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Empowered Involvement and Word of Mouth:
Conceptual Model and First Empirical Evidence

Abstract:

Word of mouth (WOM) is currently one of the topics most discussed particularly among practitioners in marketing communication. Industry experts presume an enormous impact on the future of communication in marketing. However, most attempts to implement WOM into communication activities are still based mostly on intuition or trial and error procedures. In fact, we observe a gap in profound understanding of WOM. In marketing literature WOM is not a new phenomenon, though it is seen more or less as a trait of consumers and should, thus, primarily be subject of consumer analysis. Treating WOM as instrumental in communication is rather new and requires some reformulation of existing concepts. Consequently, there is also a gap in explanation of WOM. In this paper we will therefore first describe some of the reasons behind the ongoing attention WOM receives. We will then outline and evaluate the existing literature on the phenomenon. Based on this review of theory and practice we propose a new and extended WOM conceptualization. Involvement and Empowerment as underlying foundations will play a primary role. Currently, we are also in the position to present results of a first empirical study to validate parts of this conceptualization. The results are rather encouraging and approve our research direction. They also prepare the ground for some preliminary recommendations that can help practical decision makers to better understand antecedents and consequences of WOM and systematically prepare WOM stimulating activities.

Key Words

Word-of-mouth communication, marketing communication, viral marketing, consumer involvement, consumer empowerment, experimental research

1 Word of Mouth and Consumer Marketing

1.1 Word of Mouth as a field of Academic Study

Word of mouth (WOM) has been studied in Academia for more than 50 years, and frequently it has been referred to as one of the most powerful forces in business (Arndt, 1967; Day, 1971; Buttle, 1998). A wide range of studies have observed how informal communication impacts on markets and on marketing actors. While Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, as well as Katz introduced the two-step flow of information concept and the opinion leader idea in communications research (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Katz, 1957), Whyte found striking evidence of the importance of Word of Mouth for business with his air conditioner study in 1954. Dichter (1966) and Arndt (1967) provided pioneering insight into various drivers and effects of word of mouth, and Sheth observed the importance of word of mouth for marketing low-risk innovations (Sheth, 1971). Until this day, scores of studies have analysed various facets of the role word of mouth plays. The lifetime value of a customer may be estimated twice as high when positive WOM effects are taken into consideration (Hogan et al., 2004). Reichheld introduced the Net Promoter Score and discovered a significant correlation between customers' readiness to talk favorably about a brand or company and its corresponding performance in various US industries, a finding that was corroborated shortly afterwards by Marsden et al. in the UK (Reichheld, 2003; Marsden et al, 2005), but which has since become an issue of intensive debate (see for example Keiningham et al, 2007). Recently, Godes et al. (2005) recommended that today, companies should expand the scope of their interest in word of mouth and more holistically look at the full set of social interactions between consumers, while Liu (2006) showed that the volume of online WOM about a new film release can help predict the movie's success at the box office. In expanding WOM research beyond national boundaries, Cheung et al. (2007) found subtle differences between Chinese and US-American nonopinion-leader consumers' attitudes towards spreading word of mouth. Yet, despite this on-going academic interest with word of mouth, the mass marketing practice has not always paid as much attention. However, this has now started to change.

1.2 Recent Rising Importance of Communication among Consumers

A renewed interest in word of mouth has recently been noticeable. There are a number of reasons for this renewed attention:

1. As the number of TV stations, publications, websites, or simply: media channels is multiplying at a breath-taking rate, consumers are increasingly found to be fragmenting into smaller and smaller audiences, and sometimes also overwhelmed with the media choice at their disposal. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach them with standard media advertising techniques. Thus, companies are beginning to get interested in new and more promising ways of reaching consumers (Firat & Schultz, 1997; Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004; Keller & Berry, 2003; Kirby & Marsden, 2005).

