Journal of Euromarketing
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjem20

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Published online: 12 Oct 2008.

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J037v11n02_04

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Interpersonal Communication and Personal Influence on the Internet: A Framework for Examining Online Word-of-Mouth

Pamela Kiecker
Deborah Cowles

SUMMARY. This paper reports a preliminary investigation into interpersonal communication and personal influence on the Internet. It addresses the potential need to reformulate current thinking about what comprises interpersonal communication to address its specific use in an interactive electronic environment. We look particularly at one of the most potent forms of interpersonal communication—word-of-mouth (WOM)—and offer a typology for examining online WOM. A review of current online activities uncovers ways in which both consumers and businesses are using WOM, which represent tactics heretofore unavailable via traditional media. Findings suggest the need to expand our view of interpersonal communication and personal influence to include special cases of online sources and online WOM. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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KEYWORDS. Interpersonal communication, personal influence, word-of-mouth, Internet

INTRODUCTION

A recent cartoon showed a dog at a computer in dialogue with a human via the Internet. The cartoon’s caption read: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog!” The cartoon’s underlying message is an important one. The unique nature of the Internet as a communications medium makes it possible for buyers and sellers operating in the online world to do and say, as well as become, virtually anything. And, not unlike the dog in the cartoon, there are examples of how individuals and organizations alike have used this fact to their advantage.

Among the myriad marketing implications of the Internet—a widely accessible one-to-one interactive communications medium—is its impact on the phenomenon known as word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. WOM has been defined as face-to-face (or person-to-person) verbal communication (e.g., exchanges of comments, thoughts, or ideas) between two or more consumers, none of whom represents a marketing source (Bone 1995). While the role of WOM in the marketing communications mix is well-established, no research to date has examined the phenomenon on the Internet where interpersonal communication processes can be viewed as among the most powerful influence mechanisms in our society today.

At almost any time, any Internet user is capable of reaching one to an unlimited number of other Internet users in a manner that could be perceived as personal. The explosiveness of this phenomenon can be observed in the thousands of Internet newsgroups that articulate product praises and consumer complaints, seek information, report personal experiences, and ask for or offer assistance (Stauss 1997). Similarly, in another prevalent form of interpersonal communication via the Internet, online chat forums are used by consumers to “talk” to one another via their respective keyboards. These chat rooms are rapidly becoming a well-established venue for personal influence in the marketplace. The significant role the Internet plays in enhancing the power of individual consumers’ messages is also evidenced in the rise of online or “virtual” communities growing up around almost every imaginable consumer activity and interest.

This paper examines WOM communication on the Internet. As background, we first provide a brief summary of traditional WOM commu-
nication, especially its role as a type of personal influence. We identify five traditional sources of interpersonal influence and describe the role that source credibility plays in the effectiveness (acceptance and use) of WOM. We then offer a new typology for understanding WOM on the Internet, describing four distinct categories of online WOM. These two frameworks are used to discuss findings from a review of current online activities of consumers and businesses, providing exemplars of the different types of online WOM as exercised by different sources, exploring different credibility characteristics. Findings suggest the need to expand our current models of interpersonal communication and personal influence to reflect the opportunities and challenges presented by the online environment.

**INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND PERSONAL INFLUENCE**

Findings from decades of research on traditional (i.e., off-line) shopping and purchase behavior have shown that consumers are influenced by those with whom they interact. Research has consistently demonstrated that personal sources of information have a strong impact on consumer preferences and choices (Arndt 1967; King and Summers 1970; Herr, Kardes, and Kim 1991). Studies examining purchases of both durable and non-durable consumer goods reveal a significant percentage of consumers rely on personal sources of information when they make product purchases–up to 90% of respondents in one study of major durables (Price and Feick 1984). Consumers contemplating the purchase of services or making decisions involving social and/or financial risks show a pronounced preference for personal sources of information (Beatty and Smith 1987; Formisano, Olshavsky, and Tapp 1982; Murray 1991). In the most general terms, this phenomenon is known as personal influence. Personal influence refers to any change, whether deliberate or inadvertent, in an individual’s beliefs, attitudes, and/or behaviors, that occurs as the consequence of interpersonal communications (Hanna and Wozniak 2001).

