



Mapping Word-of-Mouth Pathways: Tie Strength and Contextual Reference Considerations

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Abstract. *This qualitative study explores "Mapping Word-of-Mouth Pathways: Tie Strength and Contextual Reference Considerations" with the aim of understanding the dynamics of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. The research model investigates the influence of tie strength and contextual references on the propagation of WOM messages. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants representing diverse social networks and contexts. Data analysis involved thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the qualitative data. The findings reveal that tie strength plays a significant role in shaping the direction and intensity of WOM exchanges, with strong ties facilitating more direct and impactful communication. Contextual references, including situational factors and target group characteristics, also influence WOM pathways, guiding the dissemination of messages. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of WOM dynamics and provides insights for marketers and communicators seeking to leverage WOM effectively.*

Keywords: *Word-of-Mouth, Tie Strength, Contextual References, Qualitative Research, Communication Dynamics.*

Abstrak. Studi kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi "Pemetaan Jalur Komunikasi dari Mulut ke Mulut: Kekuatan Keterikatan dan Pertimbangan Referensi Kontekstual" dengan tujuan memahami dinamika komunikasi dari mulut ke mulut (WOM). Model penelitian ini mengkaji pengaruh kekuatan keterikatan dan referensi kontekstual terhadap penyebaran pesan WOM. Teknik sampling purposif digunakan untuk memilih partisipan yang mewakili berbagai jaringan sosial dan konteks. Analisis data dilakukan dengan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola dan tema dalam data kualitatif. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa kekuatan keterikatan memiliki peran signifikan dalam membentuk arah dan intensitas pertukaran WOM, dengan keterikatan yang kuat memfasilitasi komunikasi yang lebih langsung dan berdampak. Referensi kontekstual, termasuk faktor situasional dan karakteristik kelompok sasaran, juga memengaruhi jalur WOM yang memandu penyebaran pesan. Studi ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang dinamika WOM dan memberikan wawasan bagi pemasar serta komunikator yang ingin memanfaatkan WOM secara efektif.

Kata kunci: Komunikasi dari Mulut ke Mulut, Kekuatan Keterikatan, Referensi Kontekstual, Penelitian Kualitatif, Dinamika Komunikasi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviors, influencing purchase decisions, and determining brand perceptions across various industries (Anderson, 1998; Berger, 2014). In the digital era, the dynamics of WOM have evolved significantly, with the advent of social networking sites and online platforms amplifying its impact and reach (Adjei, Nowlin, & Ang, 2016; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Understanding the pathways, tie strength, and contextual references involved in WOM communication is crucial for businesses to leverage its potential effectively.

The escalation levels of WOM, encompassing its transmission intensity, influence mechanisms, and reception dynamics, have garnered increasing attention from researchers (Mücksch, Ziemann, & Siems, 2024). However, gaps persist in comprehensively mapping these pathways, particularly concerning tie strength and contextual reference considerations. Tie strength, a concept delineated by Granovetter (1973), denotes the strength of interpersonal relationships and its impact on information dissemination. Contextual references encompass situational factors, target group characteristics, and communication contexts that shape the reception and interpretation of WOM messages (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020).

This qualitative literature review aims to synthesize existing research to elucidate the multifaceted nature of WOM pathways, tie strength variations, and contextual reference influences. By integrating insights from diverse disciplinary perspectives, ranging from marketing and communication to psychology and sociology, this review seeks to offer a holistic understanding of WOM dynamics in contemporary settings.

Key Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

Central to this review are the concepts of tie strength and contextual references, which provide a nuanced lens for analyzing WOM communication. Tie strength, initially proposed by Granovetter (1973), delineates the strength of interpersonal connections, ranging from strong ties characterized by intimacy and frequent interaction to weak ties marked by loose affiliations. The strength of ties influences the transmission dynamics of WOM messages, with strong ties often facilitating more personalized and influential communications (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Weak ties, on the other hand, tend to bridge disparate social networks, enabling the dissemination of novel information beyond close-knit circles (Granovetter, 1973).

Contextual references encompass a myriad of situational factors and contextual cues that modulate the reception and impact of WOM communication. These include demographic characteristics, cultural norms, consumption contexts, and communication channels (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020). Understanding the interplay between tie strength variations and contextual references is essential for deciphering the intricacies of WOM pathways across diverse settings.

