was to map the customer journey and identify specific WoM activities in it; it was intended to describe the journey in an analytic way in order to identify detailed stages and steps that correspond to the adoption and use of the specific product.

3.1. Methodology

The study was conducted via contextual interviews with customers. Contextual interviewing was considered as the most appropriate approach as it combines interviewing and observation of users' actual behaviour and/or automated routines (e.g., Strauss and Corbin, 1998). As a result, contextual interviewing allows recording of behaviours and reactions that are not always recalled by consumers and as such, neither discussed during an interview. To this end, personal interviews took place in a location that allowed interviewing and observing product usage in daily life (e.g. home, place of work). A Customer Journey Mapping template was used to help customers describe their whole journey with the product: from product discovery as such (given that it was an innovative device that was recently launched) to their current state. Step by step analysis included users commenting what they did and why they did it per stage, behaviours and goals behind behaviours, emotions and touchpoints used. Interviews were audio recorded, upon participants' consent and in accordance with GDPR code of conduct.

Thirty-two users participated in the study. Users were selected to ensure participation of 4 customer segments representing key profile of product users. We conducted interviews with 8 participants per segment. Selection of participants was done with the use of screening questions. Users were incentivised for their participation in the study.

This data collection resulted in more than 2880 minutes of recorded interviews, from which transcripts per interview were created. Transcripts were then analysed by the researchers in

parallel to individual journey map per participant on the template used, which allowed an initial analytic visualization of the journey per participant. Collected materials were analysed for the four segments separately, using Excel spreadsheets per segment to produce: (a) a separate journey map per persona identifying journey steps, customer activities, emotions and pain points, touchpoints used throughout the journey. Customer journey stages were not defined in a “a priori” basis and emerged inductively, as described by users; (b) an analytical mapping of WoM activities, its direction (active – initiated by the person interviewed, or passive – initiated by others), its content, and its impact to users thought the journey.

3.2. Findings

Despite differentiations among personas, universal learnings across users’ personas stood out in respect to WoM activities. Results showed that: (1) WoM activity among users and/or prospects was omni-present in the journey and did not constitute a separate stage at the end of it; (2) WoM activity proved to be critical at various journey stages, from the very beginning (product awareness and trial) to the very end (product adoption and use). For instance, across all personas, it was observed that WoM combined with a social trial (trial of a friend’s / colleague’ device), was a key entrance point to the product; (3) users were both WoM receivers and a transmitters in different journey stages; (4) users were in general promoters, that is, despite variations in the degree of use, most users spontaneously shared with their social environment product benefits and offered to the prospects the opportunity to try the product; (5) WoM activity was done almost exclusively via face-to-face interactions, when meeting and discussing with family, friends or colleagues; e-WoM (product ratings and reviews, discussions in social media and so on) were very rarely. Specifically, the output of the analysis produced six distinct “Word of Mouth moments” along the journey:

- WoM #1 Product discovery & discussing alternatives: A very decisive WoM moment, as it defines go / no go with the product; user (being prospect at this stage) receives information by other user(s) on product benefits, has the opportunity to try the product and discuss about first impression; WoM may also include practical info regarding product distribution and purchase.
- WoM #2 Asking for support: This WoM moment regards practical tips of usage, information or advice that users may need at the early adoption stage of their journey.
- WoM #3 Re-evaluating decision (Is it really for me?): This WoM moment mainly regards discussing adaptation difficulties; it is a critical one, because WoM may function in favor or against product definite adoption (“make or break point”).
- WoM #4 Challenged by others: This regards negative social WoM that users may come across as they move on with their journey. The higher the product adoption, the lower the impact of this moment, as users rely more on their personal experience and overcome or defend their choice against external challenges.
- WoM #5 Discussing product’s benefits: At the late adoption stage of the journey, WoM consists of users discussing the positive aspects their new habit have into their life; although not overtly realizing, users are becoming promoters of the product.
- WoM #6 Actively promoting the product: At the bonding stage, users promote the product not only by discussing product benefits but also by offering it for trial and actively providing information to new prospects on how to get it. Users become product advocates (by closing the loop of being receivers to WoM#1 to become transmitters in WoM#6)

Table 1 summarizes the customer journey stages that were identified and the corresponding WoM activity together with the 6 WoM moments. The content of the WoM activity (the content of the conversations) is omitted for confidentiality reasons.

