DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

WORD-OF-MOUTH AND FORMS OF CONVERSATIONS: WHAT PEOPLE SHARE.

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Executive Summary

This dissertation highlights the importance to understand how word-of-mouth is an aspect extremely important in the communication process among peers with the ability to modify and persuade differently consumers. A main property of word-of-mouth and that represents the pillar of this dissertation is the content of the communication and how consumers share their messages. The present dissertation is the first to examine different types of communication into interpersonal domain taking both the perspective of the sender and the receiver of the messages. Paper 1 discusses how the language abstraction is a valuable communicational sign in order to optimize interactions. Specifically, I study the effect of language abstractness in word-of-mouth communication on the recipients' perceptions about message effectiveness and their purchase intentions. I hypothesize that the effect of language abstractness depends on the word-of-mouth recipient's prior knowledge, and demonstrate that abstract (concrete) language is more effective than concrete (abstract) language for recipients with high (low) prior knowledge. Moreover, I predict that the higher (lower) effectiveness of abstract messages for consumers with high (low) prior knowledge is explained by consumers' engagement in mental imagery processing. Two experiments conducted in different service settings provide support for our hypotheses. Paper 2 focuses on specific types of information which contain controversial arguments and where the process of sharing on virtual platforms can modify behaviors. Controversial topics are those topics on which people tend to take different, quite polarized opinions. While I acknowledge that people tend to hold extreme positions on controversial topics, I hypothesize that whether they share their extreme opinions with others importantly depends on the communication channel they use for sharing. Across three experiments, I show that opinion extremeness generally increases tendency to share, but, more importantly, I show this is more likely to occur when sharers use communication platforms that allow them to select specific, identified recipients, thus having more control on their

audience. More specifically, I demonstrate that individuals are more likely to share the extreme versus moderate opinions about controversial topics via email, but such a difference no longer exists when sharing via post on social network pages. Paper 3 demonstrates how form of communications that contain gossip is surrounded by false myths. Popular beliefs encourage people in believing that negative gossips are shared more than positive gossip and thus I demonstrate the contrary. Through three experiments, I show that people are more likely to share a positive form of gossip in a network composed by the sender, the target of the gossip and the receiver. I hypothesize that individuals are more likely to share positive (negative) gossip in respect the target of the gossip (in-group versus out-group) and that the sender is more (less) likely to share gossip with whom has less (more) capacity to verify the truthfulness of the gossip's content.

This dissertation is of interest to marketers for two reasons. First, these findings may help firms to understand and interpret word-of-mouth. By analyzing the content of the messages companies would be able to adapt their communication strategies, implement more fruitful one-to-one communications and deal, positively, with possible crisis management especially in virtual settings. Secondly, the effect of different types of communications can be used by marketers in order to achieve an higher number of consumers and encourage them in sharing voluntarily. Moreover, understanding the effect of word-of-mouth on receivers may support firms in improve communicational campaigns and increase the level of customer satisfaction in different stage of the marketing processes. Future research should examine what are the boundaries between word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth and whether consumers differently depending to the context.