

**DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT**

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

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*To Emi,  
for her endless love,  
patience and support*

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## **Introduction**

## **Introduction**

Word-of-mouth (WOM), or the “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers” (Westbrook 1987, 261), is one of the most interesting and pervasive topics for today’s marketing practitioners as well as scholars (Berger 2014). The relevance of this phenomenon is explained on the hand by the frequency with which consumers engage in informal conversations about products and services, and on other hand by the huge impact that such conversations have on consumer decision making. To illustrate, according to Keller Fay Group (2007), about 3.4 billion conversations about brands occur every day. Moreover, opinions, recommendations, news, and information shared by consumers have been shown to be the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of buying decisions (McKinsey and Company 2010). A research conducted by Nielsen has shown that 92% of consumers find suggestions received from other consumers to be the most reliable form of communication about products (Nielsen Global Survey 2012).

The analysis of literature suggests that scholars have recently been devoting a good deal of attention to the behavioral processes underlying WOM communications, although much still needs to be investigated (Berger 2014). More specifically, scholars have mostly focused on such aspects of WOM communications as the valence of the messages shared (e.g., Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Naylor and Kleiser, 2000), the stage at which WOM occurs (generation versus transmission; e.g., De Angelis et al. 2012), the form WOM may take (for instance, opinions versus recommendations; e.g., Cheema and Kaikati 2010; Gershoff, Broniarczyk and West 2001; Gino and Moore 2007; Zhao and Xie 2011), and the time horizons of WOM messages (for instance, immediate versus ongoing WOM; e.g., Berger and Schwartz 2011).

Although these studies have shed light on very important aspects of WOM communications, less attention has been devoted to another relevant aspect of WOM, i.e., the content of the message

that consumers use to convey their messages about products and services. Content is a key factor in WOM communications for different reasons. First, anecdotal evidence as well as some research efforts have shown that content used by consumers in WOM communications tends to vary greatly (Schellekens, Verlegh, Smidts 2010). Second, different types of content used may differentially influence the behavior of the WOM receiver (Douglas and McGarty 2001; Douglas and Sutton 2003). Third, understanding the content that consumers adopt in different situations and with different individuals allows companies to establish more fruitful conversations with their customers. Whereas some past research has tried to investigate what type of language consumers might be more likely to use in different conditions (Moore 2012; Schellekens et al. 2010), little is known about the effect of content on the persuasiveness of the WOM messages. In other words, there seems to be a lack of investigations on the effect of the content of the message in WOM and what are the effect both on the senders' and recipients' behavior.

Filling this gap, I will focus on the role of the content used in WOM communications as a driver of consumer behaviour through different theories and approaches. The entire elaboration of my dissertation tries to emphasize how communication among peers vary and provoke different behaviours. Mainly, I want to prove how WOM cannot be understood as a dyadic and unidirectional exchange of information. Whereas, I want to prove how communication is flexible and multi-dimensional phenomena.

## **Word of Mouth (WOM)**

Language is the means through which consumers share information in every context of life. In particular, language importantly shapes communications among consumers about products, services, companies and brands. The interpersonal and social behavior has been deeply studied in the socio-psychology context proving the impact that individuals have on others, and how individuals may engage in certain behaviors due to the influence of others (van Eck, Jager and Leeflang, 2011; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010; Karmarkar and Tormala, 2010). In

this vein, interpersonal communications, and particularly WOM, play a key role as a means to convince others to undertake an action. WOM is defined as “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987 pp. 261). Several studies have been carried out to understand the antecedents of WOM (see DeMatos and Rossi, 2008 for a review), yet little attention has been paid to such an important aspect as the language employed when conveying WOM messages.

An important antecedent of WOM that emerged from the literature is the relationship between consumers and products and how products due to their physical characteristics, performances and a more general level of satisfaction encouraged consumers in publicize their purchasing (see Ditcher, 1966). The antecedents that refer this category are named as transactional due to they are based on the direct purchase and consumption. Afterwards, the WOM perspective moved from the product-orientation to the self-orientation. The perspectives were refocused on the consumer’s activities and how their belongings influenced the contents of their conversations due to a self-enhancement, a sense of concerning about others and as a way for reducing their cognitive dissonance in front of serious purchase and hence interpersonal factors (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993). In this case, the focus is on the relationship that is established among the interlocutors of the conversation and the social connection that they institute (Bristor, 1990). In this stream of literature several concepts are borrowed from social science and notions such as: tie strength, homophyly and demographic similarities (De Angelis, 2012).

Specifically, the tie strength is referred to the weight that individuals dedicate to dyadic relationship and it assumes multidimensional aspects such as the type of the relationship and the frequency of contacts between the parties (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). It is clear as social ties play an important rule in WOM where the pre-existence of social bonds have a direct outcome on the capability to influence the other party. On the same perspective, the impact of homophyly is based on WOM that is generated because the continuous search of information by the individuals and where the research is lead among person that have similar characteristics or they are akin to (De



Angelis, 2012). On the basis of homophily there are correspondences in terms of tastes, values and experiences (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Demographic similarities, whereas, are seen as vehicle for establishing a communicational exchange based, overall, upon likeness in terms of race, age, gender and education (Brown and Reingen, 1987).

Another set of antecedents in WOM can be related to the individual sphere including the self-concept both in terms of cognitive and emotional outlook. One of the major aspect discussed in the literature, related to the cognitive expressions, is the level of involvement accurately divided in different levels (Dichter, 1966). According to De Angelis (2012) the degree of involvement can be distinguished in product-involvement, wherein consumers prove a cognitive attachment with a particular product or brand due to functional features; self-involvement whereas identify consumers who spread out WOM in order to obtain a sort of self-gratification and message-involvement that identify consumers that under certain circumstances (i.e. promotional campaigns) diffuse positive information. Furthermore, others properties have been found in the cognitive view for spreading WOM. On the basis of these further researches, (DeMatos and Rossi, 2008; Sunderam et al., 1998) attributes such as altruism, self-enhancement and the willingness to become helpful have been discovered. These additional aspects may assume different point of view if applied in positive or negative context. For example, the concept of altruism applied in positive setting may be interpreted as the consumers' willingness to render advices to other consumers both for encouraging the consumption and for desisting from that particular product or brand if the experience was negative. Moreover, consumers disseminate information about products or brands for reaching level of accomplishment in respect the interlocutor and aggrandizement the personal self-concept. On the negative perspective, consumers may profuse unfavourable comments to particular brands for a mere sense of vengeance (Gregoire, Tripp and Legoux, 2009).

Carrying on the evolution of WOM perspective, in the last decade the attention shifted toward more emotional rather than cognitive motives for diffusing WOM. In fact, one of the main outcomes in the analysis of brand love - defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment

a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006 pp.81) – is positive WOM. According to Westbrook (1987) who pointed out how emotions have a higher impact in diffusing either positive or negative WOM in respect to satisfaction both in pre-purchase and in post-purchase experiences (Ladhari, 2007).

Therefore, WOM is a communicational exchange among individuals who share or not a series of similarity and where the way of express opinions, thoughts and experiences may follow pre-determinate paths including lexical differences that can contain latent messages, vary in front of the type of interlocutors and have different degree of persuasiveness. Exchange of messages among individuals can be interpreted through lexical techniques and disclose information about consumer behaviour.

## **Research Questions**

In this dissertation I will analyse the role of content in the WOM context by employing frameworks that are commonly used in consumer behaviour research streams. Furthermore, the composition of the dissertation will be based on communication among peers and taking in account also on-line communication.

Building on this model, I will explore the conditions under which a consumer will be more or less likely to share specific piece of information and the conditions under which communication may become a tool in modifying behaviour. Therefore, the role of content will be analyzed by taking the perspective of consumers who send the message, receivers who heard the message and how external factors and perception may influence the judgment of the message. In other words, by studying WOM with the content perspective, this research aims to understand what type of information is more likely to be used on the one hand, and what type of message is more likely to be shared on the other hand.

To summarize, the questions that this dissertation attempt to answer are:

- *Are many differences in WOM content when people convey?*
- *Why do people share information based on semantic differences?*
- *What and how does increase the likelihood of sharing WOM?*
- *How do people behave in relation to specific form of conversations such as controversial topics and gossip?*

The hypotheses I have developed to address these questions about the role of content are built upon different approaches according to which individuals typically share information. Importantly, I will use theoretical framework in a parsimonious way, as I will predict that content of message affect on the likelihood of sharing information. Thus, while advancing the knowledge on the different aspects of WOM communications by investigating a relevant factor, i.e., language, that has been quite overlooked by scholars so far, this research aims at pursuing high rigor as it uses a unique theoretical framework to develop different predictions. A key contribution of this project is advance the knowledge in WOM and try to understand whether information received can be turn into consumer behaviour. Moreover, the project will shed light on the activated mind-set by different typologies of WOM. This study will permit, also, to understand how consumers select information and which can be perceived fruitful for them and in a given period; how messages may generate different degree of relationship and influence the level of comfort in incoming information; the language power to activate simultaneously different mind-set; how virtual platform may encourage users in expressing extreme opinions and what form of gossip are spread out easily in conversations. Furthermore, these studies will permit to understand and investigate new form of consumers' involvement.

This research dissertation is structured as collection of papers where specific and *ad hoc* research questions and hypotheses are presented. The first paper tries to investigate WOM under the perspective of the language and how different semantic structures may activate specific mind-set and become more persuasive in the sector of services. The second paper is focused on virtual setting

and examines what are the main drivers that encourage users in sharing extreme versus moderate opinion regard topics that are perceived as controversial. The third paper, instead, tries to understand whether there are differences in sharing valenced form of gossip among peers and if there are effects based on the target of the gossip and on receivers' capacity of verifying the information. All studies used experimental design for testing empirically the hypotheses. Finally, in every study I discuss theoretical and managerial implications, limitations and directions for future research.

### **Language and WOM**

In this paper, I investigate how a well-known dimension of language—its degree of concreteness/abstractness—affects service-related WOM. In particular, I apply the well-established Linguistic Category Model (hereafter LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991) and examine the conditions under which consumers' service-purchasing decisions are affected by other consumers' use of abstract versus concrete language. I propose that the impact of abstract versus concrete WOM language on consumers' behavior depends crucially on the receiver's prior knowledge about the service in question (i.e., consumers' personal information about the WOM topic based on work experience, education or other means; Shepherd & DeTienne, 2005). Specifically, I predict that abstract language will be more persuasive for consumers with a higher level of prior knowledge, while concrete language will be more persuasive for consumers with a lower level of prior knowledge. I also shed light on the mechanism underlying this effect by demonstrating that abstract language is more likely to stimulate mental imagery processing (e.g., Bone & Ellen, 1992) in consumers with higher prior knowledge, thus rendering the message more persuasive for such consumers compared to consumers with low prior knowledge

Overall, my research offers several contributions. First and foremost, it contributes to the literature about language in services by exploring the role played by the type of language in consumers' peer-to-peer conversations. Second, it contributes to research about the role of language

abstractness in WOM, represented in particular by the work of Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts (2010), who have studied what drives consumers to use a concrete versus abstract language in their WOM communications. I differentiate from this work in the following ways. First, our study is about service, while Schellekens et al. (2010) focused on products. Second, I investigate the differential persuasiveness of concrete versus abstract language, while Schellekens et al. (2010) mainly investigated the likelihood that WOM senders use either type of language in their communication. In other words, I focus on the recipient of WOM, while they mainly focused on the sender of WOM. Third, and consistent with our focus, I analyze the moderating role of a WOM recipient-related factor (prior knowledge), while Schellekens et al. (2010) analyzed the moderating role of a WOM sender-related factor (pre-established product attitude). Finally, I explore the mental processes stimulated in recipients with high prior knowledge when they receive a message delivered in abstract versus concrete language. From a managerial standpoint, my research aims to provide interesting insights for service companies about how to effectively tailor the language used in social communications to the type of audience. Specifically, companies could not only use different types of the language in their direct communication (e.g., conventional or digital advertising) with customers having different levels of service-related prior knowledge, but they can also suggest influencers (e.g., bloggers) how to strategically adapt their language to the audience they address, thus potentially improving service company's performance.

### **Extremity Position in Controversial Conversations**

The second paper deals with a specific form of WOM. Today's proliferation of websites and social media platforms where consumers freely create and share information about companies, products, services and brands has substantially increased the pervasiveness of peer-to-peer communications, leading to the emergence of a very lively stream of research about electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter eWOM; e.g., Blazevic et al. 2013; Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; King, Racherla, and Bush 2014; Sweeney, Soutar and Mazzarol 2014), defined

as “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” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39).

In this research, I investigate the sharing of information about topics that are controversial in nature with the objective to shed light on what drives people’s decision to share their opinions about controversial topics through different online platforms. Controversial topics are those topics on which people tend to take polarizing opinions (Chen and Berger 2013). Conversations about topics that are controversial in nature, such as abortion, immigration, and politics are more likely to be characterized by people’s expression of opposing views than conversations about topics that are less controversial in nature, such as increasing the level of security in the cities, lowering taxes or punishing those who bribe public officials. Like topics, also products and brands typically vary in how controversial they are. Consumers are more likely to have opposing (i.e., strongly positive versus strongly negative) opinions about Viagra or McDonald’s rather than about Tide or Intel.

Based on the common knowledge that would predict that highly controversial topics tend to be talked about more than lowly controversial topics, research in marketing, psychology and consumer behaviour has long neglected to investigate the ways in which controversy might spark discussion. A notable exception is represented by a recent study by Chen and Berger (2013) that has shown that the relationship between the degree of a topic’s controversy and WOM tendency, i.e., the likelihood that people engage in conversations about that topic, is curvilinear. Specifically, controversy increases WOM up to moderate levels of topic controversy, but when the level of topic controversy becomes higher WOM decreases.

While past research has investigated how WOM about a topic is affected by the level of controversy associated with that topic, I investigate how WOM is affected by the extremeness of the opinion about a controversial topic. Specifically, I predict that controversial topics generally increase people’s tendency to take extreme opinions and, more importantly, I predict that more extreme opinions about controversial topics are likely to be shared through some electronic

platforms, while less extreme opinions are likely to be shared through other electronic platforms. Specifically, my experimental studies demonstrate that people prefer using email to share relatively more extreme opinions on controversial topics, while they prefer using social networks (e.g., Facebook) to share relatively less extreme opinions on controversial topics. Therefore, I claim that the online platform used plays a crucial role in affecting people's decision to share more versus less extreme opinions about controversial topics.

Building on the idea that high levels of controversy increase discomfort, thus reducing people's likelihood to engage in discussions about controversial topic (Chen and Berger 2013), I reason that expressing highly extreme opinions on controversial topics may similarly expose people to the risk of social rejection (Buss 1990; Reiss 2004). Importantly, in the online setting, such a risk might be enhanced or reduced depending on the electronic platform used to convey messages. Specifically, I hypothesize that sharing an extreme opinion about a relatively highly controversial topic via post on one's social network page might carry a higher level of social risk for the sharer than sharing the same opinion via email. The difference between these two communication modes that would explain our prediction is given by the extent to which the sharer may select his/her message's recipients, thus exerting a varying degree of control on the audience, which is expected to be lower when communicating via post on social network pages than via email.

