

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF SPORT PRACTICE ON WOM BY DEMOGRAPHICS: EXPLORATORY INSIGHTS FROM A NCA APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Sport practice offers numerous psychophysical and social benefits. Yet understanding how it influences word of mouth (WOM) is crucial for sports organizations with the aim to promote it properly. This study investigates the impact of various dimensions of the sports practice experience on WOM, with a focus on how these effects vary by demographic factors such as gender and age. Using a comprehensive framework grounded in classical experience theories, the research employs Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) to determine which experiential dimensions are essential for generating WOM. Results indicate that, overall, no single dimension is necessary for WOM; however, significant differences emerge across demographic groups. For instance, sensory, behavioural, and relational experiences are critical for men, while sensory and behavioural experiences are vital for individuals over 25 years of age. These findings underscore the importance of adapting marketing strategies and public promotions to different consumer segments. New insights by applying NCA in the context of sports practice offers practical implications for managers and policymakers aiming to enhance sports engagement and advocacy.

KEYWORDS

experience, consumer behaviour, sport practices, WOM, NCA,

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sport practice is associated with a number of benefits that impact psychophysical well-being (e.g. Bonavolontà et al., 2021; Carretti et al., 2024) as well as social well-being (Raimundi et al., 2024). Besides, playing sports is popular and sports participation is growing, in particular because more and more people are looking for a healthy and active living (Akoglu & Özbek, 2022). Recent data indicates that sports practice is on the rise. According to the latest data from the study on sports habits in Spain, published by the Ministry of Culture and Sport (2022), 6 out of 10 people over the age of 15 had participated in sports, both sporadically and regularly, in the year prior to the survey. It represents an increase of 3.8 percentage points compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2015. This upward trend highlights a growing interest in active lifestyles, driven by increasing awareness of health benefits and broader accessibility to sports activities. However, disparities in participation, such as those related to gender, remain areas for further improvement.

WOM is a powerful communication tool, valued for its credibility and personal relevance (Ismagilova et al., 2017). As sports organizations strive to increase participation rates, WOM emerges as a cost-effective and impactful means of reaching potential participants, offering credibility and trustworthiness that traditional advertisements may lack. In sports, WOM inspires participation by sharing authentic experiences, which often motivate others to adopt similar activities (Girish & Lee, 2019). Beyond individual influence, WOM fosters community and social norms that promote active lifestyles, amplifying its impact within groups (Keiningham et al., 2018). By leveraging WOM, sports organizations can enhance engagement and build lasting connections among participants.

WOM has consistently demonstrated greater effectiveness compared to traditional marketing campaigns across various domains. It is a critical driver of consumer behavior, particularly in the context of sports, where personal recommendations often outweigh traditional marketing campaigns. Sports practice, while increasingly popular, faces significant challenges in terms of engagement among certain demographic groups, such as younger individuals or those with sedentary lifestyles (Akoglu & Özbek, 2022). WOM stands out due to its perceived credibility and authenticity, as it originates from trusted social connections rather than commercial entities (Ismagilova et al., 2017). Research has shown that WOM not only enhances consumer trust but also significantly influences purchasing decisions and long-term loyalty (Andersen et al., 2024; Keiningham et al., 2018).

Understanding the experience of sport practice and how it influences word of mouth (WOM) is therefore essential for the development of sports practices and its benefits in a society. The knowledge of this experience is also crucial for sports organizations (Pizzo et al., 2021). Indeed, it can bring them a competitive advantage (Yoshida & Nakazawa, 2016) and help them retain customers (García-Pascual et al., 2023), which has become fundamental due to the intense competition between sports businesses, as it is for instance the case in the fitness industry (e.g. Pizzo et al., 2021; Sevilmiş et al., 2024). Furthermore, in 2017, sports consumer experience has been identified as a key priority for sport consumer research for the upcoming years (Funk, 2017).

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to investigate the consumption experience of the sport practice and its influence on WOM. Following the classical theories of experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999), we seek to understand the relationship between personal and contextual experience and its influence on WOM.

