Research Review

Word of mouth and interpersonal communication: A review and directions for future research

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Abstract

People often share opinions and information with their social ties, and word of mouth has an important impact on consumer behavior. But what drives interpersonal communication and why do people talk about certain things rather than others? This article argues that word of mouth is goal driven and serves five key functions (i.e., impression management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion). Importantly, I suggest these motivations are predominantly self- (rather than other) serving and drive what people talk about even without their awareness. Further, these drivers make predictions about the types of news and information people are most likely to discuss. This article reviews the five proposed functions and well as how contextual factors (i.e., audience and communication channel) may moderate which functions play a larger role. Taken together, the paper provides insight into the psychological factors that shape word of mouth and outlines additional questions that deserve further study.

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Introduction

Consumers often share opinions, news, and information with others. They chitchat about vacations, complain about movies, or rave about restaurants. They gossip about co-workers, discuss important political issues, and debate the latest sports rumors. Technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and texting have only increased the speed and ease of communication. Thousands of blogs, millions of tweets, and billions of emails are written each day.

Such interpersonal communication can be described as word of mouth, or "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers," (Westbrook, 1987, 261). Word of mouth includes product related discussion (e.g., the Nikes were really comfortable) and sharing product related content (e.g., Nike ads on YouTube). It includes direct recommendations (e.g., you'd love this restaurant) and mere mentions (e.g., we went to this restaurant). It includes literal word of mouth, or face-to-face discussions, as well as "word of mouse," or online mentions and reviews.

Word of mouth has a huge impact on consumer behavior. Social talk generates over 3.3 billion brand impressions each day (Keller & Libai, 2009) and shapes everything from the movies consumers watch to the websites they visit (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chintagunta, Gopinath, & Venkataraman,

2010; Godes & Mayzlin, 2009; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Interpersonal communication increases product awareness and persuades people to try things (Van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2009). A study by Bughin, Doogan, and Vetvik (2010) suggest that "word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20 to 50% of all purchasing decisions…and… generates more than twice the sales of paid advertising" (p. 8).

But while it is clear that word of mouth is frequent, and important, less is known about the intervening behavioral processes. Indeed, some have called word of mouth "The world's most effective, yet least understood marketing strategy" (Misner, 1999). What drives people to share word of mouth? Why do some stories, rumors, or brands get talked about more than others? And how does who people are talking to (e.g., friends vs. acquaintances) and the channel they are communicating through (e.g., face-to face or online) impact what gets discussed?

This article addresses these, and related questions, as it integrates various research perspectives to shed light on the behavioral drivers of word of mouth. I suggest that word of mouth can be understood in terms of five key functions that it serves for the word of mouth transmitter: impression-management, emotion regulation, information acquisition, social bonding, and persuasion. Further, I argue that these functions tend to be self- (rather than other) serving and drive what people share even outside their awareness. As I will discuss later, even acts of sharing attributed to altruism may actually be driven by self-oriented motives. In addition, I suggest that aspects of the audience and communication channel moderate which functions play a relatively larger role at any given point in time. Finally, the article closes with a discussion of fruitful areas for further research.

As with any paper that attempts to review a large and diverse literature, choices must be made. Word of mouth strongly impacts consumer behavior, but a full review of its impact is beyond the scope of this paper (see Godes et al., 2005 for a recent review). Similarly, a great deal of research has examined how social networks shape the spread of information and influence (see Van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2009; Watts, 2004 for reviews), but this paper focuses more on micro-level (i.e., individual) processes of transmission. Finally, when considering audience and channel characteristics, this paper focuses on how they impact what people talk about and share rather than their selection. Future work is needed to understand how often people select who to share with and which channel to share through, and why people may select one option versus another (for a deeper discussion, see Other questions for future research section).

Why people talk and what they talk about

Early research on interpersonal communication examined what topics receive more discussion. In 1922, for example, Henry Moore walked up and down the streets of New York, eavesdropping on conversations. He found that men talked a lot about money and business, while women, at least in the 1920s, talked a lot about clothes. Landis and Burtt (1924) found that the prevalence of different topics varied with the situation: food was talked about in restaurants while clothes were talked about near store windows. More recent research found that people

often talk about personal relationships and experiences (Dunbar, Marriott, & Duncan, 1997).

Knowing what topics people talk about is interesting, but it says little about the drivers of discussion, or why people talk about some products and ideas more than others. Fortunately, however, pockets of research in psychology, sociology, communications, and consumer behavior have begun to consider this issue. For a popular perspective, see Berger (2013).

Building on this research, I suggest that word of mouth serves five key functions: Impression Management, Emotion Regulation, Information Acquisition, Social Bonding, and Persuading Others (Fig. 1). Below, I review support for each of these functions, noting both the underlying psychology that drives sharing (i.e., why people share), as well the types of things that particular function leads people to share (i.e., what people talk about). Note that a given instance of word of mouth may be driven by multiple motives at the same time. Someone may share information about a new technology gadget both to look smart (impression management) and to connect with someone else (social bonding).

Impression management

One reason consumers share word of mouth is to shape the impressions others have of them (and they have of themselves). Social interactions can be seen as a performance (Goffman, 1959), where people present themselves in particular ways to achieve desired impressions. Consumers often make choices to communicate desired identities and avoid communicating undesired ones (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Levy, 1959). One reason job applicants dress up for interviews, for example, is because they want to signal that they are professional. Similarly, sharing word of mouth may present who people are or want to be.

Similarly, interpersonal communication facilitates impression management in three ways: (1) self-enhancement, (2) identity-signaling, and (3) filling conversational space. I review each individually and then discuss how they, together, affect what people share.

(1) Self-enhancement

One way word of mouth facilitates impression management is through self-enhancement.

The tendency to self-enhance is a fundamental human motivation (Fiske, 2001). People like to be perceived positively and present themselves in ways that garner such impressions. Just like the car they drive, what people talk about impacts how others see them (and how they see themselves). Consequently, people are more likely to share things that make them look good rather than bad (Chung & Darke, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998) and look special, show connoisseurship, or garner status (Dichter, 1966; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993; Rimé, 2009). Some suggest that status seeking is the main reason people post online reviews (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007) and people are more likely to

Function	Components		Effects On Sharing
Impression-Management	Self-Enhancement	⇨	+ Entertaining content + Useful information + Self-Concept relevant things + High status things + Unique and special things + Common ground + Accessible things + When aroused Shapes content valence
	Identity-Signaling		
	Filling Conversational Space		
Emotion Regulation	Generating Social Support	⇨	+ Emotional Content + Arousing Content Shapes content valence
	Venting		
	Facilitating Sense Making		
	Reducing Dissonance		
	Taking Vengeance		
	Encouraging Rehearsal		
Information Acquisition	Seeking Advice	⇨	+ Sharing when decisions are important or uncertain +Sharing when alternative info is unavailable or untrustworthy
	Resolving Problems		
Social Bonding	Reinforcing Shared Views	⇨	+ Common Ground Content + Emotional Content
	Reducing Loneliness and Social Exclusion		
Persuasion	Persuading Others	⇨	+ Polarized Content + Arousing Content

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Fig. 1. The five functions of word of mouth (for the transmitter).

talk about products that convey an impression of being "with-it" (Chung & Darke, 2006).[1]

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[1] Impression management should lead people to talk about things that make them look good, but it is worth noting that this may be driven more by avoiding bad impressions than pursuing good ones. Self-presentation can be protective (e.g., avoiding social disapproval, Richins, 1983; Sedikides, 1993) or acquisitive (e.g., seeking social approval, Brown, Collins, & Schmidt, 1988). Protective self-presentation, however, occurs more frequently (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Hoorens, 1995/1996; Ogilvie, 1987). Research on self-serving biases, for example, finds that people are more likely to underestimate their bad traits than they are to overestimate good ones (Hoorens, 1995/1996). Concerns about the audience making negative inferences may reduce acquisitive self-presentation in word of mouth. While people may want to aggrandize their accomplishments, bragging too much may have the opposite effect, leading others to make negative inferences about the self. Consequently, people often avoid direct self-praise (Speer, 2012) and engage in "humblebragging" (Wittels, 2012) sharing their accomplishments while being self-deprecating in the process.

(2) Identity-signaling

Beyond generally looking good, people also share things to communicate specific identities, both to themselves and others.

If someone always talks about new restaurants, others may infer that they are a foodie. If someone always knows the latest sports news, others may assume they are a sports-nut. Thus people may talk about particular topics or ideas not only to self-enhance but also to signal that they have certain characteristics, knowledge, or expertise in a particular domain (Chung & Darke, 2006; Packard & Wooten, 2013).