2. Secondly, the spread of digital word of mouth on the Internet has increased manifold, particularly thanks to the rise of weblogs (Sifry, 2007; Scoble & Israel, 2006). A number of researchers are focusing on this new phenomenon in marketing (Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003/4; Dellarocas et al., 2004; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Online word of mouth provides peer-to-peer communication with a new dimension, as it enables access to WOM sources irrespectively of time and place (Weiber & Meyer 2005). Some argue that, in the recent surge of both niche suppliers and consumer generated content on the web ("The Long Tail"), word of mouth is actually becoming the crucial element for economic success (Anderson, 2006, pp. 98-124). Overall, online word of mouth might be considered part of a more global consumer empowerment phenomenon: As consumers embrace the Internet and different types of digital technology, they become increasingly able to not only spread word of mouth and control their own exposure to advertising (owners of digital video recorders are said to skip up to 92% of all ads in the recorded programmes they watch, see Markillie, 2005, p. 2), but also to express their opinions about brands, companies and people with new multimedia tools to potentially global audiences, sometimes producing quite harmful consequences for companies (Dambek, 2006; Murray-Watson, 2005).

3. In light of the two previous factors, companies particularly in the USA are increasingly viewing word of mouth as a marketing issue that needs to be addressed in a professional way (Walker, 2004; Farah, 2006), maybe best expressed by the growth of the US-based Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA), which since its launch in 2004 has managed to attract more than 500 US- and international member

companies, including well-known brands such as Microsoft or Masterfoods USA.[1] One of the tactics used in the word of mouth marketing context is a new approach to advertising – companies actively invite consumers to become part of the advertising or marketing process, by allowing them to submit their own ads or shape the development of marketing campaigns. In the USA, brands such as Converse, Chevrolet, Sony, and growing numbers of others have tried such approaches (Bosman, 2006; Kiley, 2005; Walker, 2006); and in Germany, the Mini car brand is known as probably the first to have started to test such tactics, in order to more actively involve consumers in the marketing process (Karig, 2007; Seith, 2007).

In summary: the importance of word of mouth for purchasing decisions has long been known. Today, its importance seems to increase even more, as consumers are, on the hand, confused by proliferating media channels and search orientation elsewhere, while, on the other hand, the web offers them new avenues for expressing their opinions about brands, products and services to potentially massive peer audiences. Also, consumers appear to have increasing control over how marketing messages reach or do not reach them, which enables growing numbers of them to tune out of advertising at will. Some marketing companies are trying to tap into these new forms of creative expression and media power, by inviting consumers to design advertising campaigns for them, while others enlist consumers as supporters for promoting brands and products. These developments appear to make word of mouth a field of study with more impact than ever before.

More particularly, we find that an improved understanding of how companies can stimulate positive word of mouth through their marketing efforts may be especially useful, as it could help provide marketing managers with actionable information in their quest for effective marketing communications tools. That this might be in consumer goods companies' best interest has already been hinted at by Bowman & Narayanda (2001) who showed how the outcome of customer-initiated contacts in consumer goods industries can have an impact on word of mouth behaviour. If we categorise word of mouth research according to Nyilasy (2005), our interest would be situated in the lower left corner – it is concerned with antecedents to output word of mouth:

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[1] For updated members lists, see http://www.womma.org/members/.

Unit of analysis	Main focus of study	
	Antecedents to word of mouth (causes)	*Consequences of word of mouth (effects)*
Receiver of communication (input word of mouth)	"Why do people listen?"	"The power of word of mouth"
Communicator (output word of mouth)	"What makes people talk?"	"What happens to the communicator after the word of mouth event?"

Table 1: Word of mouth research directions (Adapted from Nyilasy, 2006, p. 168)

In other words, this research aims at identifying and understanding stimuli that may be tapped into, in order to help companies support their marketing communications efforts through improved word of mouth from consumers. For this purpose, we rest less on the assumption that word of mouth, before anything else, needs to start with a great product or service. Because this would, essentially, limit word of mouth as a responsibility to the product development or service design staff, and it would fail to explain why some arguably superior market offerings are denied market success (example in Rogers, 2003, pp. 8-10). Instead, in this research, we want to focus on the marketing department's scope of activities and identify approaches that are available to marketing managers when organising marketing communications. Following Richins & Root-Shaffer (1988), we acknowledge that consumers also engage in word of mouth activity without necessarily having direct product experience – they may also pass along "product news", which may be "based less on personal experience", and more on general knowledge (p. 33). This seems to suggest that – provided suitable approaches are available – it might be possible to stimulate such "word of mouth news" through marketing communication efforts. At this point, we would therefore propose a first overall research question: Considering the modern media-empowered and web-active consumers, how can a company's brand communications efforts be organised in a way to better help stimulate positive word of mouth among consumers?