Research Objectives:

Building upon the foundational frameworks of tie strength and contextual references, this literature review seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- **Synthesize Existing Literature:** Provide a comprehensive synthesis of qualitative studies exploring WOM pathways, tie strength variations, and contextual reference influences.

- **Identify Patterns and Trends:** Uncover recurring patterns, emerging trends, and theoretical gaps in the literature concerning WOM dynamics.
- **Offer Practical Implications:** Translate theoretical insights into actionable recommendations for businesses and marketers to enhance their WOM strategies and engagement initiatives.

A qualitative literature review methodology will be employed to systematically identify, analyze, and synthesize relevant studies from academic databases, journals, and scholarly repositories. The inclusion criteria will encompass qualitative research articles, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies exploring various facets of WOM communication, tie strength dynamics, and contextual reference considerations. A thematic analysis approach will be adopted to categorize findings, elucidate key themes, and draw connections across diverse disciplinary perspectives.

This qualitative literature review endeavors to unravel the intricate dynamics of WOM pathways, tie strength variations, and contextual reference influences. By synthesizing insights from multidisciplinary research, this review aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of how interpersonal relationships, situational contexts, and communication channels shape the dissemination and reception of WOM messages. Ultimately, the findings of this review are poised to inform strategic decision-making and enhance the effectiveness of WOM strategies in contemporary marketing and communication contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication serves as a potent tool in influencing consumer behaviors and shaping brand perceptions across various industries (Anderson, 1998; Berger, 2014). Previous research has highlighted the pivotal role of WOM in driving purchase decisions, with consumers often relying on recommendations from friends, family, and online networks (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). The communication style of the KPK Spokesman had a positive impact on public perception and this positive impact had an influence strength of 15% (Hadi, S.P., 2020). However, the dynamics of WOM transmission are influenced by factors such as tie strength and contextual references, which warrant further exploration (Granovetter, 1973; Krishna & Kim, 2020).

Tie strength, as conceptualized by Granovetter (1973), refers to the intensity of interpersonal connections and their impact on information dissemination. Strong ties, characterized by close relationships and frequent interaction, tend to facilitate personalized and influential WOM exchanges (Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Internal Communication has a

positive impact on employee engagement (Karunia, P. & Hadi, A.S.P., 2022). Conversely, weak ties bridge disparate social networks, enabling the spread of novel information beyond close-knit circles (Granovetter, 1973). There is an influence of internal organizational communication between the Head of the Corporate Secretary Division and employees on motivation (Pingkan, J.A., & Hadi, S. P., 2021). Previous studies have underscored the significance of tie strength variations in shaping the diffusion patterns and reception of WOM messages (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Marsden & Campbell, 1984).

Contextual references, encompassing situational factors and communication contexts, play a crucial role in modulating the reception and impact of WOM communication (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020). These include demographic characteristics, cultural norms, consumption contexts, and communication channels (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020). Understanding the interplay between tie strength variations and contextual references is essential for deciphering the intricacies of WOM pathways across diverse settings (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Berger, 2014).

Recent research by Mücksch, Ziemann, and Siems (2024) delved into the escalation levels of WOM, presenting empirical findings that shed light on the interplay between tie strength, contextual references, and WOM transmission intensity. Their study, published in *Hermes – Journal of Language and Communication in Business*, offers insights into the nuanced dynamics of WOM communication across different situations and target groups. Building upon this research, it is imperative to further explore how tie strength variations and contextual references influence the escalation levels of WOM in contemporary marketing contexts.

This literature review underscores the multifaceted nature of WOM communication, highlighting the roles of tie strength and contextual references in shaping its dynamics. Drawing upon foundational frameworks and empirical research, this review sets the stage for further exploration into the escalation levels of WOM and its implications for marketing strategies. By unraveling the complexities of WOM pathways, tie strength variations, and contextual influences, businesses can optimize their engagement initiatives and leverage the power of interpersonal communication to enhance brand perception and drive consumer behaviors.

3. METHOD

The qualitative literature review methodology adopted for this study involves a comprehensive examination and synthesis of existing research findings on word-of-mouth

(WOM) pathways, tie strength variations, and contextual references. Through a systematic approach, relevant literature from academic journals, books, and conference proceedings is analyzed to identify key themes, theoretical frameworks, and empirical evidence pertaining to the research topic (Bohlmann et al., 2006; Mücksch, Ziemann, & Siems, 2024).

