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# ON WORD OF MOUTH VALENCE: THE IMPACT OF FACE-SAVING MECHANISMS ON ONLINE WOM

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## INTRODUCTION

How are people's experience shared online? Are individual more inclined to share positive or negative experiences in such an environment? Is Facebook just a fictional stage onto which individuals project the desired image of themselves?

The questions previously stated are, obviously, broad questions; this thesis' goal is to give hints and partial answers to them in order to ultimately have a clearer understanding on the topic of online word of mouth, and word of mouth valence.

The research questions at the core of this paper are the following: "How does one's need to preserve his/her public image affect his/her willingness to share a positive or negative experience with others? How does it affect the choice of the online platform selected to do so?"

This thesis' purpose is to shed more light on the matter of word of mouth valence and its connection to one's psychological need to make and maintain a good impression on others; in doing so, the questions previously phrased aim at elucidating the different facets of said connection.

By selecting social networks and private messaging as online platforms, we suggest the people with higher need to save their public image will ultimately be more willing to share positive content over negative content via a public post on a social network rather than a private message or e-mail.

Chapter 1 will provide an introduction to the importance of word of mouth by covering the contributions on the subject in literature. It will encompass the main characteristics of traditional and online word of mouth, as well as similarities and differences between them. It will then illustrate the main drivers and motivations behind word of mouth.

Chapter 2 will take a closer and more in-depth look at one of the main word of mouth motivators: impression management, and it will outline the

consequences of impression management mechanisms on word of mouth. It will also introduce the concept of face and face-saving as an extension of the notion of impression management, and it will encompass the literature on the matter.

Chapter 3 will present the experiment conducted, its criteria and its results. It will highlight the main implication of the results as well as its limits.

# Chapter 1

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WOM

Word of mouth refers to the flow of communication amongst consumers about a purchasing experience (Westbrook, 1987). It is one of the most powerful communication tools since and because it is one of the main drivers of consumers' buying decisions (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988).

WOM could very likely be the most ancient way to share one's ideas, and it has been used as a way to communicate opinions since people began to exchange information amongst themselves. The way word of mouth has been conveyed has experienced processes of evolution alongside the societal evolution itself. The major mutation it has undergone is the changing process from a mere unconscious act to something that marketers try to use and influence. (Sernovitz, 2009)

Speaking of WOM as a marketing tool, it has been proven that word of mouth, vis-à-vis marketing-initiated communication, is far more credible. (Allsop et al, 2007). Thus, consumers are more likely to judge as sincere and trustworthy someone's opinion with respect to formal advertising. Some researchers have found that WOM alone is able to influence up to 70% of a person's buying decision process (Balter, 2008), and it is considered to be the main driver in two-thirds of all the industries (Dye, 2000).

This chapter on Word of Mouth aims at giving an overview on the topic as well as giving a distinction between traditional WOM and online WOM; it also wants to provide a deeper understanding on what people share the most, the consequences of their WOM, and the reasons behind a person's WOM.

## 1.1 Traditional Word Of Mouth

The first real research about word of mouth is dated 1955. In their book *Personal influence*, Katz and Lazarsfeld give a clear definition as well as important contributions for what concerns WOM and its influential capabilities. In their research, they found that “informal personal advise” (namely, word of mouth), as having, at the time, far more impact than mass media advertising; they proposed that suggestions from person to person are more powerful (in terms of the intensity of the message) to the recipient than formal and mere advertising.

After Katz and Lazarsfeld, WOM has been vastly discussed in literature. The first clear definition comes from the work of Arndt (1967), who describes WOM as an “*oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product, or a service*”

We now know that WOM has some peculiar features: it is transmitted orally (loose characteristic, since the coming of the web has revolutionized WOM and in the online environment it is no longer oral), it is a person-to-person communication, and it concerns a buying experience. Stating that WOM is a person-to-person communication is an important turning point; if it is a one-to-one communication it means that it has to be somewhat different from other flows of communication.

We will now digress by taking a look at the different communication flows.

A **one-to-one communication** is a communication flow involving one sender and one receiver of a certain message. The contact is direct and very interactive, and, very often, it concerns people who are getting to know each other or who already know each other (Pitta and Fowler, 2005).

A **one-to-many communication** is a communication flow that involves a sender passing on the message to multiple persons (think, for instance, of a person standing in front of a crowd while conveying a message). Thanks to new technologies it is now possible for a person to reach quite an unlimited

number of people still maintaining the vibes of the message as being personal (Kiecker and Cowles, 2001).

A **many-to-many communication** is a communication flow that involves more than one sender and more than one receiver of the messages. Numerous people provide information about a certain experience to other people; messages are, thus, available to everybody (Pitta and Fowler, 2005).

At this point, it is important to make a clear distinction about the phases of WOM and how it is passed on. “WOM generation” is a word of mouth that is passed on as a result of a personal experience; if I “generate” WOM, it means that I am sharing an experience that I personally had. In contrast, “WOM transmission” is a word of mouth that is passed on as a result of someone else’s experience; if I “transmit” WOM, it means that I am sharing an experience that I have heard of, and that I have not experienced myself directly. (De Angelis et al., 2012)

This distinction will come in handy especially during the experiment, where every reference to WOM is related to “WOM generation” and “WOM generation” only.

After Arndt’s early contribution to the definition of WOM, word of mouth has been analyzed even more deeply, mainly in the last three decades. Stern (1994) made a more satisfying definition:

« WOM occurs in real time and real life: it refers to utterances that can be taken as the verbal acts of real persons on specific occasions in response to particular circumstances. These utterances are personally motivated, spontaneous, ephemeral, and informal in structure – that is, they are not paid for by a sponsor; they are not composed and revised over time; they disappear as soon as they are uttered; and they are not consciously structured by means of literacy devices (imagery, rhythm, rhyme) or formal patterns (poetic, epic, and so forth) ».

Stern goes one step further and introduces the spontaneity of WOM, which is a crucial characteristic of word of mouth, without which we would not have the legitimacy of WOM itself. Stern makes this point clear in order to differentiate and, in some sense, elevate WOM to a completely different level



with respect to formal advertising, which is *paid for by a sponsor [...] composed and revised over time* (Stern, 1994).