Research on individual differences in the propensity to share word of mouth is consistent with this perspective. Market mavens, or those with general marketplace knowledge or expertise, report being more likely to share information with others in a variety of product categories (Feick & Price, 1987). Other work suggests

that opinion leaders also talk more (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In both cases, people may share to communicate their knowledge. While cars, clothes, and other publicly visible goods are often used to signal identity (Berger & Heath, 2007), knowledge is usually private and much more difficult to display. Consequently, experts or individuals that have (or desire) expertise in a given area may be particularly interested in talking about that knowledge to display it to others.

(3) Filling conversational space

Finally, interpersonal communication should also facilitate impression management through small talk.

Beyond communication content, people also infer things about others based on conversational style. Rate of speech or avoidance of pauses between conversational turns both communicate things about the speaker (Tannen, 2005). Failures to live up to expectations on these different dimensions can lead others to make negative attributions about a person (Loewenstein, Morris, Chakravarti, Thompson, & Kopelman, 2005). Transitions from one party speaking to the other, for example, usually occur with no long gap or silence in between. Consequently, taking too long to respond may lead others to make negative inferences (Clark, 1996; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Tannen, 2000). That one is not a great conversationalists or doesn't have much to say.

As a result, people may engage in small talk, sharing almost anything to fill conversational space. People often bump into a colleague in the hall or run into an acquaintance on the street. In these, and other similar situations, people may not have a goal to say the most interesting thing possible, but they do not want to stand there in silence.

How impression management drives what people share

Taken together, these underlying components (i.e., self-enhancement, identity-signaling, and filling conversational space) provide some suggestion about how impression management shapes what people talk about and share. In particular, I suggest that impression management should encourage people to share (a) entertaining, (b) useful, (c) self-concept relevant, (d) status related, (e) unique, (f) common ground, and (g) accessible things while also (h) leading incidental arousal to boost sharing and (i) affecting the valence of the content shared.

(a) Entertaining things

Impression management should lead more entertaining (i.e., interesting, surprising, funny, or extreme) things to be discussed because sharing entertaining things makes the sharer seem interesting, funny, and in-the-know.

Consistent with this suggestion, a variety of research finds that interesting, surprising, novel, and funny things are more likely to be shared. Interesting products (e.g., night vision goggles) get more immediate (Berger & Schwartz, 2011) and online (Berger & Iyengar, 2013) word of mouth than mundane products (e.g., toothpaste) and more interesting or surprising New York Times articles are more likely to make the paper's Most Emailed List (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Consumers

report being more likely to share word of mouth about original products (Moldovan, Goldenberg, & Chattopadhyay 2011) and interesting and surprising urban legends (Heath, Bell, & Sternberg, 2001). Moderate controversy boosts word of mouth because it makes discussion more interesting (Chen & Berger, 2013).

Research on extremity is also consistent with the notion that impression management leads entertaining things to be shared. Compared to normative stories (e.g., John caught a 10-pound fish), people are more likely to pass on extreme stories (e.g., John caught a 200-pound fish; Heath & DeVoe, 2005). Impression management also leads people to distort the stories they tell. Around 60% of stories are distorted in one way or another (Marsh & Tversky, 2004), and entertainment goals lead people to exaggerate and make stories more extreme (Burrus, Kruger, & Jurgens, 2006; also see Heath, 1996).

(b) Useful information

Impression management should also lead useful information (e.g., advice or discounts) to be shared because it makes the sharer seem smart and helpful.

Consistent with this suggestion, researchers have long theorized that people share rumors, folktales, and urban legends not only for entertainment, but "because they seem to convey true, worthwhile and relevant information" (Brunvand, 1981, p. 11; also see Allport & Postman, 1947; Rosnow, 1980; Shibutani, 1966). Rumors about a flu shot shortage, for example, provide information that it would be good to get one early this year to ensure protection.

Empirical evidence also suggests that useful information is more likely to be passed on. Useful stories (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Heath et al., 2001) and marketing messages (Chiu, Chiou, Fang, Lin, & Wu, 2007) are more likely to be shared. Restaurant reviews, for instance, are particularly likely to make the New York Times most emailed list. Usefulness may also explain why higher quality brands are more likely to be discussed (Lovett, Peres, & Shachar, 2013).

(c) Self-concept relevant things

Impression management should lead people to discuss identity-relevant information. Certain products (e.g., cars, clothes, and hairstyles) are more symbolic of identity than others (e.g., laundry detergent) and these products are often used are markers or signals of identity (Belk, 1988; Berger & Heath, 2007; Shavitt, 1990). Identity-relevance also varies between individual consumers. Some people care a lot about politics and see knowledge in that domain as a signal of who they are, while others could care less. These differences in self-concept relevance should impact word of mouth.

Consistent with this suggestion, people share more word of mouth for symbolic products than utilitarian ones (Chung & Darke, 2006). Similarly, the greater the gap between actual and ideal knowledge, the more likely people are to talk about a domain (Packard & Wooten, 2013). This indicates that people talk not only to signal who they are, but who they would like to be.

(d) High status goods

Impression management should encourage high status goods to be talked about. Talking about owning a Rolex should make people seem wealthy and high status. Indeed there is some evidence that premium brands are discussed more (Lovett et al., 2013). Information can also connote status, and people may share knowledge to show they are in-the-know (Ritson & Elliott, 1999).

(e) Unique things

Impression management should also encourage unique or special products to be discussed. Talking about one's limited edition sneakers or other distinctive products and experiences, makes people seem more unique or differentiated from others.

People with high needs for uniqueness, however, may talk in ways that discourage product adoption. Talking about unique products makes people seem unique, but it can also facilitate others adoptio, which reduces the sharers' uniqueness. Consequently, high need for uniqueness individuals are less willing to generate positive word of mouth for publicly consumed products they own (Cheema & Kaikati, 2010). Similarly, early adopters with high needs for uniqueness may "share and scare," sharing favorable word of mouth but mentioning product complexity (Moldovan, Steinhart, & Ofen, 2012).

(f) Common ground

Impression management should also encourage people to talk about things they have in common with others (Clark, 1996; Grice, 1989; Stalnaker, 1978; see the Social bonding section for a more in-depth discussion). Covering common ground should lead the conversation to go more smoothly, lead conversation partners to perceive more interpersonal similarity, and lead the sharer to look better as a result.

(g) Emotional valence

Impression management should also influence the valence of what people share, or whether they pass on positive or negative word of mouth.

Some research suggests that positive word of mouth should be more likely to generate desired impressions. Talking about positive experiences supports one's expertise (i.e., the restaurant I choose was great, Wojnicki & Godes, 2011) and people may just want to avoid associating themselves with negative things. People prefer interacting with positive others (Bell, 1978; Folkes & Sears, 1977; Kamins, Folkes, & Perner, 1997), so consumers may share positive things to avoid seeming like a negative person or a "Debbie Downer." Consistent with this notion, people prefer sharing positive rather than negative news (Berger & Milkman, 2012; see Tesser & Rosen, 1975 for a review) in part because it makes them look better. Self enhancement may also explain why there are more positive than negative reviews (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; East, Hammond, & Wright, 2007).

Other research, however, suggests that negative word of mouth can facilitate desired impressions. Reviewers were seen as more intelligent, competent, and expert when they wrote negative as opposed to positive reviews (Amabile, 1983). Similarly, concerns about public evaluation led people to express more negative ratings in some situations (Schlosser, 2005).

One important moderator may be whether the item or experience being discussed signals something about the speaker. When someone chooses a restaurant, or shares online content, the valence of that thing reflects on them. If it is good (bad) that makes them look good (bad). Consequently, people may spread positive word of mouth to show they make good choices. When someone has less to do with choosing something, however, then whether that thing is good or bad signals less about them. Consequently, people may be more willing to share negative word of mouth to show they have discriminating taste.

Consistent with this perspective, research finds that whether people are talking about themselves versus others moderates word of mouth valence (Kamins, Folkes, & Perner, 1997; De Angelis, Bonezzi, Peluso, Rucker, & Costabile, in press). People generate positive word of mouth when talking about their own experiences (because it makes them look good), but transmit negative word of mouth when talking about others' experiences (because it makes them look relatively better).

(h) Incidental arousal

Impression management may also lead incidental arousal to increase sharing. Incidental arousal (e.g., running in place) can spill over to increase the sharing of even unrelated content (Berger, 2011). Similarly, early work on rumor transmission suggests that rumors flourish in times of conflict, crisis, and catastrophe (e.g., natural disasters), due to the generalized anxiety (i.e., arousal) those situations induce (Koenig, 1985, see Heath et al., 2001). One reason may be self-enhancement. If people misattribute their general feeling of arousal to a story or rumor they are considering sharing, they may come to infer that this piece of content is more interesting, entertaining, or engaging. Impression management motivations should then increase transmission.