Overall, this research advances knowledge about the underexplored area of sharing information about controversial topics by testing how likelihood to engage in WOM about such topics is affected by opinion extremeness and online communication platform. In the remainder of this article, I review previous literature about controversy and controversial topics as well as previous literature about WOM and communication channels. Then, I present our conceptualization for the role of communication channel in which I hypothesize that people share their more versus less extreme opinions about controversial topics through different online platforms. I then present four experimental studies that provide support for our hypotheses. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our results and identify directions for future research.

## **Gossip and sharing effect**

The last paper in the dissertation deal with a type of conversation that is very common in daily-basis conversations: that is the gossip. Data on types of conversations reported that 60% of adult conversations are about absent person (Wert & Salowey, 2004; Emler, 1994; Levin & Arluke, 1985) and people spend between 65% of their day-to-day conversations talking about others (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012) although in many cultures and religions is seen as a type of conversations that violate moral norms (Yerkovich, 1977). Moral codes strongly condemn these conversations and frowned as reproachable behaviour (Goodman, 1994). Nevertheless, people gossip. Naïvely, gossip is perceived as a form of mundane conversation with negative stereotypes and with the main scope of entertaining others (Rysman, 1977). Gossip can be clearly connected to a general form of exchange, albeit stereotypical views and false myths surround this type of conversation. Despite the widespread interest in gossip and the attention received from different fields of research such as gossips' main antecedents (Rosnow & Kimmel 2000; Fayard & Weeks, 2008), cultural differences in gossiping (Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Eder & Enke, 1991), gossiping in specific contexts (e.g. Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993), and gossip as a way to strengthen informal relationships within organizations (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Michelson & Mouly, 2004) few studies have tried to understand whether differences in gossip provokes differences in likelihood of sharing. Although it is clear that transmission of gossip is frequent form of conversation, less is known about under which circumstances this form of conversation spread out easily and why sender of the gossip is more inclined to do it.

In this regard, current literature seems to totally neglect three main issues related to gossip: whether exist (i) differences in valenced form of gossip (positive versus negative), the (ii) degree of the valence (malicious versus non-malicious), whether (iii) people broadcast gossip in regard the



social membership of the target and (iv) if gossiper consider receivers' possible awareness in the news.

My object is firstly to prove that gossip increases the diffusion on the basis of the nature and the gossip and in respect the involvement that have the two interlocutors with the target of the gossip. Secondly, my intention is to investigate situational processes that underlie gossiping. In so doing, I aim to demonstrate that gossip drives conversations through a content structure of the message and whether the character of the gossip either belong to or not to the discussers network and, finally, to understand whether some contextual factors, such as the capacity of verify the information, can increase the dissemination of gossips.

Experiments are introduced for testing the hypotheses. In this study I demonstrate how individuals display differences in sharing gossip on the basis of alterations formulation (valence) and differences in perception of social ties create differences in the virality of the news. The uniqueness of my approach and the introduction of new theoretical concepts will help to demonstrate that gossip is a form of conversation highly used in daily basis moment but the diffusion is basis on a counter intuitive pattern.

Overall, the study aims at contributing to increase the understanding of the phenomenon of gossiping, by defining more clearly the concept and measuring the impact of gossiping in conversations. The practical importance of the findings is especially relevant for understanding how information spread out and how the gossip phenomenon can be managed.

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**Word-of-Mouth in Services: The Effect of Language Abstractness and Recipients' Prior Knowledge on Message Persuasiveness**

Paper 1



## Introduction

Word-of-mouth (hereafter WOM), defined as the “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261), is today’s most influential communication medium. According to the Nielsen Global Survey (2012), 92% of consumers find suggestions from other consumers to be the most reliable form of communication about products and services. Moreover, opinions and recommendations shared by consumers have been shown to be the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of buying decisions (Bughin, Doogan, & Vetvik, 2010).

In service contexts, WOM plays a particularly important role due to the fact that services are typically experience or credence goods (e.g., Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970; Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995)—that is, types of goods that consumers cannot test prior to making a purchase (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Thus, the best way to infer whether a doctor is reliable or a restaurant is good is by asking other people who visited said doctor or said restaurant. While this communication can and does happen face-to-face, people are increasingly turning to reviews posted to social media platforms. According to a survey conducted by comScore (2007), a leading company in measuring the digital world, consumers are willing to pay 20% more for services receiving “Excellent” or “5-star” ratings compared to “Good” or “4-star” ratings. Moreover, about three quarters of online review users—in categories such as hotel, restaurant, travel, legal, medical, car and home services—reported that online reviews had a significant influence on their purchase decisions (comScore, 2007).

Despite the relevance of WOM to service industries, extant research has not investigated the role that *type of language* plays in peer-to-peer conversations about services. Previous research has mainly focused on understanding the role of language in interactions between service providers and customers. For instance, some recent studies have focused on how service providers interact with multilingual consumers, finding that service customers prefer to be served in their native language (Holmqvist, 2011; Holmqvist & Gronroos, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013, 2014). To

the best of our knowledge, only a study by Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) has linked language in services and WOM, considering customers' positive WOM intentions as a consequence of being served in their native versus nonnative language.

In this paper, we investigate how a well-known dimension of language—its degree of concreteness/abstractness—affects service-related WOM. In particular, we apply the well-established Linguistic Category Model (hereafter LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991) and examine the conditions under which consumers' service-purchasing decisions are affected by other consumers' use of abstract versus concrete language. We propose that the impact of abstract versus concrete WOM language on consumers' behavior depends crucially on the receiver's prior knowledge about the service in question (i.e., consumers' personal information about the WOM topic based on work experience, education or other means; Shepherd & DeTienne, 2005). Specifically, we predict that abstract language will be more persuasive for consumers with a higher level of prior knowledge, while concrete language will be more persuasive for consumers with a lower level of prior knowledge. We also shed light on the mechanism underlying this effect by demonstrating that abstract language is more likely to stimulate mental imagery processing (e.g., Bone & Ellen, 1992) in consumers with higher prior knowledge, thus rendering the message more persuasive for such consumers compared to consumers with low prior knowledge

Overall, our research offers several contributions. First and foremost, it contributes to the literature about language in services by exploring the role played by the type of language in consumers' peer-to-peer conversations. Second, it contributes to research about the role of language abstractness in WOM, represented in particular by the work of Schellekens, Verlegh, and Smidts (2010), who have studied what drives consumers to use a concrete versus abstract language in their WOM communications. We differentiate from this work in the following ways. First, our study is about service, while Schellekens et al. (2010) focused on products. Second, we investigate the differential persuasiveness of concrete versus abstract language, while Schellekens et al. (2010) mainly investigated the likelihood that WOM senders use either type of language in their

communication. In other words, we focus on the recipient of WOM, while they mainly focused on the sender of WOM. Third, and consistent with our focus, we analyze the moderating role of a WOM recipient-related factor (prior knowledge), while Schellekens et al. (2010) analyzed the moderating role of a WOM sender-related factor (pre-established product attitude). Finally, we explore the mental processes stimulated in recipients with high prior knowledge when they receive a message delivered in abstract versus concrete language. From a managerial standpoint, our research aims to provide interesting insights for service companies about how to effectively tailor the language used in social communications to the type of audience. Specifically, companies could not only use different types of the language in their direct communication (e.g., conventional or digital advertising) with customers having different levels of service-related prior knowledge, but they can also suggest influencers (e.g., bloggers) how to strategically adapt their language to the audience they address, thus potentially improving service company's performance.

In the following section, we review the relevant literature on language in services, WOM and LCM. Next, we develop our conceptual framework and hypotheses. Then, we present the two experiments used to test our hypotheses about the differential persuasiveness of abstract versus concrete language and the role of mental imagery processing as evoked by abstract language. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of our work, as well as its limitations and some directions for future research.

## **Theoretical background**

### ***Language in services***

Starting from the seminal contribution about quality in services offered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), according to whom “communication means keeping customers informed in language they can understand” (p. 47), research on services has come to emphasize the importance of quality communication between consumers and companies in affecting consumers' perceptions of the service provider and the experience as a whole (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007;

Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Grönroos, 2008; Mai & Hoffmann, 2014; Otnes, Ilhan, & Kulkarni, 2012).

Recent studies have given particular attention to customers' assessment of service encounters, particularly looking at differences in language groups, a topic of growing interest in today's world in which more than half countries are officially multilingual (e.g., Holmqvist, 2011; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013; Wei, 2011). Specifically, scholars have focused on understanding the effect of language convergence and divergence on service customers' perceptions and behaviors. Language convergence occurs when, during service encounters, the service provider speaks a language the customer considers his/her first (or native) language, while language divergence occurs when the service provider speaks a language the customer considers his/her second (or non-native) language (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014). Holmqvist (2011) provided a first investigation into this issue, showing that multilingual consumers express an emotional preference for their first language; this effect is stable across different language groups in different multilingual countries (e.g., English/French in Canada and Finnish/Swedish in Finland). Subsequently, Holmqvist and Grönroos (2012) presented a series of propositions concerning the effect of language used by service providers on customers' perceptions about the service before, during and after the service encounter. For example, the language used by the service provider is expected to influence consumers' decision to use the service, consumers' ability to interact during the service encounter, as well as consumers' propensity to return to a service provider. Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2013) further advanced knowledge in this domain by analyzing the behavioral consequences of using customers' native versus non-native language. Using tipping as a focal point, these scholars found that consumers are more likely to tip if served in their native language than if served in their non-native language, with this relationship being independent from consumers' perceived second language proficiency. Finally, Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist (2014) demonstrated that consumers served in their second language are less likely to spread

positive WOM about their service experience, and also perceive the service provider to be less responsive in general.

Overall, extant research on service has only examined the role of language in WOM as far as it affects the relationship between service companies and their customers. No research, to the best of our knowledge, has investigated whether the type of language used in peer-to-peer WOM influences the shared message's effectiveness and recipients' purchasing intentions.

### ***Research on WOM***

Research in the last decade has focused on the “why” and “what” aspects of WOM behavior. As a result, scholars have shed significant light on both the motivations that drive individuals to engage in WOM as well as the content of WOM conversations (see Berger, 2014 for a recent review). To illustrate, individuals have been shown to engage in social transmission of information to fulfil certain psychological motives, such as the need to affirm a positive image of themselves in the marketplace (De Angelis et al., 2012), the need to regulate their emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012), the need to gather information about how to best use a product or service (Moe & Schweidel, 2012), the need to strengthen social bonds (Rimé, 2009), the need to show their uniqueness (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010) and expertise (Packard & Wooten, 2013), as well as the need to help others make better purchasing decisions (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998).

In pursuing one or more of such goals, individuals typically share different types of content. Specifically, WOM has been shown to vary on the basis of a number of dimensions, such as valence, emotion intensity, interest, and usefulness for the sender/recipient. For instance, consumers have been shown to share positive information about their own experiences or negative information about others' experiences as a way to self-enhance (De Angelis et al., 2012). Moreover, consumers have been shown to prefer sharing content of higher emotional intensity in online WOM (Berger & Milkman, 2012). In addition, individuals might differentially share WOM about interesting products (e.g., cars, clothes, technology) versus publicly visibly and more mundane ones (e.g., packaged goods); while more interesting products tend to get immediate WOM (e.g., WOM

occurring soon after a consumer experiences a product) , publicly visible products tend to get ongoing WOM over an extended period of time (e.g., WOM occurring over multiple months; Berger & Schwartz, 2011). Finally, individuals have been shown to share self-presentational content (i.e., content that sheds positive light on the sharer) when talking to broad audiences, but useful content (i.e., content that helps others make good decisions) when talking to narrow audiences (Barasch & Berger, 2014).

While much has been said about the why and what aspects of WOM, less is known about the “how” aspect. In other words, there have been limited insights into the way(s) in which consumers convey their WOM messages to others and how this might affect others’ behavior. One relevant factor concerning the “how” aspect of WOM is the language consumers use to convey information about products or services. Some attempts have been made to understand the type of language that individuals are more likely to use in different situations. For instance, Moore (2012) investigated the impact of WOM on the sender by demonstrating that using an explaining language—defined as language that involves generating explanations about the reasons why experiences happened and were liked/disliked—helps the sender understand those experiences, thus influencing his/her evaluations and intentions to repeat, recommend, and retell stories about those same experiences. Schellekens et al. (2010) focused on a different dimension of WOM language (i.e., language abstractness/concreteness), demonstrating that consumers are more likely to use an abstract language when describing experiences that align with the valence of their pre-established product attitude, whereas they are more likely to use a concrete language when describing experiences that diverge from the valence of their pre-established product attitude. It is important to note that Schellekens et al. (2010) mainly focused on the WOM sender, inasmuch as they studied his/her likelihood to adopt either abstract or concrete language. In their investigation of language abstractness, these scholars adopted the LCM (Semin & Fiedler, 1988, 1991), a widely-used framework for studying the language people use in social communications. In the section that follows, we provide an overview of this framework, which we also used in our experiments.

## ***The LCM***

Language abstractness refers to the extent to which people use more versus less abstract verbs and predicates when describing experiences and events. One well-established framework that helps to classify language into more abstract versus more concrete is LCM (Semin & Fiedler 1988, 1991). More specifically, LCM identifies four different levels of language abstractness that people can use to describe single events (Maass et al., 1989). The most concrete level is represented by *descriptive action verbs*, which refer to observable behaviors with a clear beginning and end (e.g., *to hit somebody*); next are the *interpretive action verbs*, which provide a description and interpretation of the behavior (e.g., *to hurt somebody*); the third level is represented by *state verbs*, which refer to the unobservable psychological state of the actor (e.g., *to hate somebody*), while the most abstract level is represented by *adjectives*, which allow people to generalize the behavior to the trait level (e.g., *to be aggressive*).

LCM has been widely used to study the language employed in different cultural contexts, each associated with a different language spoken (English, French, Spanish, Greek, Italian, Japanese, German and Dutch; e.g., Maass et al., 1989, 1995; Webster, Kruglanski, & Pattison, 1997). LCM has also been used in different research streams. For example, Rubini and Sigall (2002) found that individuals tend to use more abstract language when communicating to an audience that homogeneously shares their political views. Moreover, Born and Taris (2010) applied LCM to job advertising, showing that individuals have a greater inclination to apply for a job when the advertisement describes said job in abstract rather than concrete terms. Finally, Hansen and Wänke (2010) used LCM to investigate people's judgments of truth, finding that messages written in concrete language are more likely to be perceived as true than messages written in abstract language.

In this research, we apply LCM to the study of consumers' language in WOM conversations, specifically those about services. While past research applying LCM to WOM has focused on the antecedents of consumers' decision to use abstract versus concrete language in peer-to-peer

communications, we focus on the consequences of using either type of language, aiming to understand what drives the differential persuasiveness of abstract versus concrete language in service settings. In the next section, we outline our conceptual framework that explains how WOM language abstractness might influence recipients.