The last contribution, that is important to mention and discuss for the prosecution of this thesis, is the one of Dwyer (2007), who embodies previously discussed characteristics of WOM and enhances them with the idea of networking: *"Word of mouth is a network phenomenon: People create ties to other people with the exchange of units of discourse (that is, message) that link to create an information network while the people create a social network"*.

With this last definition, the spectrum of characteristics of word of mouth is much more clear and complete; the inclusion of the social aspect of WOM is crucial for the development of the idea of Online WOM and Social Media WOM. When people share experiences, they create links and ties between each other.

Sharing information (sending a message to a recipient) is the cause of the creation of interpersonal bonds, and of Social Networks, enhanced by an information network. Since this thesis revolves around the concept of social media WOM, it is important to state that social media word of mouth is imprinted on the concept of information sharing in a social network scenario.

Most of the literature about word of mouth has been focused on the consequences, and how it may influence, stimulate, and alter people's choices. Less attention has been devoted to the rationale behind one's willingness and eagerness to WOM, so much that many have described WOM as the *"world's most effective yet less understood marketing strategy"* (Misner, 1999); in this regard many researches have been trying to evaluate one's willingness to share a particular message based upon the valence of the message itself, i.e. if it embodies a negative or a positive message. This field of research and its implications is preparatory for the experiment that will follow and it will be discussed in chapter 2.

As we have said multiple times, this thesis revolves around the concept of Social Media Word of mouth, especially for the construction of the

experiment that will follow; it is, thus, mandatory to cover the literature about online WOM, its implications and its characteristics, and how traditional word of mouth it translated in the online world.

## 1.2 Online Word Of Mouth

«Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or a company which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet» (Henning – Thureau et al, 2004)

As the name itself suggests, Online WOM is that particular word of mouth that is transmitted or generated, but not necessarily originated in an online environment.

Online WOM clearly stems from traditional WOM, and for this reason it preserves the peculiar qualities of the traditional one, with the exception of not being transmitted orally. Researches in this field has led to believe that the closeness of characteristics between traditional and online WOM is such that the consumer motives that are relevant to traditional WOM, are also relevant to online WOM. (Henning- Thureau et al, 2004). For this reason, the functions of word of mouth analyzed in the previous Chapter remain in force in an online environment

Online WOM is indeed a very powerful tool, and one of the most influential marketing tools. 59% of people report that they frequently share online content with others (Alsopp et al., 2007). Its influential power mainly comes from two additional qualities (with respect to traditional WOM).

The first characteristic is the easiness to share: the Internet now enables consumers to collect impartial product information from other customers in a very easy way as well as communicating their personal experiences (Henning - Thureau et al, 2004). New communication channels, such as the Internet, mobile phones, text messaging, email, instant messaging and blogs, have all made it very easy to share information (Alsopp et al., 2007).

The second characteristic is the reach. As the web grows, as the Internet enlarges, as new online ways of communicating are created, as social networks gain more importance, and as new social networks emerge, online

WOM has gained a lot of interest and relevancy, mainly due to its broader echo. Online WOM is able to reach a much bigger target for an unspecified period of time, in clear contrast with a mere spoken word, which is very confined in time lifespan (Henning – Thureau, 2004). In addition, Technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and texting have only increased the speed and ease of communication (Berger, 2014).

We have briefly introduced the various media through which the online WOM can be activated. All the above-mentioned media and more make up for what is called Social Media, being defined as *“a group of Internet-Based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009).

For the purpose of this thesis and of the experiment that will follow, it is important to spell out clear definitions of three particular online media: Email, Instant messaging, and Social networking sites.

An email is a quick and easy method to communicate with other people, it is possible to relate with one or with many receivers at the same time. It is an important tool for both organizational and interpersonal communication (Wang et al, 2009)

Instant messaging is said to be a computerized application that allow somebody to exchange text messages among two or more people using the Internet (Huang and Leung, 2009). Its use is largely and mainly employed by a younger audience (Huang and Leung, 2009).

E-mails and instant messages, if directed toward one and only one person, can share the same characteristics, which are: 1.written communication, 2. Small audience (one person de facto), 3.possible stronger ties with the WOM receiver, and 4.the WOM receiver is actually physically present (Berger, 2014) (these peculiarities will be taken as given in the experiment is Chapter 3).

A social networking site, which is the youngest born among these three media, is defined as a web site *“allowing people to 1.construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system. 2. Articulate a list of other users*

*with whom they share a connection, and 3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system".* Another approach of defining SNSs comes from the work of Trusov et al. in 2009, describing a Social Network as *"a small group of founders who send out invitations to join the site to the members of their own personal networks. In turn, new members send invitations to their networks and so on"*.

This view emphasizes the creation of a social network online and shifts the attention to the incorporation of a person's real life networks in an online environment. At the moment the most prominent social networking sites (SNSs) are Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, even though in recent times, other SNSs have gained a lot of attention in terms of subscribers and online traffic.

It is important to give a clear definition of the characteristics of a Social Network's public post. It involves, de facto, a 1. written communication, 2. A broad reach, and 3. Weak ties strength with the WOM receivers, and 4. the target audience is not physically present (Berger, 2014) (these peculiarities will also be taken as given in the experiment in Chapter 3).

### **1.3 Word Of Mouth Motivators**

This paragraph is devoted to understand the drivers and the psychological motives behind any WOM communication. Although the importance and the frequency of WOM is very clear, the rationale behind it, i.e. why people share information and experience, is a much less understood, and for this reason, it is much more studied.

It is important to state right away that the motives analyzed are valid for traditional Word of mouth and for online WOM, as their close relation has been proven (Henning-Thurau, 2004), and it will be discussed in a more refined manner in Chapter 1.3-1.4.

Many researches have tried to inspect this field of study in order to give an answer to "why people share in the first place", and "why certain types of content is shared more often than other types of content", even though it is

known that consumers, and, in general, people do not act homogeneously and have different motives for engaging in word of mouth (Henning-Thurau, 2004).