The core challenge this research addresses lies in the underexplored relationship between sports practice experiences and their impact on WOM, particularly when analyzed through

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demographic lenses such as gender and age. While WOM's effectiveness in promoting products and services has been widely acknowledged (Keiningham et al., 2018), its application in the context of sports practice remains underdeveloped. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing competition within the sports industry to attract and retain participants (Pizzo et al., 2021). Moreover, understanding which experiential dimensions drive WOM provides actionable insights for tailoring marketing and engagement strategies to specific demographic groups. Therefore, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: *What dimensions of the sports practice experience are necessary to generate WOM?*

RQ2: *Are there differences based on sociodemographic characteristics such as gender and age in the identification of the dimensions of the sports practice experience that are necessary to generate WOM?*

This research will contribute to literature on customer experience, answering the zooming-perspective advocated by Chaney et al. (2018) by examining a specific experiential context, that of recreational sports. It will also provide useful insights for sport businesses managers. Typically, the study of consumer experience is approached from the sufficiency perspective, often realized through SEM or PLS models. However, this decade has introduced a new statistical analysis technique based on the logic of necessity, aiming to determine what is truly needed to explain a (Dul, 2016; Richter et al., 2020). To address the research questions proposed in this manuscript, Necessary Condition Analysis (NCA) techniques are suitable and provide an enriched analysis beyond merely assessing sufficiency to explain the WOM phenomenon through regression techniques. Unlike SEM, NCA relies on the logic of necessity rather than sufficiency, making it a powerful tool for identifying essential conditions that offer actionable insights to enhance WOM. By applying NCA, this study not only fills a theoretical gap but also equips sports managers and policymakers with practical tools to enhance participation rates and foster long-term engagement. Managers and policymakers can leverage this insight by ensuring these dimensions are prioritized in their strategies to effectively engage target audiences. The friction lies in the complexity of decoding how varied dimensions of experience intersect with demographics to influence WOM, a challenge this research directly tackles.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Customer Experience

Scholars and practitioners alike consider customer experience to be a fundamental concept in the field of marketing (e.g. Chaney et al., 2018). Delivering a good customer experience can indeed help firms get a competitive advantage (e.g. Gahler et al., 2022; Roy et al., 2022; Verhoef et al., 2009), particularly because experience influences strategic variables such as customer satisfaction, loyalty or WOM (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Various definitions have followed one another, and the terms have multiplied to specify the type of experience considered, depending on its context, the consumption phase, or the offer to which the author refers. One of the most synthetic definition of the consumption experience is given by Becker and Jaakkola (2020, p. 638) who state that “customer experience comprises customers’ non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli along the customer journey”.

Several characteristics common to all types of experiences can be identified. Thus, according to Arnould et al. (2002), the consumption experience is a process that can be divided into four phases: the anticipation experience, the purchase experience, the experience itself, and the memory experience. The experience is also an outcome (Antéblan et al., 2013). It is holistic (e.g. Verhoef et al., 2009). It can be positive or negative (Filser, 2002). It is personal (e.g. Gentile et al., 2007). It can be conscious or unconscious (Gentile et al., 2007). The experience can be placed on a continuum ranging from the ordinary to the extraordinary (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2015). It is multidimensional (e.g. Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Moreover, experiences are all structured around key dimensions, which Hoffman & Novak (2018) synthesize by the acronym BASIS -Behavioural (physical), Affective (related to feelings; emotional, experiential or hedonic), Sensory, Intellectual (cognitive or rational), Social, in line with the work of Roederer (2008) and Brakus et al. (2009). The knowledge of these dimensions can give companies levers for action to better “position [...] [their] offer and deliver or produce more value with the consumer/customer” (Roederer, 2012, p. 82). By making it possible to define a typology of consumers according to the experiential attractions they prefer, this knowledge can provide companies with strategic tools and the possibility of communicating in a differentiated way according to the type of consumer concerned (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

On the other hand, customer experience in the area of culture and leisure was one of the first to be studied since the seminal article by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). Indeed, the experience-seeking model is particularly well suited to the field of culture, leisure and sport (Bourgeon & Filser, 1995). As early as 1993, Arnould & Price (1993) investigated the (extraordinary) rafting experience on the Colorado River. Yet, while experience of sports tourism (e.g. Klaus and Maklan, 2011) or sports events (e.g. Kunkel et al., 2017) have been often studied, research on sport practice experience *per se* – empirical in particular - is more recent and less extant (Mao et al., 2023). In the context of fitness clubs, Mao et al. (2023) identified four main dimensions for the customer experience: cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, and social, which importance can vary according to the context.