### **Conceptual development**

We predict that the differential persuasiveness of abstract versus concrete language crucially depends on the WOM recipient's level of prior knowledge regarding the service field being discussed. We reason that individuals with higher prior knowledge, relative to those with lower prior knowledge, are more likely to engage in imagery processing when the message they receive is more abstract, thereby making the message more persuasive.

Prior knowledge can be defined as “the extent to which a person has an organized structure of knowledge (schema) concerning an issue” (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 165). In other words, prior knowledge refers to information about a topic that people might have as a result of their experiences, education or other means (Shepherd & DeTienne, 2005). Prior knowledge is an important element of the well-established Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). In particular, prior knowledge is a key factor in individuals' ability to process received information: The more people know about the topic at hand, the more likely they will be to process topic-related information carefully (Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985). Prior knowledge plays a particularly relevant role in services, as their essential characteristic, intangibility, makes it impossible for consumers to see, touch, and test services before making their choice (Flipo, 1988). Because service evaluations are more subjective in nature than tangible product evaluations, higher levels of prior knowledge might allow individuals to better assess service-related information received from others.

According to past research on mental imagery, prior knowledge is typically stored as a set of images in individuals' memory (e.g., Bugelski, 1983; Kieras, 1978; Kosslyn, 1976). Mental imagery is described as visualizing, or seeing in the mind's eye (MacInnis & Price, 1987), and is



composed of three dimensions: vividness, quantity, and elaboration (Babin & Burns, 1998). Vividness refers to the extent to which the information received by an individual elicits clear and distinct images in his/her mind (Marks, 1973). Quantity refers to the number of images evoked by that stimulus (McGill & Anand, 1989). Finally, elaboration refers to an individual's production of mental images beyond what is provided by the stimulus (Babin & Burns, 1998). Therefore, while quantity and valence do not imply a deep engagement in information processing, elaboration does. For this reason, the elaboration dimension of mental imagery is likely to be shaped by WOM recipients' prior knowledge about the service being discussed.

Indeed, previous research suggests that higher prior knowledge about the stimulus received triggers more imagination than lower prior knowledge (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Building on the evidence that prior knowledge is positively associated with mental imagery, we develop our predictions about what type of language is likely to be more effective in influencing WOM recipients' behavioral intentions. Our main hypothesis is that abstract language will be more influential than concrete language for consumers who have higher pre-established knowledge about the topic at hand, while concrete language will be more influential than abstract language for consumers who have lower pre-established knowledge about the topic at hand.

In developing our hypothesis, we presume that WOM recipients need a higher level of prior knowledge regarding the service in question in order to produce relevant mental images. Also, abstract language typically requires that recipients take an active role in the elaboration process, as they must look beyond the literal words in the message in order to ascertain the full meaning. In order to do so, individuals may need to draw upon stored mental images that are associated with their knowledge of and experiences with the service in question. To illustrate, if a financial advisor describes an investment option as convenient, thus using an adjective (i.e., the most abstract level in the LCM), it is necessary that recipients of this message have a relatively higher level of prior knowledge about finance to fully understand what convenient means in that context. In contrast, concrete language does not typically require that recipients look beyond the words used, thus

allowing them to derive meaning without engaging in a deep and highly active mental elaboration process. For instance, using descriptive verbs (i.e., the most concrete level in the LCM) to describe experiences with services is often enough for recipients to fully understand what is being communicated.

As a consequence, we predict that consumers with relatively higher prior knowledge about services are better able to engage in mental imagery processing when exposed to messages conveyed in abstract language. For those consumers, the abstract message will spur higher engagement in the elaboration process, thus rendering the WOM more effective in influencing their behavior. In contrast, we predict that WOM will be more effective for consumers with low prior knowledge when shared through concrete language, as those recipients are less able to produce topic-related mental images. Formally:

**H1a.** For consumers with higher prior knowledge about services, abstract language in the WOM message will be more persuasive than concrete language.

**H1b.** For consumers with lower prior knowledge about services, concrete language in the WOM message will be more persuasive than abstract language.

**H2.** Abstract messages will be more effective for consumers with high prior knowledge about services than for consumers with low prior knowledge because high prior knowledge enables a mental imagery process.

Next, we present two experimental studies to test our hypotheses. Study 1 is an online experiment intended to test H1a and H1b, while Study 2 is a laboratory experiment intended to test H2.

## **Study 1**

Focusing on H1a and H1b, this study provides evidence for the interaction effect between WOM language abstractness and WOM recipients' service-related prior knowledge. We expected that the persuasiveness of abstract versus concrete language depends on the recipients' degree (high or low) of prior knowledge about the service in question.

### ***Method***

One hundred and twenty students (74 females, 46 males) recruited from a European university participated in a 2 (type of language: abstract vs. concrete) x 2 (prior knowledge: high vs. low) between-subjects online experiment in which they were asked to read a WOM message about financial services. We manipulated the type of language by randomly assigning respondents to either the abstract or concrete condition, while we measured prior knowledge by asking respondents whether they had ever taken a course about finance. In order to have enough variance in students' prior knowledge, we emailed the electronic questionnaire to students from the department of business management and the department of political science.

To begin, we asked respondents to read a fictional scenario, framed as an online review from a financial blog in which the author shared their experience with a financial consultant advising them to purchase forward contracts. To manipulate type of language, we designed the scenarios according to the LCM framework: In the abstract condition, the message mainly contained adjectives (e.g., expert, unbeatable, wise), while in the concrete condition, the message mainly contained descriptive verbs (e.g., presents, shows, tells).

After reading their respective scenario, participants were asked to rate the language's level of abstraction on a seven-point scale (1 = very concrete; 7 = very abstract; Schellekens et al., 2010), which served as a check of our manipulation. Next, participants rated how much they intended to buy forward contracts in the following months/years (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). This variable served as our dependent variable. Then, respondents indicated whether or not they had ever

attended a course on finance or similar subject matters, which served as our measure of prior knowledge. Finally, to prove the reliability of our prior knowledge measure, we asked respondents to rate how expert about financial services they felt to be (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). The questionnaire ended with socio-demographic questions.

### ***Results and discussion***

We first checked the validity of language manipulation and prior knowledge measure. As expected, respondents rated the message in the abstract condition as more abstract ( $M = 4.70$ ;  $SD = 1.55$ ) than the message in the concrete condition ( $M = 3.69$ ;  $SD = 1.66$ ;  $F = 10.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, expertise ratings for respondents who had taken a course about finance ( $M = 3.81$ ;  $SD = 1.20$ ) were significantly higher than expertise ratings for respondents who had never taken a course about finance ( $M = 2.02$ ;  $SD = 1.01$ ;  $F = 70.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To test H1a and H1b, we employed the PROCESS SPSS macro developed by Hayes (2013), using a moderation model (Model 1) where type of language was the independent variable, prior knowledge was the moderator, and intention to buy was the dependent variable. The results show that the main effect of language ( $b = .71$ ;  $t = 1.76$ ,  $p = .08$ ) and the main effect of prior knowledge ( $b = .83$ ;  $t = 1.95$ ,  $p = .05$ ) were marginally significant. More importantly, the effect of the type of language x prior knowledge interaction on intention to buy was fully significant ( $b = -1.47$ ;  $t = -2.69$ ,  $p > .01$ ). To examine this interaction more closely, we looked the conditional effects of type of language on the dependent variable within the two levels of prior knowledge. At a high level of prior knowledge, respondents' intention to buy forward contracts was higher in the abstract language condition than in the concrete language condition ( $b = -.76$ ;  $t = -2.07$ ,  $p = .04$ ), consistent with H1a. Meanwhile, at a low level of prior knowledge, respondents' intention to buy forward contracts was higher in the concrete language condition than in the abstract language condition ( $b = .71$ ;  $t = 1.76$ ,  $p = .08$ ), consistent with H1b.

Overall, these findings provide full support for our hypotheses about the joint effect of WOM language abstractness and WOM recipients' prior knowledge.

## **Study 2**

Aimed at testing H2, this study provides evidence for the underlying role of mental imagery in explaining why abstract language might be more effective in persuading recipients with higher prior knowledge than those with lower prior knowledge. We reason that recipients with high service-related prior knowledge are better able to produce mental images when receiving messages conveyed in abstract words compared to recipients with low service-related prior knowledge. Unlike Study 1, which was conducted online, Study 2 was conducted in a laboratory.

## ***Method***

One hundred and fifty-eight students (63 females, 95 males), recruited from the same European university as in Study 1, participated in a 2 (type of language: abstract vs. concrete) x 2 (prior knowledge: high vs. low) between-subjects laboratory experiment in which they were asked to watch and listen to a fabricated video containing a message about homeopathic medical services. We manipulated the type of language by randomly assigning respondents to either the abstract or concrete condition, while we measured prior knowledge by asking respondents about whether or not they had ever received a homeopathic medical examination.

Regarding the manipulation of language, the videos respondents listened to were framed as coming from an unknown person sharing information about how a homeopathic doctor behaves during a typical medical examination. Such videos were allegedly created by the research team. In essence, the person in the video promoted the effectiveness of homeopathic medical services. Similar to Study 1, the video in the abstract condition mainly contained adjectives (e.g., expert, unbeatable, reliable), while the video in the concrete condition mainly contained descriptive verbs (e.g., tells, gives, writes).

Next, participants were asked to rate the language's degree of abstraction on a four-point scale (1 = most concrete; 4 = most abstract; Semin & Fiedler, 1989), which served as a check of our manipulation. Next, they rated how much the message evoked images in their mind (1 = not at all; 7 = very much; adapted from Bone & Ellen, 1992), which served as our mediating variable. Then, using the WOM message as a baseline, they rated the effectiveness of homeopathic medical services on a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not effective at all; 10 = very effective); this variable served as our dependent variable. The questionnaire ended with socio-demographic questions.

### ***Results and discussion***

We first checked the validity of language manipulation. Respondents rated the message in the abstract condition as more abstract ( $M = 2.51$ ;  $SD = .68$ ) than the message in the concrete condition ( $M = 2.23$ ;  $SD = .56$ ;  $F = 8.17$ ,  $p < .01$ ). To test H2, we employed the PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes, 2013), using a moderated mediation model (Model 7) where prior knowledge served as the independent variable, type of language served as the moderator, imagery evoking served as the mediator, and homeopathic medicine effectiveness served as the dependent variable.

We first regressed imagery evoking on prior knowledge and type of language individually, and then on their interaction. We found that prior knowledge (coded as 0 for low prior knowledge and 1 for high prior knowledge) had a marginally significant main effect ( $b = -.61$ ,  $t = 1.80$ ,  $p = .07$ ), while type of language (coded as 0 for concrete and 1 for abstract) had a fully significant main effect ( $b = -1.73$ ,  $t = -3.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). More importantly, the effect of the prior knowledge x type of language interaction on imagery evoking was significant ( $b = 1.14$ ,  $t = 2.47$ ,  $p = .01$ ).

Next, to test the mediation of imagery evoking, we regressed homeopathic medicine effectiveness on prior knowledge and imagery evoking. The results showed that the effect of imagery evoking on homeopathic medicine effectiveness was positive and significant ( $b = .24$ ,  $t = 1.90$ ,  $p = .05$ ), while the effect of prior knowledge became non-significant ( $b = -.24$ ,  $t = -.63$ , *ns*).

Moreover, the direct effect of prior knowledge on the dependent variable was not significant ( $p > .5$ ). These results provide evidence for the mediating role of imagery evoking.

As a further test, we examined conditional indirect effects to see whether imagery evoking mediated the effect of prior knowledge on homeopathic medicine effectiveness for messages containing abstract language. After applying the bootstrapping technique, the results showed that when the message was conveyed in abstract language, prior knowledge had a positive and significant effect on homeopathic medicine effectiveness, mediated by imagery evoking ( $b = .13$ , 95% C.I. = .01, .46). In contrast, when the message was conveyed in concrete language, prior knowledge had a non-significant, indirect effect on homeopathic medicine effectiveness ( $b = -.15$ , 95% C.I. =  $-.59$ , .02). Lastly, the index of moderated mediation presented a significant result ( $b = .28$ , 95% C.I. = .02, .87), solidifying the mediating role of imagery evoking. In support of H2, these results demonstrate that respondents with high prior knowledge perceived the message employing abstract language as more effective than respondents with low prior knowledge.

## **General discussion**

Because services are characterized by intangibility, WOM is a particularly relevant source of information for consumers and a valuable communication medium for companies. In this research, we empirically investigated an important and quite unexplored dimension of WOM—namely, the type of language consumers use in their conversations about services— and how it affects the likelihood that WOM recipients are persuaded by received information. Overall, our results suggest that both consumers and companies can increase recipients' engagement by tailoring their language to the recipients' prior knowledge, which might improve the effectiveness of the message and positively influence purchase intentions.

Our experiments tested the effect of using abstract versus concrete language in service WOM on the persuasiveness of the WOM message. In particular, we found that whether an abstract versus concrete language is more effective in driving service consumers' purchase intentions depends on the prior knowledge held by the WOM recipient concerning the service in question. Moreover, we

demonstrated that high prior knowledge enables WOM recipients to derive the full meaning of the abstract message by engaging in mental imagery processing.

Study 1, which focused on financial services, showed that abstract (concrete) language is more persuasive than concrete (abstract) language for service consumers with high (low) prior knowledge. Meanwhile, Study 2, which focused on medical services, showed that abstract language is more effective for service consumers with high prior knowledge because they are more likely to engage in service-related mental imagery processing.

### **Theoretical and managerial contributions**

By analyzing the role of WOM language in services, our research contributes to both the literature about language in services and the literature about language in WOM. Regarding the former, we shed light on the role played by type of language (abstract vs. concrete) in consumers' peer-to-peer conversations concerning services. In doing so, we extend previous research, which has mainly focused on the role of service providers' language when interacting with customers, and in particular the effect of using customers' native versus non-native language on their evaluation of the service experience.

Regarding our contribution about the role of language in WOM, we advance knowledge in three key ways. First, while past research has investigated WOM senders' tendency to use abstract versus concrete language in their communications, we focused on the effect of abstract versus concrete language on WOM recipients. Second, we analyzed the role of WOM recipients' prior knowledge as a moderator of the effect that language abstractness has on service WOM communication effectiveness. Third, we investigated the mental process activated in recipients with high prior knowledge when receiving messages conveyed in a more abstract versus concrete language.

Practically, this research shows that language used in WOM conversations should be regarded by service companies as an important predictor of their performance, as well as that prior knowledge might be used by service companies as a relevant variable for segmenting their customer



base. More specifically, our work offers interesting implications for both service consumers and marketing managers. First, our results suggest that consumers should tailor their advice to their audience, using more abstract or concrete language depending on the recipient's prior knowledge. Second, service companies might implement more abstract versus concrete language in their communication activities in order to better persuade customers. It is essential that companies adapt the type of language to the targeted customer segment, giving particular attention to customers' degree of prior knowledge about the service being promoted. In addition to tailoring the type of language to customers when communicating directly with them, companies might also suggest influencers (e.g. bloggers) as well as salesforce which type of language to use to be more persuasive. Finally, our work suggests that service companies can stimulate an increase in customers' engagement, specifically by using abstract messages to evoke mental imagery in experienced customers.