2 Involvement and Word of Mouth

2.1 Introduction

In our attempts to learn more about how companies can stimulate word of mouth for brands, it became apparent that involvement (Krugman, 1965; Kapferer & Laurent, 1985) plays an important role. According to Dichter's pioneering qualitative research (1966), product/category involvement, self-involvement, other-involvement and message involvement stimulate word of mouth. Enduring involvement with a product category is believed to play a crucial role for opinion leadership (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988; Weimann, 1994). Darden and Reynolds (1971) found that a strong interest in a product category (fashion) combined with a high degree of social integration makes a person a natural conduit for influence, in that it enables her to both receive and send relevant information about the category to and from her followers. Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) found that enduring involvement with a category is a necessary precondition for opinion leadership, whereas situational involvement – that does not last long enough to form a permanent state of opinion leadership – may also lead to word of mouth. Feick and Price (1987) identify involvement as a key driver for word of mouth. So enduring or not, involvement with a product (category) appears to lead to word of mouth.

2.2 Involvement as Internal and Individual-specific

Consumers are likely to express their involvement through word of mouth communication to their peers – either as part of their behaviour as opinion leaders, or because situational involvement stimulates them. However, as we aim to identify avenues for stimulating word of mouth that spreads news among consumers, this finding presents a challenge: Many scholars seem to agree that involvement is a variable which depends on each individual, and most researchers seem to agree that involvement can be measured, but not 'produced' or 'created' (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Deimel, 1989, p. 153; Costley, 1988, p. 554). Hence, in most involvement research, academics analyse situations of varying relevance for consumers, and their responses to it. Yet they do not attempt to manipulate involvement as such. Even when explicit attempts are made to stimulate involvement with advertisements, there seems to be agreement that no matter how the advertisement is designed, internal factors still play a major role.

2.3   Stimulating Involvement

As an exception to the above, two existing studies present insight into why and how involvement levels may be raised in the marketing process, and how word of mouth can result from it. File, Judd & Prince (1992) hypothesised that the degree of customer participation during a service encounter plays a key role for post purchase word of mouth, particularly because they assume participation to be closely linked with involvement, as "consumers participate in what they feel involved with" (p. 8). To test the hypothesis, the researchers selected the area of estate planning services offered by attorneys. Clients of said services were interviewed. The results show that those scoring highly on relevant participation items – including tangibility, empathy, attendance and meaningful interaction – also more actively produced word of mouth, with a higher willingness to recommend the service and the company. The authors consequently recommend that service companies allow clients to more actively participate in the service delivery process.

Mancuso's study on rock music record sales (1969) describes an approach to *creating* category involvement, opinion leader status and thereby stimulating word of mouth. Marketers from a record company selected high school students who were assumed to engage in more social exchange than average ("Class presidents, secretaries, sports captains and cheerleaders", p. 21). An interest in or particular involvement with rock music was not required. The participants were given exclusive information about and access to music from new bands, and they were invited to get involved in discussions about the quality and potential of different rock groups, which – as Mancuso claims – amounted to effectively transforming them into opinion leaders. In those cities were the approach was used, Mancuso states that the respective artists' record sales were higher than in control markets.

3   From Involvement to Empowerment

As we have seen, some word-of-mouth researchers have analysed intentionally raised involvement levels through active customer participation in marketing processes (File et al. 1992). Others have looked at how interaction with and exclusive information provided to selected individuals – who have the traits necessary to efficiently spread word of mouth – can stimulate sales (Mancuso, 1969). Combining the insight gained from these two studies, we may conclude that "creating involvement" with the intention to stimulate word of mouth could be based on giving consumers a more active role in the marketing process. While it is

customary to this day to refer to consumers in marketing as "the (target) audience", thereby implying a very passive role for them, we might draw a first conclusion about how word-of-mouth marketing could change this perception: In order to stimulate word of mouth, marketing should offer (selected) consumers the possibility to more actively participate in the marketing process.