Table 1: Word of Mouth Moments along the Customer Journey

Customer Journey Stages	Type of WoM	WoM activities	Importance	Impact	WoM moments
Discover	Passive /Active	Get introduced to the product by a friend or colleague who is current user. Prospect receives positive comments by current user after asking.	Extremely High	Go /no go with the product	WoM #1 Product discovery & discussing alternatives
First try		First social trial of the product.			
Consider	Passive	Prospect gets informed by current users on points of sale & distribution channels.	Moderate	Getting practical info	
Find-Try- Buy					
Getting used (learn how to use it in daily life)	Active / Passive	User turns to the person who introduced him/her to the product to deal with small daily issues via a phone call, or random personal interactions. User seeks for support, guidance & encouragement.	Extremely High	Stay / no stay with the product	WoM #2 Asking for support or WoM #3 Re-evaluating decision
	Active	User receives queries and negative comments about the product. Starts positive WoM as a response.	Moderate	Defend the choice	WoM #4 Challenged by others
Adoption (recognition of product's benefits and systematic use)	Active	User regularly spreads positive WOM even if not asked or with minimum encouragement & offers the product for trial	High	User becomes promoter	WoM #5 Discussing product's benefits.
Bonding (enhancing usage, add on purchases, becoming enthusiastic)	Active	A positive WoM peak, user may discuss the experience to his/her social environment, even to people that may not be concerned by the product.	High	Spreading the benefits (news)	WoM #6 Actively promoting the product
	Active	User gets actively involved into promoting the product by encouraging friends and colleagues to use it, providing practical guidance on how to get it, and support / follow up once friend buy the product.	Extremely High	User becomes active promoter & acts towards this direction	

4. Study 2

Given the intense WoM activity and the WoM moments identified in study 1, the objective of study 2 was to gain a deeper understanding of this activity for each WoM moment, specifically (Harrison- Walker, 2001): who was the initiator (the user or other persons) and the participants (who and how many), the location (where it took place), the emotional impact and the intensity of the WoM activity.

4.1. Methodology

For study 2 we followed a totally tailor-made approach taking into consideration insights from the customer journeys of study 1. The core approach consisted of live collection of WoM interactions via a digital diary that users completed daily for a whole week. This approach as well as questionnaire's responsive design allowed to "merge" into user's actual life and record all WoM interactions with any receiver (other user, prospects etc) while following users through their day. Diaries and e-diaries are suggested as the appropriate method to capture feelings and behaviours as they happen, but have received limited attention in marketing (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003; Garry and Roper, 2011). In addition to actual daily WoM activity, there was the need to confirm and gain a deeper understanding of the 6 WoM moments identified in study 1.

For these reasons, the e-diary per day consisted of 2 parts: (a) part "JUST HAPPENED" referring to WoM moments that happened during the day. For this part we followed the "Day after recall" data collection approach that is often used in Media Measurement Studies. Knowing that WoM interactions are mainly impulsive, happening anytime in the day, this approach was selected because it captures in detail what happened in the past 24 hours; (b) part "HAPPENED

IN THE PAST” referring to the 6 specific WoM moments that happened anytime in the past. For this part, participants were asked to re-live the moment in every detail and recall any related WoM activity (for instance, for WoM#1, “Please recall the first time you ever discussed this e-cigarette alternative with someone else. How did it happen? ... and so on). Elements recorded for each interaction – either current or past ones – included: initiator (the user or other persons), participants (who and how many), location (where it took place), actual dialogue (content & tonality), the emotional impact. In addition, time of interaction was recorded for past WoM moments.

Study was conducted in 2 bursts during a 6-month period. In total fifty-two users participated in the study (20 users in burst 1 and 32 users in burst 2). Knowing that WoM activity tends to be more frequent at the beginning of the product use, all participants were recent product users (up to 6 months). Demographic and usage characteristics were also monitored to ensure a representative sample of users. Selection of participants was done via telephone interviews with the use of a screening questionnaire. Prior participation, all users received an analytical briefing on digital diary process and data collection procedure to avoid technical pitfalls but also to ensure smooth daily questionnaire completion. In addition, follow-up rules were set to monitor participation and seamless survey experience for all.

Results were analysed separately per burst, then compared and merged. On average, users reported approximately 6 “just happen” interactions during the week resulting into approximately 300 WoM interactions in total. Almost equal amount of “Happened in the past” WoM interactions were collected and analysed. Data analysis was done at 2 levels:

- initial data analysis involved content analysis. By reading all interactions’ content and dialogues, with the use of an Excel spreadsheet, the researchers categorized the “just happened” interactions into the 6 WoM moments and merged them with the content regarding “happened in the past” WoM moments;
- then, for each of the 6 WoM moments (including both “just happened” and “happened in the past” interactions per WoM moment), a statistical analysis via SPSS followed as far as the quantitative parameters were concerned, namely who/ initiator, how many, where, and emotional impact.

4.2. Findings







The content and the timing of the reported WoM activity confirmed the 6 WoM moments and allowed to further profile them. The findings are summarized on Table 2.

Key general observations, regard the frequency of WoM as such, that was - as commented by users - “*much more frequent than I actually realized*”. On average users reported approximately 6 “just happen” interactions during the week, confirming a daily frequency of WoM. Also, the daily meticulous reporting of interactions allowed users to spot out interactions that they tended to overlook, such as interactions among colleagues at place of work.