In order to address *virality*, some argue that this phenomenon (i.e. the tendency of an image, video, or piece of information to be circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another; the quality or fact of being viral), which can be seen as a proxy for “why certain types of content is shared more often than other types of content”, is just driven by randomness (Cashmore, 2009), while others believe that certain characteristics alter the likelihood of a content to be shared. Recent studies have shown that people are more likely to share content that is accessible. Accessibility, used in this framework, refers to the capability of content to be easily brought up in a conversation. People tend to talk about product or events that are top of mind. (Berger and Swartz, 2011).

Of course certain content have to be, in some degree, interesting to be shared (Sernovitz, 2006), because nobody would want to talk about boring things. Along this line of thought, Hughes (2005) states that bizarre, curious, and remarkable are more incline to generate conversation.

At first glance, out of intuition, one may think that consumers may share content with other people for altruistic motives, that is for helping others; although this is, in fact, the psychological starting point, along with the need for self-enhancement, of this field of study (Wojnicki and Godes, 2008), it is just the tip of the iceberg of the possible explanation we will discuss in this paragraph.

Drafting a list of WOM drivers is not an easy task, and this topic is still actively debated in literature; however, there have been important contributions that have tried to clarify this matter. The first work that truly acted as a door opener is the one of Dichter (1966); he analyzed the underlying motivational aspects of positive WOM and classified them into: 1.*Product-involvement*, which is when the customer feels so close to a certain product that pressure builds up in wanting to transmit to others the same feelings. 2.*Self-involvement*, which is when the product serves as a

vehicle for emotional needs' gratification by the consumer. 3. *Other-involvement*, which is when the consumer uses WOM as a vehicle to give something to the receiver. 4. *Message-involvement*, which refers to the discussion triggered by marketing initiatives, such as advertisements or commercials. The preliminary work left by Dichter has been taken as a reference for further modifications throughout the years.

The second focal contribution that shed even more light on the matter is "*Word-of-Mouth communication: A Motivational Analysis*" by Sundaram, Mitra, Webster. After a significant amount of critical-incident interviews they found to be consistent eight motives that drive word of mouth communication: four for positive WOM, and four for negative WOM. The underlying motives for positive WOM are the following: *altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company*; and the ones for negative WOM are the following: *altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance, and advice seeking*.

The definitive work, which is taken as a primary reference for this thesis is Berger's work (2014): "*Word of mouth and interpersonal communication: A review and directions for future research*".

Berger takes WOM motivations to a whole new level and scrupulously arranges the psychological drivers into five main areas we will now discuss: *Impression Management, Emotion Regulation, Information Acquisition, Social Bonding, and Persuading Others*.

### 1.3.1 *Impression management*

*Impression Management* refers to the people's willingness to shape what others think of them. It is how people present themselves, and would like other people to see them. Impression management will be the main focus of Chapter 2, and it will be talked about in a detailed way, as well as amplifying the concept.

### 1.3.2 *Emotion regulation*

*Emotion Regulation* refers to ability of word of mouth to manipulate and regulate one's emotions. It is about how people manage emotions, how they interact with them, how they utilize word of mouth to express them, how they

experience them, and when they have them (Gross, 1998, 2008). We know that emotions are highly impacted by external factors, i.e. externalities that alter our mood, and emotion regulation is a way through which people may try to enhance or reduce the particular state of emotions they are in.

Commiserating with a friend about an unlucky experience we just had is a perfect example of emotion regulation through word of mouth, i.e. trying to relieve some of the stress generated by the externalities by communicating it to someone else- the social sharing of emotions constitutes a relevant medium through which regulating emotions (Rimè, 2009).

Berger (2014) amplifies the concept of emotion regulation, and identifies six ways thanks to which the act of sharing helps regulating emotions: 1. *Generating social support*, 2. *Venting*, 3. *Sense making*, 4. *Reducing dissonance*, 5. *Taking vengeance*, and 6. *Encouraging rehearsal*.

1. *Generating social support*- it refers to the consolation and compassion of the receiver toward the sender (Rimè, 2009). It is the power of interpersonal communication to generate help from others or social support. Recent research has proven that the act of sharing with others a recent negative emotional experience helps the sharer to heal the negativity and regain some of the positivity lost (Berger and Buechel, 2012). Early evidence of such effect can also be found in older and more general studies, like Schachter's (1959), in which an experiment proven that people who were afraid of receiving an electric shock were more likely to remain with other people as a way to console themselves.
2. *Venting*- Communicating experience is also important as it allows people to vent (Henning-Thurau, 2004). The Collins Dictionary defines the verb to vent as "*to release or give expression or utterance to (an emotion, idea, etc.)*", Venting basically refers to the catharsis as stress relief, sharing negative experiences so as to let out some of the generated anger.

3. *Sense making*- Sharing an experience is helpful to the sender in order to better understand what is going on and why it happened what happened (Rimè, 2009). Talking to others may help in defining what emotion we are really feeling at the moment, or why we are feeling that particular emotion in that particular moment (Rimè, 2009). Trying to re-evocate the experience and, thus, putting emotions into words requires the sharer to make an extreme effort in clearly reappraising the emotional motive. It can be a very hard task but it has been proven to lead to recovery from the negative experience (Pennebaker et al., 2001).
4. *Reducing dissonance*- even if it has been proven that people are more likely to confirm their own ideas when talking to others, (Dichter, 1966), other studies have shown that when uncertainty arises, as a result of an ambiguous experience, people tend to share said experience so as to double check if they made the right decision or not, if their train of thoughts make any sense and is in line with the one of the receiver of the experience (Engel et al., 1993).
5. *Taking vengeance*- sharing WOM for taking vengeance for a negative experience is very similar the power of venting WOM has, but it differs in the sense that, at times, people would communicate a negative experience they had in order to somehow punish the person or the company with which they had the bad experience, so as to damage them. Dissatisfied consumers, for example, are more likely to share negative WOM for pure vengeance purposes (Anderson, 1998).
6. *Encouraging rehearsal*- the act or talking about past positive experience is a way of regulating emotions. In this way, reappraised good experiences can positively boost our mood. Talking about



positive things elicits pleasurable feelings (Dichter, 1966). Dichter stressed this concept and many times describes WOM as a way to “*relieve the pleasure the speaker has obtained*”

We can conclude that the role of emotions is very important. In this regard, a relevant contribution we cannot miss out is the work of Berger and Milkman (2011).