Interestingly, recent advances in the development of online communication tools, such as blogs and other so-called "Web 2.0 applications", now enable this kind of active participation on a large scale. By openly communicating on blogs, and by allowing participation through a shift of both creative and decision-making power into the hands of consumers, marketers are already testing *active consumer empowerment* strategies (see Marsden & Oetting, 2005, Cova & Pace, 2006, and Scoble & Israel, 2006, for examples). At the same time, consumers are adopting these tools themselves – on the one hand, in order to filter, re-arrange and redistribute existing content, and on the other hand to manifest their opinions and expectations about products and brands on the web, as a demonstration of their media empowerment. In fact, these developments could constitute such a global shift in the way media are being accessed, consumed or used that the current model of advertising might more or less cease to exist, because consumers are less and less bundled in front of specific programmes as captive audiences that can be advertised to, as some business writers claim (Garfield, 2006).

As a consequence, it may potentially become an increasingly important option for marketers to deliberately yield power to the consumers by way of how marketing communication is organised. As we have seen above, some companies are already testing ways to have consumers contribute actively to the development of advertising campaigns. This emerging development to more actively empower the consumer may make it fruitful to turn to the concept of empowerment.

3.1   Introducing *Empowered Involvement*

3.1.1   Employee Empowerment in the Human Resources

Overall, the concept of consumer empowerment still appears to be a somewhat underdeveloped and fragmented field of sociological study (Wathieu et al, 2002). Empowerment studies in the human resources field, however, have a longer history (see Locke & Schweiger, 1979; Spreitzer & Doneson, forthcoming). Even though the idea of

empowerment in the workforce is sometimes presented as a fairly novel approach, its roots can actually be traced within a much longer history of democratic thinking (Spreitzer & Doneson, forthcoming). Primarily, empowerment approaches are concerned with improving employee performance and motivation under increased (global) competitive pressure, and they are seen as an alternative to the classical view of a command-and-control approach to worker management (Lawler, 1992, pp. 25-34).

A fairly close link between marketing and worker empowerment can be found in the area of services marketing. Since the interaction with the customer is an integral part of the service delivery process (and not something that may or may not occur, depending on the way distribution is organised in the marketing of goods), an employee's empowered status allowing her to directly make autonomous decisions about errors or problems will have an immediately noticeable effect on the customer experience (Bowen & Lawler, 1995). More particularly, both the ability to address problems quickly and responsibly (Hart, Heskett & Sasser, 1990) and the opportunity to delight customers by exceeding expectations (Bowen & Lawler, 1995, pp. 1033-1034) are desirable outcomes which some researchers link to service-employee empowerment.

Building on the conceptual work of Conger & Canungo (1988) and Thomas & Velthouse (1990), Spreitzer (1995) proposed a first model to measure the effects of psychological empowerment on the workforce. She defined psychological empowerment as intrinsic task motivation, and explained that it required the subjects to feel meaning, competence, self-determination and impact (Spreitzer, 1995, pp. 1443-1444). At the core of her model, these four factors combine additively to jointly create an overall feeling of empowerment – in other words, it is a formative model in which empowerment is the resulting factor from combining the four individual conditions. (See p. 1444. In her empirical analysis, however, Spreitzer conceptualised the model as reflective – i.e. the four dimensions reflect the overall construct. This may be owed to the fact that, at the time of her writing, the debate about the distinction between formative and reflective models had not yet been developed to the point where it is today. For a discussion of the differences between formative and reflective models, see Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer (2001); Rossiter (2002); Jarvis et al. (2003) or Fassott (2006).)

While in the work environment field, an empowering approach is claimed to produce advantages in terms of output, quality, productivity, speed and innovativeness (see Lawler, pp. 31-42, for an overview), in the context of marketing – and, more particularly, external brand communications – we hypothesize that an empowering approach is likely to stimulate more and more positive word of mouth. This leads us to a model of Empowered Involvement.

3.1.2 The Empowered Involvement Model

As our overall hypothesis we therefore propose that companies interested in stimulating word of mouth for their brands may do so, by increasing cognitions of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact and thereby stimulating empowered involvement among members of their target audience. Using Spreitzer's model as a basis, we combine it with our above observations – that increased participation and involvement can stimulate word of mouth – to arrive at a definition of Empowered Involvement.