One of the most powerful categories of personal influence in the marketplace is WOM. WOM is person-to-person communication between a receiver and a source that the receiver perceives as noncommercial (Day 1971). The power of WOM to motivate attitudes and behaviors is well accepted in both academic and practitioner realms. For example, estimates regarding negative WOM suggest that almost 60% of dissat-
satisfied consumers tell at least one friend or acquaintance about the dissatisfying experience (Richins 1983). People generally think about WOM in terms of advice given and received within the context of face-to-face conversations. In reality, WOM communication can be transmitted in a variety of ways including in person, over the phone, through the mail and, with increasing frequency, via the Internet. In any setting, the influence of WOM communications cannot be separated from the communicator or source. Therefore, as further background for understanding personal influence via the Internet, we now turn to an examination of WOM sources and the related issue of source credibility.

**Personal Sources and Source Credibility**

Different sources of personal influence via WOM are commonly recognized in the literature. For example, a vast amount of WOM is communicated and received by individuals who could be considered “typical consumers,” often relaying situational information (e.g., a late delivery of a package, a particularly helpful retail salesperson, a seemingly deceptive advertisement). However, the literature also recognizes formal categories of personal influence, each of which performs a somewhat unique role or operates in a particular context relative to the consumer. While WOM communication by “typical consumers” that enters into everyday conversations in a less-than-formal way is by no means insignificant in the marketplace, we focus here on the established categories of personal influence and WOM. We believe this focus provides greater insight and opportunity in an interactive electronic business environment.

When confronting unusual circumstances, unfamiliar issues, and/or challenging decisions, individuals in search of pertinent information frequently turn to others within their social sphere that are better informed on the subject. These more knowledgeable people who provide product-specific advice are known as *opinion leaders*. Opinion leaders are influential with consumers as sources of information and advice because of their involvement, expertise, and experience in a product category (Myers and Robertson 1972; King and Summers 1970; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1998; Venkatraman 1990).

Another source of personal influence is *market mavens*. Market mavens are distinguishable from opinion leaders because their influence stems not from product category expertise, but from general knowledge or market expertise. Market mavens possess a wide range of information about many different types of products, retail outlets, and other as-
pects of markets. They share information because of their interest in others’ welfare (i.e., for altruistic reasons). Market mavens like to browse and shop, and they like to talk about what they observe and learn (Feick and Price 1987; Slama and Williams 1990).

A third influential personal source is *purchase pals*. Purchase pals are individuals who accompany shoppers to the point of purchase and act as a source of information and/or social support and thereby influence shoppers during the actual shopping trip (Kiecker and Hartman 1995, 1994, 1993; Hartman and Kiecker 1994, 1991). While purchase pals also may be opinion leaders or market mavens, their unique influence is tied to the role they play at the point of purchase. For example, Kiecker and Hartman (1993, 1994) show that purchase pals often are responsible for actual product selection and negotiation of final purchase prices. Their research also has shown that consumers select different purchase pals for different shopping objectives, including social as well as functional or task-specific ones.

*Innovators or early adopters* of new products represent another type of influential personal source due to their experience with new products. They can exert either a passive or active influence on later purchasers. For highly-visible projects (e.g., automobiles), much information is transmitted from early to later purchasers simply by product use. Research has indicated that early adopters will talk about products and that there is, indeed, a group of influential early adopters. Like opinion leaders, research suggests that early adopters are product-specific (Baumgarten 1975; Robertson 1971).

A fifth formally-recognized personal source is the *surrogate consumer*. A surrogate consumer is “an agent retained by a consumer to guide, direct, or transact marketplace activities” (Solomon 1986). Unlike other personal sources, the surrogate is usually financially compensated for this involvement. Surrogates are used by consumers who may lack the know-how, time, or desire to personally search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make choices. Consequently, they employ an intermediary for these purposes. While many surrogate consumers are “independents,” others may be commissioned employees of business organizations, which likely influences the recommendations they provide consumers and the choices they make on behalf of consumers. By definition, since they are paid for their services, surrogates do not engage in what is technically WOM. However, we feel they provide WOM-like communication, as the messages communicated are often seen as originating from a source more independent of the marketer when compared to a salesperson or other paid employees. Indeed, the
effectiveness of a surrogate consumer’s WOM likely would be related closely to the extent to which consumers believed the information provided was independent of marketer influence.