(i) Accessibility

As noted earlier, impression management should encourage small talk, and, as a result, lead more accessible products to be discussed.

Consistent with this perspective, products that are cued or triggered more frequently by the environment get more word of mouth (Berger & Schwartz, 2011). Eighty percent of word of mouth about coffee, for example, was driven by related cues (e.g., seeing an ad or talking about food, Belk, 1971). Similarly, word of mouth referrals often occur when related topics are being discussed (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Accessibility also helps explains why more advertised products receive more word of mouth (Onishi & Manchanda, 2012). More frequent advertising should make the product more top-of-mind, and thus more likely to be shared.

Accessibility may also explain why publicly visible products (e.g., shirts rather than socks) get more word of mouth (Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Lovett et al., 2013). Increased visibility should increase the chance that a product or idea is accessible, which in turn, should make it more likely to be discussed when people are looking for something to talk about.

Taken together, impression management should encourage people to talk about (1) entertaining content, (2) useful information, (3) self-concept relevant things, (4) things that

convey status, (5) unique and special things, (6) common ground, and (7) accessible or publicly visible things while also (8) leading incidental arousal to boost sharing and (9) affecting the valence of the content shared.

Emotion regulation

A second function of word of mouth is to help consumers regulate their emotions. Emotion regulation refers to the ways people manage which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998, 2008). External factors (e.g., a terrible flight) impact the emotions people experience, but emotion regulation describes the processes through which consumers manage their emotions. If the flight is terribly delayed, for example, people may try to reduce their anger by reminding themselves that it will be over soon.

While prevailing emotion regulation approaches (e.g., Park & Folkman, 1997) consider the self in isolation, other researchers have noted that communal aspects aid coping (Dunahoo, Hobfoll, Monnier, Hulsizer, & Johnson, 1998). These approaches argue that the social sharing of emotion (see Rimé, 2009 for a review) provides an important channel for sharers to regulate their emotion. If the delayed flight is sitting on the tarmac, for example, people don't just try to reappraise the situation, they may also call their friend to complain and commiserate.

Sharing with others should facilitate emotion regulation in a number of ways including (1) *generating social support*, (2) *venting*, (3) *facilitating sense making*, (4) *reducing dissonance*, (5) *taking vengeance*, and (6) *encouraging rehearsal*. I review each component individually and then discuss how they affect what people share.

(1) Generating social support

One way interpersonal communication should facilitate emotion regulation is by generating help and social support.

Particularly when people have had a negative experience, talking to others can provide comfort and consolation (Rimé, 2007, 2009). This, in turn, may help buffer negative feelings that arise from negative emotional experiences. Indeed, classic work by Schachter (1959) found that people who were anxious about receiving an electric shock preferred to wait with others. While many explanations have been suggested for this effect, one possibility is that others provide emotional support. More recently, research finds that sharing with others after a negative emotional experience boosted well-being because it increased perceived social support (Buechel & Berger, 2012).

(2) Venting

Interpersonal communication should also foster emotion regulation is by allowing people to vent (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram et al., 1998; though see Rimé, 2009).

Flights get canceled and customer services representatives can be rude. Talking with others can help people deal with these negative consumption experiences and provide catharsis that helps reduce the emotional impact (Pennebaker, 1999;

Pennebaker, Zech, & Rimé, 2001). Compared to keeping it bottled inside, expressing anger may help people feel better.

Consistent with this theorizing, 90% of people believe that sharing an emotional experience will be relieving (Zech, 1999). In interpersonal interactions, the desire for catharsis is one reason people share negative personal experiences (Alicke et al., 1992; Berkowitz, 1970). In the consumer context, work suggests that angry consumers (Wetzer, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2007) or dissatisfied customers (Anderson, 1998) share word of mouth to vent.

(3) Sense making

Interpersonal communication should also facilitate emotion regulation through helping people attain a better sense of what is happening and why (Rimé, 2009).

Emotional stimuli often elicit ambiguous sensations. Someone who is fired from their job may feel negatively, but may be uncertain about whether they feel angry, sad, or both. Alternatively, people may feel a particular emotion (e.g., anxiety) but not be sure why. Talking with others can help people understand what they feel and why (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, & Boca, 1991; Rosnow, 1980). Putting emotion into words requires clear and thoughtful articulation, which can foster cognitive reappraisal and sense making of the distressing experience (i.e. cognitive emotion regulation; Gross & John, 2003). This insight can lead to recovery from the negative experience and increased long-term well-being (Frattaroli, 1996; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Pennebaker, 1999; Pennebaker et al., 2001; Smyth, 1998).

(4) Reducing dissonance

Sharing should also aid emotion regulation by allowing people to reduce dissonance.

In extreme situations where experiences challenge people's way of seeing the world, sharing may help people cope (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). On a daily basis, however, consumers are more likely to share with others to confirm their own judgment (Dichter, 1966). Even after they have made a decision, consumers are often uncertain about whether they made the right choice, so talking to others can help bolster the decision and reduce feelings of doubt (Engel et al., 1993; Rosnow, 1980).

(5) Taking vengeance

Though not as common as some of the other functions, sharing should also allow consumers to regulate their emotions through punishing a company or individual for a negative consumption experience (Curren & Folkes, 1987; Folkes, 1984; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Richins, 1983; Sundaram et al., 1998; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). While similar to venting in some ways (i.e., it may provide catharsis), taking vengeance is slightly different in that the consumer's goal is not just to feel better but to punish the company.

Consistent with this suggestion, angry, frustrated, or dissatisfied consumers are more likely to share negative word of mouth to take revenge (Anderson, 1998; Wetzer et al., 2007).

(6) Encouraging rehearsal

Finally, sharing should also foster emotion regulation by allowing people to rehearse and relive positive emotional experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Rimé, 2009).

Re-accessing past emotional experiences should revive related feelings, and as a result, people may talk about positive experiences because it elicits pleasurable feelings. Dichter (1966), for example, talks about word of mouth as "verbal consumption" allowing people to "relive the pleasure the speaker has obtained," (p. 149). Sharing word of mouth about a delicious 5-course French dinner or amazing Brazilian vacation may encourage rumination and savoring of these positive events. Indeed, Langston (1994) found that communicating positive events to others enhanced positive affect, even above and beyond the affect associated with the experiences itself (also see Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004).

How emotion regulation drives what people share

Taken together, these various underlying components provide some suggestion about how emotion regulation shapes what people share. In particular, I suggest that emotion regulation should (a) drive people to share more emotional content, (b) influence the valence of the content shared, and (c) lead people to share more emotionally arousing content.

(a) Emotionality

Emotion regulation should lead more emotional things to be shared. Psychological research on the social sharing of emotion (see Rimé, 2009 for a review) argues that people share up to 90% of their emotional experiences with others (Mesquita, 1993; Vergara, 1993; Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1992; also see Walker, Skowronski, Gibbons, Vogl, & Ritchie, 2009).

Experimental work is consistent with this perspective. Movies are more likely to be discussed, and news articles are more likely to be shared, if they are higher in emotional intensity (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rime, 2000). People are more willing to forward emails with higher hedonic value (Chiu et al., 2007), share more emotional social anecdotes (Peters, Kashima, & Clark, 2009), and retell urban legends that evoked more disgust, interest, surprise, joy, or contempt (Heath et al., 2001). Highly satisfied and highly dissatisfied customers are also more likely to share word of mouth (Anderson, 1998; also see Richins, 1983).

Some emotions, however, may decrease sharing. There is some suggestion that shame and guilt decrease transmission (Finkenauer & Rime, 1998), potentially because sharing such things makes people look bad. Extremely strong emotions (e.g., high levels of fear) may also stunt sharing as they generate a state of shock that decreases the chance people take any action.

(b) Valence

Beyond emotion in general, emotion regulation should also impact the valence, or positivity and negativity, of what people share.

Emotion regulation tends to focus on the management of negative emotions. Further, when considering interpersonal communication, it's clear that people often share negative emotions with others to make themselves feel better. Indeed, many of the functions of social sharing reviewed above skew towards reducing negative emotion (e.g., anxiety or feelings of dissonance). Thus one could argue that emotion regulation should lead people to share negative emotional experiences as a way to improve their mood.