### **Limitations and future research**

Our research features some methodological and conceptual limitations that can potentially open fruitful avenues for future studies. Methodologically, our experiments used single-item measures to operationalize both prior knowledge and mental imagery. Moreover, we used a sample of students drawn from the same university. Future research should strive to replicate our results using multi-item measurement scales and different consumer samples. Finally, we employed two different measures of language abstractness in our two experiments (i.e., a 7-point and a 4-point measure) to check the validity of our language manipulation. While one might see this choice as a lack of consistency, our goal was to increase the robustness of our results. Moreover, we used such two different of language abstractness because they have both been used in previous literature.

From a conceptual standpoint, our research carries three main limitations: First, although abstractness is an important and unexplored dimension of language, other dimensions exist that might be worthy of investigation. For instance, WOM messages can vary in the amount of intensity used to express a position: To illustrate, one can express his positive or negative opinion about a

service in an extreme or moderate way. Scholars might investigate how language intensity can affect the persuasiveness of a service-oriented WOM message. Language complexity is another potentially worthwhile dimension. In both our theorizing and our experiments, we did not vary the level of linguistic complexity used in WOM messages; we only altered the abstractness of the language by manipulating the use of either verbs or adjectives, in line with the LCM framework.

Second, our experiments only focused on positive WOM, in which WOM senders tried to motivate recipients to purchase financial and medical services. Future research could investigate whether our results still hold when considering negative WOM, whereby consumers share their negative opinions about services.

Third, we believe that scholars may find moderator variables beyond recipients' prior knowledge that could moderate the effect of language abstractness on WOM persuasiveness. One such variable might be the type of service. Our experiments specifically used two services, the financial and the medical, that require the provider to have specific skills and professional competencies in order to deliver said services. However, other studies might see if our results change when studying services where high specialization and competences are relatively less important for delivering high-quality services.

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## **Sharing Extreme Opinions about Controversial Topics: The Moderating Role of Online Communication Platform**

Paper 2

## **Introduction**

As it is true that people express their opinion, it also true that people take stances. The literature in word-of-mouth (WOM) have often analysed the phenomena of communication among peers as a dyadic and linear exchange of information (e.g. Berger 2014 and De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso; Rucker and Costabile 2012 and Berger and Schwartz 2011 and Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006) although conversations are not a list of cues where interlocutors react automatically (Ryu and Han 2009). The content and the tone of the information are important aspects in the analysis of consumer behaviour (e.g. Schellekens, Verlegh and Smidts 2010 and Moore 2012; Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013) and give the possibility to catch more nuances in discussions. Conversations grow around a multitude of topics that differ in terms of involvement, engagement and interest, provoking differences in sharing. People, in fact, may emphasize or deemphasize particular issues, agree or disagree on specific topics and regulate their message in regard the audience that are discussing with (e.g. Barash and Berger 2014 and Moe and Schweidel 2012). Contextual factors such as venues and places - wherein conversations occur - may affect the succession of the conversation and the expressiveness about own beliefs. The Internet is no less so and virtual platforms create systematic bias in transmission of the own opinion (Moe and Scheweidel 2012). The development of on-line technologies has modified the manner of communicate among individuals and, nowadays, represents a neutral setting where consumers contribute easily and are prone to express their opinion more freely in regard to face-to-face dialogues (Berger 2014) boosted by intrinsic characteristics of the net (i.e. anonymity, asynrocicity and undirected communication) and with the final result that have begun to talk with each other on large scale. Websites such as TripAdvisor, Epinions.com and Yelp based their quintessence on copious comments left by users that reviews places, products and services. Mashable.com, Huffington Post, and others blogs and forums, whereas, represent virtual places where users express liberally their opinion regard topics not merely connected to consumption activities and sanction conversations around thorny discussions.

Issues such as abortion, sexual minority rights and immigrations have been legitimized and widely discussed on the Internet involving thousands of users. These arguments, among others, have the ability to divide diverse societies and creating opinion conflicts with different degree of disagreement (Wojcieszak 2011). The nature of these topics has generated huge numbers of comments but also has triggered individuals in expressing a position in favor/against to (Nickerson 1998 and Wojcieszak 2011). The role of public deliberation, however, assumes a fundamental notion in communication involving different actors who express diverse ideas and promote their point of views (Ho and McLeod 2008). In the same vain, companies have designed products, services and communicational campaigns based on issues that purposefully create conversations and polarized opinions. Despite news report the cases of companies that are involved accidentally in controversial situations such as Ikea, McDonald and British Petroleum, there are companies that deliberately create a questionable image such as Virgin and Ryanair, others assume a position on controversial topics such as United Colour of Benetton, Diesel and Levi's and others that do not overtly express their position such as Old Navy.

The exposure to conversations and issues that engender debates, can be limited by socio-psychological process and provoke differences in behaviours especially in face-to-face conversations (Noelle-Neumann 1974 and 1993). Physical proximity, moreover, affect what people convey with detriment on what they can express (Barber, Mattson and Peterson 1997). Conversations on the net reduce observable social behaviour that are relative to physical dialogs and encourage more provocative and interesting conversations (Ho and McLeod 2008). Moreover, research leads on WOM have proved differences in communication due to the medium. Berger and Milkman (2012) found that differences in the medium of communication shape the content of the information that is shared. They argue that interesting things are more discussed on the web rather than in face-to-face contexts (Berger and Milkman 2012). Intuitively, discussions around topics that are perceived more interestingly might increase the number of comments and the positions expressed on it. According to Lee, Choi, Kim and Kim (2014) the heterogeneity of the network

assumes a crucial role in the extremity of the own position and deliberate theorists pointed out that exposure to diverse communication networks have direct effect on the extremeness of the position expressed (Delli, Carpini, Cook and Jacobs 2004 and Lee, et al., 2014). For example, high exposition to opposite view increases the level of tolerance and legitimate opposing perspective in working places (Mutz and Mondak 2006). Although, the Internet gives the possibility to express the own opinion there are, still, limit in passing the information to others. According to Barash and Berger (2014) the number of people with whom someone communicate influence what people discuss and share. Communicating with only few people imply a self-focus rather than focusing on others when communicating with more people (Barash and Berger 2014).

Research in WOM has, on one hand, shed light on different dimensions of WOM content (e.g., valence, emotion, self-relevance, interest, language), and, on the other, have recognise electronic word-of-mouth as (e-WOM) a consolidate form of communication among peers (Babic, Sotgiu, de Valck and Bijmolt 2015). Peculiarly, the communication in the net is characterised by the exposure of multiple and simultaneous points of view that promote diversity (Yardi and Boyd 2010). Polarization in comments is feature that can be observed in on-line conversations and with effects that can be following a specific path. Negative reviews, for example, can be very powerful in decreasing sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006) but also increases product evaluations (Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen 2010).

Extremity in comments is very common in on-line settings although appears underexplored. With the exception of Berger's (2014, p 11) prediction that "if the goal is to convince someone that something is good (bad), for example, people should share extremely rather than moderately positive (negative) information," empirical research on when consumers are likely to share extreme versus moderate WOM is scant. To fill this gap, we investigate what drives consumers to take and share extreme versus moderate positions on topics. As reported by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a position on any topic is extreme when it is "not moderate", i.e., when it is taken at a "very high degree." In other words, by extreme opinions we refer to situations where individuals strongly

position themselves on one clear side of a topic, thus potentially being in disagreement with others who are positioned on other sides (e.g., one might be strongly in favor of a company's initiative while others might strongly disagree with it).

In our study of WOM extremeness we examine the role of controversy characterizing the topic at hand in affecting individuals' likelihood to take extreme versus moderate positions. Controversial topics are discussion characterised by the expression of opposing views and on which individuals hold different and polarized opinions (Merriem-Webster 2003). We predict that topics characterized by high degrees of controversy enhance people's tendency to take extreme positions, and that such extreme positions are, in turn, more likely to be shared than less extreme ones. Across a field data study and three experiments, we provide convergence about these effects. Overall, this research offers three main contributions to extant literature. First, it provides insights into such a previously unexplored dimension of WOM content as extremeness. Second, it advances knowledge on the role of controversy in WOM by studying how the level of controversy of a topic makes consumers likely to take a more or less extreme position on that topic. Third, debunking myths on Internet's users share opinion without any concern and those platforms play a mediation role.

### **Word of Mouth**

A number of studies have shed light on the fact that people share content of different nature in their daily conversations. As reported in a recent review by Berger (2014), a functional view of WOM has emerged, whereby WOM can allow individuals to fulfil specific motives they might have, such as impression management, information acquisition, emotion regulation, social bonding, and other persuasion. Therefore, in order to fulfil these goals, people might be more likely to share certain types of content rather than others. To illustrate, De Angelis et al. (2012) have shown that in order to self-enhance consumers tend to engage in positive WOM when sharing their own experiences, while they tend to engage in negative WOM when sharing experiences they heard occurred to others. Barasch and Berger (2014) have shown that individuals tend to share self-presentational content when talking to large audiences, and content that is more useful for others

when talking to smaller audiences. Moreover, Berger and Milkman (2012) have found that online sharing of content is driven by both impression management, through which people tend to share interesting and surprising content, and to share emotionally arousing content. However, the Internet has changed the way in which users relate. Changing in social interconnections and the intrusiveness of digital in daily activities has modified significantly social interactions. Opinions and recommendations are exponentially powerful on the Internet and this increase the persuasiveness of the message (Hornik, Satchi, Cesareo and Pastore 2015). Facebook updates, tweets and on-line reviews can be compelling tools and influence an increasing number of receivers both positively and negatively. Evaluative comments are characterised by extremeness in rating have direct consequences in consumer judgement and decision-making (Moe and Schweidel 2012). This can be accentuating in conversations that flourish around discussions that are controversial in nature.

### **The current research**

Controversial topics and controversial discussions are setting that have not been taken in account in marketing in general despite of is a technique widely used in communication. However, a lot can be proved investigating through these types of topics and shed light on the Internet consumer behaviour. We believe that controversial topics trigger extremity in opinion expressions, although the types of virtual platform that people may use (social networks versus emails) in sharing can alter this propensity. The combination of virtual platforms and controversial topics, furthermore, radically change the behaviour in sharing the information with others.

### ***Controversy***

The psychology of controversy has been debated in socio-psychology, communication and education literature with several implications in how to use these issues for creating involvement and interest (e.g. Boring 1929 and Phillips 1999 and Hermann 2008). Literature suggests diverse definition of controversy albeit there does not seem to be a wide agreement (Hermann 2008).

According to Hermann (2008 p 1013) controversy is seen as a way where “rational people may disagree on a topic because they maintain different worldwide assumptions despite the fact that opposing sides of an argument may both contain valid assertions.” Implicitly, literature agrees on the fact that controversial topics have as well different degrees. Chen and Berger (2013) have identified three levels of controversy (i.e., low, moderate, and high) and have studied which of such levels of controversy is more likely to spark discussion. They found that when moving from low to moderate levels of controversy, individuals’ likelihood to engage in WOM increases; however, when moving from moderate to high levels of controversy, individuals’ likelihood to engage in WOM decreases. This finding is explained by the fact that controversial topics increase interest in talking on the one hand, but also increase sharers’ sense of discomfort on the other hand. Past researches have investigated how controversial conversation generate WOM and the likelihood to initiate this kind of conversations (e.g. Chen and Berger 2013), proving that controversial dispute can generate interpersonal conflicts and contrasting feelings with the result of increasing the sense of discomfort and reducing the likelihood of discussion (Buss 1990 and Chen and Berger 2013). Chen and Berger (2013 p 580) proved that controversy drives conversations and “contextual factors like anonymity and closeness of the audience moderate the controversy-conversation relationship.”

However, little is known about the dynamism of contextual conditions that affect individuals’ talks and what are the socio-psychological characteristics that drive controversial conversation. Positions regarding prickly discussions are often based on personal viewpoints that refer directly to the perception of the self in specific context and in regard the perceived social ties with others interlocutors (Verplanken and Holland 2002). That is why, controversial topics have to be interpreted as multidimensional phenomena and not as mono-dimensional, wherein aspects concerning the internal status and the external setting should be taken in account simultaneously. According to Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger (1989) analysing situations wherein individuals cope with accountability, it is necessary undertake a wider perspective due to the connection between interpersonal and institutional variables. Interpersonal and institutional variables interact

synchronously during conversations in relation to cognitive tendencies in understanding the other interlocutors and adapting the responses (Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger 1989). There are, also, evidence indicates that the pressure of talking and taking a position in specific situation affect both what people think (through the preferences they express), how they think (Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger 1989) and thus what they express. Further stream of research reports that people involved in conversations tend to seek out the most obvious and acceptable position with a multidimensional and flexible way of thinking with the capability to modify responses in the perspective of the other interlocutors (Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger 1989 and Tetlock 1983a; Tetlock 1983b). Although, Chen and Berger (2013) have proved that the controversial conversations vary in the degree of debate due to the capacity of this conversation in limited opinion expressiveness, it also true that the Internet is a sort of free-zone and controversial discussions abound easily. The Internet media “support anonymity promote the possibility to more egalitarian participation (Siegel, Drubowsky, Kiesler and McGuire 1986), allow greater idea generation (Gallupe, Bastianutti and Cooper 1991), and potentially increase overall participation (Kiesler, Siegel and MCGuire 1984)” (Ho and McLeod 2008 p 192). Thus, we hypothesized:

*H1: Highly controversial topics make consumers more likely to take extreme positions than lowly controversial topics*

### ***Opinion Extremeness***

Controversial conversations can be interpreted as competitive dialogue wherein individuals tend to assert their belief and “evokes differences in opinions” (Chen and Berger 2013 p 581). People may assume a clear position during a conversation with controversial topic due to they believe that their opinion is more interesting and valuable in respect to others (Chen and Berger 2013). On the other hand, considering the opinion of others and invalidate the position of other interlocutors can decrease the likelihood to generate verbal conflicts and it reduces egocentric biases in judgment (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000 and Neale and Bazerman 1983). Modern



societies are heterogeneous and people interact with strangers that have experienced different episodes and matured different perspectives and opinions (Simmel 1950). People are subject to multiple styles of conversations with an exposure of topics that can be unexpected both in terms of variety and in terms of level of involvement. Conversing, in any case, is a natural propensity of individuals to absorb, interpret and reply information in line with personal traits (Berger 2014). Social interactions, additionally, are strategic moments where individuals can achieve latent goals (De Angelis et al., 2012 and Epley, Caruso and Bazerman 2006) although people interact, synchronize or align their communication ability (e.g., Riordan, Kreuz and Olney 2014 and Mars, Richardson and Schmidt 2009 and Pickering and Garrod 2004) both verbally and nonverbally, assuming common sets (for example phonology, posture, pragmatics, pitch) (see Bock 1986) and adapting topics and subjects (Berger 2014). Moreover, aligning one's own communicational behaviour is also seen as a manner for accepting and eliciting information about others (Riordan et al., 2014). Recognizing others and the typology of the conversation can have a direct impact on what people disclose. Previous studies pointed out that deliberate free interaction with different social actors exposes the individual to diverse ideas that others can create on him/her and accentuate multiple points of view (e.g., Dewey 1954 and Gutmann and Thompson 1996 and Katz, 1997). The sense to express one's own opinion can be impeded by social-psychological processes including the potential coercion of the majority and the reluctance of the minority to speak out (e.g. Ho and McLeod 2008 and Noelle-Neumann, 1974 and 1993). On the opposite, public individuals' expressions are influenced by others and does not necessarily represent the independent opinion of the sender (Godes and Silva 2012 and Li and Hitt 2008 and Moe and Trusov 2011). However, early studies have proved a positive correlation between opinion extremity and conviction (e.g., Allport and Hartman 1925). Individuals who possess a stronger view are found to be more confident in expressing their opinion (Johnson 1940 and Suchman 1950). Confidence reflects, also, the fact that the senders of the information have more evidence as pro or cons in regard to the topic and that produce the capability to assume a different degree of extremity position and with potential effects on receivers' perceptions

(Baron, Hoppe, Kao, Brunzman, Linneweh and Rogers 1996). Different level of chronic objectivism contributes in how opinions are expressed due to moderate the impact of thought on affect and beliefs (Leone 1996).