Zaichkowsky (1985) proposed the following definition of involvement:

> "*A person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests.*" (p. 342)

Spreitzer (1995) defines and specifies psychological empowerment as follows:

> "*[...] a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role. [...] The four dimensions are argued to combine additively to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment.* " (p. 1444)

Combining these approaches, we would like to propose the following definition of Empowered Involvement in the marketing context:

> *Empowered involvement is a person's perceived relevance of an object based on the person's cognitions of meaning, competence, self-determination and impact related to said object, resulting from both objective external conditions and the person's interpretive styles.*

In other words: by relying on the psychological empowerment construct, we shift the involvement perspective to a theoretical foundation which explicitly allows for antecedent modification in order to stimulate the corresponding cognitions. Additionally, it is based around the central idea of increased participation – a theme that we hypothesise to be of importance for a better understanding of how to stimulate word of mouth.

Our overall research hypothesis is that *Empowered Involvement* (EmI) among consumers leads to positive Word of Mouth and can thus support other marketing communication efforts by generating positive informal communication among consumers.

We specify the model as follows (adapted from Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1457):
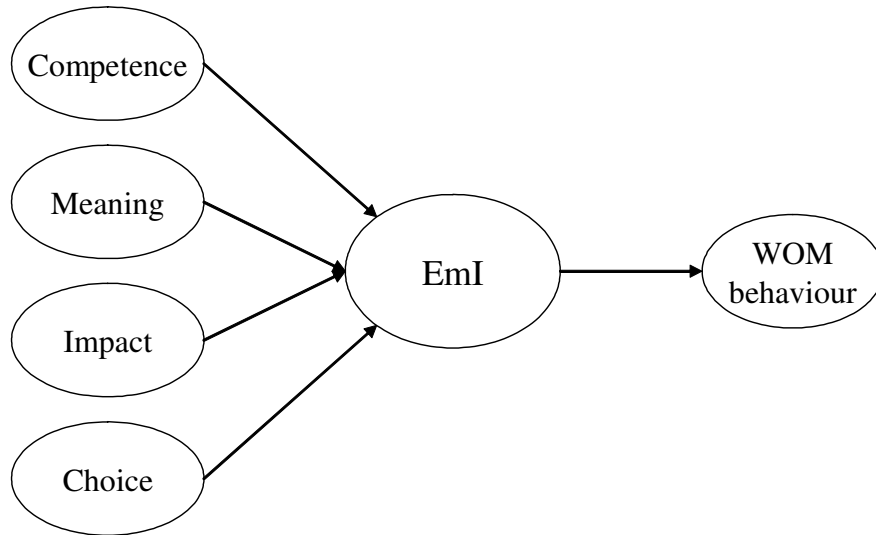
Picture 1: Empowered Involvement

In the next section we shall describe steps already taken and planned for the future to empirically validate this conceptualization.

3.2   Testing *Empowered Involvement*

3.2.1   Overview

The empirical part of our research consists of two stages. In the first stage, we set out to validate the general direction of our research, and more particularly, of our overall research hypothesis – as mentioned above – that an empowered involvement approach is likely to stimulate word of mouth communication among consumers. This first stage will be more descriptive in nature, and less explanatory. If the appropriateness of our direction is confirmed, we will move to the second stage, which will be based on a more complex conceptualisation, including a measurement of EmI, its antecedents and consequences.

At this point, we can report about results from stage one. As the results obtained so far appear valuable in their own right, we will present some of them here, and then point out open questions and limitations which we are currently addressing in the second stage of our research.