Other aspects of emotion regulation, however, may lead people to share positive things. As discussed in the section on rehearsal, consumers share positive emotions to re-consume or extend the positive affect. When something good happens, we want to tell others. An exciting date, big promotion, or delicious dinners are all wonderful experiences, and they are more enjoyable when shared.

Consequently, whether emotional regulation encourages positive or negative things to be shared may depend on the particular component being served.

Further, while social sharing is a fruitful way to deal with negative emotions, other concerns may inhibit sharing negativity. As discussed in the impression management section, people may avoid sharing negative stories or information to avoid coming off as a negative person. Posting negative content can lead people to be liked less (Forest & Wood, 2012). Sharing negative things can also be uncomfortable, and discomfort has been shown to decrease willingness to share (Chen & Berger, 2013). Thus even though sharing negative emotions can be beneficial, impression management concerns may deter people from doing so.[2]

(c) Emotional arousal

Emotion regulation should also lead more emotionally arousing things to be shared. In addition to valence, another key way that emotions differ is their level of physiological arousal, or activation (i.e., increased heart rate, Heilman, 1997). Anxiety and sadness are both negative emotional states, for example, but they differ in the level of arousal they induce (Christie & Friedman, 2004).

On the negative side, compared to low arousal emotions (e.g., sadness), experiencing high arousal emotions (e.g., anger or anxiety) should increase the need to vent. On the positive side, compared to low arousal emotions (e.g., contentment), feeling high arousal emotions (e.g., excitement or amusement) should increase desires for rehearsal. Dichter (1966), suggests

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[2] Note that culture plays an important role in emotion expression. Research on ideal affect, for example, shows that while European Americans value being excited, East Asians value being calm (see Tsai, 2007 for a review). These differences also impact communication. When talking about their relationships, European American couples express high arousal positive emotions more than Chinese Americans (Tsai, Levenson, & McCoy, 2006). Thus which emotions people feel comfortable expressing, and which require regulation, may vary cross-culturally.

that sharing word of mouth allows people to "dispose of the excitement aroused by use of the product," (p. 149; also see Sundaram et al., 1998). High arousal emotions are also associated with greater levels of activation, which should encourage sharing more generally (Berger, 2011).

A number of research findings are consistent with the notion that arousal increases social transmission. News articles that evoke high arousal emotions, like awe, anger, or anxiety, are more likely to be highly shared, while articles that evoke low arousal emotion, like sadness, are less likely to be highly shared, and arousal mediates these effects (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Super Bowl ads that elicit more emotional engagement (i.e., biometric responses like skin conductance) receive more buzz (Siefert et al., 2009). Further, the fact that surprising, novel, or outrageousness content is more likely to be shared may also be consistent with the notion that arousal boosts transmission.

Taken together, emotion regulation may (1) drive people to share more emotional content, (2) influence the valence of the content they share, and (3) lead people to share more emotionally arousing content.

Information acquisition

A third function of word of mouth is to acquire information. Consumers are often uncertain about what to buy or how to solve a particular problem, so they turn to others for assistance. They use word of mouth to actively seek information. To obtain the information they need, they talk about that product or idea themselves (i.e., bring it up).

Sharing should enable information acquisition via (1) *seeking advice* and (2) *resolving problems*. I review each individually and then discuss how they affect what gets shared.

(1) Seeking advice

One way word of mouth seems to facilitate information acquisition is by helping consumers seek advice (Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Rimé, 2009).

People are often uncertain about what they should do in a particular situation. Should I adopt this new technology or wait a couple months? Which movie should I see, the romantic comedy or the action flick? People use word of mouth to get assistance: For suggestions about what to do, recommendations, or even just an outside perspective (Fitzsimons & Lehmann, 2004; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012; Zhao & Xie, 2011).

Research on gossip is consistent with this perspective, arguing that one of gossip's key functions is helping people learn about the world around them (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Rather than trying to acquire information through trial and error, or direct observation of others (which may be difficult), gossip serves as a form of observational learning, allowing people to acquire relevant information quickly and easily. Hearing a story about how Verizon has terrible customer service, for example, may help other consumers avoid that brand. Related research (Dunbar, 1998; Dunbar et al., 1997)

suggests that interpersonal communication allows people to acquire relevant information about others' behavior.

(2) Resolving problems

The other way word of mouth seems to facilitate information acquisition is through helping people resolve problems (Sundaram et al., 1998).

Choices may not work out as planned, preferences may change, and products may break. By talking to others, consumers can get advice on how to deal with these issues and fix the problem. Telling a friend about faulty shoes, for example, may help people learn about a company's 30-day no questions asked return policy.

Consistent with this suggestion, people who reported using word of mouth to help solving problems commented more on online opinion platforms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Similarly, people often use interpersonal communication to solve health problems (Knapp & Daly, 2002).

How information acquisition drives what people talk about

The underlying components (i.e., seeking advice and resolving problems) provide some suggestion about how information acquisition shapes what people talk about and share. In particular, I suggest that information acquisition should drive people to talk about (a) risky, important, complex, or uncertainty-ridden decisions and (b) decisions where (trustworthy) information is lacking.

(a) Risky, important, complex, or uncertainty-ridden decisions
Consumers should be particularly likely to use word of mouth to acquire information when decisions are risky, important, complex, or ridden with uncertainty. If someone is considering a new type of open heart surgery, they will likely try to talk to others who have undergone similar procedures to make them feel better about the decision. Consistent with this suggestion, there is some evidence that brands that involve more risk are discussed more (Lovett et al., 2013). Talking to others can reduce risk, simplify complexity, and increase consumers' confidence that they are doing the right thing (Engel et al., 1993; Gatignon & Robertson, 1986; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004).

(b) Lack of (trustworthy) information
People should also use word of mouth to acquire information when other types of information are lacking. If little information exists about a particular travel destination, for example, consumers will be more likely to talk to others to find out more. If company generated content (e.g., website or advertisements) is all the information that exists about a particular product, consumers should use word of mouth to acquire additional information.

In sum, information acquisition motives may lead people to talk more when (1) decisions are risky, important, complex, or uncertainty-ridden or (2) alternative sources of information are unavailable or not trustworthy.

Social bonding

A fourth function of word of mouth is to connect with others (Rimé, 2009). Dunbar's social bonding hypothesis (1998, 2004) argues that language evolved as a cheap method of social grooming. Rather than actually having to pick nits out of each other's hair, language allows humans to quickly and easily reinforce bonds and keep tabs on a large set of social others.

Whether or not language originally evolved for this reason, it is clear that talking and sharing with others serves a bonding function. People have a fundamental desire for social relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and interpersonal communication helps fill that need (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). It connects us with others and reinforces that we care about them and what is going on in their lives (Wetzer et al., 2007). Interpersonal communication can act like "social glue" bringing people together and strengthening social ties.[3] Indeed, one reason people engage in brand communities is to connect with like-minded' others (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Along these lines, researchers use the term phatic communication (Malinowski, 1923) to describe conversations whose function is to "create social rapport rather than to convey information," (Rettie, 2009, p. 1135). Some work suggests that 59% of text messages are phatic in nature, conveying simply that the sender is thinking of the recipient (Rettie, 2009).

Sharing seems to facilitate social bonding through (1) *reinforcing shared views* and (2) *reducing loneliness and social exclusion*. I review each component individually and then discuss how they affect what people share.

(1) Reinforce shared views

One way sharing should deepen social bonds is through reinforcing shared views, group membership, and one's place in the social hierarchy.

What people buy or consume acts as a communication system, delineating group memberships and allowing people to connect with similar others (Berger & Heath, 2007; DiMaggio, 1987; Douglas & Isherwood, 1978). Word of mouth serves a similar function. Talking to a friend about a band you both like, or a political issue you feel similarly about, should reinforce that you have things in common. Talking about popular advertisements, for example, gives teenagers common ground and a type of social currency that allows them to fit in with their peers and show they are in-the-know (Ritson & Elliott, 1999).

(2) Reducing loneliness and social exclusion

Sharing should also deepen social bonds through reducing feelings of loneliness or social exclusion.

Loneliness is an undesirable feeling of social isolation driven by how one feels about their frequency of interaction (Wang, Zhu, & Shiv, 2012). Social exclusion refers to when people feel ostracized or rejected. Loneliness and social exclusion should increase people's desire for social connection (Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), which should, in turn, lead people to reach out and communicate with others. Sharing should decrease interpersonal distance and help people feel closer to others.

While it is not the same as loneliness, boredom may have similar effects. Boredom is a state of lack of interest or things to do. While it is not a social deficit per se, it may lead people to reach out to others for entertainment or just something to fill time.