What is more, different areas of research have posited their attention in understanding why people tend to align their own opinion with the majority group opinion. Spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann 1974 and 1993), for example, postulates how “fear of isolation” can predict a specific behaviour such as the propensity to espouse vision that are widely accepted. As a consequence, people tend to support their opinions the more they believe these opinions are shared by others (Morrison and Wheeler 2010; Bassilli 2003). People adopt and express majority opinions due to a desire to feel a part of a group and fit with their peers (Ho and McLeod 2008). Yet, social identity theory suggests that people associate themselves to particular group in order to maintain a positive self-image and distancing from other cluster of people that are perceived out from their perspective (Tajfel and Turner 1979). On the contrary, there are reasons that heighten people in adopting minority opinions. Firstly, racial and ethnic minority enhances the sense of the self and having a minor position is seen as an important aspect for their existence (Breakwell 1987). As noted by Morrison and Wheeler (2010) there are people who avoid a sense of conformity and are aware of their minority status (Shamir 1997). A possible reason for expressing a minority opinion is having a well-defined self-concept and a high sense of self-esteem (Morrison and Wheeler, 2010 and Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavalley and Lehman 1996). There are also individuals who persistently tend to reflect a sense of avoidance toward what is perceived as group norms (Santee and Maslach 1982). Personal characteristic such as expertise can affect the position: the more experienced commenter tends to “be more negative in evaluations and more prone to post in dissentious environment (i.e. environments with higher opinion variance)” (Moe and Schweidel 2012, p 373). Position adoption can be also modified by the content of the conversation such as whether are valenced (positive/neutral/negative). Either negative or positive on-line review has been proved to alter the response of the follower reviewers (Moe and Schweidel, 2012; Schollosser,

2005) The positive valence of ratings increase the likelihood in posting while negative valence of the post discourage posting (Moe and Schweidel 2012).

Having opposite opinion and interest may create divergent perspective and failing in understanding the other interlocutors opinion provoking polarized and different stances (Epley, Caruso and Bazerman 2006 and Babcock and Loewenstein 1997). An important aspect of WOM is that consumers talk about things that are interesting and avoid to talk about products/services and brands that are boring (Berger and Schwartz 2011 and Sernovitz, 2006). Concern to psychological aspects, people believe their own opinions are more interesting than others and so they tend to express them. We therefore posit the following:

*H2: Highly controversial topics make consumers more likely to share their extreme positions*

### **Communication Channels**

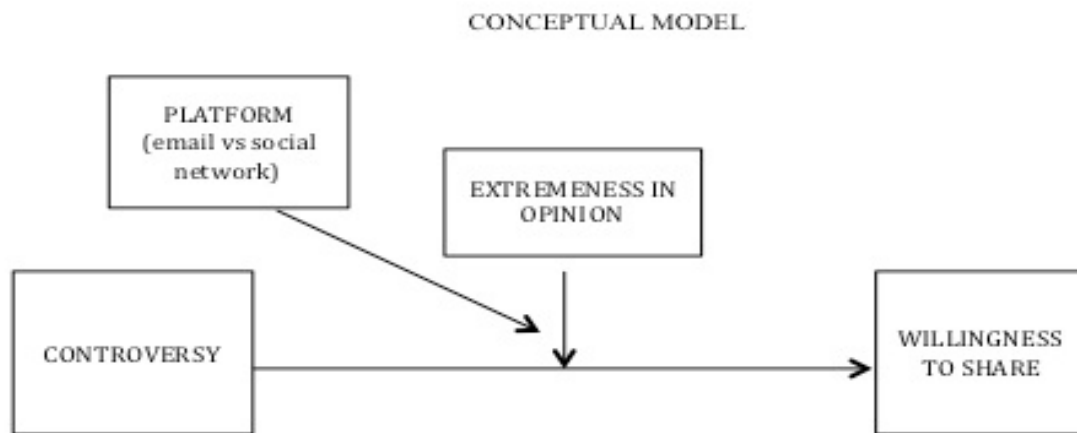
According to Berger and Iyengar (2013) communication modalities (oral versus written communication) have effect on what people share. Differences exist with whom people share information: with anyone when the value of the information is low and are more reluctant when the information is valuable with whom are weak ties (Barasch and Berger 2014 and Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993). Computer-mediated discussion, however, are able to abate social-psychological influence on opinion expression and create a milieu favourable for public expressiveness (Ho and McLeod 2008). The Internet interactions are characterized by undirected communications (Berger 2014). Updating status on social networks is less direct in nature in respect to face-to-face conversations due to the fact that users might not talk directly to a person but just express their thoughts. Undirected communication is useful because give the possibility to people to communicate and reduce risk related to social connection and increase the number of potential responses (Berger 2014). A further difference between communication channels is the modality and the level of synchronicity: in oral conversations interlocutors interact in real time, whereas, written conversations tend to be asynchronous such as in the case of email's conversations and posts on

social networks/blogs (Berger and Iyenger 2013 and Clark and Brennan 1991). Dissimilarities on synchrony allow people in formulating responses given the possibility, for example and thanks to the more time, to edit, to refine and better to address the message for on-line communications (Berger and Iyenger 2013). In on-line settings, due to the absence of nonverbal cues, the intensity and the extremity of a stance can become more ambiguous than an identical position expressed face-to-face (Ho and McLeod 2008). Anonymity, moreover, within on-line communications prove to be an important aspect in modifying the perception of reality. Participants in anonymous experiment find their group members as less credible and less influential than those where in an identified setting (Ho and McLeod 2008 and Rains, 2007). Main conversations are written and this reduces the social presence and encourages people in behaving extremely open (Berger 2014). Online communications, give the possibility to share information with a large audience (Berger 2014). The impact of the audience has effects on information dissemination. The audience size (small versus large), in fact, affects on the content of the information (Barasch and Berger 2014). Although it does not seem intuitive, on the Internet, users have the possibility to select the audience size, adjust and weight the information that want to share. Blogs, forums, chat rooms and emails' communication are mainly perceived as small and dedicated spaces and where users share common sets of idea, values and intimate thoughts (Gilbert, Bergstrom and Karahalios 2009). Facebook, Twitter and others social networks are seen, instead, as large places where information shared are public domain (Barasch and Berger 2014). Differences in the medium of communication have effects also in the degree of the extremity of the position-expressed. Knowing that a specific opinion would be sent by email or update on Facebook's board might modify users' behaviour. Our conceptual framework, for sake of simplicity, is summarized in figure 1. Formally, we predict:

*H3: More (less) extreme opinions are more likely to be shared whether passed through a small (large) virtual medium.*

*H4: More (less) extreme opinions and higher (lower) the topic is controversial more likely to be shared whether passed through a small (large) virtual medium.*

== Figure 1 ==



## Overview

In summary, we suggest that the nature of the topic addresses the extremeness in the comment and these effects are mediated by the typology of the virtual platforms used for sharing the own opinion. We believe virtual platforms mediate the degree of opinion extremeness shared. Comparison between two distinct platforms should encourage people in sharing more or less polarized opinion on controversial topics.

A field data and three experiments test our predictions, proving that (i) controversy in topic addresses for more extreme opinion (ii) users share with differences in extremeness degree in respect the platforms they will use for. The first study examines how the controversy on news articles increases the level of extremity in the forward comments expressed by the readers. Study 2, toward an on-line experiment, tested whether exist a relation between controversy of the topic and willingness to share with others and if the degree of extremeness plays as mediator. Study 3 and 4 investigate whether the extremeness in opinion is shared differently due to the virtual medium that people deal with.

## Study 1

Our first analysis aims to understand whether there is a relation between controversial degree in topic and the extremity in relative comments. Following Chen and Berger (2013 see study 1) we used data from online web-sites (The Economist). We investigate how level of controversy intrinsic into the articles evoke the level of extremeness in the comment posted by readers. The Economist has been chosen for several reasons. First, it covers different topics from world news and politics to business and sports. Second, the newspaper is one of the most popular with more than 1.6 million readers (Annual Report, 2014). Third, the structure of the newspaper avoids that preferential featuring influences how much attention article receives (Berger and Milkman, 2012), influencing the number of comments. Articles are placed in chronological way without giving greater importance at some news rather than others.

### *Methods*

Data were collected downloading news uploaded in the period March 7<sup>th</sup> 2015 – April 27<sup>th</sup> 2015 directly from the website. A total of 200 articles covered a wide range of topics (i.e., UK elections, the use of drone and immigration policy) and different disciplines (world politics, business, culture, science and technology, news and finance and economics) were collected. Furthermore, per each topic we collected the comments left by readers (1754 total comments;  $M=8.77$ ).

### *Results and Discussion*

After this, each article was codified following the definition of controversy used by Berger and Chen (2013, pp. 583) “the extent to which a topic allows for dispute, debate and differing opinions”. The level of controversy varies on a scale from 1 (“not at all controversial”) to 7 (“very controversial”). An example of low-controversy article is “*New York City Ballet: Something old, something new*” while an example of high-controversy article is “*Europe’s boat people: The EU’s policy on maritime refugees has gone disastrously wrong*”. Secondly, we coded how extreme each

comment was. An extreme opinion was one with which individuals strongly position themselves on one clear side of a topic. The coding was done assigning a value between 1 and 7 (1= “not extreme at all”; 7= “very extreme”). An example of very extreme comment is “*Europeans should invest in bait boats and sabotage them midway. Very strong deterrent, and inexpensive*” while a not extreme comment is, for example, “*I live in Canada and I don't know anyone who drinks Bud. Even in the small towns... it's usually Canadian or Blue*”. Two independent coders rated the articles and comments ( $r_{controversy} .55$ ;  $r_{extremeness} .52$ ). We decide to average the rates in order to form a controversy and extremeness index and checked for correlation. The linear regression proves that the two variables are positively dependent ( $\beta = .54$ ,  $SE = .033$   $t(16.5)$   $p .000$   $R^2 .58$ ). Given this relationship and analysis of the topics and the relative comments on the website, we can assert that high level of controversy increases the extremeness in the comments. H1 has been confirmed.

## **Study 2**

Study 2 was used to understand whether extremity in the position have direct effect in sharing. To test our hypothesis a web experiments was implemented. By manipulating controversy and measuring the level of extremeness regard the scenario shown and the degree of sharing with others the information, we can directly examine the effect of controversy on sharing through opinion extremeness.

### *Methods*

One hundred and twenty respondents were recruited from the Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated for their time ( $M_{age} = 35.6$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.1$ , 49.2% Male). The cover story asked participants to read a sign appeared outside a bakery store in US. Participants were randomly assigned to either the sign was about the refusal of the owner of the bakery in preparing cakes for homosexual marriages (high controversial) or the request for a wedding cakes at last thirty days before an event (low controversial). On the next screen, respondents were presented five items in

order to measure whether, in their opinion the scene that they saw allowing for different and polarized views (1= very unlikely; 7= very likely) and how controversial they perceive the sign (1=not controversial at all; 7= very controversial). Next, we asked whether they were against or in favour the bakery's initiative (1= completely against; 7= completely in favour), how extreme was their position about the sign (1=not extreme at all; 7=very extreme) and how they are likely to share their opinion (1= very unlikely; 7= very likely) and used as dependent variable. We, finally, asked for demographics information and thanks the participants.

### *Results and Discussion*

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, corresponding to two levels of manipulated topic controversy. In the "high controversy" condition (coded as 1), participants read a scenario about a hypothetical announcement appeared at a bakery store reporting that the store neglects to prepare cakes for homosexuals. In the "low controversy" condition (coded as 0), the announcement participants read reported that consumers had to book their wedding cake no less than thirty days before the wedding. Manipulation check showed that participants in the high controversy condition perceived the company's initiative as more controversial than those in the low controversial condition ( $M_{high} = 6.35$ ,  $SD = .92$  vs.  $M_{low} = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ,  $F(1, 119) = 196.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). To test people's tendency to share extreme opinions on controversial topics, we employed a mediation model using the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013; model 4). WOM likelihood served as dependent variable, level of controversy as independent variable and opinion extremeness as mediator. In a series of linear regressions, we explored the direct and indirect effect of level of controversy on WOM likelihood. Results first showed that level of controversy positively affects opinion extremeness ( $b=1.86$ ;  $t=5.62$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Next, we regressed WOM likelihood on level of controversy and opinion extremeness, finding that the effect of level of controversy on WOM likelihood was marginally significant ( $b=.67$ ,  $t=1.91$ ,  $p=.06$ ) and, more importantly, opinion extremeness had a positive and significant effect on WOM likelihood ( $b=.37$ ,



$t=4.36, p<.001$ ). The mediation effect of opinion extremeness was further proved by the significant indirect effect of level of controversy on WOM likelihood ( $b=.69, 95\% \text{ C.I.} = .31, 1.18$ ). Overall, therefore, the effect of topic controversy on WOM likelihood is mediated by opinion extremeness, which suggests that people are generally willing to share their extreme opinions about controversial topics with others. In the next two studies, we test whether the communication channel moderates the effect of opinion extremeness on WOM likelihood.

### **Study 3**

Study 3 had the main goal to understand whether the platform used in on-line context (social networks versus email) mediated the willingness to share the own opinion in respect a controversial product (slimming pills). In order to test our hypotheses (H3) a field experiment was established and data were gathered in a shopping mall through an electronic device. We asked respondent to rate their level of extremeness in opinion regarding the possibility to use slimming pills as a solution to lost weight. Extremeness was measured and used as dependent variable. The randomization of the platform (social network versus email) allowed us to understand whether exist a relation with the willingness to share.