3.2.2 Research Design: Quasi-Experiment

In 2006, we conducted an early quasi-experiment with chewing gum maker Wrigley. The primary objective was to assess whether an approach designed to stimulate the four factors thought to contribute to an experience of empowerment would indeed stimulate word of mouth activity. Chewing gum was chosen for two reasons: One, as it is a low-involvement product category, we were able to ensure that the resulting word of mouth was not the product of intensive enduring involvement with the product category, but could indeed be attributed to situational Empowered Involvement. Two, chewing gum is readily available and a product category that most people, our target population included (see below), can relate to. The design consisted of two matched samples with one test group and one control group, thus constituting a quasi-experiment (Rack & Christophersen, 2006). The test group was invited to vote on an advertisement for a new chewing gum and subsequently witness the launch with the chosen ad, the control group would only see the launch, without voting. The approach allowed us both within-subject comparisons of the test group before and after, and between-subject comparisons between test and control group.

3.2.3 Sample selection

We matched sample groups of students at two university campuses. Students were chosen for a number of reasons: At university campuses, they are usually easy to reach. Also, we anticipated that they would be ready to participate in the project. Third, they are typical consumers for the product category we had chosen to work with. Fourth, the brand we worked with was Hubba Bubba, a children's chewing gum brand. By working with a group that was clearly not part of the target population for the brand, we could ensure that no other marketing communication organised at the time of the experiment by Wrigley would interfere with the project, as such advertising would be scheduled to be directed at a much younger audience. However, as some researchers have shown that student experiments may not easily be extrapolated to the general population (Cunningham, Anderson & Murphy, 1974; Soley & Reid, 1983), we will reflect this in our interpretation of the results. We chose the two university cities of Paderborn and Oldenburg (Niedersachsen) in Germany. Both are cities of

similar sizes (Paderborn has ca. 140.000 inhabitants, Oldenburg close to 160.000), and the universities have similar sizes as well (the University of Paderborn has around 13.000 students, the University of Oldenburg around 11.000). In Paderborn, 101 students (50 women, 51 men) were subjected to the experimental treatment, through random selection by field researchers who addressed them with a questionnaire in a central university hallway close to the students' restaurant.

3.2.4 Experimental Treatment and Data Collection

The Paderborn students were informed that by participating in a short survey, they could enter a prize draw to win one Apple iPod Nano or one of ten large boxes of various chewing gum brands. If they agreed, they were first asked a few general questions (age, purchasing behaviour, word of mouth behaviour, etc.), and then informed that a new chewing gum from the Hubba Bubba brand would soon come out on the market. The advertising for this chewing gum would be organised in a different way than usual – instead of anonymously launching ads and expecting the students to purchase the product, in this case the students themselves could help decide by voting which ad should be used within the university, as they would know better which ads appeal to students and which do not. They were then shown two different advertising visuals, and asked to indicate which of the two ads would be more suitable – according to their own preferences – for advertising the new product within the university building. They were then asked for their e-mail addresses, as these were needed for a follow-up question a few weeks later, and to inform them whether they had won one of the prizes. Finally, they were thanked for their input and help. Overall, the communication with the subjects was designed to provide some sense of meaning of the project to the participants as individuals, emphasise their self-determination in the project, prove to them the impact of their decision, and instil a sense of personal competence with regards to the project – in other words: reflect the four components of Empowered Involvement.

Two weeks later, the ad that had received the majority of votes (93,5%) was put up in the same area in the building where the survey had taken place.[2] Also, the product was put up on sale in the cafeteria. At the same time, the advertising and the product were also introduced in the control university, where no students were involved in the decision making.

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[2] Pre-testing had established that one of the two ads would be received much more favourably than the other, that way making sure that we would have an ad that would likely receive the majority of votes.

Another two weeks later (four weeks after the initial survey in Paderborn), in both cities two further surveys were administered. In Paderborn, all participants from the first wave were sent an email, informing them about the outcome of the voting, and providing a link to an online questionnaire, which asked them to answer a few follow-up questions about their attitudes and word of mouth behaviour. In the control area, field researchers administered a similar survey to a random selection of students in a section of the university building where the ads had been put up and where the new product had been put on sale in a cafeteria outlet. Out of the 101 participants in the test area, 76,2% answered the online questionnaire: 77 people in total, 41 male, 36 female, their average age was 22,6 years. In Oldenburg, the researchers spoke with 120 people: 60 female, 60 male, average age 24,2 years.