Knowing that emotions play a big role in the communication of experiences, they analyzed which content would be more likely to become viral, based on its level of emotionality. Findings suggested that content that evoked high-arousal emotions is more likely to become viral (no matter if it is negative or positive). Content filled with deactivating emotions is less likely to be shared. Even if this study suggests that valence (positivity versus negativity) is a superficial characteristic, it is still considered a turning point in the analysis of shared content, and it will be discussed in Section 2.2.

### 1.3.3 *Information Acquisition*

*Information acquisition* refers to the need and want of the sender to get information about something.

Word of mouth is used to proactively look for pieces of information in order to have a clearer understanding of for example, what we are going to buy; we seek information in order to take the definitive purchasing decision. In this scenario sharing will have the function of *Seeking advice* and *Resolving problems*.

1. *Seeking advice*- The search for another person’s opinion on a specific matter is one way WOM is used for acquiring information (Henning-Thurau et al, 2004). People often look for advice when they are uncertain about a decision they are about to make or when they do not have enough knowledge on a specific subject. Seeking advice is basically seeking for assistance in the form of suggestions of recommendations (Dichter, 1966).

2. *Resolving problems*- Problem solving through Word of mouth is one of the main findings of Sundaram et al. (1998). The process of talking to others as a consequence of personal problems, for instance, with a product, is an efficient and effective way of solving it. Online opinion platforms, such as blogs, forums and social networks are all examples of places in which people often resolve problems just by communicating them and by receiving feedbacks and opinions (Henning-Thurau et al, 2004)

#### 1.3.4 *Social Bonding*

*Social Bonding* refers to WOM as a mean to connect with other people (Rimè, 2009). It is known that interpersonal communication has been used throughout the years as a mean for creating bonds between people, which is one of the most crucial need for human being (Henning-Thurau et al, 2004). A slightly different aspect with respect of social bonding is interpersonal closeness.

In this section we are analyzing WOM as a way to engage in new acquaintances, and as a way to create social connections; although the concept of interpersonal closeness is different from social bonding, it is important to be discussed since it is one of the main affecting factors of WOM.

Interpersonal closeness refers to the feeling of attachment a person has towards another, more specifically, to the perceived attachment (Dibble, Levine, and Park, 2012). Interpersonal closeness incorporates the concept of tie strengths and completes it with perceived psychological proximity between two people. In this regard, there have been numerous studies trying to find a nexus between IC (interpersonal closeness) and WOM valence (willingness to share positive or negative things). It has been shown, for instance, that when two people feel distant one another, it is more likely that they engage in behaviors directed at promoting one's favorable image (Blaine and Crocker, 1993), and they tend to talk about positive news (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Further empirical findings suggest that the more

attached two people are, the more likely they are to share negative experiences relative to positive experiences (De Angelis et al., 2012).

This digression about interpersonal closeness serves to better understand Social Bonding that we are now going to discuss in a more detailed way, following Berger's work. Social Bonding is said to serve the following functions: 1.*Reinforce shared view*, and 2.*Reducing loneliness and social exclusion*

1. *Reinforce shared view*: Talking to somebody else about something in common (sport team, for instance), should reinforce the bonds you already established. Talking about a social matter with someone with which you have similar views is able to reinforce the interpersonal bonds you have (Ritson and Elliott, 1999). It has been shown that in an online environment, and in particular, on Social Networks, people tend to communicate and develop relationships with likeminded (Bickart and Schindler, 2001)
2. *Reducing loneliness and social exclusion*: Sharing experiences also soften the feeling of loneliness. Feeling alone or left out from a certain social scenario should increase one's willingness to share information and experiences (Lakin, Chartrand, and Arkin, 2008). Although there are not any empirical evidence to support what follows, boredom could also trigger similar effects as loneliness, even if they are two different phenomena, they could respond to the same stimuli.

#### 1.3.5 *Persuading others*

The fifth and final function of WOM, taken from 2014 work by Berger is to persuade other people. This function of word of mouth is very straightforward, especially in sales environments. Sharing a real or fake positive experience about a restaurant might very well result in the WOM recipient going to that restaurant; opposite result with a negative WOM.

WOM as a persuading tool can obviously be used in a non-sales environment, extensively talking about your favorite team to a friend may lead that friend to ultimately like that team. This view is in line with the fact that 70% of ongoing WOM is concentrated on the self (Dunbar et al, 1997); in parallel, 70% of Social media posts are also about the self or one's experience (Naaman, Boase, Lai, 2010)

We will now discuss the similarities and differences between online and traditional Word of Mouth, then we will take a more accurate look at the characteristics of WOM and how it can change according to these characteristics

#### 1.4 Online WOM versus Traditional WOM

So far we have analyzed Online WOM as having inherited all the characteristics of traditional WOM and as enhancing them with new features. We can now highlight the commonalities and, most importantly, the differences between the two forms of word of mouth. The first clear difference is the **environment** in which word of mouth takes place: offline in the traditional WOM, and online in the online WOM; second main difference is the **perishability** of the message: perishable in the traditional WOM since it is transmitted through spoken words, and non-perishable in the online WOM since it is transmitted through a written message, thus remaining available for a substantial period of time; the last distinguishing characteristic is the **reach**: limited to a person-to-person or a person-to-few communication in the traditional WOM, and, instead, able to reach a much broader audience in the online WOM. Online is, indeed, able to make one person's experience arrive to many people as well as containing said opinion to a one-to-one communication, according on the media chosen. A public post on a social network, for instance, can reach a broader mass with respect to a communication via private chat or email, which is predominantly one-to-one, even if, at will, it is possible to have a one-to-many communication.

In the experiment conducted, great importance has been attributed to the media chosen to communicate one's opinion. This choice has been primarily made upon the nature of the media: one was chosen for its peculiar narrow reach with respect to the other media chosen, peculiar for its broad reach. It is now important to highlight the qualities of narrow and wide reach communication.