Population and Sample

The population for this study comprises scholarly articles and publications addressing the phenomenon of WOM communication, tie strength, and contextual influences across various disciplines such as marketing, sociology, and communication studies. Given the nature of qualitative literature review, the sample encompasses a broad range of studies that offer diverse perspectives and insights into the research topic (Bohlmann et al., 2006; Mücksch, Ziemann, & Siems, 2024).

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique employed in this literature review involves purposive sampling, wherein studies are selected based on their relevance, theoretical richness, and methodological rigor (Bohlmann et al., 2006; Mücksch, Ziemann, & Siems, 2024). By focusing on seminal works, recent publications, and studies that contribute significantly to the understanding of WOM pathways and tie strength variations, the sampling process ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives and empirical evidence.

Sample Size

The sample size for this qualitative literature review is not predetermined, as the aim is to encompass a comprehensive range of scholarly works that offer relevant insights into the research topic (Bohlmann et al., 2006; Mücksch, Ziemann, & Siems, 2024). However, efforts are made to include a sufficient number of studies to achieve thematic saturation and ensure the representation of key findings and theoretical perspectives in the synthesis process.

Analysis Technique

The analysis of selected literature involves a thematic synthesis approach, wherein key themes, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings are identified, categorized, and synthesized to derive overarching insights into the research topic (Bohlmann et al., 2006; Mücksch, Ziemann, & Siems, 2024). By systematically organizing and integrating diverse sources of evidence, this approach facilitates the generation of rich and nuanced understandings of WOM pathways, tie strength variations, and contextual influences.

The qualitative literature review methodology adopted for this study involves a systematic examination and synthesis of existing research on WOM communication, tie strength variations, and contextual references. Through purposive sampling and thematic

synthesis, this methodology enables the identification of key themes and empirical evidence to inform the research objectives and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

4. RESULT

The qualitative research findings from this study titled "Mapping Word-of-Mouth Pathways: Tie Strength and Contextual Reference Considerations" shed light on the intricate dynamics of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication, particularly concerning tie strength variations and contextual references.

WOM Pathways and Tie Strength

The analysis revealed that tie strength, characterized by the intensity of interpersonal connections, significantly influences the pathways of WOM communication. Strong ties, such as close friendships and familial relationships, facilitate personalized and influential WOM exchanges, leading to deeper levels of engagement and trust (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). In contrast, weak ties bridge diverse social networks, enabling the dissemination of information across disparate groups and amplifying the reach of WOM messages (Granovetter, 1973).

Contextual References and Communication Dynamics

Furthermore, contextual references emerged as critical factors shaping the reception and impact of WOM communication. Demographic characteristics, cultural norms, consumption contexts, and communication channels play pivotal roles in modulating the effectiveness and resonance of WOM messages (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020). For instance, studies have shown that cultural differences influence the interpretation and transmission of WOM messages, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive communication strategies (Berger, 2014).

Integration of Tie Strength and Contextual References

The synthesis of findings underscored the interconnectedness of tie strength variations and contextual references in shaping WOM pathways. Strong ties often operate within specific cultural and social contexts, fostering deep-seated trust and credibility (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). In contrast, weak ties traverse diverse contexts, facilitating the diffusion of information across cultural and social boundaries (Granovetter, 1973).

Implications for Marketing Strategies

These qualitative findings have significant implications for marketing strategies aimed at leveraging WOM communication. By understanding the interplay between tie strength variations and contextual references, businesses can tailor their communication efforts to resonate with diverse audience segments and cultural contexts (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020). Moreover, by fostering strong ties and strategically engaging weak ties, organizations can enhance the effectiveness and reach of their WOM initiatives (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). In conclusion, the qualitative research findings highlight the nuanced interplay between tie strength variations, contextual references, and WOM communication dynamics. By integrating insights from diverse disciplines and theoretical frameworks, this study provides valuable insights into the complexities of WOM pathways and offers actionable recommendations for marketers seeking to harness the power of interpersonal communication.

5. DISCUSSION

The qualitative research findings on "Mapping Word-of-Mouth Pathways: Tie Strength and Contextual Reference Considerations" provide valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of WOM communication. By integrating insights from previous studies and offering a nuanced examination of tie strength variations and contextual references, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how interpersonal communication shapes consumer behavior and decision-making processes.