2.2. WOM

Ismagilova et al. (2017, p. 7) defines WOM as “oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator, whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, product, service, or organization”. WOM is informal (Fiandari et al., 2024). This social process has a strong influence on the customer’s behaviour (e.g. Keiningham et al., 2018; Mangold et al., 1999) and is a good predictor on its decision making (Lien et al., 2018). It is a powerful source of information (e.g. Andersen et al., 2024), that recipients consumers consider independent and very reliable (Ismagilova et al., 2017). On the other hand, people engage in WOM because they want to help, because they feel an obligation or because they enjoy telling others (Keiningham et al., 2018).

Consumer experience is widely acknowledged as a precursor to WOM, with existing research suggesting that positive experiences significantly enhance individuals’ likelihood of sharing recommendations (Moliner-Tena et al., 2023; Triantafyllidou & Siomkos, 2014). While customer experience models such as those proposed by Schmitt (1999) and Pine and Gilmore (1999) provide a robust foundation, it is essential to consider the specificities of sports practice. Unlike general consumer activities, sports experiences often involve unique sensory, emotional, and physical engagement that may amplify WOM differently. While WOM has been studied in the field of sport events (e.g. Girish & Lee, 2019; Tzetzis et al., 2014), research is scarcer in the case of sport practice. The relationship between sports experience and WOM is rooted in the multidimensional nature of experiences, which shape what individuals choose to share with others. Many researchers showed that customer experience influenced WOM (e.g. Moliner-Tena et al., 2023; Triantafyllidou & Siomkos, 2014). Experiences evoke emotional, sensory, intellectual, and relational responses (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999), and these responses are critical in driving WOM. For example, sensory and affective aspects—such as the physical satisfaction of exercise or the exhilaration of a team victory—often generate memorable moments that individuals naturally discuss in social settings (Moliner-Tena et al., 2023). Additionally, relational experiences, such as a sense of belonging to a sports community, have been shown to amplify WOM by fostering deeper emotional connections and shared narratives (Keiningham et al., 2018). In the context of fitness, Mao et al. (2023) identified WOM as one of the outcomes of customer’s sport practice experience. This study explicitly quantifies how

specific dimensions of sports practice experiences influence WOM, offering insights into which aspects are most effective for promoting conversations and advocacy across different demographic groups. Yet, few studies analyse the individual impact of each experience dimension on WOM; and we have not found any in the context of the sports practice.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

3.1. Research methodology

A structured questionnaire, administered electronically using convenience sampling through snowball sampling among individuals who engage in sports, yielded 175 valid responses.

3.2. Sample profile

Table 1 presents the sample profile, showing that 49.1% of the respondents identify as female, while 48.6% identify as male. The majority, 55.4% of the sample, are under 25 years of age. Regarding current employment status, 38.3% are employed, followed by 30.3% who are students, and 25.7% who are both studying and working. The sports practiced are diverse and overlapping, including bodybuilding (54.3%), aerobic exercises (23.4%), team sports (27.4%), contact sports (51%), racket sports (15.4%), running (40.0%), swimming (16.6%), among others (18.3%). Notably, 80% of the sample engages in sports more than once a week.