The following table presents the different steps in the research process in an overview:

Timing	Research Process	Paderborn (Test)	Oldenburg (Control)
Start	1st questionnaire	Students asked about WOM behaviour	
	Experimental treatment	Participants voted on two ads	
2 weeks later	Product launch	Product on sale and ads put on display	Product on sale and ads put on display
2 weeks later	2nd questionnaire ("After treatment" questionnaire)	Students asked about WOM behaviour (online survey)	Students asked about WOM behaviour

Table 2: Research process chewing gum experiment

The participants' data can be summarised as follows:

City	Paderborn (Test)	Oldenburg (Control)
Number of participants	77	120
Percentage male - female	53% - 47%	50% - 50%
Average age	22,6	24,2

Table 3: Participant data

3.2.5 Scales / Measurement

Word of mouth behaviour was measured with the following two questions which were administered by field researchers:

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1. Normally, people do not usually speak much about chewing gum – but if we assume that you would recommend a chewing gum: how likely is it, on a scale from 1 to 7 that you would recommend to try and test Hubba Bubba?
1 would be very unlikely, 7 very likely.

2. Have you spoken about Hubba Bubba with your friends in the past four weeks?
Yes □ – No □

3.2.6 Hypotheses

We started the experiment with the following four hypotheses regarding the expected behaviour of the participants:

Hypothesis 1a: Participants who voted on an ad talk **more** about the brand with their friends after the experiment than before.

Hypothesis 1b: Participants who voted on an ad talk **more favourably** about the brand with their friends after the experiment than before.

Hypothesis 2a: Participants who voted on an ad talk **more** about the brand with their friends after the experiment than members of the control group.

Hypothesis 2b: Participants who voted on an ad talk **more favourably** about the brand with their friends after the experiment than members of the control group.

3.2.7 Results

We were able to observe that the above attempt of producing Empowered Involvement seems to have lead to both significantly more and significantly more positive Word of Mouth from the participants to their peers about the brand. The unusually high response rate (76,2%) for the online survey already appears to indicate that involvement levels seem to have been raised in the test group. The results from the within-subject measures indicate substantial rises in Word of Mouth activity: before the experiment, only 5.2% of the participants had claimed to have spoken about the brand to their friends in the past 4 weeks, while 68.8% claimed to have

done so afterwards. The application of a Chi-squared test reveals strong statistical significance for this difference.

Treatment group	Percentage who had spoken to friends about brand in previous 4 weeks	Level of significance
Before treatment	5,2%	$p < 0,001$
After treatment	68,8%	

Table 4: Hypothesis 1a

Also and maybe more importantly: when asked about their likelihood of recommending the brand to their peers, on a scale from 1 to 7, the average shifted from 2.58 before the experiment to 3.26 afterwards. T-testing for equal means qualifies this difference again as strongly significant.

Treatment group	Average likelihood to recommend on 7-point scale	Level of significance
Before treatment	2.58	$p < 0,001$
After treatment	3.26	

Table 5: Hypothesis 1b

Both held true also compared with the control group. The members of the control group spoke significantly less with their friends about the brand than their counterparts who had voted on the ads:

Treatment and Control group	Percentage who had spoken to friends about brand in previous 4 weeks	Level of significance
Test group, after treatment	68,8%	$p < 0,001$
Control group, after treatment	13,33%	

Table 6: Hypothesis 2a

And they were also significantly less willing to recommend the brand to their peers:

Treatment and Control group	Average likelihood to recommend on 7-point scale	Level of significance
Test group, after treatment	3.26	
Control group, after treatment	2,19	p < 0,001

Table 7: Hypothesis 2b

3.2.8 Discussion

At this point, we can conclude that our first empirical observations appear to substantiate our assumptions. The hypothesised effect was observed, both test and control group appeared to behave the way we expected them to. None of our hypotheses was refuted, so these first results encourage us to continue with step 2 in our research project. At this point we feel confident that allowing participants to get actively involved with the shaping of the marketing process does indeed appear to give them something worth talking about, and to improve advocacy for the brand among the target population.