#### 1.4.1 *Written versus Oral*

Out of intuition, we can state that communicating face-to-face with someone, for whatever reason, is a whole different story than sending a letter or an email to the same person. The main difference between oral communications (e.g. face-to-face, phone call, Skype) and a written communication (e.g. a letter, an email, a private message, an SMS, online posts) is their *timing*: an oral conversation, more often than not, is carried out in a synchronized timing. Little to no breaks in the conversation, and quick thinking; most written communications, in turn, are asynchronous, since people can take their time and even revise what they are about to express (Berger and Iyengar, 2013). As a result of different timing, a written message is far more likely to be perceived more polite than an oral message (Duthler, 2006). This undergoes all the implications of sending a polite message or a less polite message.

Written words are also said to have an indefinite lifespan (Henning-Thurau, 2004), and for this reason, consumers can always come back to it and read more carefully, gaining an even more detailed understanding. (Andreassen and Streukens, 2009).

#### 1.4.2 *Broad reach versus Narrow reach.*

We will now focus on the difference between broad reach and narrow reach, so as to have a better understanding of the results, and implications of the two communication schemes.

As we have said, it is evident that traditional word of mouth occurs in a face-to-face scenario and it is thus limited to a very narrow reach; in contrast with

online word of mouth, which amplifies the reach to a broader audience. Because of the Internet, online WOM is now able to reach audience at an unprecedented rate (Delarocas, 2003), as it only needs the recipient of the message to have a computer with Internet access, a mobile phone, or any other similar electronic device. Of course, this does not mean that traditional word of mouth is exclusively limited to a one-to-one communication, nor that online word of mouth is exclusively a broad reach communication; but the sources using online word of mouth communication have considerably more options available for passing on the word with respect to traditional WOM communication.

In this section, two are the contributions that majorly spell out the characteristics and qualities of a narrow reach and a broad reach. The first is “*Service innovation and electronic word-of-mouth: is it worth listening to?*” by Andreassen and Streukens (2009), and the second is “*Broadcasting an Narrowcasting. How Audience Size Impacts What People Share*” by Berger and Barasch (2014). Andreassen and Streukens, in their work, make an interesting distinction between what they call “*private rooms*” and “*public rooms*”. Traditional WOM is carried out in “*private rooms*”, whereas online WOM, or e-WOM is carried out in “*public rooms*”. (Andreassen and Streukens, 2009). Private rooms (and as a result, traditional WOM) are said to generate narrow reach and the speed at which the message travels is relatively slow. Public rooms (and as a result, e-WOM), because of the Internet, generate a much broader reach and the message is able to run freely much faster and much further, due to its public nature.

But, how does the actual reach, i.e. knowing the audience to which our message arrives, impacts what we share? The work of Berger and Barasch sheds light on the matter and gives preliminary insights on the topic. We refer to broadcasting as communicating with a large group of people, and to narrowcasting as communicating with one person. (Barasch and Berger, 2014) .The distinction is valid and it holds in a traditional word of mouth scenario (narrowcasting would be talking face-to-face with one person, whilst broadcasting would be, for instance, talking in front of an audience, or to a

large group of friends), as well as in the online scenario (narrowcasting would be, for instance, sending an instant message or an email to a colleague or a friend, whilst broadcasting would be, for instance, writing a public post and sharing it on Facebook or Twitter). Key findings in their work highlight that, on average, broadcasting encourages people to share more likely self-presentational content; it leads people to be less likely to share negative events, and reframe already shared negative events to make them seem less negative, avoid negative conversation in a face-to-face situation, and also avoid sharing things that would somehow make them look bad. Narrowcasting, in contrast, has been proven to lead people to be more likely to share content that is helpful to the person they are talking to, rather than self-presentational content (Barasch and Berger, 2014). These findings are consistent with, and are reinforced by impression management motives (to be dealt with in Chapter 2).

Stemming from their work, the experiment that will follow, borrows the concept of narrowcasting and broadcasting, although limiting it to an online scenario, and it also expects similar results in terms of valence.

So far we have seen how WOM is generated, what are its characteristics, its various forms, the way it can be transmitted, and what are the rationales behind it. While covering WOM functions we left a topic unspoken on purpose: Impression Management. We will devote an entire chapter on the matter, and we will expand said topic in order to give it a more complex and in-depth look. By completing the idea of impression management with the concept of face and facework, we will have a clearer picture of how impression management can alter WOM and WOM generation. The concept discussed is preparatory for the experiment at the heart of this thesis.

## Chapter 2

### IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND FACE THEORY

This Chapter will serve the purpose of introducing both the concept of Impression Management and the concept of Face and Facework. It is crucial to give importance to these topics because they structure the experiment that will come. We will analyze these topics in conjunction, since they are similar and they are able to complete one another, even if they come from different branches of science. This chapter will first introduce impression management, stemming from the 2014 work of Berger, thus continuing what we have left off in the section about WOM functions; then it will introduce Face and Face Theory, as it has been depicted in literature and it will connect the two concepts.

#### 2.1 Impression Management

Let's go back to what we have left incomplete in Section 1.2. As a matter of fact, we have started to take a look at impression management as one of the five basic functions of word of mouth, following Berger's *“Word of mouth and interpersonal communication: A review and directions for future research”*. Impression management, as a function of WOM, refers to the capabilities of word of mouth to shape the opinions and the impressions that others have on them, and have of themselves. Presenting yourself, through the communication of one or more personal experiences, serves the purpose of trying to shape in other people's mind the opinion they should have of you. In this perspective, social interactions are means through which a person presents himself in order to achieve a desired impression (Goffman, 1959). Evidence of Impression management can be traced back in time, since it is a well-described and well-known phenomenon. The famous saying “the dress



does not make the priest“ can be closely related to this concept. Indeed, it refers to the clothing of a person, proxy of his image and exterior appearance, as a way to define a person in a deeper way. In the same fashion, presenting yourself, through word or by communicating something, is a way to let other people define you in a way you want them to define you. Dressing up nicely for a job application suggests your professionalism; similarly WOM is used to present yourself or to present the way you want to be perceived (Berger, 2014).

A key finding in literature that is important to mention when talking about impression management, is that, in general, talking to a broader audience is likely to activate impression management motives (Barasch and Berger, 2014); and, talking to a psychologically perceived distant other, is also likely to prompt impression management while engaging in word of mouth (Belk, 1988).