#### *Methods*

One hundred and one respondents were recruited in a shopping mall in a Rome (Italy) and participated for free. First respondents were presented a cover that emphasize how looking slim and in good shape is an important state nowadays and rather than strict diets there are pills that allow people to lose weight quite quickly. Then an ad, apparently real and with a fake brand, was used. The ad illustrates the same individual before using slimming pills and after with clear differences in weight. The images were correlated with a message that claims: “With 7-day pills you can lose up to 50 pounds in three months. Try it!”. Respondents were asked to rate, how likely are people to have divergent opinions on slimming pills (1= very unlikely, 7= very likely), to what extent such product allows to conversations with different opinions (1= not at all, 7=very much) and how

controversial the product was perceived (1= not at all controversial, 7= extremely controversial). Then we asked to rate regardless they were against or in favor of using pills to lose weight how extreme and clear was their opinion on such product (1= not at all extreme, 7= very extreme). Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to a condition (platform: social network versus email) and told that might be directed to the home page of the most common social networks (Facebook and Twitter) or access to personal email account and share the ad. Next, we asked how likely they would share their opinion on slimming pills (1= very unlikely, 7=very likely). Finally, we debrief respondents and ask for demos.

### *Results and discussion*

Initially we checked whether consumers might have divergent opinion on slimming pills ( $M=5.3$   $SD=1.8$ ), to what extent such product might allow for different opinion ( $M=5.1$   $SD=1.4$ ) and how the consumption of slimming pills as a controversial product ( $M=5.4$ ,  $SD=1.6$ ). In general we can assert that the product and the ad was seen as controversial and consequently we employed a moderation analysis (Hayes, 2013). Extremity of the opinion acted as independent variable, willingness to share as dependent variable and platform served as moderator. We initially regressed willingness to share and extremity and then on their interaction. We discovered that willingness to share had significant effect on type of platform ( $b=3.6$ ;  $t=2.6$ ;  $p=.01$ ) and on the extremity of the opinion ( $b=.62$  ;  $t=3.1$ ;  $p=.003$ ). The interaction between the extremity of the opinion and the platform was significant ( $b=-.71$  ;  $t=-2.8$ ;  $p=.005$ ). As a further test, we examined conditional indirect effects to see whether what type of platform people select for sharing their extreme opinion. The platform (coded as 0 for email and 1 for social network) resulted significant for the sharing ( $F(1, 97)=8.0$   $p=.005$ ) and specifically, respondents prefer sharing their extreme opinion through email ( $b=.62$   $CI: .22, 1.01$ ) rather than social networks, where results were not significant ( $b=-.09$   $CI: -.39, .21$ ). The results, finally, support H3 and demonstrate that respondents prefer share extreme opinion via email rather than social networks. However, the results can be driven by the

fact that controversy is not included in the model and we decided to address the fourth study incorporating the perceived controversy of the topic (measured).

#### **Study 4**

Study 4 had the goal to provide a further test of our hypothesis by offering convergence on Experiment 3's findings. Moreover, Study 4 extended our investigation in three important ways. First, we included controversy of the topic as main independent variable. If consumers were more disposed to WOM sharing when the topic of the discussion is more controversial. Second, we examine the level of extremeness on the topic in order to examine the robustness of our initial assumptions. Third, we measure the impact of the platform in generating different level of sharing.

#### *Method*

One hundred and eighteen US residents ( $M_{age} = 36$ ; 45% Male) were recruited from the Amazon Mechanical Turk and paid for their time. The study account the same set up of study 3 with the introduction of three main factors: controversy and extremeness were measured and platform was randomly assigned. We asked respondent to estimate how likely people might have different and polarized views about the pills (1= very unlikely; 7= very likely) and level of extremeness in opinion regarding the possibility to use slimming pills as a solution to lost weight regardless they were against or in favour (1= not extreme at all, 7= very extreme). Next, respondents were randomly assigned to a different platform (social network versus email) with the possibility to share their opinion immediately. Right after, we asked how likely they were to share their opinion on slimming pills (1=very unlikely, 7= very likely). The randomization of the platform allowed us to understand whether exist a relation with the willingness to share, the degree of extremeness and the controversy of the topic. The willingness to share was used as dependent variable, extremeness and platforms as moderators and the controversy of the topic as independent variable.

## *Results and Discussion*

As in study 3 we checked for the controversy of the subject used in the experiment ( $M = 6$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ). As a test of our process model, we conduct a moderated mediation analysis, using bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2013 model 3). Results of the analysis revealed that the interactions are statistically significant. As in study 2 the interaction between the controversy of the topic and the extremeness of the opinion endure ( $b = .65$   $t = 2.33$   $p = .02$ ). Consistently with study 3 the interaction between extremeness of the opinion and the platform is positive ( $b = 2.5$   $t = 2.53$   $p = .01$ ). More important, three-way interaction revealed a main effect among the controversy of the topic, the extremeness of the opinion and the platforms ( $b = -.36$   $t = -2.42$   $p = .02$ ). Follow-up analyses of conditional effects of the moderators prove how higher the extremeness on controversial topic higher the willingness to share via email ( $b = -.28$   $t = 2.1$   $p = .03$  and the 95% of confidence of interval (CI) excluded zero CI: .015, .55). The result, finally, support our H4. We obtain the evidence that people take to the extreme their opinion on topics that are contentious and share with an intimate set of people.

## **General Discussion**

Users and consumers are longer exposed to controversial topics and controversial conversations on the Internet. Until limited analyses on WOM and the content of conversations these studies shed light on how messages are spread out among users. Studies prove how topics of the conversation address the type of comments that users may leave and the platforms change their behaviour. Specifically, the studies reveal that the higher is the controversy in the topic the higher is the extremeness in the comments. In contrast, the platforms that users might use for sharing the information on the Internet have a strong impact. Users weight their opinion and address accurately the information received. The willingness to share present a direct indicator of the extent to which opinion are spread out and our project focus in this relation.

## **Conclusions**

Although, previous literature have proved the fact that users are inclined to discuss controversial conversation in computer-mediating communication more easily rather than face-to-face setting (see Ho and McLeod 2008) it is also true that they share their opinion differently and weight the means in respect the extremity of their position. Our analyses provide support for the hypotheses regarding the extremeness of the own opinion on topics that are perceived controversial and the influence that the specific medium (email versus social networks) have in the willingness to share with others. Particularly, respondents are prone to express their opinion on controversial topics and controversial ads. However, behaviors are susceptible of virtual settings. We found that virtual interfaces affect the transmission of the own stance on polemic conversations due to social-psychological factors such as assuming a more conservative attitude and sharing in large platform or assuming a progressive role and sharing with circle of known people.

Before moving on managerial implications of our findings, one methodological issue needs to be addressed. To our knowledge and with few exceptions, our study is the first that use controversial ads as main setting, extremeness as content (in all studies the extremeness in measured) of messages in WOM field and test the effect of two distinct on-line platforms. Moreover, in our studies we attempted to induce respondents to believe and react to real stimuli and real reactions to issues that take places in real life and that can be disseminate virtually (e.g. realistic ads and sign that are common to found in the net). Our studies reveal interesting findings on virtual contextual factors on extremeness. Since previous studies have tried to understand how people behave in regard to controversial conversations (e.g. Chen and Berger, 2013) and how people undertake positions (e.g. Morrison and Weeler 2009 and He and Bond 2015) we found that people share differently their extreme opinion on controversial ads. Congruent with previous studies, we prove that controversy increase the level of WOM with differences in sharing. Specifically, we found that respondents who display a high level of extremity in their opinion tend to share with a small group of people using emails instead showing their impression on social networks. This highlight the importance of the Internet in electronic WOM's transmission that in one hand might

works as facilitator, and in the other hand as restrains. The Internet, thus, should not be seen as a place where people speak out freely and without barriers but also a place where human behavior can be inhibited. One plausible explanation for the effect of platform in communication of extreme opinion may be that users want to protect their image or want to address specific concern to precise group of people. On the opposite, people on social network prefer contribute with content that are general and that may found approval by the majority of the people connected. From a managerial point of view, our research suggests that communications plans can be differ whether they are planning either a social media or a newsletter campaigns. Messages can be formulated differently and contains sharp communications in emails-newsletter and generic on social media communications. According to our research, addressing and ponder communications due to the selected platforms may trigger high level of sharing by the receiver to third parties that are not directly involved in the campaign. Moreover, the share process between peers (excluding the company) increase the level of penetration rate and attention due to the fact that messages are addressed to people that are truly interested in the content of the information (Berger, 2014).

Future research could build on these findings and investigating what are the main psychological drivers that engage people in the sharing process in the net. Continuing investigating the content of the message such as argument quality could be useful in understanding sharing-mechanism. Furthermore, further research could as explore others independent variables related to contextual factors such as expertise of the audience who the message is concentrated and the social status of the sender. To understand the “extremeness” as WOM’s characteristic is necessary. Investigating whether the valence of extreme comments may evolve differently in term of sharing can be useful such as whether corroborated a specific stance may mediate the diffusion. Moreover, it can be interesting to understand if using controversial topics give the possibility to turn “lurckers” (those who read comments but do not post themselves) into active posters. As regard platforms, future studies may try to understand whether face-to-face conversations mediated by virtual devices (e.g. Skype) affect the extremeness of the opinion as well as instant chats. In respect to “opinion”, future

research may look at whether there are differences in sharing between opinion formation and opinion expression.

To conclude, our research contributes to the growing of literature in WOM by being one of the first studies to examine the role of extremeness in opinion on controversial ads mediated by virtual platforms. The framework proposed help in conceptualize the phenomenon and the interplay of the variables and leave the room for further investigations.

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## **What people gossip (more) easily?**

Paper 3

## **Introduction**

Not all information travel among people with the same velocity and not all information is shared equally. When talking, people deal with several topics, tell their own experiences and express their judgments around episodes and events that might belong to others. These conversations are not limited to merely report the facts other people experienced. Rather, they are frequently spiced with personal opinions and commentary about the event and the person in question (Wert & Salovey, 2004) and prove how human beings show a high interest and attraction in telling stories that do not belong to their own sphere (Mar, 2004).

Data on types of conversations reported that 60% of adult conversations are about absent person (Wert & Salovey, 2004; Levin & Arluke, 1985) and people spend between 65% of their day-to-day conversations talking about others (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012). Although in many cultures and religions it is seen as a type of conversations that violate moral norms (Yerkovich, 1977) and frowned as reproachable behaviour (Emler, Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994), people still gossip. Although, gossip is defined as an evaluative talk about a third person who is absent during the conversation and with the consequences to generate and spread both negative and positive gossip (Foster, 2004), naïvely, is perceived as a form of mundane conversation with negative stereotypes and with the main scope of entertaining others (Rysman, 1977). Gossip, moreover, requires the interaction of more than one party, indeed it involves a triad composed by a gossipper (sender of the message; hereafter the sender), a social object (the target that form the topic of discussion; hereafter the target) and the receiver(s) (who hear the gossip; hereafter the receiver) (Peter & Kashima, 2015).

Albeit stereotypical views and false myths surround this type of conversation, gossip can be clearly connected to a general form of communicational exchange. Previous studies have investigated the main characteristics of the gossip such as the conditions under which it develops (Rosnow, 2001; Fine & Rosnow, 1978) its main antecedents (e.g. Rosnow & Kimmel 2000; Fayard & Weeks, 2008), cultural differences in gossiping (e.g. Clegg & van Iterson, 2009; Eder & Enke,



1991), gossiping in specific contexts (e.g. Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993) and gossip as a way to strengthen informal relationships within organizations (e.g. Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2012; Dunbar, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2005; Michelson & Mouly, 2004). Despite the widespread interest in this topic, previous researches have neglected to understand whether differences in content of the gossip affect the likelihood of the sender to share the gossip with others. Understanding the willingness to share is helpful for comprehending how and what types of information people select and pass through (Berger, 2014). Indeed, the content of the message is a relevant dimension in social communication and has gained attention in studies inherent, for example, word-of-mouth (Schellekens, Verlegh & Smidts, 2010; Moore, 2012). These studies have proved how differences in the formulation of the message may provoke differences in reactions of individuals demonstrating how structure content is an essential part in the diffusion of information (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Unkelbach, Fiedler, Bayer, Stegmuller & Danner, 2008 ). Moreover, since gossip is a form of conversation that at least involves three individuals, it would be important to explore how the parties involved in the communication process may have a role in affecting the likelihood of sharing the gossip. Gossiping about a person that belongs to the sender's social group instead of other groups might in reality impact on the receiver's willingness to share the gossip. Finally, existing research has mostly overlooked the role of the receiver in controlling the veracity of the gossip.

Based on this, our research aims at addressing the following research questions: *“do differences in the content of the gossip (positive versus negative) affect the sender's willingness to share with others?”*; *“does the target of the gossip (in-group versus out-group target) affect the sender's willingness to share with other people?”*; *“what is the role of the receiver in the ability to control the veracity of the gossip?”*.

This article makes a contribution mainly in the field of information sharing and communication. First, we shed light on the content of the gossip and the people involved in the conversation. Whereas studies of gossip have mostly focused on the contextual factors, we explore

both the features of the gossip's content and the role played by the parties involved in affecting the sender's willingness to share the gossip. In the next section, we briefly define the gossip and the sharing effects highlighting how valence may affect this relation. Further, we prove how actors involved in the gossip affect the willingness to share. Then, we present three experiments and the main results. Finally, we present relevant implications both theoretical and managerial.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **The definition of Gossip**

Gossip is an important form of social communication that serves to link people (Dunbar & Bickerton, 1996). Sociological and social-psychological perspective stress that it helps maintain and establish social relationships (Smith, Lucas & Latkin, 1999; Dunbar, 2004) as well as increase the senders' status, allowing to share information about both friends and enemies (Smith, 2014). Gossip is traditionally conceived of as a negative communication, an idle talk (Fine & Rosnow, 1978) or a small talk with a purpose (Rooks, Tazelaar, and Snijders, 2011). Most explanations would agree that gossip is justified by the exchange of information about absent third parties (Foster, 2004) and in a social context (Kurland & Pelled, 2000) where all actors involved in the exchange are known. In this regard, Kurland and Pelled (2000, p. 429) defined gossip as "informal and evaluative talk in organization, usually among no more than a few individuals, about a member of that organization who is not present". Gossips are characterized by a list of common topics such as "personal qualities and idiosyncrasies, behavioural surprises and inconsistencies, character flaws, discrepancies between actual behaviour and moral claims, bad manners, socially unaccepted modes of behaviour, shortcomings, improprieties, omissions, presumptions, blame mistakes, misfortunes, and failures" (Bergmann, 1993, p.15).

Individuals perceive gossip, as a communicational mean for gathering information about people with whom are either closely or distant connected and for satisfying personal goals (Foster, 2004). According to Kurland and Pelled (2000), gossip improves social status, power and prestige

within groups through the exclusiveness of the information that the groups' members possess, in so doing, it implicitly shows their social position in a given network (Ellwardt, Labianca & Wittek, 2011). Gossip is also an important tool to learn social information about others by eluding personal and direct contact (Di Fonzo & Bordia, 2007). For example, learning from others that a target of the gossip behaves into a particular range of negative conduct allows the individual to avoid this person. Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann & Milinski (2007) have proved that the gossip about targets' behaviour is more influential than direct observations, allowing people to recognize usefulness of the gossip (Smith, 2014). Considering the gossip as a communicational exchange of information among peers, further studies have tried to understand what people share. Mostly, gossip has a function of impression management and amuses the people involved although furthers aspects. Subtle dynamics are, also, embedded in this conversation and associated with particular form of interaction such as the speakers' tone and the combination with non-verbal communication and gesture.