A primary determinant of the influence of the information communicated is the perceived credibility of the source of the information. **Source credibility** is the extent to which the receiver (1) sees the source as having relevant knowledge, skill, or experience and (2) trusts the source to give unbiased, objective information (Belch and Belch 2001). As suggested by this definition, credibility has two dimensions—expertise and trustworthiness. Characteristics such as knowledge, intelligence, maturity, and professional or social status all lend an air of expertise to individuals. A source with expertise is more persuasive than one with less expertise. But the source also has to be trustworthy. Although many definitions of trust have been provided in the marketing literature (e.g., Doney and Cannon 1997; Moorman, Deshpande, and Zaltman 1993; Morgan and Hunt 1994), we feel the dimensions of trust most critical to WOM are (1) the influencer is motivated by the best interests of the individual receiving the message and, related to the first dimension, (2) the influencer will not take advantage of any vulnerability on the part of the receiver. Research has shown that the influence of a personal source will be less if the receiver thinks the source is biased or has underlying personal motives for his or her recommendation (O’Keefe 1987).

Another source attribute contributing to perceived credibility is attractiveness. It encompasses similarity, familiarity, and likability (Triandis 1971) and reflects the extent to which the receiver identifies with the source. Similarity is a supposed resemblance between the source and the receiver. Research suggests that the more receivers feel that a source is similar to themselves (or how they would like to think of themselves), the more likely they will perceive the source as credible and, therefore, be persuaded (Chaiken 1979; Kahle and Homer 1985). Familiarity refers to knowledge of the source through exposure or past association whereby a level of comfort with the source is established for the receiver. Likability is an affection for the source as a result of physical appearance, behavior, or other personal traits (talent, personality, etc.). Both familiarity and likability influence positively the extent to which the consumer perceives the source to have the consumer’s best interests in mind. Research has shown that the greater the perceived attractiveness of the source—a function of similarity, familiarity, and likability—the more persuasive the communication. While the credibility of opinion leaders has been found to derive primarily from their
knowledge and perceived expertise, they (as well as other personal sources) may derive credibility from perceived trustworthiness, similarity, familiarity, and/or likability (Myers and Robertson, 1972). Therefore, in our investigation of online influencers, each of these attributes will be examined to determine the extent to which personal sources—including those developed for commercial use by businesses—use such characteristics to establish credibility online, and how consumers perceive and interpret the same credibility cues online.

