

Submission for the Award of Masters of Business (Research)

TV to Talk About: Investigating the Content of Word of Mouth

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Abstract

Word of mouth (WOM) occurs when consumers share advice, experiences and opinions about products, services and brands (Arndt, 1967b; Charlett et al., 1995; East et al., 2008). Interest in the WOM phenomenon can be attributed to the strong impact it has on consumer purchase decisions (Keaveney, 1995), with studies showing its influence to be greater than that of traditional advertising (Day, 1971; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Hartnett and Romaniuk, 2008). This has led to a desire among managers to better understand not only how WOM operates, but also how it can be influenced through marketing efforts. The task of driving WOM, however, is a difficult one without the basic knowledge of *what* people talk about. Understanding the content within WOM communication is an important component for devising plans to stimulate WOM, as it allows marketers to better provide stimuli that consumers are inclined to talk about.

The content of WOM has been a largely neglected area within the marketing literature. This is likely because the elements associated with WOM, particularly spontaneity and ephemerality, have made the behaviour extremely difficult to capture and measure. While past studies have typically utilised retrospective surveys to collect WOM data, these are problematic in their heavy reliance on respondent recall and memory. The Internet has since provided an alternative means for researching WOM. In the online environment, consumer-to-consumer posts are easily accessible and WOM can be captured as it occurs in real-time. However, despite the Internet's potential to improve the measurability of WOM, few published studies have explored how this media can be used for WOM research. This provides an opportunity to study the content of WOM via the online environment.

This thesis examines the content of online comments about TV programs aired in Australia. Instances of online WOM concerning 79 individual TV programs were collected using the Nielsen BuzzMetrics software. Using a thematic analysis approach, a framework was developed to describe the overarching themes within the comments collected. By drawing on this framework, three independent coders then classified 14,312 comments into one of 15 categories to reflect the nature of WOM conversations. To address the key objectives of this research, the content of WOM was investigated for all TV programs, then compared across New and Returning TV programs, and Pre and Post-launch for New series. Finally, to better understand the impact of advertising on the content of WOM, comments that related to a TV show's program promotion were isolated and further explored.

The main findings of this thesis and the resulting managerial implications of these include:

Key Themes within WOM about TV Programs

- Within the conversations about TV programs, the two most prominent themes were Programming (comments about *when* a program airs) and Opinion (comments expressing one's thoughts or attitudes about a program). The prevalence of WOM about programming suggests that functional information related to consumption is considered helpful and newsworthy enough to be relayed. While details concerning when a TV program airs are often hidden within promo-material, broadcasting networks should aim to communicate as much programming information as possible to stimulate this WOM. By consistently reminding people of when a TV program is on, this also makes it easier for audiences to actually view the program. Networks can further capitalise on the opinions expressed about their TV programs by developing promotional material that allows viewers to develop attitudes, as well as increasing the available platforms and opportunities for which these can be shared.
- The presence of comparisons made between different TV programs within WOM, particularly before the launch of a New series, suggests that people rely on their experiences and knowledge of other products/events to provide context to new information. Therefore, the effectiveness of marketing for a TV program can be enhanced if contextual information is provided. Providing context within promotional material should make it easier for consumers to encode the information, which ultimately makes it more likely to be retrieved.

The Content of WOM for New versus Returning and Pre versus Post New Program Launch

- The content of WOM about New TV programs was similar to that for Returning programs. Given that New series are launched with no base audience and Returning series are re-launched with an established audience, this indicates that past viewing experience has little impact on the content of discussion. This is good news for networks, as it suggests a new marketing model need not be created to stimulate WOM each time a new TV show is launched.
- Overall, there were few differences in the content of WOM across Pre and Post-launch periods for New TV shows. Prior to launch, WOM was slightly more likely to be a comparison of different TV programs or be about the program promotion. After launch, WOM was more likely to be experience-driven, as reflected in more discussions surrounding the show's talent and storyline/content. While this highlights the importance of providing context and using promo-material to shape viewer expectations before a TV program's launch, the act of experiencing a TV program did not appear to alter the content of WOM.

Key Themes within WOM about Program Promotions

- WOM related to program promotions was most commonly about the scheduling of the promo or involved a statement about viewing (or non-viewing) of the promo. Based on these findings, network broadcasters should aim to understand the ideal frequency of promotion for optimum effect on both WOM and viewing, and ensure that their promos are easy to access and share with others.

As well as providing insight into what people talk about within WOM, this thesis offers some practical recommendations on how WOM can be stimulated. From a measurement perspective, this research demonstrates that online social media can successfully be used to capture and study WOM behaviour. The development of a robust framework not only provides an initial benchmark for understanding what consumers talk about, but should also be useful for other researchers examining the content of WOM in additional markets and for other product/service categories. The main limitations of this study include the use of a single research method, the exploration of only one industry and the inability to distinguish between what was explicitly stated within a comment versus the actual triggers that generate WOM.