How social bonding drives what people share

The desire to reinforce shared views, reduce loneliness, and decrease social exclusion provides some suggestion about how social bonding motives shape what people share. In particular, I suggest that social bonding should drive people to talk about things that are (a) common ground or (b) more emotional in nature.

(a) Common ground

Social bonding should drive people to talk about things they have in common with others (Clark, 1996; Stalnaker, 1978). People often talk about the weather or what they are doing this weekend not because these subjects are the most interesting, but because they are common ground (Grice, 1989), or topics that everyone can relate to and comment on.

People prefer talking about common ground topics because it makes them feel more socially connected (Clark & Kashima, 2007). Talking about such communal topics increases the chance that others can weigh in, increasing the bond between conversation partners. Consistent with this suggestion, more familiar baseball players get more mentions in online discussion groups (even controlling for actual performance; Fast, Heath, & Wu, 2009).

(b) Emotionality

Social bonding motives should also encourage people to share more emotional items. Sharing an emotional story or narrative increases the chance that others will feel similarly. Telling a funny story, for example, makes both the sharer and recipient laugh. This emotional similarity increases group cohesiveness (Barsade & Gibson, 2007) and helps people synchronize attention, cognition, and behavior to coordinate action.

Note that social bonding may be both a driver and a consequence of emotion sharing. While some research finds that emotion sharing bonds people together (Peters & Kashima, 2007), other work suggests that feeling high arousal emotions may increase social bonding needs (Chan & Berger, 2013). Thus experiencing high arousal emotions may increase the desire to connect with others, which, in turn, may lead people to communicate to satisfy that need.

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[3] While social bonding is related to the social support motive discussed in the emotion regulation section, it is different in some fundamental ways. Social support refers to getting help when needed, usually helping people feel better after a negative event occurs. Social bonding, in contrast, refers to the more general desire for social connection and to keep up with others, even when nothing is wrong.

In sum, social bonding motives may lead people to talk about things that are (1) common ground or (2) more emotional in nature.

Persuading others

Finally, a fifth function of word of mouth is to persuade others. Though this certainly occurs in a sales context, it also seems to occur on a more interpersonal level. Spouses may talk positively about a restaurant to persuade their partner to go or friends may talk negatively about a particular movie because they want to see a different one.

A large literature has examined the effects of persuasive communications (see Petty, Wheeler, & Tormala, 2003 for a recent review), but there has been less attention to the sharer side, or when, why, and how consumers share word of mouth to persuade others. It often seems to involve joint consumption or instances where one consumer's choice affects another's satisfaction, i.e., cases where someone wants others to give them something, agree with them, or do something they want.

Some work, however, however, is consistent with the notion that people use interpersonal communication to influence others. People's desire to change their relationship partner's attitudes, for example, affects whether they use relationship referencing influence strategies (i.e., words like "we" and "us") during an argument (Orina, Wood, & Simpson, 2002). Similarly, across a wide range of domains including health behaviors (Cohen & Lichtenstein, 1990; Tucker & Mueller, 2000) and purchase decisions (Kirchler, 1993) people report using interpersonal communication to affect others (Bui, Raven, & Schwarzwald, 1994; Roskos-Ewoldsen, 1997).

How persuading others drives what people share

Persuasion motives should shape what people share in a number of ways. In particular, I suggest that persuasion motives should drive people to share things that are (a) more emotionally polarized and (b) arousing in nature.

(a) Polarized valence
Persuasion motives should encourage people to share emotionally polarized content. If the goal is to convince someone that something is good (bad), for example, people should share extremely rather than moderately positive (negative) information.

(b) Arousing content
Persuasion motives should encourage people to share more arousing (e.g., anger or excitement inducing) content. Arousal in characterized by activity (Heilman, 1997) and this excitatory state has been shown to increase a broad range of action related behaviors like helping (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977) and responding faster to offers in negotiations (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011). Researchers have gone so far as to suggest that "the primary role of autonomic changes that accompany emotion is to provide support for action," (Davidson, 1993, p. 468). Consequently, people who want to persuade others may share arousing content to incite others to take desired actions.

In sum, persuasion motives may lead people to talk about things that are (1) more emotionally polarized or (2) more arousing in nature.

Separating functions from conscious deliberation

This article argues that word of mouth serves a number of key functions, but this does not mean that a conscious, deliberate choice process is involved. Research often talks about word of mouth as motivated action, wondering why consumers pick certain things to talk about and what goals they are attempting to achieve by doing so.

But this way of framing the discussion suggests a more active and conscious process than may actually be involved. The fact that exercise increases sharing (Berger, 2011) or that anger-inducing things are more likely to be passed on (Berger & Milkman, 2012) could be driven by conscious motivations, but a more automatic process seems more likely. Feeling physiologically aroused may lead people to share even though they are unaware that they are aroused, or that this arousal encouraged them to share.

Consequently, it is important to separate motivation from conscious awareness. Word of mouth may serve a variety of functions, and those functions may drive people to share particular things, but this does not necessarily mean that people are aware of those functions or that they actively pick things to share to achieve those goals.

There are certainly some situations, however, where conscious choice plays a role. When on a first date, for example, or at a job interview, people may actively monitor what they are talking about to achieve an impression management goal. They may even consider what to say ahead of time to make sure they achieve a desired impression. Most other situations, however, do not seem as conscious. When you run into a colleague in the hall, or have dinner with a friend, what topics come up seem more driven by the context than active topic selection. Thus particularly in face-to-face interactions, accessibility may play a larger role in what people discuss (Berger & Iyengar, 2013).

Further, some of the word of mouth functions discussed may involve more conscious involvement than others. As noted above, people may sometimes actively choose particular things to talk about in service of impression management goals. Similarly, consumers may consciously bring up certain topics in the hopes of persuading others or acquiring information. There seem to be fewer situations, however, when consumers consciously choose what to talk about to service emotion regulation. People may sometimes be aware that they are venting, for example, but are less likely to realize that they are talking about something to encourage rehearsal, reduce dissonance, or make sense of their feelings. It is even harder to think of situations where people actively share emotions to attempt to bond with others.

Future research might more directly examine when what people talk about involves more deliberate selection, and which word of mouth motives are more versus less deliberate in nature.

Is word of mouth self-serving?

One might also wonder how much word of mouth is driven by the self (or source of transmission) versus others (the audience). All interpersonal communication involves some sort of audience, whether real or implied. So how much of what people share is driven by themselves and their own goals, versus the needs and interests of their audience?

The functions discussed here suggest that most of what people talk about and share is self-oriented or self-serving. Sharing to present the self in a positive light, regulate one's emotions, acquire desired information, deepen social bonds, or persuade others are all relatively self-centered motives. They are all either explicitly motivated by the self, or make the self better off as a by-product of interpersonal communication.

Consistent with the notion that communication is self-focused, studies suggest that over 70% of everyday speech is about the self (e.g., personal experiences or relationships, Dunbar et al., 1997). Similarly, over 70% of social media posts are about the self or one's own immediate experiences (versus sharing information, Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010). Neuroscientific evidence further suggests that such self-disclosure is intrinsically rewarding (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012). Sharing one's own personal thoughts and feelings activates the same brain regions that respond to things like food, money, and seeing attractive members of the opposite sex.

Further, while some have suggested that altruism or audience tuning shape communication, even these other-focused concerns can be interpreted in a self-serving light.

Altruism?

One argument against a self-serving account is altruism. Researchers have theorized people sometimes share to help others (Dichter, 1966; Engel et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). When consumers are asked why they share things, for example, some report wanting to help others make good decisions (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998). Similarly, one reason people share surprising information may be to entertain others (i.e., make them better off).

It is unclear, however, whether these instances are truly about altruism or the more self-serving motives I laid out previously (see similar discussions in research on prosocial behavior: Batson & Powell, 2003; Clary, Snyder, & Clark, 1991; Clary et al., 1998). Sharing useful or entertaining information is also self-enhancing (i.e., makes people look smart and helpful) and people may share useful information to generate future reciprocity. Even advice giving may occur for self-serving reasons, allowing people to restore threatened senses of control by influencing others' behavior (Peluso, Bonezzi, De Angelis, & Rucker, 2013). Finally, people may report altruistic motives even if those motives did not actually drive behavior.

Disentangling altruism from self-serving motives requires situations where sharing helps others but hurts the self. Talking about how everyone hated the restaurant you picked, for example, is more selfless because it helps other people avoid an awful meal even though makes you look like you have bad taste. But even sharing this information could be self-driven because it makes someone seem caring and helpful. A particularly awful experience can even be turned into an entertaining story, which bolsters impression management.