Figure 1 represents the foregoing discussion. It defines five “formal” sources of WOM communication and summarizes the characteristics that influence their perceived credibility. As indicated in Figure 1, Opinion Leaders are more likely to derive their credibility from expertise and trustworthiness than from attractiveness. Opinion Leaders influence consumers’ brand choices within product categories by providing WOM recommendations that are viewed as credible due to their involvement, expertise, and experience in a product category and the receiver’s belief (trust) that the Opinion Leader has no vested interest in nor anything to gain personally from their purchase. Market Mavens are viewed similarly. However, as shown in Figure 1, they are noted for their expertise in the general marketplace (i.e., the quantity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONAL SOURCES</th>
<th>Expertise</th>
<th>Trustworthiness</th>
<th>Attractiveness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Opinion Leaders</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES VARIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide product specific advice based on their involvement, expertise, and experience in a product category.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Market Mavens</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES VARIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possess a wide range of information about many different types of products, retail outlets, and other aspects of markets that they share with others.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Purchase Pals</td>
<td>VARIES</td>
<td>YES VARIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accompany shoppers to the point of purchase to assist in decision-making during the actual shopping trip.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Innovators/Early Adopters</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES VARIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to others about their experience with new products.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Surrogate Consumers</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>VARIES VARIES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide, direct, or transact marketplace activities on behalf of consumers for a fee.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and quality of information they possess about a wide range of products, retail stores, etc.) rather than expertise in a specific product category. Not unlike Opinion Leaders, Market Mavens are perceived to be trustworthy due to their altruistic motives. Further, they do not stand to gain from a consumer’s particular choice of a product or distributor. *Purchase Pals* have been shown to derive their credibility from trustworthiness more than any other credibility characteristic. While Purchase Pals may or may not be perceived as expert, consumers rely on their WOM communication to be honest, objective, and free of bias. *Innovators and Early Adopters* of products are influential sources of WOM communication due to both expertise and trustworthiness. Their expertise stems from their direct experience with new products, while their trustworthiness stems from their status as an “average consumer” without any ties or affiliation with the marketer of the new product. *Surrogate consumers*, while viewed as credible sources of WOM communication due to their expertise, may or may not be viewed as trustworthy due to two important defining characteristics of their role as a WOM source. The first is the fact that they receive payment for their activities—for guiding, directing, or making purchases on behalf of consumers. The second is their explicit or implied relationship with the businesses whose goods and services they represent. As shown in Figure 1, the credibility characteristic of attractiveness (including similarity, familiarity, and likability) varies across all five sources of WOM communication. Accordingly, attractiveness can be viewed as a less defining characteristic of the credibility of WOM sources than both expertise and trustworthiness.

**A TYPOLOGY OF ONLINE WOM COMMUNICATIONS**

Our investigation into online WOM involved a review of current online activities of both consumers and businesses. Our review included (1) examination of popular press and online media vehicles focusing on reports of consumers’ online activities and current practices of online businesses and (2) visits to more than 100 Web sites. It revealed many forms of WOM in the Internet environment. As an initial framework for classifying the many forms, we suggest four distinct categories (see Figure 2). We label the first category *spontaneous* WOM. This type of online WOM is initiated and/or carried out by individual consumers using their own means and know-how (e.g., via a personal e-mail account or personal homepage). *Spontaneous* WOM is the online form of WOM...
**FIGURE 2. Word-of-Mouth Communication in an Internet Environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Online WOM</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples of Positive Communications</th>
<th>Examples of Negative Communications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Spontaneous</td>
<td>Initiated and/or carried out by individual consumers using their own means and know how (e.g., via a personal email account or homepage).</td>
<td>A consumer sends an email message to friends and family members in her personal address book telling everyone about a great movie she saw; a consumer prepares a personal review of a local restaurant and emails it to friends he thinks may also enjoy the restaurant.</td>
<td>A consumer sends an email message to friends and family members in his or her personal address book telling everyone about a really bad book or bad movie, or a lousy experience at a new restaurant (bad food, poor service).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Quasi-Spontaneous</td>
<td>Initiated and/or carried out by individual consumers in web environments created by marketers (e.g., corporate Web sites).</td>
<td>A consumer posts a positive book review at Amazon.com; a user provides a high rating of a vendor on eBay.</td>
<td>A consumer posts a negative book review at Amazon.com; a user provides a cautionary comment regarding a seemingly unscrupulous dealer on eBay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Independent- or Third Party-sponsored</td>
<td>Initiated and/or carried out by individual consumers in web environments created by special interest groups, professional associations, and/or organizations for purposes other than selling products.</td>
<td>A consumer tells other women about a great new drug for PMS through the online community at iVillage.com; a kit car enthusiast provides a recommendation of a particular company’s products and services based on his recent order on Kitcar.com</td>
<td>A woman uses iVillage.com’s chat room to warn other mothers about a company that seems to be targeting children with an online scam; a kit car enthusiast uses Kitcar.com to report the failed delivery of a kit purchased via an online dealer and warns others against using said dealer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Corporate-Sponsored</td>
<td>Initiated by marketers, but carried out by individual consumers who are paid and/or otherwise motivated to “spread the word” about a product or company for the purposes of selling its products or promoting the company.</td>
<td>A company pays consumers to monitor activity in its chat rooms and to participate in discussions in a way that ensures other consumers will hear consistently good messages about their products; the company uses its paid consumer advisors to post positive comments, reviews, and ratings of its products among user groups.</td>
<td>A company pays consumers to participate in user groups, chat rooms, and/or online communities of its competitors and through this participation, to offer negative reviews, evaluations, misinformation, or to start and/or encourage negative rumors about other businesses or market factors that may affect the company and its products; the company uses its paid consumer advisors to steer users away from competitors’ products by emphasizing bad product features in their product comparisons.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that is most like informal WOM in traditional marketing settings. Individual consumers can be proactive in terms of offering WOM via the Internet. An example of such was provided in a 60 Minutes' report of a 16-year-old stock investor who made glowing predictions for penny stocks via the Internet by sending hundreds of personal e-mail messages via different e-mail accounts/names and was credited with influencing others' investments and thereby manipulating the market for his personal gain ("Pump and Dump," CBS News Broadcast, Sunday, October 22, 2000). Spontaneous WOM also can be reactive in terms of responding to information from other consumers. The “reply” function (which generally offers a “reply to all” option) that is customary in e-mail services attests to the fact that responding to information from others is a common online consumer behavior. Unlike most traditional WOM, it is important to note that sources of spontaneous WOM may or may not be strongly tied to the individuals exposed to their messages (i.e., they may or may not be close friends or family members, co-workers or neighbors). It is the ability of spontaneous WOM communicators to reach such a vast audience of consumers via the Internet with very little cost or effort that sets this category of WOM apart from its traditional counterpart.