Findings per WoM moment provided a detailed “profiling” of each moment, revealing differences among moments that helped identifying the influential power of each moment during product launch and establishment in the market. As the Table 2 shows, depending on the moment, there are differences among the 6 WoM moments both in terms of practical elements (who, how many, where) but also in terms of emotional impact of the WoM interaction. For example, WoM#4 “Get challenged by others” is a critical moment, not only because of its frequency but also because it includes many participants and has negative emotional impact to

users. WoM#5 “Discussing product benefits” is also a crucial moment for peer-to-peer product promotion since it involves the discussion and sharing on specific product attributes and detailed benefits of its use, confirming the choice for the user and spreading largely the word around him/her (WoM moment with the most interactions).

Table 2: Results on WoM moments and their profile

	Initiator	WoM activity	Where	Average number of people (excl. user)	Emotional footprint of the respondent	Number of interactions	% on total interactions
WoM#1 Discovering the product	me 44% someone else 40%	Prospects asking or users suggesting to a friend the product and a trial	Work 27% Entertainment venue 27% Friend's house 23%	2	3,8/5 positive curiosity & interest	52	 10%
WoM#2 Asking for support	me 62% (active) someone else 32%	Early users asking advice to a (more) experienced user	Work 29% Home 20% Messaging/tel. 20%	1,4	3,5/5 neutral to positive relief, problem solved	77	 15%
WoM#3 Not for me / re-evaluate the decision	me 31% someone else 44%	Others discuss reason of non-adoption or abandonment	Work 25% Entertainment venue 24%	1,7	2,3 negative annoyance	68	 14%
WoM#4 Get Challenged by others	me 12% (reactive) someone else 70%	Defending against critics when challenged by friends	Entertainment venue 29% Work 21% Home 18%	2	2,7 negative embarrassment	99	 20%
WoM#5 Discussing product benefits	me 29% someone else 38%	Exchange of views & experiences on how the product changed users' life, confirming their choice so far	Home 29% Entertainment venue 28% Work 21%	1,8	4,2/5 very positive enthusiastic	125	 25%
WoM#6 Actively promoting the product	me 35% someone else 40%	Users actively promote or respond when asked product's benefits	Work 30% Entertainment venue 24%	1,7	4,0/5 very positive convinced, confident	78	 16%

Note: missing (not reported here) to 100% cases: for column Initiator, “just happened” case; for column Where, “other”

Finally, it is worth noting some subtle differences between WoM#5 and WoM#6: the former concerns users discussing how the product changed their life, while the latter is a step forward, with users becoming advocates and suggesting the product as an alternative to other prospects. Both moments exhibit very positive emotional impact; sharing a personal experience is a very positive moment.

5. Discussion, implications and limitations

The objective of this research was to identify specific WoM activities along the customer journey and gain a deeper understanding of their nature in the case of an innovative product during its introduction stage. Findings of the two studies clearly confirmed an intense, two-way and influential role of WoM along all stages of the customer journey and allowed to identify 6 distinct “WoM moments”. Further, these WoM moments were profiled in terms of dimensions discussed in previous research (e.g. Harrison-Walker, 2001; Chen and Berger, 2016) to better establish their importance and impact.

From a research perspective, the paper contributes to overcoming a fragmented view studying WoM as an activity either at the post-purchase stage or as an information search at the pre-purchase step. It responds to recent calls for further examining the use of WoM in different stages of the consumer journey (Bartschat et al., 2022; Pizzutti et al., 2022). Findings offer an integrative view and are consistent with previous studies suggesting that for high involvement products the use of WoM as an information source is intense and based on face-to-face interactions (Bartschat et al., 2022; Duhan et al., 1997; Chen and Berger, 2016), while the same seems to happen in the pre- and post-consumption phases (Pizzutti et al., 2022).

From a managerial perspective, the study confirmed the high impact of WoM on the

evaluation and adoption of a new product. The identification and detailed description of specific WoM moments provides actionable insights on when and how to support the introduction of a new product, accelerate and enhance its adoption, beyond the “typical” push-style brand communications. This can be done by actions of motivating and triggering WoM from early adopters, facilitating and contributing to virality, through company or user-generated content creation (Bartschat et al. 2022; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Additionally, the content of WoM conversations (not reported here for confidentiality reasons) will provide the guidelines of all the content and communications.

Beyond these contributions, the findings should be considered as exploratory for a number of reasons and these limitations offer the grounds for future research. The qualitative methodology used did provide the rich insights expected, yet it does not allow to validate the results on a large scale. Thus, the WoM moments will need to be confirmed via a quantitative study. Also, as the study focused on a specific product during its introduction stage, the findings cannot be generalized to other product categories. It is suggested that other product categories in the introduction stage are studied to validate the WoM moments. Further, although the introduction stage is a crucial period, it would be interesting and managerially useful to examine the evolution of WoM activity (in intensity, nature, impact) along the product life cycle.

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