1. Tie Strength and WOM Pathways

The findings of this study corroborate previous research indicating that tie strength plays a pivotal role in shaping WOM pathways (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Strong ties, characterized by close relationships and high levels of trust, are found to facilitate personalized and influential WOM exchanges. These ties often operate within specific social circles or communities, leading to deeper levels of engagement and amplification of WOM messages (Granovetter, 1973). In contrast, weak ties bridge diverse social networks, enabling the dissemination of information across disparate groups and expanding the reach of WOM communication (Granovetter, 1973).

2. Contextual References and Communication Dynamics

The study highlights the significance of contextual references in modulating the effectiveness and impact of WOM communication. Cultural norms, consumption contexts, and communication channels are identified as critical factors influencing the reception and interpretation of WOM messages (Berger, 2014; Krishna & Kim, 2020). For instance, cultural

differences have been shown to shape the transmission and reception of WOM messages, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity in communication strategies (Berger, 2014).

3. Integration of Tie Strength and Contextual References

An important contribution of this study is the integration of tie strength variations and contextual references in understanding WOM pathways. Strong ties are often closely intertwined with specific cultural and social contexts, leading to heightened trust and credibility within these settings (Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1984). Conversely, weak ties traverse diverse contexts, facilitating the dissemination of information across cultural and social boundaries (Granovetter, 1973).

Comparison with Previous Studies:

Berger, J. (2014). Word of mouth and interpersonal communication: A review and directions for future research. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 24(4), 586–607.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.

Krishna, A., & Kim, S. (2020). Exploring customers' situational and word-of-mouth motivations in corporate misconduct. *Public Relations Review*, 46(2), 101892.

Marsden, P. V., & Campbell, K. E. (1984). Measuring Tie Strength. *Social Forces*, 63(2), 482.

Buttle, F., & Groeger, L. (2017). Who says what to whom in what channel? A rules theoretic perspective on word-of-mouth marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 33(13–14), 1035–1059.

Harrison-Walker, L. J. (2001). The Measurement of Word-of-Mouth Communication and an Investigation of Service Quality and Customer Commitment As Potential Antecedents. *Journal of Service Research*, 4(1), 60–75.

Godes, D., & Mayzlin, D. (2004). Using Online Conversations to Study Word-of-Mouth Communication. *Marketing Science*, 23(4), 545–560.

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Moreover, Mücksch et al.'s (2024) research underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to understanding WOM behavior. While previous studies have explored various aspects of WOM communication, such as its drivers and transmission pathways, Mücksch et al. (2024) delve deeper into the escalation process, shedding light on the factors that contribute

to the amplification of WOM messages. This adds depth to our understanding of how and why WOM spreads, offering valuable implications for marketers and communicators.

In conclusion, the qualitative research findings offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of WOM communication. By integrating insights from previous studies and offering a nuanced examination of tie strength variations and contextual references, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how interpersonal communication shapes consumer behavior and decision-making processes.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the qualitative research on "Mapping Word-of-Mouth Pathways: Tie Strength and Contextual Reference Considerations" has provided valuable insights into the intricacies of word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Through an exploration of tie strength and contextual references, the study aimed to illuminate the pathways through which WOM messages propagate and the factors influencing their dissemination.

The findings of the study underscore the significant role of tie strength in shaping WOM pathways. Strong ties are observed to facilitate more direct and intense WOM exchanges, leading to faster and more widespread dissemination of messages. Conversely, weak ties contribute to broader reach but may result in slower transmission and reduced impact. Furthermore, the influence of contextual references, such as situational factors and target group characteristics, is highlighted as crucial in guiding the direction and intensity of WOM communication.

These insights have important implications for marketers and communicators seeking to leverage WOM effectively. By understanding the influence of tie strength and contextual references, practitioners can tailor their WOM strategies to maximize reach and impact. Strengthening ties with influential individuals or groups and crafting messages that resonate within specific contexts can enhance the effectiveness of WOM campaigns and drive desired outcomes.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The qualitative nature of the research limits the generalizability of the findings, as they may not be applicable across all contexts or populations. Additionally, while the study provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of WOM communication, it does not explore the effects of other potential variables that may influence WOM pathways, such as message content or channel characteristics. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a broader

range of factors and employing mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of WOM dynamics.

Overall, the study contributes to advancing our understanding of WOM communication by shedding light on the role of tie strength and contextual references in shaping WOM pathways. By addressing these factors, marketers and communicators can develop more effective strategies to harness the power of WOM and achieve their communication objectives.

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