The second category of online WOM includes consumers who participate in what we label quasi-spontaneous WOM. It is initiated and/or carried out by individual consumers, but in environments created or encouraged by marketers. Examples of quasi-spontaneous WOM include book and music reviews written by consumers at corporate Web sites such as Amazon.com and participation in company-hosted electronic chat rooms or bulletin boards such as those provided for buyers and sellers at eBay. By chatting at the eBay Café or through the bulletin boards, users petition one another for information about specific products they are interested in buying or selling, as well as prior experience with vendors. To a greater extent than spontaneous WOM, sources of quasi-spontaneous WOM are unfamiliar with the individuals exposed to their messages (i.e., they are not close friends or family members, co-workers or neighbors, but rather unacquainted strangers, for all intents and purposes). For these reasons, we believe that quasi-spontaneous WOM is unlike both spontaneous online WOM and traditional WOM communication.

A third category of online WOM is independent- or third party-sponsored. It is initiated and/or carried out by individuals in environments created by special interest groups, professional associations, and/or organizations for purposes other than selling products. Instead of selling
products, these sites represent a wide variety of perspectives on different categories of goods and services as well as a variety of topics such as hobbies, interests, and activities. One example of such a site is AskJeeves.com, which is designed to supply consumers with fast access to answers to a wide variety of questions. Users pose questions in their own words and receive links to Web sites containing relevant information on goods and services based on millions of previous searches conducted for other users. Ask Jeeves includes an “Ask the Experts” option that allows users to seek the counsel of self-designated experts who have been rated on the basis of their performance as advisors by previous users. Another example of independent or third party-sponsored WOM is evidenced at Epinions.com, which claims to offer over one million reviews by and comments of consumers and to cover over 200,000 goods and services to help users make better buying decisions. Epinions.com includes a “Web of Trust” feature that it claims “mimics the way people share word-of-mouth advice every day.” Users’ involvement in building their “Web of Trust” on the site helps the Epinions.com system decide automatically how useful an opinion, service, or good may be to specific users.