### **The Target of the Gossip**

The target of the gossip is, without any doubt, the focal node during the conversation. Conversing about a person that is perceived close or distant can be affected by different cues and produce different reactions (Liviatan, Trope & Liberman, 2008). Although, the relationship between interpersonal similarity and social closeness has been widely recognized in the social psychology, the processing of information in a particular form of communication such as the gossip has not been fully investigated. People gossip about behaviours and attitudes that are perceived not in line with the own perspective. Hence, social comparisons are the basis of the gossip activity and comparing the various groups help people to establish a social identity (Wert & Salovey, 2004). This need gives the tendency for people to distinguish between their in-group and out-group (Tajfel, 1979). People naturally form perceived distribution of the characteristics of category members and this play an important role in cognitive processes and correspond to behaviour (Linville, Fisher & Salovey, 1989). In- and Out- group relations are influenced by a complex interactions of social

forces, social beliefs, group dynamics, individual cognitive and motivational processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) on what people transmit (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri & Semin, 1989). According to social psychologist people categorize themselves on many aspect of life and members of group form impressions of the group as a whole and then generalize (Tajfel, 1981). Perception of differences between in- and out- group may, for instance, enhance the credibility of the individual's opinions and create a common sense of biasness in terms of variability of agreement and with the consequences of creating stereotyped assumptions (Mullen and Hu, 1989). For instance, people tend to perceive out-group member as being more homogeneous in their characteristics than in-group (Linville, Fisher and Salovey, 1989). Previous literature has emphasized as the perception of a common identity mediated on the positive effects directed to in-group (Hehman, Gaertner & Dovidio, 2011). In general, groups develop norms that prescribe how individuals should behave (Campbell, 1975). But even with group norms it is inevitable that there are group members that will behave in discord with the norms (Beersa & Van Kleef, 2012). Mainly, literature on social identity has proved how the perception of differences among group membership provokes different behaviours and attitudes. From a pure communicational perspective, individuals are more likely to interact with in-group members than with out-group members (Quattrone & Jones, 1980). According to Carpenter and Ostrom (1985) people codify and encode information differently about in-group and out-group. People show more spontaneous positive affective responses to in-group than out-group members, think more deeply and favourably about in-group members, and respond more cooperatively to in-group members (Hehman et al., 2010). However, when people face specific types of communications such as gossip differences among group perceptions disappear. Speech is one of the opportunities that make individuals to behave in discordance with the group (Dunbar, 2004) and gossip is a clear example (Enquist & Leimer, 1993). The literature has tried to understand gossip within groups and argued that gossip serves as a mechanism to keep the behaviour of individuals in check by pressuring them to adhere to social norms (Beersa & Van Kleef, 2012; Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen & Kraus, 2008). According to social identity theory and

self-group categorization people should gossip differently in regard the third person whether belong or not to the reference group adapting the valence and the content of the message and the willingness to share the piece of the information. Liviatan, Trope and Liberman (2006) examined the perception of social distance under the effect of perceived similarity. Following their findings the less similar someone is to oneself, the more socially distant they feel.

Although, people demonstrated an innate capacity to categorise and classify group of individual they may have social relationship and exchange of opinions with whom is outflow and inflow in their conversations. The distinction between in-group and out-group people is not exclusive. People in fact may have relations with who is part of their social group for instance. And in conversations this may happen more frequently. When people gossip, the target of the conversation can be a person that belong to the own social group but even a person known that is not perceived to be part of the own group. For example, in organization people may feel part of a group with their close colleagues who work in the same department and feel as distinct group with colleagues who belong to another area. Knowing people is the main pre-requisite for being in the position to gossip. People, in fact, gossip about person that they know very well but also about person that they barely know.

Although, many gossip structures are based on “us versus them” people gossip about in-group as well (Wert & Salovey, 2004). People talk with each other through comparison process in order to obtain the most accurate information. Information about group members is in demand (e.g. workplace group) and it is based on the tendency of people to focus on information that they know others possess (Wert & Salovey, 2004; Wittenbaum, Strasser & Merry, 1996). Gossiping about in-group members is more risky activity and it allows generating group polarization and carry for more extreme opinion (Wert & Salovey, 2004). Intragroup and intergroup gossip differs in the effect that may provoke and in the social reasons that boost people to talk.

### **The content of the gossip**

Content of the gossip plays an extremely important role in order to understand what people share more. Noon and Del-bridge (1993 p. 25) define gossip as “value-laden information” and leaving the room for defining and investigate different types of gossip. Conversely unvalenced conversations are essentially a broadcasting of news. News about who is buying a new car, getting a new job, the launch of a new product or service and who moved in a new flat do not imply evaluative and significant meanings. Nevertheless, focusing on information that is not evaluative would limit the scope of investigating gossip. Despite gossip conversations may seem idle (Rosnow, 2001) a deep understanding of gossip it is needed: looking the details of its components and that are supportive of the conversations is necessary (Foster, 2004). Researchers have proved more interest in negative gossips rather than positive (e.g. Smith, 2014) albeit Rosnow (2001) account, as well as, for positive gossip. Grosser, Lopez-Kidwell and Labianca (2010) argue that positive and negative gossip is different and that each form travels through differently. Common knowledge and popular beliefs about gossip create bias assumptions leading people to think that negative news is more likely to be transmitted (Godes, Mayzlin, Chen, Das, Dellarocas & Pfeiffer, 2005). Mettetal (1982) observed, for instance, as the increasing of age among people play an important aspect in spreading gossip and that adults are prone to spread out more positive than negative gossip respect to young people. Berger and Milkan (2012) in study regard social transmission argue that positive information is more likely to be diffused due to reflects positively the sender (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Individuals tend to share content for self-presentation scope, or to convey the own identity (Wojnicki & Godes, 2008). In this research we argue that negative (positive) gossip is the transmission of valenced news about a target without evaluative support and with equal degree of diagnostic in the meaning: “Alex has been fired (promoted)” is an example of valenced gossip whereas “Alex is in the office” is an illustration of unvalenced information. According to Dubois, Rucker and Tormala (2011, p. 1021) people’s beliefs take the form of valenced or unvalenced “assessment of an object’s properties”. The valence of the message has impact on what people share, although, the content of the message may contain others communicational features increasing

the level of degree of the comment (Berger & Milkman, 2012) and impact differently on the sharing process (Berger, 2014).

Actually, one of the main scopes of verbal communication is convincing and persuading others (Petty, Wheeler & Tormala, 2003) and people may do it in a number of ways such as emphasize piece of information. According to Berger (2014) people share things that are polarized in content and arousing in nature. Gottman and Mettetal (1986) account that adult people spread elusive and complex form of gossip and the possibility that form of gossips are manipulated is higher (Smith, 2014). To illustrate, gossip is a prosocial act that can be used for gathering and distributing reputational information (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar & Keltner, 2012) and can take the form of malicious, false information but also non-malicious (McAndrew, 2014). These kinds of information may be used for enhancing the status of the sender within the group and under certain points (McAndrew et al., 2007). If too explicit, for instance, it can lead to perception of low status of the gossiper (Farley, 2011). Giardini (2012) affirms that gossipers who directly and falsely report a piece of information may be exposed to punishment whether discovered, although, receivers of the gossip proved cognitive limits in recognize false gossip.

Senders of the message may devise for communicational strategy and attribute the information to other source (“I heard that..” or “They say..”) and avoid punishment (Smith, 2014 p. 312). Hess and Hagen (2006) argue that the sender can intentionally manipulate gossip in pejorative sense. On the opposite, Sommerfeld, Krambeck and Milinski (2008) find out that people mitigate positively the gossip in regard the receiver. People, moreover, intend gossip as a malicious when they perceive an attack against the object with the purpose to denigrate (Sherman and Cohen, 2006) and non-malicious when the sender of the message might gain advantage (Mc Andrew, 2014). Gossip has also positive nuances and assumes a form that it is opposite to malicious form (Mc Andrew 2014). Non-malicious gossip is very common in conversations and people prove high level of interest toward these information (Mc Andrew, 2014). The communicational sequence is generally introduced by linguistic formulation (“did I tell you”) and the focus of the gossip is in the fact rather

than the person (Guendouzi, 2001). The semantic analysis lead by Guendouzi (2001) reported as non-malicious gossip is characterised by neutral pronoun rather than personal to comment the fact.

Thus:

*H1: The sender of the gossip is more (less) likely to share positive (negative) regardless the target belongs to the sender's social group.*

*H2: The sender of the gossip is more (less) likely to share non-malicious (malicious) gossip in respect to in-group (out-group) members;*

### **The role of the receiver in the gossip transmission**

Conversing implies that the actors involved have mutual trust in each other and interlocutors possess diverse portion of information. Methods of verifying the information is a process that is connected to an extra activity that goes beyond the conversation *momentum*. Validation of the information is achieved by referring to sources with credible reputation. However, in conversation the sender of the message might decide to transfer a specific piece of information for several reasons. In some cases senders of the message share the information because believe that is valuable and interesting for the receiver. In other cases the information might be shared because the sender knows that the receiver has an expertise in a topic or because wants to discuss things that may signal identity (Berger, 2014). Moreover, one of the main reasons for encouraging conversations is to discuss unique things that may talkers seem distinctive (Berger, 2014). Furthermore, sender of the message shares information when they are certain about a story (Dubois et al., 2011). Senders, in this case, assume specific behaviours in order to avoid undesirable characteristic such as hesitation in transmission and become more persuasive in communication (Camerer, Bhatt & Hsu, 2007). In other circumstances, senders might share because know that the receiver possess either less information or less capacity to verify the accuracy of information. According to Grosser et al., (2010) gossipers will engage in the transmission based on the dyadic relationship tie with the receiver. Due to gossiping is a risky activity (Rosnow, 2001) it requires that the sender should act in a sort of “safe area” and with the capacity to control external factors.



Granhang and Hartwig (2008) have argued that the process of avoiding specific piece of information and adapting what communicate is related to a self-regulatory process that humans use to pursue goals. According to Luke, Dawson, Hartwig and Granhang (2014) sender of the information adapt what convey in relation to what believe the receivers may possess. We would, however, expect that sender of the message would share gossip with whom as less objective capacity to verify whether the information is true or not. In other words, knowing that the receiver will be able to privately investigate or to be in position to possess a major portion of information of the gossip will limit the willingness to share of the information. Formally:

*H3: The sender of the gossip is more (less) likely to gossip with whom has less (more) capacity to verify the truthfulness of the gossip's content.*

## **The current research**

We examine how contents' characteristics of the gossip drive transmission. In particular, we not only examine whether positive or negative gossip is differently shared but go beyond to examine how different degree of gossip activate and induce transmission. The main aim of our research is to discredit the false idea that negative and malicious gossip is more likely to be shared. Furthermore, our goal is to prove that target of the gossip and receivers' position affect on what gossipers share. We study gossip transmission in two ways. Through a series of web-experiments we investigate the valence of gossip in relation to the social closeness of the target of the gossip. Second, we conduct a follow-up study putting in relation the social closeness of the target and degree of the gossip and we tried to understand the effect of receivers' capacity in ascertain the information. By directly manipulating specific forms of valence and measuring the willingness to share, we test our hypothesis that positive gossip is more likely to be shared.

## **Study 1**

Experiment 1 tested our hypothesis of differential valence of the gossip versus the social closeness of the target of the gossip. We manipulated the valence of the gossip. Moreover, we show

participants a short story where the target of the gossip was a person that belongs to (or not) their social circle. Then, we asked them to rate their willingness to share. We predicted that compared with negative, positive gossip would lead people to share more. We prove, also, that the target of the gossip influences the sharing.

### *Methods*

Respondents were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk paid for their time and randomly assigned in one condition. Since the subject of the experiment was inherent a scene set up in a working places only respondents who declare to possess a job position at that time were taken in the analysis. Ninety-five participants (58.9% female) with a current job position were considered suitable for the analysis. The cover story asked participants to imagine to receive news about a wallet stolen with a good amount of money in their workplace and that the person who stolen (negative) (found and give back) the wallet was either a co-worker personally known (in-group) or a person who occasionally works in the company (out-group). Next respondents were asked to rate how they would share the content of the news with others (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) and used as dependent variable. We, finally, control for the formulation of the messages and whether perceived correctly (1= very negative; 7= very positive), asked for demographics information and thanks the participants.

### *Results and discussions*

After controlling that respondents perceived gossips used for the manipulation as positive/negative ( $M_{\text{negative}} = 2.6$   $SD_{\text{negative}} = 1.5$ ;  $M_{\text{positive}} = 5.9$   $SD_{\text{positive}} = 1.2$   $F = 10.6$  (1, 94)  $p = .002$ ) we employed analysis of variance.

A 2 (valence of the gossip: positive versus negative) x 2 (group: in-group versus out-group) revealed the main effect of gossip valence and social group closeness such that people were more likely to share. Test of homogeneity (Levene test) proved differences in the variance among

groups ( $F= 1.283 (3, 91) p = .285$ ) while 2- way ANOVA proved a significant level of interaction among the independent variables ( $F= 4.14 (1, 12) p = .045$ ).

The results indicate that content of the gossip is more likely to spread out easily the more positive it is. The data proves that the gossip is also valence-laden content, regardless of the membership, is more likely to spread out positive gossip. On the opposite, the negative gossip is shared mainly when the target is perceived as external to the own social group. The nature of our data set is particularly useful because it enables us to disentangle preferential transmission of negative gossip. These experiments results are consistent with the notion that social transmission is related to the valence of the message (Berger and Milkman, 2012), however gossips are characterised by different degree of valence and for this reason we decide to run a new experiment.

## **Study 2**

It is possible that the valence of the gossip it is not enough for comprehending the phenomena at all. Because gossip is often viewed as a message that contains additional cues, people might be motivated to transmit differently. To address this possibility, in Experiment 2 we modify the manipulation of the message through gossip that contain malicious (non-malicious) information and we kept constant the social perspective of the target of the gossip (in-group versus out-group).