A similar argument could be made when consumers share things that help companies they like. Some researchers suggest that consumers recommend companies they like as thanks for a good experience or because they want that company to be successful (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Sundaram et al., 1998). But while it is clear that people talk about products they love or companies they support, the exact motivation for such interpersonal communication is less clear. It may be altruism, but it also may be driven by identity signaling or self-enhancement. Talking about a great experience or product, especially if one chose it themselves, makes the self look good.

Overall then, it is unclear whether altruism explains sharing over and above the more self-focused motives discussed earlier. Teasing apart pure altruism, reciprocal altruism, and mixed self and other motives in interpersonal communication deserves more attention and is a rich area for future research. Research might also examine the different external actors sharers may be altruistic towards (e.g., the audience or the brand).

Audience tuning?

Another potential argument against a self-serving account is audience tuning. Communicators often tailor what they share to the knowledge, attitudes, and interests of their audience (Clark & Marshall, 1981; Clark & Murphy, 1982; Higgins, 1981; Higgins, 1992; Krauss & Fussell, 1991). When talking to foodies, people bring up restaurants, and when talking to sports junkies, people bring up football.

But while audience tuning certainly occurs, the motive for doing so is less clear. People certainly care about their audience, but tailoring one's message also facilitates self-presentation and social bonding. It's not much fun talking to someone who always brings up topics you have no interest in, so from a communicator's perspective there is clear value in tailoring. Further, as discussed in the section on social bonding, discussing common ground topics facilitates social connection. Finally, even when trying to bring things up that are of interest to the audience, people tend to use their own interests as a guide. The restaurants someone mentions to a foodie, for example, are often ones they themselves enjoy. Interpersonal communication can be seen as analogous to gift giving. Gift giving involves both a giver and receiver, but the giver often uses their own interests and preferences as a proxy for what the receiver might like. Overall, most interpersonal communication can be interpreted as relatively self-serving in nature.

That said, future research might examine factors that encourage people to think more about others. Talking to just one individual rather than a large group increases other focus (Barasch & Berger, 2014), and encourage people to share things that are more useful to their audience. In such situations, what people share may still be predominantly self-serving, but the relative focus on others may increase. Communication channels may also have an effect. Communicating via mobile devices may

make people more self-focused, in part because people are so strongly connected to them (Lurie, Ransbotham, & Liu, 2013).

How does the audience and channel shape word of mouth?

So far we have focused on *why* people talk and share, but situational factors may moderate *when* different word of mouth functions have a greater impact. Two key moderators are the audience, or whom people are communicating with, and the channel, or how people are communicating (Fig. 2). While not a lot of work has examined these moderators, I outline a few key characteristics of these factors, some potential ways they might shape word of mouth, and possible directions for future research.

Communication audience

Consumers communicate with a variety of different audiences depending on the situation. They may talk to friends or acquaintances, just one person or a large group, and people that are higher or lower status. Thus three key aspects of the communication audience are (1) tie strength, (2) audience size, and (3) tie status.

(1) Tie strength

Research distinguishes between strong and weak ties; people we know well, trust, and/or speak to often, versus acquaintances with whom we do not have as strong a connection (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Granovetter, 1973). Good friends, family members, or close colleagues are strong ties, whereas acquaintances are weak ties. Tie strength should impact which word of mouth functions play a larger role and what people end up sharing.

Impression management. First, there are reasons to believe that impression management motives should be stronger when talking to weak ties. People want to be socially accepted (Reiss, 2004), but while close others already know you quite well, weak ties do

not. Consequently, just as concerns about others' judgments increase when behavior is public (Ratner & Kahn, 2002), impression management concerns may be heightened when communicating with weaker ties. Consumers should be more likely to talk about things that make them look good because this single interaction will have a greater impact on how weaker ties see them. People are less willing to talk about controversial topics with acquaintances (Chen & Berger, 2013), for example, because acquaintances will be more likely to judge them solely on that interaction. Similarly, word of mouth to weaker ties tends to be more positive (Dubois, Bonezzi, De Angelis, 2013). People should also be less likely to share embarrassing (e.g., loving Britney Spears music) or potentially damaging things (e.g., cheating on a test) with weak ties for similar reasons. Strong ties also know more about the actor, making obvious attempts at impression management riskier.

That said, the relationship between tie strength and Impression Management may not be so straightforward. People also impression-manage with strong ties (Baumeister, 1982; Tesser & Campbell, 1982; Tesser & Paulhus, 1983) and some work finds that people were more likely to present themselves positively to neighbors (who should be closer ties) than strangers (Argo, White, & Dahl, 2006). Strong ties are more important to one's self-concept, making them potentially more relevant for impression management. Taken together then, whether strong or weak ties increase impression management concerns may depend on the specific situation.

Emotion regulation. Word of mouth should be more likely to facilitate emotion regulation when talking to strong ties. Particularly when experiencing negative emotions (e.g. dealing with a break-up), people should be more likely to reach out to strong ties for support because the social connection is stronger. Other emotion regulation functions such as sense making and reducing dissonance may also be better served by strong ties. Indeed, some work suggests that people are particularly likely

	Communication Audience			Communication Channel		
	Stronger Ties	Larger Audience	Higher Status	Written vs. Oral	Identifiability	Audience Salience
Impression-Management	-/+	+	+	+	+	+
Emotion Regulation	+	+/-	-	-	0	+
Information Acquisition	+/-	+/-	0	+/-	0	+
Social Bonding	+	-	+	-	+	+
Persuade Others	+	+/-	-	+	+	+/-

Note: + means increase, -means decrease, 0 means no change, and +/-means both directions

Fig. 2. Important moderators and their impact on word of mouth motivations. Note: + means increase, − means decrease, 0 means no change, and +/− means both directions.

to share emotional experiences with close others or people they know well (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Heath et al., 2001; Rimé, 2009). Tie strength may play less of a role in venting, taking vengeance, or encouraging rehearsal, however, and emotion regulation may even involve weaker ties if people use online channels to communicate.

Information acquisition. Tie strength should moderate information acquisition. People have more in common with strong ties (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), and trust them more, so they should be more likely to reach out to them for advice. That said, people have more weak ties than strong ones. Consequently, while people who want to acquire information may actively seek out stronger ties to talk to, in aggregate, people may end up acquiring more information from weaker ties because they interact with them more frequently.

Social bonding. Word of mouth should be more likely to facilitate social bonding when talking to stronger ties. Given their greater similarity to the self, strong ties should be particularly useful in reinforcing shared views. Both strong and weak ties should be useful for reducing loneliness and social exclusion, however, though strong ties may be more effective as the depth of interaction should be greater.

Persuading others. The persuasive function of word of mouth may also be stronger with strong ties. People interact with individual strong ties more frequently, so may be more prone to trying their opinions. Further, people should be more likely to make joint consumption decisions with strong ties, so may care more about persuading those types of individuals.[4]

Overall, tie strength should shape which word of mouth functions are more important. That said, little work has examined these questions empirically, so it remains a rich area for future research.

(2) Audience size

Research has focused on audience type (i.e., tie strength), but mere audience size also matters. Sometimes people talk to a large audience (e.g., a group of co-workers) and other times they talk to a small audience (e.g., just one co-worker). The former can be described as broadcasting, while the latter can be described as narrowcasting. Audience size should impact which word of mouth functions play a larger role and what people end up sharing.

Impression management. Impression management motives should have a greater impact when people are communicating with larger groups (Barasch & Berger, 2014). Broadcasting encourages self-focus and leads people to share things that make the self-look good (e.g., sharing less negative content). By making others more concrete, however, narrowcasting encourages other-focus and reduces the sharing of self-presentational content.

Emotion regulation. Audience size should moderate the use of word of mouth for emotion regulation. Putting oneself out there in front of a large group is daunting, so people may be less likely to share negative emotions when broadcasting. That said, people may use broadcasting to serve other emotion regulation functions. If someone wants to take vengeance, for example, they may try to spread the word to as many people as possible. Further, the undirected nature of broadcasting on social media may be particularly effective in providing social support (Buechel & Berger, 2012). Rather than feeling like they are burdening one person, people can use status updates or other undirected communication to reach out to many people. This simultaneously decreases the weight put on any one tie, and increases the number of responses people receive increasing perceived social support.

Information acquisition. Audience size should moderate information acquisition. Given conversations with one person usually involve more depth, narrowcasting may be better suited for acquiring nuances and acquiring detailed information. That said, talking to a large group should result in a greater volume of advice or solution to ones' problems.