A fourth and final category of online WOM is corporate-sponsored. Based on our traditional definitions of WOM, corporate-sponsored WOM technically is not WOM communication at all due to the commercial nature of the source of the message. However, because it has the capability of being perceived as WOM by consumers, we believe it needs to be addressed as such. Corporate-sponsored WOM is initiated by marketers, but carried out by individual consumers who are paid and/or other motivated to “spread the word” about a product or company for the purposes of selling its products or promoting the company. Corporate-sponsored WOM has emerged, we contend, because marketers understand the power of WOM communication, especially as they struggle to differentiate and position themselves in cyberspace. This category of online WOM reflects at least two different online tactics. The first is the use of company employees to monitor lists and newsgroups that discuss their products and those of their competitors with the goal of managing the quality and quantity of information shared within online environments. As a result of such monitoring, they can quickly detect emerging problems and respond to statements that may be incorrect. In the same way, less scrupulous businesses can actually spread negative information to adversely impact competitors’ standings. For many businesses, “eavesdropping” on customers’ online conversations is an important source of market intelligence and is be-
coming an element of their public relations programs. Another type of "monitoring" in this corporate-sponsored environment is exemplified by a relatively new service, Icontact, offered by Heyinc.com. The service tracks consumers' movements through web sites, and customer service representatives step in if they believe they are needed. A second online tactic that represents corporate-sponsored WOM is featuring individual experts or personae (real or simulated) whose scripted role is to recommend goods and services to consumers visiting the corporate Web site. One example is the Meeting Place at MarthaStewart.com where shoppers can “talk” with Martha and other experts about goods and services, as well as activities and interests represented on the site. While it is not the case for all corporate-sponsored WOM scenarios, one can imagine cases where such WOM communicators could be likened to the dog at the PC in the opening scenario, except the caption would read, “On the Internet, no one knows I’m really a paid employee.” Examples in Figure 2 show how both positive and negative communications are possible within each of the four categories of online WOM.

INTEGRATING THE FRAMEWORKS

Using the two frameworks presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 above, the focus of our exploratory investigation was to identify prototypes of the five categories of personal influence in the online environment. This section discusses our findings.

As indicated in a previous section of this paper, although spontaneous WOM is perhaps most like traditional WOM communication, the unique capabilities of the Internet demand that it be considered separately. While e-mail messages between and among Internet users who know each other personally would be very similar to traditional WOM, the fact that e-mail is forwarded so easily with little time cost and virtually no monetary cost, it is clear that spontaneous WOM has much greater reach than traditional WOM. Another distinction between spontaneous WOM and traditional WOM is the fact that sources have many more options available in terms of communicating information about a product or a company. One example is the near legendary Untied Airlines Web site (www.Untied.com). It began as one consumer's dissatisfaction with service provided by United Airlines. Today, it provides a highly systematic process for the wide dissemination of negative information about United Airlines, with buttons on the homepage including
Rudeness, Misinformation, Incompetence, and Refund Problems. Similarly, the widely disseminated Neiman Marcus chocolate cookie recipe represents the power of viral marketing (www.urbandlegends.com/ult/twofifty.html; Harmon 2001). The false story of a woman forced to pay $250 for the cookie recipe spread from each message recipient to hundreds of others with each request to “share the message.” While we encourage marketers to recognize that spontaneous WOM is different from traditional WOM in the ways outlined above (and we call for additional research to determine the cues used by consumers to assess the credibility of spontaneous WOM from various sources), the subsequent discussion is focused on the remaining three types of online WOM that directly or indirectly involve commercial sources of communication. It is these types of online WOM that we believe represent the greatest break from our traditional understanding of WOM.

Turning to the other three forms of online WOM communication, (1) quasi-spontaneous, (2) independent- or third-party, and (3) corporate-sponsored, we offer Figure 3 as a means of integrating the personal source (Figure 1) and online WOM type (Figure 2) frameworks. Figure 3 also includes examples of how source credibility manifests itself in various online WOM venues. Each case poses a particular challenge inasmuch as it may be more difficult for (potentially vulnerable) users to assess the traditional cues used to determine credibility and easier for businesses and other vested sources to manipulate/simulate credibility characteristics to their commercial advantage. Importantly, further research is needed to determine (1) the extent to which each of the five personal source roles is effective in quasi-spontaneous, independent- or third-party, and/or corporate-sponsored WOM settings, and (2) how each of the characteristics of credibility can be manipulated to enhance the impact of the communicated message.