For the rapidly developing field of Word-of-mouth marketing, this would have some implications. As consumers are becoming increasingly media-savvy, as the media is increasingly fragmenting, and as advertisers are increasingly finding that their established approaches are losing effectiveness, companies can attempt to forge more intensive relationships with their consumers, in order to stimulate word of mouth as part of their brand communication efforts (see also Gremler et al., 2001). The current state of research appears to suggest that a targeted psychological empowering of consumers in the marketing process – which we refer to as *Empowered Involvement* – may be a useful approach in this context. Both theoretical and first empirical findings suggest that those subjects who get actively involved in the shaping of marketing activities experience a type of involvement that can lead to positive word of mouth. Marketing companies challenged by today's increasingly complex media environment may therefore be well-advised to not only try to use their advertising to

stimulate word of mouth[3], but to focus on strategies that more actively involve customers or consumers in the process, and – more particularly – grant them a certain level of decision-making power that allows them to experience psychological empowerment. Additionally, as the current state-of-the-art in Internet-related technology is increasingly providing new instruments for online dialogue and exchange, this type of empowering interaction may become a viable option even for those industries that would previously consider the costs of direct interaction with their consumers prohibitively high (see Bowman & Narayandas, 2001, p. 281).

In our on-going research, we shall attempt to more thoroughly explain the way Empowered Involvement works.

3.2.9   Limitations and further research directions

A number of limitations should be noted in connection with these results, and they will impact on the next steps of our research:

1. The between-subject results have to be interpreted with some caution. Due to the experiment design, it was not possible to exactly mirror all conditions in the control group – in particular, it was not possible to alert the control group participants to the project at the beginning, so that they would be as attentive to the ads as the involved group must have been. Thus, it was a question of chance whether or not we were actually interacting with students who had noticed the advertisements and the new product. Had we alerted them beforehand, this would have constituted a first intervention which would have made interpretation of the results just as difficult. Also, the spatial conditions in the two universities were not exactly the same, so this is another factor that may have played a role in the way the new brand and product were received by the two groups.

2. The ads used in the process were only displayed in fairly small parts of the respective university buildings, they were not used on a larger scale within the city or country. This means that some laboratory effect may be present.

3. As mentioned above, the fact that we worked with students is likely to produce a sample bias – even though we find that the experiment intervention seems to have led

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[3] On the web, this is often called "viral advertising" or, somewhat confusingly, "viral marketing".

to a change in behaviour, we have difficulty predicting if this effect can be reproduced in other sections of the population.

4. Lastly, it is uncertain whether the intervention has indeed led to Empowered Involvement, or whether it may simply have been the novelty aspect of a brand asking for votes about ads that has triggered the word of mouth behaviour (see Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003, for an investigation into word of mouth triggered by surprise).

In order to remedy these limitations, we are currently carrying out a second study.

While the above experiment attempted to manipulate the external factors considered key for EmI, it does not measure whether EmI actually did take place and was felt by the participants. Our second study carried out in 2007 was therefore designed to help develop a more thorough understanding of Empowered Involvement. It was carried out in collaboration with the German marketing services company Trnd GmbH ("the real network dialogue") which has collected a community of approx. 50,000 volunteers, and with Payback, a loyalty programme in Germany, which is a Trnd client. Payback planned to launch a corporate weblog and wanted to increase the likelihood of the blog being received favorably within the blogosphere. To achieve this, the blog was designed and configured in collaboration with a blog-reading selection of Trnd members – 112 were selected for the project. After the blog was launched[4], both members and non-members of the project team were questioned about their empowerment levels and their respective word of mouth behaviour. More particularly, complete empowerment profiles of both members and non-members of the Payback blog project were assembled, which will allow us to measure the various facets of Empowered Involvement and trace their impact on Word of Mouth behaviour through path modeling. According to our hypotheses, the empowered participants should display higher Net Promoter scores and more Word of Mouth activity than those who were not part of the project. Analysis of the data is currently in progress.

Also, the project allows us to address the other limitations listed above: we have two groups which have been questioned under much more similar conditions, so the between-subject comparisons should be more reliable. The weblog in question is now online, so the

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[4] Online at http://www.paybackblog.de

participants had an impact on a real-world marketing vehicle. The two groups are much more heterogeneous, so we can hope to have less biased groups. And lastly, the Trnd members are used to being part of marketing projects, so for both the test and the control group, participation in such a project will have less of a novelty character.

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