Social bonding. Word of mouth should be more likely to facilitate social bonding when audience size is small. The larger the audience, the less likely everyone has the same opinion, so it may be harder to use word of mouth to reinforce shared views. Further, people who feel lonely or socially excluded may be concerned about reaching out to others, and larger group sizes should magnify these concerns.[5] Finally, smaller audiences allow for deeper conversations which should bolster social bonding.

Persuading others. Audience size should also moderate the persuasive function of word of mouth. It is difficult to persuade even one person, and multiple people with potentially heterogeneous views should be even more difficult. That said, in cases where people can hide behind anonymity, or the social presence of others is not felt (e.g., on the web), broadcasters may try to change the opinions of many.[6]

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[4] Tie strength also has other effects. When the moral hazard of information is high (e.g., a sale that only a certain number of people can get access to), people may only share with strong ties (Frenzen & Nakamoto, 1993).

[5] As noted above, however, the undirected nature of broadcasting on social media may allow people to tentatively reach out without having to put oneself all the way out there (Buechel & Berger, 2012). This may more effectively reduce feelings of loneliness and exclusion than just reaching out to one person who may not respond.

[6] Audience size may also have other effects. Because larger audiences often contain multiple viewpoints, broadcasting often requires acknowledging multiple perspectives while dumbing down content to the lowest denominator. Broadcasters must appeal to different people with the same message, simultaneously presenting multiple viewpoints (Schlosser, 2005), and adjusting the message to offer a more balanced opinion (Fleming, Darley, Hilton, & Kojetin, 1990). Finding something everyone can relate to may also become more difficult as audience size increases, which could lead simpler, more basic, or less controversial things to be discussed. Consequently, when broadcasting, audience heterogeneity becomes important. It's hard to find topics that appeal to everyone in a heterogeneous audience, so discussing more abstract or surface-level things will be easiest. In cases where the audience is more homogeneous, however, more in-depth conversations may still be possible.

(3) Tie status

Audiences also vary in status. Sometimes people communicate with high status others (e.g., one's boss or a popular friend), while other times they communicate with low status others (e.g., a subordinate or a less popular friend). While this particular dimension has received almost no attention, it should moderates what people talk about and share and why.

Some work, for example, suggests that people may share more positive information with those that are higher in the social hierarchy (Du Plessis & Dubois, 2014). This may be due to people's greater desire to associate with or impress high status others (impression management). One might also imagine that people try harder to bond with higher status others than low status others. At the same time, people might be more reticent to use high status others for emotion regulation and may attempt to persuade low status others more often. The effect on information acquisition is less clear.

Overall, audience characteristics should have an important impact on which word of mouth functions are more important. That said, little research has examined these questions empirically, so it remains a rich area for future research.

Communication channel

Beyond audience effects, consumers also communicate through different channels. They talk face-to-face, on the phone, and in chat rooms; through blogs, on Facebook, and over text. While channels differ in a number of ways, some key dimensions are (1) written vs. oral, (2) identifiability, and (3) audience salience.[7] (See also Berger, 2014.)

(1) Written vs. oral

One important dimension of communication is the modality through which it occurs (Chafe & Tannen, 1987 for a review). Sometimes consumers use oral communication (e.g., talking face-to-face, over the phone, and Skype), while other times they use written communication (e.g., email, online posts, and texting).

Communication modalities differ in their synchronicity (Becker-Beck, Wintermantel, & Borg, 2005; Clark & Brennan, 1991; Morris & Ogan, 1996). Oral conversations tend to be rather synchronous, with little break in between conversational turns. Most written communication is more asynchronous, where people tend to respond minutes, hours, or even days later. This difference in synchronicity, in turn, provides time to construct and refine communication (Berger & Iyengar, 2013; Chafe & Danielewicz, 1987; Redeker, 1984; Walther, 2007, 2011). Having an oral conversation requires thinking on your feet, but written communication allows time to reflect on (and even edit) communication. Requests made by email, for example, are seen as more polite than those made by voicemail, ostensibly because people have time to compose their requests (Duthler, 2006). Similarly, 71% of Facebook users self-censor at least some of their posts, or edit them before they hit send (Das & Kramer,

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[7] The real time nature of mobile communication may also impact communication, leading people to share more emotional content (before it dissipates) and more current concerns (Lurie, Ransbotham, & Liu, 2013).

2013). This has a number of implications for word of mouth motives.

Impression management. Written communication's asynchronicity should encourage impression management. Consistent with this perspective, written communication, and asynchrony itself, leads people to talk about more interesting products and brands (Berger & Iyengar, 2013) Similarly, there is some indication that premium and differentiated brands receive more discussion online rather than offline (Lovett et al., 2013). Written communication may also affect the valence of what people discuss (fewer negative things that may make them look bad) and lead people to share more useful information. Oral communication, however, should encourage people to talk about whatever is top of mind leading accessibility to have a greater impact on what is discussed (Berger & Iyengar, 2013).

Persuading others. Asynchrony should also facilitate persuasion. More time to craft a message should give people the opportunity to devise a more persuasive pitch. Consistent with this suggestion, synchronicity affects negotiation outcomes (Loewenstein et al., 2005).

Emotional regulation and social bonding. Synchrony, however, should facilitate emotion regulation and social bonding. The quick back and forth provides immediate feedback, while longer breaks between conversational turns may inhibit deeper conversation. These factors, in turn, should make it easier to reinforce shared views and enable social support.

Information acquisition. Asynchrony may moderate information acquisition. Just as longer breaks may inhibit deeper conversations, they may also make it harder to acquire information about complex topics. More synchronous conversations, however, allow people to make sure they are on the same page before moving forward. That said, asynchronous communication may be beneficial in some ways because they allow respondents more time to collect the most useful information before sharing.

Finally, oral and written communication also differ on a number of other dimensions that may moderate word of mouth functions. Written communication tends to be more effortful (takes longer to produce), more formal, and more permanent. One would imagine that the more permanent nature would bolster impression management concerns. The more effortful and formal nature of writing should discourage sharing trivial matters. Voice also provides a dimension of richness that should facilitate emotion regulation and social bonding. Text based communication, for example, does not release oxytocin and reduce stress in the same way that warm interpersonal contact can (Seltzer, Prososki, Ziegler, & Pollak, 2012).

Research has only begun to examine how communication modality shapes interpersonal communication, however, and much more remains to be done.

(2) Identifiability

Communication channels also differ in the degree to which communicators are identifiable. People often post reviews or tweet anonymously. In other situations, identities are disclosed, and people know who they are talking to. This should have a number of implications for word of mouth motives.

Impression management. Identifiability should lead impression management to play a larger role (Goffman, 1959). Similar to effects of public consumption (Ratner & Kahn, 2002), identifiability should make people more conscious of what they are saying and what it communicates about them. Along these lines, research shows that people are less willing to talk about controversial topics when their identity is disclosed (Chen & Berger, 2013) and engage in more effort to communicate greater consumption knowledge (Packard & Wooten, 2013). Similarly, research suggests that public discussion may lead people to adjust their attitudes downward so as not to appear indiscriminant (Schlosser, 2005). Anonymous posting, however, should reduce impression management concerns (Spears & Lea, 1994). This may be one reason people say nasty or repulsive things in online forums where their identity is not disclosed.

Social bonding and persuading others. Identifiability should bolster the social bonding and persuasive functions of word of mouth. Just as oral and synchronous communication provide more depth to an interaction, it will be harder to bond with others if you don't know who they are. Similarly, credibility and other factors that increase persuasion should be enhanced when a communicator is identifiable.

Emotion regulation and information acquisition. Identifiability may have little impact on emotion regulation or information acquisition. Venting or taking vengeance is just as easy if people know who you are or not. Same with seeking advice. While one could argue that people might be less likely to vent or request information about an embarrassing topic when they are identifiable, such instances are more about impression management than emotion regulation or information acquisition per se.

(3) Audience salience

A third way communication channels differ is whether the audience is salient during communication. Compared to face-to-face discussion, for example, the audience is often less salient in online communication, in part because sharers often neither see nor hear each other (though webchats may increase the feeling of social presence).

This should have a number of implications for word of mouth motives. While audience salience is distinct from identifiability, it may often have similar effects. The more people are aware of their audience, the more they should recognize that what they are sharing acts as a signal of the self. This in turn, should lead impression management to play a larger role. Giving people a video feed of their audience, for example, reduced self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001).

Similar to the effects of oral communication, audience salience should also provide a richness that deepens social connections, and facilitates emotion regulation and information acquisition. While the audience being physically present should increase the persuasive impact of communication, it may be easier to make difficult requests when one's conversation partner is not present.