As for the other functions of WOM already analyzed, word of mouth and interpersonal communication facilitate impression management in the following ways: 1. *Self-enhancement*, 2. *identity-signaling*, 3. *Filling conversational space*.

#### 2.1.1 *Self-enhancement*

The first way WOM helps to facilitate impression management is through the enhancement of the self. Self-enhancement is described as one of the fundamental motivations for a human (Fiske, 2001). It is obvious that people want to be perceived in a positive way and that they will try to present themselves in a way that triggers such impression. What people talk about shapes how others see them, or perceive them (Baumeister, 1998-de angelis braggards). For this reason, people are, on average, more likely to share things aimed at making them look good rather than bad (Henning-Thurau, 2004). The same concept can be rephrased, in the sense that people are more likely to share things aimed at avoiding bad impressions.

Self-enhancement is closely connected with the maintenance of one's self-esteem (Brown, Collins, and Scmhidt, 1988); people with low self-esteem are

more prone to seek self-enhancement, thus they are more prone to engage in WOM for self-enhancement purposes (Jones, 1973). The presentation of the self (i.e. self-presentation) can be either *protective*, that is, self-presentation done in order to avoid bad reputation and social disapproval in general (Richins, 1983), or it can be *acquisitive*, that is, self-presentation done in order to look good and seeking social approval (Brown, Collins, and Scmhidt, 1988).

Talking about self-enhancement is a crucial step. This underlying motive also appeared in the word of Sundaram et al. (1998), but it was regarded as the least relevant amongst the other discussed drivers and motivators. More weight had been attributed to, for instance, altruism and product-involvement. Although this is a respectable view, the paper was drafted in 1998, way before the birth of social media and way before the advances in social media communication. In fact, the boom of Online Social Networking sites, and its correlated advances in terms of communication and WOM spreading, has been able to shed new light on the topic of self-enhancement, since it is now easy to “publicise” oneself and one’s experiences, beliefs, and opinions. The tendency of the new generations to focus on the self and to bring attention to themselves, exactly reflects the concept we are dealing with in this Section, as it revolves around the idea of constructing and protecting a projection of the self in an online Network of interpersonal connections (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009).

Speaking about self-enhancement, there has been found a substantial connection between said phenomenon and WOM valence. Although, in general, consumers tend to share more positive information, less is known about the underlying motive.

De Angelis et al. (2012) asserted that self-enhancement could very well give explanation on when a WOM sender is more likely to share positive over negative content. After conducting three experiments, findings suggested that people, who seek self-enhancement, are more prone to generate positive content, but they tend to transmit more negative content. Study 3 of this

research, also shows that the findings are far more credible and reliable if applied to a person with relatively low self-esteem.

### *2.1.2 Identity-signaling*

Identity-signaling is part of impression management since it refers to the capability of word of mouth to let one person communicate his identity, both to himself and to others.

Talking about a specific matter often is a sign that you may be passionate about that matter; for instance, always talking about football with others, might mean that you want to signal your passion about the sport, as being part of your identity and your self. This concept may be confused with self-enhancement, but they differ because identity-signaling, although exploiting self-enhancement mechanisms, is aimed at signaling to others that you have specific characteristics, interests, and knowledge on a specific topic (Chung & Darke, 2006). Studies on people's willingness to share have shown how connected people's shared content is with identity-signaling motives (Feick & Price, 1987). Individuals that have, or wish to have, a particular high knowledge on a subject are found to be more prone to share that knowledge or part of that knowledge.

### *2.1.3 Filling conversational space*

Small talks and chat is what filling conversational space refers to. When engaging in chats people tend to share almost anything, no matter if it is interesting or not, in order to fill up the conversational space. The reason being is that resting in silence before another person may trigger negative inferences toward your being (Clark, 1996). Taking time between conversational turns is something to be avoided, and if it happens it may be interpreted as a bad thing, ultimately leading the other person to make negative attributions of you (Loewenstein, Morris, Chakavrarti, Thompson and Kopelman, 2005).

## 2.2 Consequences of Impression Management on WOM

It is easy to see how the three drivers above discussed can influence and trigger word of mouth communication. It is clear, on what forces impression management acts upon and why it causes people to engage in WOM. In this Section we will investigate what type of content is more likely to be shared if the underlying force that is hindering it, is, indeed, impression management. Berger (2014) finds that impression management encourages people of sharing nine recurring topics or areas of content, which he classifies into: 1. *Entertaining things*, 2. *Useful information*, 3. *Self-concept relevant things*, 4. *High status goods*, 5. *Unique things*, 6. *Common ground*, 7. *Emotional valence*, 8. *Incidental arousal*, and 9. *Accessibility*.

1. *Entertaining things*- As Sernovitz (2006) suggests, boring content is not likely to be shared, and, by contrast, interesting content is more likely to be passed on. In the same fashion entertaining things have more probability to be talked about; impression management should ultimately lead the sharer to talk more about entertaining things so as to make himself look funny, accepted or knowledgeable in the eyes of others. Berger and Milkman (2012) analyzed a set of over 7000 New York articles, and tried to give an explanation for why certain articles were more feasible to be shared than other articles. They took a step further in terms of valence study and they found that more emotionally loaded articles were more prone to be shared. Articles containing interesting, surprising and entertaining features more appeared than often in the paper's Most Emailed List. Impression management also leads people to distort the story or the experience they are telling, by making it more interesting and appealing (Marsch & Tversky, 2004).
2. *Useful information*- Impression management might also make the sharer want to engage in WOM communication providing useful

information to the receiver, thus resulting somewhat knowledgeable and helpful. Also stemming from Berger and Milkman's work (2012), we know that articles containing useful content are more likely to be shared. Restaurant reviews, for instance, are examples of articles that frequently made the New York Times's Most Emailed List. The idea of sharing useful content is in line with the desire of a person's identity-signaling; communicating to other the bad weather that is coming means sharing useful information in order to make others judge you as clever, smart and knowledgeable.