TABLE 1: Sample profile

		%			%
Gender	Man	49.1%	Professional status	Student	30.3%
	Woman	48.6%		Employed	38.3%
	Nonbinary	2.3%		Student and employed	25.7%
Age	<25	55.4%		Unemployed	2.3%
	>=25	44.6%		Other	3.4%

		%			%			%
Sport practiced	Bodybuilding	54.3%	Running	40.0%	Frequency of sports practice	Every day	10.3%	
	Aerobic exercises	23.4%	Swimming	16.60%		4-5 times a week.	32.6%	
	Team sports	27.4%	Others	18.3%		2-3 times a week.	37.1%	
	Contact sports	5.1%				Once a week.	10.9%	
	Racquet sports	15.4%				1-2 times a month.	5.1%	
						Less regularly	4.0%	

3.3. Measuring instruments

The questionnaire includes various sections that collect the items of the scales to be evaluated, as well as the classification variables. The five dimensions of the experience were measured using a 5-point Likert scale adapted (Cuadrado-García et al., 2023) from various authors (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999), which assessed the sports practice experience through 14 items listed in Table 2. This study builds upon general experience frameworks while integrating the specificity of sports contexts, particularly through the adapted use of dimensions. Such adaptations allow for a nuanced analysis of how sports practice experiences influence WOM, addressing the interplay between general consumer experience theories and the unique characteristics of sports. To measure the WOM variable, a 3-item scale, which has been successfully used in studies such as Fu et al. (2021) and Gallarza et al. (2020), was adapted and is also showed in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Measurement instruments

EXPERIENCE DIMENSIONES	ÍTEMS	AUTHORS
Sensory (ES)	SE1: It has had a positive effect on my body.	Cuadrado et al (2023)
	SE2: It has been stimulating for my senses.	

	SE3: It has been pleasant for my senses.	
Affective (AE)	AE1: It has provoked strong emotions in me (e.g., joy, anger, sadness, shame, surprise, etc.).	
	AE2: It has generated feelings in me (e.g., euphoria, admiration, anger, etc.).	
	AE3: It has been very exciting.	
Behavioural (BE)	BE1: I have been carried away by my senses.	
	BE2: It has prompted me to do things (clap, cheer, encourage, hug, etc.).	
	BE3: It has made me want to do it again.	
Intellectual (IE)	IE1: It has made me think.	
	IE2: It has intrigued me.	
	IE3: It may help me solve personal problems (physical or emotional).	
Relational (ER)	RE1: It has made me feel part of a community.	
	RE2: It has made me feel part of a family.	
VARIABLE	ITEMS	AUTHOR
WOM	WOM1: I would say positive things about the sport I practice.	Adapted from Fu et al. (2021) and Gallarza et al. (2020)
	WOM2: I would encourage my family and friends to practice this sport/exercise.	
	WOM3: I would recommend this sport to anyone seeking my advice or opinion.	

3.4. Results

To address the research question, NCA was conducted using SmartPLS v.4.1.0.6 (Ringle et al., 2024), adhering to best practice guidelines for analysing and reporting NCA results (e.g.: Sukhov et al., 2022).

About the measurement model and following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019), the adequacy of individual reliability for the reflective constructs was confirmed, as they significantly exceeded the 0.7 threshold. Table 3 presents the construct reliability (indicators above 0.7), convergent validity (indicators above 0.8), and discriminant validity. Regarding discriminant validity, although the Fornell & Lacker (1981) criterion was met, to adjust the HTMT matrix to the Henseler et al (Henseler et al., 2014) criterion, it was necessary to remove item 3 from the affective dimension of experience. This adjustment ensures that the criterion remains below 0.85 for conceptually distinct constructs (i.e., WOM and the experience dimensions) and below 0.9 for constructs that may be conceptually similar (e.g., experiential dimensions) (Henseler et al., 2014), except for the affective and behavioural dimensions. Considering the literature, the relationship between these dimensions makes sense (e.g., the case of affective and cognitive satisfaction in Gallarza et al., 2016; Martínez Caro & Martínez García, 2007). Although it is often recommended to unify these dimensions into a single construct or divide them into smaller groups in such cases (Henseler et al., 2014), it is preferable to maintain the proposed dimensionality in this research to avoid issues with content validity (Henseler et al., 2014). Additionally, the satisfactory compliance with the Fornell-Larcker criterion supports this decision (Gallarza et al., 2023).