Audience salience may also have a number of other effects. It should also be easier to exit conversations where others are not physically present, for example, so there should be less need to fill conversational space. Monitoring the nonverbal signals of one's conversation partner should also reduce cognitive resources, which may make it harder for people to consciously monitor what they are saying.

In sum, the communication channel and the audience play an important role in moderating the functions of word of mouth and what consumes talk about. While a few papers have empirically tested the ideas mentioned here, much more work remains to be done, and this is an open area for further investigation.

Other questions for future research

In addition to the research outlined above on the five functions, there are a number of more general questions that would benefit from further research.

When is word of mouth context versus content driven?

As discussed in the sections on audience and channel, word of mouth is often shaped by the context. If someone is talking face-to-face with a friend, for example, they might talk about different things than if they were talking online with an acquaintance. In these, and other situations, the context is exogenously imposed. Both the channel (i.e., face-to-face), and the audience (i.e., a friend) have already been set, and the communicator must now decide what to share in that situation.

In other situations, however, people can actively choose who they talk to and the channel they communicate through. People that find a particular online news story, for example, can decide who they want to share it with and whether they want to pass it along online or through some other channel.

The former can be described as context-driven word of mouth, while the latter is more content driven.

Though the distinction between content and context driven is intuitive, it likely has important implications. Is context driven word of mouth, the key questions are (1) do people talk and (2) if so, which of the things that could be mentioned are actually discussed. Context driven word of mouth should depend a lot on accessibility, where the audience and other surrounding factors act as triggers to bring up certain things to discuss. In these instances, the key question may be given that something is top-of-mind, should it be talked about or held back.

In content driven word of mouth, the content itself compels people to share. Consequently, it seems like the key question is whether the content is above a certain threshold of interest,

utility, emotion, or some other factor that drive people to pass it on.

That said, content driven word of mouth also raises additional questions. How do people decide who to share something with? What role does the strength of tie or frequency of interaction play? And how do people decide what channel to share the content through? Is channel selection simply driven by convenience? Further research might delve into these issues more directly.

One possibility is that accessibility shapes who people share with. Just as with other mental constructs (Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, & Tota, 1986), one's social ties should vary in both their chronic and temporary accessibility, which, in turn, should affect whether people share content with them. Strong ties, for example, or people one interacts with frequently, should be more chronically accessible than weak ties. Consequently, people should be more likely to select one of their strong ties to share a given piece of content with. That said, situational factors should also make particular social ties temporarily accessible. Just as one's social ties can activate related interpersonal goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003), the reverse should also occur, whereby content activates related individuals. Reading an article about gardening, for example, should increase the accessibility of social ties who might find that article interesting or useful.

Evolution of conversation

Most word of mouth research treats each utterance as an isolated event, but in reality, they are embedded in a broader conversation. How do conversations evolve? And how does the stage of conversation impact what people talk about?

Accessibility likely plays a large role. The current conversation topic likely acts as a cue, or trigger, increasing the accessibility of related ideas (Collins & Loftus, 1975) and making them more likely to be discussed. Thus conversations may move from one cued topic to the next, along a line of related concepts.

Topics may also become more personal, revealing, and abstract as the conversation evolves. Particularly for strangers, talking for a period can create familiarity and connection that encourages trust and deeper revelation (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). It is also difficult to start a conversation with high-level issues or controversial topics (e.g., abortion or beauty norms in society). Consequently, conversations may start with more concrete, pedantic topics and through associated cues, move to broader more abstract higher-level discussions.[8]

If true, this would have important implications for information diffusion. Important, weighty, or embarrassing topics are not brought up with all social ties to begin with, and if such topics are only brought up later in conversations, that further reduces likelihood of discussion and the likelihood that such information diffuses widely.

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[8] Some research on online discussion forums also points to the potential importance of affiliation motives in driving how conversational content evolves (Hamilton, Schlosser, Chen, 2014).

Not just what people talk about but how they talk

Research might also more deeply examine *how* people say what they say. Most work on word of mouth has examined whether one thing or another is discussed (e.g., whether anger inducing stories are more likely to be shared). Similarly, most work on word of mouth effects has examined word of mouth volume, or how frequently a particular product or brand is mentioned (e.g., Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Godes & Mayzlin, 2009).

But word of mouth also differs on a number of dimensions beyond whether people say a particular thing or not. Emotional arousal might lead people to talk about an experience, but there are a variety of ways people could talk about that same event. They could (1) use different words, (2) be more or less assertive, and (3) express varying degrees of certainty. People could also (4) talk about it for a longer or shorter period and (5) involve more or less conversational truns. What shapes *how* people talk about a particular product or brand? The valence, for example, or length of discussion?

Some research has begun to look at language use, investigating explaining language (Moore, 2012), expressions of modesty (Packard, Gershoff, & Wooten, 2012), personal pronoun usage (i.e., "I" vs. "you," Packard & Wooten, 2013; Packard, McFerran, & Moore, 2014), language complexity (Packard & Wooten, 2013), and linguistic mimicry of conversation partners (Moore & McFerran, 2012). Customer service representatives tend to use "you" or "we" rather than "I" when talking to customers, for example, but using "I" actually enhances satisfaction and purchase intentions (Packard et al., 2014). Other research has begun to examine how product characteristics (Moldovan, Goldenberg, & Chattopadhyay, 2011) and consumer motives (Sundaram et al., 1998) shape word of mouth valence. Much more research on these, and other dimensions of word of mouth, however, remains to be done.

One would imagine, for example, that involvement and emotionality lead to longer word of mouth episodes. The more consumers are involved with a product or experience, or the more closely tied it is to their identity, the longer they will talk. Similarly, strong emotion, whether positive or negative, should lead people to talk about something for longer. While research has examined how controversy affects whether people mention a particular topic (Chen & Berger, 2013), controversy might also affect the length of discussion, or how long conversation partners continue talking about a particular topic. The more room there is for debate, the longer conversations about a particular topic may last.

Technology and word of mouth

It is also interesting to consider how technology shapes word of mouth. While only 7% of word of mouth is currently online (Keller & Fay, 2009) this fraction is only growing. New communication technologies have made it faster and easier to communicate with a large number of others. Has technology changed word of mouth, and if so, how?

While some communications research has begun to consider how computer-mediated communication shapes interactions (Walther, 1996, 2007, 2011), much more remains to be done. Some insight, however, may be gleaned from moderators discussed above. Most online communication (e.g., Facebook status updates or posts on Twitter) involves (1) written communication to share with (2) a large audience of (3) weak ties. Further, unlike face-to-face communication, (4) the audience is not physically present. All of these factors should lead impression management to have a greater impact. People can take the time to curate whatever identity they prefer through what they share.

That said, online conversations (at least ones not through mobile) often involve people communicating in relative privacy. The lack of social presence may weaken self-enhancement concerns because it feels more private (Joinson, 2001). This may seduce people into feeling they are writing just to themselves, when really they are writing online for everyone to see.

The "cost" of computed-mediated communications may also be higher. One could argue that writing is more effortful than speech, and if so, conversations should be shorter and willingness to talk about unimportant issues may decrease. Factors that make typing relatively harder (e.g., smaller keyboards on smartphones) may also moderate these effects. Indeed, reviews written on mobile devices are shorter (Lurie et al., 2013).

Not all computer mediated communication, however, is the same. Audience size, written vs. oral communication, and directedness of the communication (whether people pick a particular person to contact or just post) all vary. Understanding how these, and other, factors impact what people share is a useful direction for further research.

Technological changes have also made it easier to study word of mouth itself. Tweets, online reviews, and blogs are only a few of the many "big data" sources of real sharing behavior. Researchers have begun using text mining and natural language processing to pull insights from large corpuses of written information (Netzer, Feldman, Goldenberg, & Fresco, 2012; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2012). But even less complex tools can be useful. Simple textual analysis programs (e.g., Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count and ANEW) can shed light on a host of psychological processes (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003; also Berger & Milkman, 2012; Chen & Lurie, 2012). Offline chatter can also be captured though unobtrusive devices (Mehl, Pennebaker, Michael Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001; Mehl & Robbins, 2012) or customer service calls (Moore, Packard, & McFerran, 2012). These data sources have opened new and exciting opportunities to study real word of mouth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, word of mouth is both frequent and important. But while researchers have shown that word of mouth has important consequences for consumer behavior, we have only begun to understand its causes. What drives people to talk and share? Why do some things get shared more than others? And how does the audience and the communication channel shape what people share? These are only a few of the overarching questions that deserve further research. Hopefully this review will spur more researchers to delve into this exciting area.

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