3. *Self-concept relevant things*- Impression management should also be able to shape what we talk about in terms of information relevant to our identity. For example, there are certain categories of product that, if talked about, are more capable of defining the identity we want to transmit (i.e. talking about a particular sport, or a particular brand of cars, versus talking about a brand of shampoo, should let other people better grasp the identity we want them to signal) (Belk, 1988). Differences in what people talk about should influence their WOM communication and their impression management. Often talking about politics, rather than talking about discos, should signal an engagement in social activities and a superior knowledge in said matter, leading the receiver to signal your political knowledge.
4. *High status goods*- Talking about luxury good should make the receiver sense your wealth. Impression management should encourage high status good to be talked about. Talking about a fancy dinner you had in a restaurant, or how you like a well-known and expensive brand of wristwatches should signal that you are

accustomed to those types of goods, hence, making you look good in front of other people.

5. *Unique things*- impression management should also lead people to talk about peculiar, unique or special products. Owning and talking about a unique product should ultimately lead others to associate the product uniqueness with the speaker's uniqueness. At times, people who share WOM about special product may do so in a non-positive way: spreading too much positive word about a product that you want to remain unique can be counter effective, for this reason "early-adopters" of a product may "share and scare", meaning that, while sharing information, they tend to scare off the WOM receiver in such a way that the product complexity may refrain them from buying it (Maldovan, Steinhart, and Ofen, 2012).
  
6. *Common ground*- Early evidence come from Clark (1996), talking about things that people have in common should also be encouraged by impression management mechanisms. This is in line with the idea of impression management, as a way to fill conversational spaces, since talking about a topic that people have in common should result in a smoother conversation with few silent and blank spaces left. Having a common ground also leads the people who engage in WOM to feel more empathic and interpersonally close one another, and, as a result, looking good in reciprocal eyes.
  
7. *Emotional valence*- We have already analyzed emotional valence as one of the main primary functions of WOM motivators. However Emotional Valence could also be triggered and generated by

impression management mechanisms. More generally this Section will provide an explanation on how impression management influences the valence of the WOM shared. In general, people tend to prefer sharing positive news with respect to negative news (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Vast fields of research suggest that positive WOM is more likely to generate a desired impression in the receiver's mind, and that positive WOM is more likely to make the WOM sender knowledgeable and expert on the topic (Wojnicki and Godes, 2011). The reason being can be traced back to self-enhancement motives, because people tend to avoid sharing negative events in order to avert being associated with the negative outcome (Bell, 1978). The valence of WOM often signals a psychological reflection of the sender; people may engage in positive word of mouth about an experience to show that they make good choices, hence looking good. This concept has its limitations since it does not take into account WOM phases. De Angelis et al. (2012), although attributing importance and recognizing the role of self-enhancement as a motivator, finds that WOM valence changes drastically according to WOM phases. Positive WOM is more likely to occur in WOM generation, and negative WOM is more likely to be shared in WOM transmission. What we have said so far about the relation between emotional valence and impression management is that impression management seems to trigger most positive WOM, so as to make people look good in front of others. That is not always the case, though. A parallel field of study asserts the exact opposite: negative word of mouth facilitates a desired end-state impression. In his work, Amabile (1983), discovered that reviewers tend more to write negative reviews and to highlight negative features, and in doing so they would look more intelligent, knowledgeable, and competent. The population of reviewers is not a good sample of the population, since they make remuneration out of it, often

leading their opinions to be deceiving and biased. Following Amabile, other researches have shown that concerns about being evaluated by a public could result in a higher number of negative ratings in certain situations (Schlosser, 2005). Preliminary findings in the relationship between Impression management and WOM valence have proven that the connection exists, however less is known about the exact effect on valence. The experiment that will follow in Chapter 3 will predict, along with other predictions, that impression management and Facework ultimately lead people to share more positive versus negative content.

8. *Incidental arousal*- Researches on the field of rumors have found that periods of turmoil, crisis, instability, catastrophes and so on, due to their attached high level of anxiety, may increase the rate of rumors people spread around (Koenig, 1985). In the same fashion, incidental arousal can have a spillover effect, such that WOM communication gets amplified. In this scenario impression management mechanisms, self-enhancement in primis, accentuates the increased sharing driven by incidental arousal motivations.
  
9. *Accessibility*- Accessibility refers to peculiar characteristics of product that make them easy to encounter, frequent in use, frequent in disposition, or visible in public. Impression management should encourage people to talk about accessible product. Berger and Schwartz (2011) suggested that the main driver of WOM content is, indeed, accessibility. Above all, they asserted that WOM, particularly on-going WOM, is driven by accessibility and whether or not products are top of mind. This idea relates back to the previously analyzed brief chats, since the frequency of the occurrence of small talks is what makes



accessibility more relevant in comparison with, for instance, self-presentational concerns (Berger and Schwartz, 2011). In the research they investigated “*whether products more interesting, publicly visible, or cued by environment receive more WOM*” (Berger and Schwartz, 2011). Their theorizing stems from the fact that the frequency of small talks should encourage people to talk about product or events that are top of mind and accessible, like publicly visible goods (e.g. It is easier to hear people talking about a well-known brand of cereal rather than a brand of refined painting brushes, because the latter is not a publicly visible good) or products that necessarily come to your mind because they are contained as stimuli in the environment. The results of the analyzed work ultimately suggest that whether or not products are discussed and/or continue to be, does not depend on their interestingness or allure, but rather on their accessibility in consumers’ minds.

So far we have analyzed Impression management and we have attributed great importance and impact to it. We have explained how Berger (2014) depicts Impression management, what are its functions, what are its consequences on WOM communication, and how it drives people to share content over another.

This thesis wants to shed more light on the topic of Impression management since it is, amongst the functions included in literature, the one function that could very well have more impact on WOM generation, aims, and valence. The section that will follow has the purpose of enlarging the concept of Impression Management by borrowing the psychological concepts of Face and Face-Saving techniques.

The experiment In Chapter 3 will have at its core Impression Managements rationales, but since the concept is felt to be too rough and unrefined, there has been the need to try and give it a clear connotation and an extension of its theoretical construct. We have already seen how Impression Management

is able to alter and drive what people share; we have already seen, for instance, the capability of altering the valence of the WOM shared, but less is known about what particular aspect of Impression Management truly comes into play when manipulating one's WOM communication, and especially, the message valence. We have seen how Berger (2014) talks about how interpersonal communication helps Impression management: Self-enhancement, identity-signaling, and filling conversational space.