TABLE 3: Reliability, convergent and discriminant validity of the latent composites

	CA	CR	AVE	SE	AE	BE	IE	RE	WOM
Sensory Exp. (SE)	0.94	0.94	0.89	0.94	0.74	0.79	0.77	0.59	0.68
Affective Exp. (AE)	0.92	0.93	0.93	0.69	0.96	0.93	0.69	0.73	0.50
Behavioural Exp. (BE)	0.74	0.81	0.65	0.70	0.77	0.81	0.87	0.85	0.64
Intellectual Exp. (IE)	0.79	0.84	0.70	0.69	0.59	0.70	0.84	0.64	0.59
Relational Exp. (RE)	0.87	0.93	0.88	0.54	0.66	0.68	0.54	0.94	0.51
WOM	0.94	0.94	0.89	0.64	0.47	0.56	0.52	0.47	0.95

CA= Cronbach Alpha; FC= CR=Composite Reliability; AVE=Average Variance Extracted
AVE in diagonal bold, estimated correlations below diagonal and HTMT criterion above diagonal (threshold<0.90)

The fulfillment of the psychometric properties of the study variables allows us to proceed with the NCA technique. The results of the NCA should be interpreted as highlighting conditions that are critical, but not sufficient, for generating WOM. Unlike traditional regression models that focus on sufficiency, NCA identifies variables that must be present at a minimum level to achieve a desired outcome (Dul, 2016). First, the effect size is analyzed according to the results presented in Table 4. It is observed that, overall, for generating WOM regarding sports practice, the experience in any of its dimensions is not necessary, as none of the effect size indicators exceed 0.1. Although some are significant, their value is indeed very small, being less than 0.1 (Dul, 2016). However, a more detailed analysis based on sociodemographic characteristics, such as gender and age, reveals differences in the dimensions that are effectively necessary to generate this WOM. For gender, in males, unlike females where no necessary dimensions are observed, three dimensions are identified as necessary to generate a large effect on WOM (>0.3): sensory experience, behavioral experience, and relational experience. Regarding age, for those over 25 years old, unlike those younger than this age where no necessary dimensions are detected, two dimensions are identified as necessary to generate a large effect on WOM: sensory experience and behavioral experience.

TABLE 4: NCA effect sizes: CE-FDH (d) values

	WOM (global)	WOM (gender)		WOM (age)	
		Man	Woman	<25	>=25
SE	0.00**	0.52**	0.00**	0.00**	0.58**
AE	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**	0.00**
BE	0.04*	0.33**	0.04	0.04*	0.34**
IE	0.03**	0.41**	0.03	0.03**	0.23
RE	0.00**	0.00**	0.06	0.00**	0.08*

In italics, necessary and significant effects ($d \geq 0.1$; $p < 0.05$)

** p-value <0.01 ; * p-value <0.05

Delving into the effect of the necessary variables identified for generating WOM, a bottleneck table was constructed (see Table 5). This table reflects the minimum values of the experience dimensions, expressed as percentages, required to obtain WOM scores. In the case of males, as shown, from the very beginning (10% of the WOM rating), 5% sensory experience, 2% behavioural experience, and 4% intellectual experience are already required, although these values do not increase significantly as more WOM is generated. As can be seen, to reach 100% of the WOM rating, 7% sensory experience, 5% behavioural experience, and 6% intellectual experience are absolutely necessary.

For those over 25 years old, as shown, from the very beginning (10% of the WOM rating), 1% sensory and behavioural experience is already required. Similarly, these values do not increase significantly as more WOM is generated. To reach 100% of the WOM rating, 4% sensory experience and 2% behavioural experience are absolutely necessary.