It should be noted that although none of the examples included in Figure 3 is negative, it is at least conceivable that negative communication could take place in these settings. In particular, in each of the examples of online WOM offered, it is not uncommon for negative product information to be communicated in such venues. Although it is far less likely that negative information would find its way into corporate-sponsored WOM, it appears as though some companies attempt to manipulate perceived credibility by providing information about competitors’ offerings, which at times influences the consumer to purchase a competing product.

Due to the ability to “be anything” on the Internet, it is quite possible that consumers receiving online WOM communications could be un-
FIGURE 3. Manipulations of Personal Sources and Credibility Characteristics in Online WOM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF ONLINE WOM</th>
<th>EXEMPLAR MANIPULATIONS OF PERSONAL SOURCES</th>
<th>EXEMPLAR MANIPULATIONS OF CREDIBILITY CHARACTERISTICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
2. Purchase Pals: Shoppers are allowed to browse the site together and may even add items to a shared shopping cart on Landsend.com’s “shop with a friend” option.  
3. Innovators/Early Adopters: Early adopters of books and music provide reviews and ratings of the books and music for other consumers to consider. | 1. Expertise is indicated by information about individual’s background (credentials) and prior experience with the product.  
2. Attractiveness is engendered by allowing consumers to share the online shopping task with friends/family members who are similar, familiar, and/or likable.  
3. Trustworthiness results from the perceived objectivity of “real people” serving as reviewers; Attractiveness is engendered due to perceived similarity between shoppers and recommenders. |
| 2. Independent or Third Party-Sponsored | 1. Opinion Leaders: AskJeeves.com provides access to a variety of “experts” who provide answers to users’ questions.  
2. Market Mavens: Unbiased information about a wide range of different online products and providers is available to consumers at mysimon.com.  
3. Surrogate Consumers: Input to consumer decision making is provided by other consumers who charge by the minute for their responses to users’ questions on keen.com. | 1. Expertise is established by the profiles of experts provided on the site.  
2. Trustworthiness results from the fact that the site provides objective information about a variety of competing products and businesses.  
3. Attractiveness (similarity) is engendered by virtue of the “real person” status of the surrogate consumer. |
| 3. Corporate-Sponsored | 1. Purchase Pals: A company sales representative co-navigates the corporate Web site with the customer or prospect via a shared browser at Hipbone.com. | 1. Expertise is assumed by virtue of the sales representatives training and experience with the company’s goods and services; Trustworthiness is conveyed through the “team-based” browsing with the customer/prospect. |
aware of the source of the communication. In addition, we believe it is possible for sources to manipulate credibility cues in such a way to motivate consumers to interpret online WOM very differently than traditional WOM communication where credibility characteristics are more concrete and easily verified. Readers are encouraged to think about the wide range of possibilities and consider the implications for a new and expanded understanding of WOM that includes the many possibilities for online WOM.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It seems clear that the Internet is ushering in an era where the role of personal influence will attain unprecedented prominence (Miller 1999). And, as argued here, WOM does not adequately describe the situation when a single electronic message can reach hundreds of thousands of people in a matter of minutes. This latter fact is further complicated by the ability of consumers and businesses alike to manipulate the cues that have traditionally been used by both to assess the credibility of and ascribe credibility to different information sources in ways heretofore unavailable via traditional media.

While we previously viewed personal influence as something that occurs when strong social ties exist between information receivers and senders (Brown and Reingen 1987), such is not the case for online WOM. Due to the Internet, interpersonal communication is no longer restricted to the small circle of family and friends that personal sources were assumed to have, wherein source credibility was quite obvious and rarely suspect.

It is our contention that establishing credibility is essential in a setting such as the Internet, where business success increasingly will be determined by the extent to which consumers can trust the individuals and companies with which they interact. A better understanding of the determinants of source credibility in online interpersonal settings is needed to guide marketing strategies and tactics for the new media into the future. The background and initial framework for investigating online WOM developed here should serve as a foundation for future examinations of the specific nature of interpersonal communication and personal influence on the Internet.
REFERENCES