### *Methods*

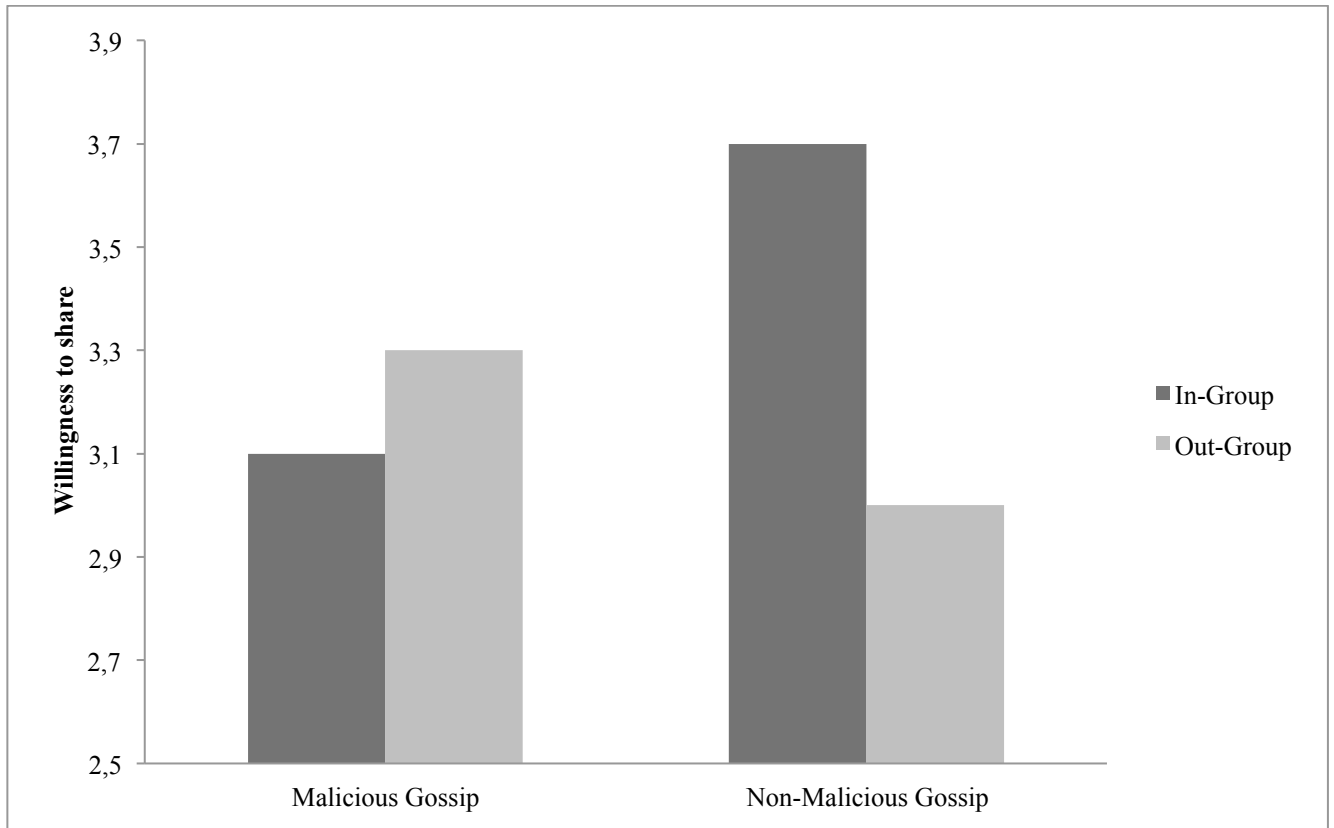
One hundred and nine respondents ( $M_{\text{age}}= 34.3$ ; 59.6% female) were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and paid for their time. Participants took part in a 2 (degree of valence: malicious versus non-malicious) x 2 (target group: in-group versus out-group) between-subjects design. They were asked that a colleague during a coffee break whisper that a third colleague known very well (barely known) was promoted as top executive manager. In the next screen, respondents saw a vignette where two co-workers talked about the promotion of the target of the gossip and in the malicious scenario was justified as the fact that the object flatter all the time with the gossip and in non-malicious condition as a result of high commitment at work. Next, we asked for behavioural

intention to transmit the gossip to a person (1= “very unlikely”, 7= “very likely”) in degree of closeness (partner/friends/acquaintance/stranger). Then we check for the manipulations and asked for demographics.

### *Results and discussions*

Initially, we controlled whether the degree of valence was perceived indeed ( $M_{\text{malicious}} = 2.9$ ;  $M_{\text{non-malicious}} = 4.0$ ). The behavioural intention to transmit the gossip to others was used as dependent variable. The variables were internally related ( $\alpha = .70$ ), and these were averaged to form a willingness to share score. Then a 2 way-ANOVA was performed. The results proved that there is difference in variance among groups (Levene test:  $F = .83$  (3, 105)  $p = .47$ ) and ANOVA reveals the interactions among the variables is marginally significant ( $F = 3.4$  (1, 109)  $p = .06$ ). Furthermore, in order to understand whether there are differences between the degree of valence in relation with the target of the gossip and the willingness to share we check for planned contrasts. Consistent with study 1, the analysis repost as there is a significant effect of the degree of the gossip on the willingness to share and this is moderated by the belonging to the target of the gossip. Non-malicious gossips are spread out more when the target is both in-group and out-group ( $F = 3.8$  (1, 132)  $p = .05$ ) in respect to malicious gossips that shown non-significant results ( $F = 1.1$  (1,132)  $p = .29$ ).

==Figure 1==  
EXPERIMENT 2: WILLINGNESS TO SHARE IN RELATION TO DEGREE OF GOSSIP  
AND TARGET OF THE GOSSIP



Asking respondents to share either malicious or non-malicious gossip and focus on the target of the gossip led the sender of the message to convey differently. When the sender of the message was in the condition of in-group was more willing to share non-malicious gossip. On the opposite when the sender of the gossip was in the out-group conditions was willingness to share malicious gossip. This experiment shows how the degrees of valence have effect on what people are more inclined to share. This finding suggests that people calibrate their gossip both in terms of degree and in regard the perceived membership with the target of the gossip. This may hide further psychological driver that are investigated in the next experiment.

### Study 3

People share gossip differently and this may caused by an individual perception about the receiver. Due to gossip is perceived as an exclusive way to prove that the sender gets original and

secretive information this might provoke differences in sharing. The inability to verify the information by the receiver of the gossip may encourage the sender to gossip easily. In order to corroborate this possibility, in Experiment 3 we keep constant the degree of the gossip and control whether the capacity of verify the information moderate the willingness to share.

### *Methods*

Two hundred and sixteen respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} 34.8$ , 59.3% female) were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensate for their time. Likewise in Experiment 2 the main manipulation regard the degree of the gossip (malicious versus non-malicious) and concern a scene that may happen during working hours. That is why, also in this case we consider only respondents who declare to have a job position. Participants were randomly assigned in one of the conditions. We used the same vignette as in Experiment 2 and then we asked how likely they would discuss the news with a given person (partner/friends/acquaintance/stranger) (1= “very unlikely”, 7 = very likely”). Next we asked to rate how likely they would share the news with who was able to verify the information and assessed on a seven-point scale (1= “very unlikely”, 7 = very likely”). Finally, we check for the manipulations and ask for demographics.

### *Results and discussions*

To test the model, we employed the Process SPSS macro by Hayes (2013; model 4) in which the participants’ willingness to share was used as dependent variable whereas degree of valence was the independent variable, using bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples. As mediation moderator we used whether the receiver was able to verify the information. Results of the analysis revealed that the interactions are statistically significant. We, initially, computed behavioural intention to discuss in an index (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .67$ ). Then we run regression and the obtained results showed a significant main effect ( $F = 7.9$  (1, 124)  $p = .005$ ). Results proved also a direct positive effect on willingness to share ( $b = .29$ ,  $t = 2.21$   $p = .02$ ; 95% C.I. .03, .55). Overall,

these findings confirm that when the sender knows that the receiver is in the position to control the information share less.

## **General Discussion**

Gossip is relatively unfamiliar field in communication and sharing process. A limited number of methodological approaches have been implemented on the topic and for this reason this research tries to highlight on what type of gossip people share through experiments design (Foster, 2004).

The review of the literature has shown that gossip is a heterogeneous phenomenon that cover several functions and that can be expressed differently and on the basis of socio-psychological aspects. Furthermore, it is a communicational process that involve at least three subjects and that prove the presence of hidden factors. The contribution, however, is to provide a wide and tri-dimensional perspective of the phenomena. We investigate separately on the main dimensions of the gossip we the scope to understand whether differences in the valence of gossip contribute in the willingness to share. We also advanced the idea that gossip may differ mainly in the valence and test for the degree of valence taking in account a less visible features of the gossip such as the maliciousness of the content. By combining several aspects of gossip and with a series of controlled on-line experiments, we prove characteristics of gossip content and shedding light on what drives social transmission. While common belief insinuates that people tend to share negative gossip than positive gossip, our results indicate that positive is actually more shared. Furthermore, our research support that gossip is more complex than valence alone. Gossip evokes also for degree of valence and this activate a process of diffusion in relation to the target of the gossip with direct consequences on what people share. Experimentally manipulating degree of valence (malicious gossip versus non-malicious gossip) in relation to the social belonging of the target (in-group versus out-group) demonstrates differences in passing information. Initially, we proved as gossip is a form of valence-laden content and the polarization of it influences the willingness to share. Our first experiment underlines how positive gossips are shared easily respect to negative ones. This suggests that social transmission of gossip is in some way related to the value exchange or self-

presentation (see Berger, 2014). Second, following the notion that gossip is an evaluative form of talk, through manipulation, and in relation to the target of the gossip we proved how it is shared differently. When the target of the gossip is “close” to the interlocutors, senders tend to share non-malicious gossip whereas when is “far” it is more likely to share malicious gossip. Consistent with the notion that people share easily positive gossip we advanced, also, that it is influenced by the membership of the target. These effects are consistent with the idea that the content of the shared message is based on the perception of the others and it is not always based on the self. For this reason that our final experiment investigates the relation between the sender and the receiver during the transmission process. Our findings illustrate how senders calibrate the information on the heuristic suspect that the receiver is able or not in verifying the information. Less likely the receiver is able to authenticate the gossip more likely the sender will gossip. This suggests that the sender adapts its verbal communication to its perception of the evidence. Alert of the receiver’s ability in verifying the gossip can decrease the likelihood of sharing.

### *Theoretical Implications*

From a theoretical point of view this study link gossip with communication diffusion. Prior research have defined gossip (Rosnow, 2001) and examined what are the main effects on social context (e.g. Foster, 2004). Although, the definition of the concept have proved a wide perspective of the issue also understanding what are the main features from a narrow perspective is necessary. Comprehending what are the social-psychological processes that boost social transmission in gossip is extremely important. Based on these assumptions, our research suggest that people gossip differently in respect the content and the social actors involved in the communication. Our findings, suggest the gossip transmission is more than an impression management strategy and gossipers weight and plan what and how to share. Nevertheless the willingness to pass gossip is based on benevolence of the information and the avoidance of negative one. Consistent with our results and on the contrary of social belief, people share more positive gossip. This effect is limited, instead, when the gossip assume a more valenced declination and the in relation to the target of the gossip.



Thus, the involvement of the social actors in gossip conversation with the target of the gossip is fundamental and even in this circumstance gossipers are aware of the fact that sharing negative gossip might have direct effect on the self. We find that gossipers tend to spread out easily maliciously gossip about target that do not belong directly to their strict social network. It is also worthwhile to consider that social transmission is in the relation of what gossiper might think about the receiver and its capacity in verifying the information received.

#### *Directions for further research and conclusions*

Future work on gossip transmission might examine this particular form of conversation focusing on psychological factors that boost the transmission for instance. According to Berger (2014) people share information for reinforcing group membership and one's place in the social hierarchy. What people gossip may delineate specific aspects and as a signal-identity process that has not been proved in literature. Further work may also investigate when the gossip contains emotional valenced information and this might have effect on both the sender willingness to share and on receiver reactions. Yet, focusing on the content of the gossip further aspects could be related the investigation of the polarization of the degree of the valence and whether polarized gossip are used to convince the receiver (Berger, 2014). Supplementary, research might examine how sharing gossip is moderated by situational factors. When, for example, the general mood in-group of co-workers is low, people may tend to gossip more and focus on targets that are socially far. On the opposite when to mood is high people may gossip less and focus on target that are socially close.

In conclusion, gossip is a communication process that involve several actors and frequently. Although, there are researches that have tried to understand what are the effects on gossip few research have looked at the characteristics of the gossip. Obviously, this research only scratched the surface of the content in gossip but hopefully to show the main intrinsic faces of it.

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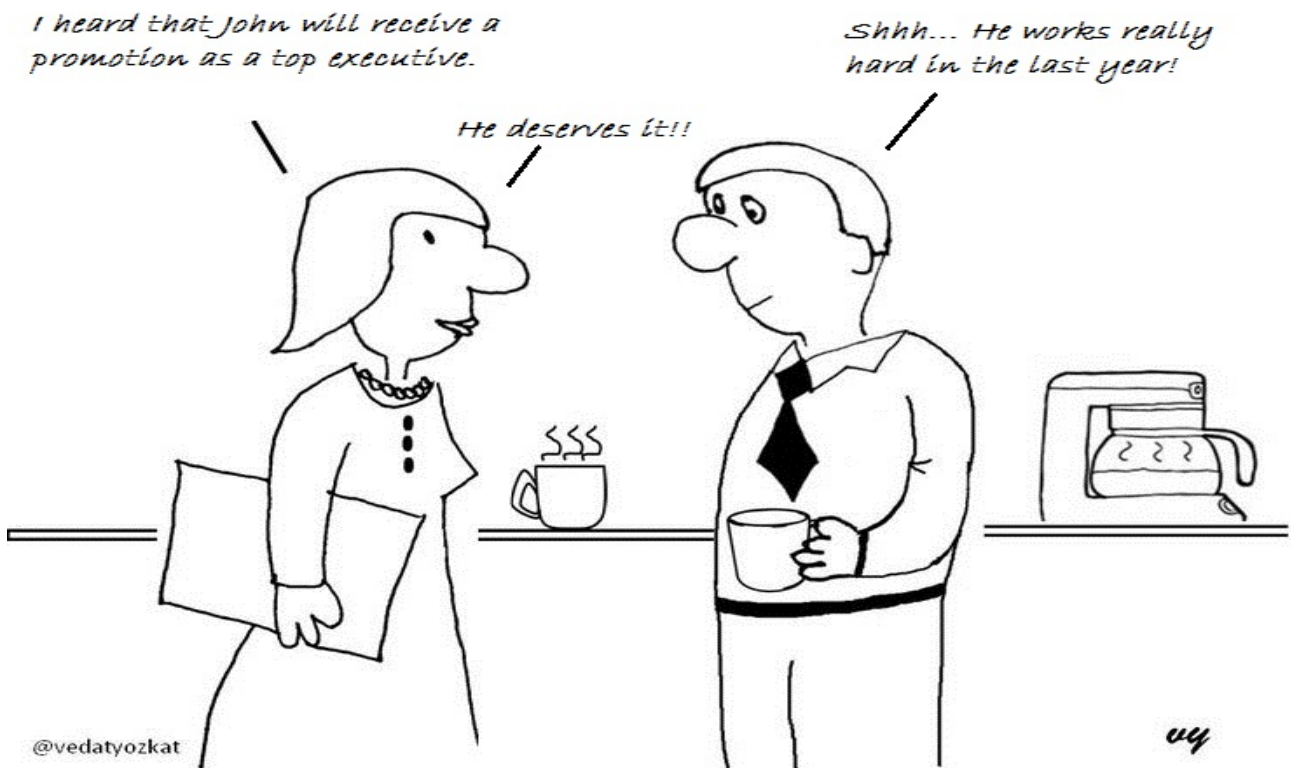


## Appendix 1

### Vignette 1: Malicious Gossip



### Vignette 2: Non-Malicious Gossip



## **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.

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