TABLE 5: Bottleneck table (percentages)

WOM (man)	SE	AE	BE	IE	RE	WOM (>=25)	SE	AE	BE	IE	RE
0%	NN	NN	NN	NN	NN	0%	NN	NN	NN	NN	NN
10%	5.00	NN	2.00	4.00	NN	10%	1.00	NN	1.00	NN	NN
20%	5.00	NN	5.00	5.00	NN	20%	1.00	NN	1.00	NN	NN
30%	5.00	NN	5.00	5.00	NN	30%	2.00	NN	2.00	NN	NN
40%	5.00	NN	5.00	5.00	NN	40%	2.00	NN	2.00	NN	NN
50%	5.00	NN	5.00	5.00	NN	50%	2.00	NN	2.00	NN	NN

60%	5.00	NN	5.00	6.00	NN	60%	4.00	NN	2.00	NN	NN
70%	5.00	NN	5.00	6.00	NN	70%	4.00	NN	2.00	NN	2.00
80%	7.00	NN	5.00	6.00	NN	80%	4.00	NN	2.00	NN	2.00
90%	7.00	NN	5.00	6.00	NN	90%	4.00	NN	2.00	NN	2.00
100%	7.00	NN	5.00	6.00	NN	100%	4.00	NN	2.00	NN	2.00

NN= Non necessary

In this study, the NCA results reveal that for certain demographic groups—such as men and individuals over 25 years of age—specific dimensions of the sports experience (e.g., sensory and behavioral experiences) act as bottlenecks. These findings indicate that, while no single dimension universally drives WOM, these key dimensions are indispensable for these subgroups.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored how consumer experience in sport practice influences WOM through the analysis of the five dimensions of experiential consumption: sensory, affective, behavioural, intellectual, and relational. Additionally, this study contributes to the existing literature on consumer experience by applying NCA in a relatively unexplored context. Unlike other studies that have focused on sporting events or sports tourism, this work offers a novel perspective by analysing sport practice experiences. Furthermore, the identification of significant differences in the necessary dimensions to generate WOM across genders and age groups adds complexity to the understanding of consumer behaviour in the sports domain. In general, the results indicate that none of the proposed dimensions is strictly necessary for generating WOM in sports practice. However, when the sample was segmented by gender and age, significant differences were observed. For men, the sensory, behavioural, and relational dimensions were found to be necessary for generating significant WOM, whereas for individuals over 25 years of age, the sensory and behavioural dimensions were crucial. These findings suggest that, while WOM in sports does not necessarily depend on a single dimension of experience, certain demographic groups exhibit specific patterns in how their experiences influence their willingness to recommend the sports activity. This underscores the importance of adapting marketing and communication strategies to different consumer segments.

4.1 Managerial implications

Our findings have significant implications for sports facility managers. Specifically, the results suggest that marketing strategies should be adapted to the demographic characteristics of users. To attract and retain men and individuals over the age of 25, sensory and behavioural experiences should be prioritized in service offerings. For example, gyms and sports centers could focus on enhancing physical sensations and active engagement for these groups to encourage WOM. Additionally, retention strategies should consider how to integrate the relational dimension, especially for men. This could include, among other things: (1) improving the quality of equipment and the aesthetics of the environment to provide a more appealing and satisfying sensory experience, (2) encouraging regular participation through loyalty programs or incentives that motivate users to return, and (3) creating a sense of community by organizing social events and group activities that foster interaction among members.

Moreover, the study also has implications for public authorities and organizations that promote sports in general. In this regard, it is essential to design campaigns that emphasize the importance of these dimensions, particularly in sports that do not require facilities, such as running. For example, among other things: (1) highlighting the physical benefits and well-being gained through sports, (2) promoting consistency in sports practice through community challenges or progress tracking programs, and (3) encouraging the formation of practice groups and events that reinforce the sense of belonging to a sports community.

4.2 Limitations and further research

The study has limitations related to sampling and the nature of the sample, which was applied within the context of sports practice in Spain. This suggests that expanding both the number and composition of the sample could improve diversity and yield more robust results. It would also be valuable to explore additional moderating variables, such as sports motivation or skill level, which may influence the relationship between consumer experience and WOM. Furthermore, investigating how the interaction between different dimensions of experience contributes to WOM in the context of sports practice could provide deeper insights, as theory suggests that experiences do not occur in isolation but interact with one another. It is also recommended to explore differences in experience and WOM across various types of sports, as well as the impact of these dimensions at different levels of sports participation. Additionally, future research should complement these findings by utilizing techniques such as PLS or QCA, which could offer a more detailed view of the relationships between experience dimensions and WOM and explain the underlying mechanisms.

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