However this could not be the whole picture; the aspect that needs to be pointed out is the one of Face and Face-Saving concerns, as either part of Self-enhancement motives or as another aspect of Impression Management. We will now thoroughly discuss the matter of Face, Face theory and Facework so as to have a better understanding of the relation between said topic and Impression Management.

### **2.3 Face, Face Theory, and Facework**

The concept of Face, although highly attributable and relatable to all cultures, is born and is still more considered in Asian cultures.

In all the countries, Face is "*associated with respect, honor, status, reputation, credibility, competence, family/network connection, loyalty, trust, relational indebtedness, and obligation issues*" (Oetzel et al. 2001). In general, though, each notion of face refers to one's social image presented to others (Oetzel et al. 2001).

The first Western study on this topic was undergone by Goffman (1955), and he gave important contributions, defining face as "The positive social value a person claims for himself (herself) by the line others assume he (she) has taken during a participant contact". He goes on explaining how face is something that can be lost, saved, and protected. He, then, introduces the concept of facework, and he defines it as the actions taken by one person in order to counterbalance the perceived failure in presenting the self in the desired way. (Goffman, 1959).

Following Goffman's work, Yutang (1968) expanded the concept of Face, by defining it as "*a psychologically image that can be granted and lost and*

*fought for and presented as a gift*"; Schneider (F. Schneider, Getting Along with the Chinese (1992), instead presented the concept of face as " a person's social connections. You are not an 'individual' in the Western sense of being defined by your personality and character, but rather you're a locus within a social context. You are X's parent, Y's spouse, Z's friend, & Q's employee. Thus you loose face by violating the propriety of a relationship. You are defined by social existence." For the first time face is seen as something malleable according to the person you are approaching, dealing with, communicating to. Losing, saving, and maintaining face is thus a very complex process since it undergoes different standards congenial to the different relationship one faces. Luigi Pirandello, in a sense, precursor of this definition of face, in his Romance "One, no one and one hundred thousands", emphasizes the concept; without venturing in the philosophical implications of Pirandello's work, we can see how his idea of people having as many different selves as the interactions they incur in, highly relates with Schneider's idea of Face. (Rosa, 2012).

### 2.3.1 Politeness Theory-Face Saving View

In this Section we will introduce the work of Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987), stemming from the core concept of Face and approaching the field of study of Politeness Theory.

They framed their work on politeness around the concept of face; treating their model person as having 'face', one's self-esteem. Their idea of Face, comes directly from the work of Goffman (1967), and it can be summarized in the following way: "*public self-image, that every member [of a Society] wants to claim for himself*".

This definition is very similar to the one given by Goffman (1967) except for the fact that '*positive social value*' is replaced by '*public self-image*' in order to stress even more the role of Face as something directed to the public and to other people in general.

Although setting Goffman's work as their starting point, Brown and Levinson (1987) expanded the concept and based their theorizing on positive-negative

Face. They divided Face, into two different types according to their valence. Positive face, being defined as “*the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others [...], the want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded*”(Brown & Levinson, 1987); and negative face being defined as “*the want of every member [of a society] that his wants be desirable to at least some others [...], the perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values) resulting from them should be thought as desirable*” (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The core principle around which their theory revolves is the fact that there are some acts that are threatening to one’s face and thus require counteraction (i.e. facework) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To their saying, the counteraction often used is politeness. By employing politeness strategies (i.e. both convey polite messages and doing so in a polite way), people are able to minimize possible face losses resulting from interaction with others, thus saving their own face. Brown and Levinson (1987) classify the threatening acts into four main areas:

1. Acts threatening to the receiver’s Negative Face (for instance, ordering or impolitely advising)
2. Acts threatening to the receiver’s Positive Face (for instance, criticizing, disagreeing, and complaining)
3. Acts threatening to the sender’s Negative Face (for instance, accepting apologies or promising something without will)
4. Acts threatening to the sender’s Positive Face (apologizing or accepting compliments)

### 2.3.2 S. Ting-Toomey’ s theorizing on face

This is one of the most definitive contributions in literature about Face. Some definitions and ideas will represent focal points for the experiment in Chapter 3. Ting-Toomey (1988), in her work “*Intercultural Conflict Styles: A Face Negotiation Theory*” deeply and meticulously analyzed the concept and the previous literature in order to come up with a clearer scheme of the topic. The definition of face given states that it is a “*projected image of one’s self in*

a relational situation and it is an identity that is conjointly defined by the participants in a setting". Again, face is describes as the image of the self projected to others, and it is shaped and modified according to others' thoughts on it. Ting-Toomey (1988), then borrows the concept of *positive-negative face* from Brown and Levinson (1987), and adds to the overall study of face the ambivalence *self-other face*.

Griffin (1997) pointed out the importance of these two distinctions, because each of them responds to a specific question: "Are you seeking inclusion or autonomy?" (Negative - positive face); "whose face are you trying to save?" (self - other face).

Ting-Toomey(1988) classifies face into four subcategories according to which they are referred to (self-face or other-face), and to whether they imply positive or negative face.

1. *Face-Restoration or Self Negative-Face* is the term used to refer to the need protect the self from the infringement of one's freedom.
2. *Face-Saving or Other Negative-Face* is the term that refers to the need to respect the other so as to have him/her his/her own freedom and space respected.
3. *Face-Giving or Other Positive-Face* is the term used to refer to the need to take defense for another person who seeks inclusion in a particular social scenario.
4. *Face-Assertion or Self Positive-Face* is the term used to refer to the need to defend and protect the self-need for inclusion and association in a particular social scenario.

The one face of face that is crucial for this thesis is Ting-Toomey's concept of Face-assertion. This idea has been and will be referred to as face-saving, despite the fact that Ting-Toomey gives a whole another meaning to the expression "Face-Saving". The first reason for using the term is that, in the English language, *Face-assertion* intended as *Face-defense* has a very close meaning to *Face-saving*, but this final expression makes up for a clearer

connotation of the concept, in the sense that it is figuratively more understandable to refer to the need of protecting one's own face for inclusion motives as *Face-saving* (i.e. trying to save one's own public face), rather than *Face-assertion*. The second reason being is the fact that the expression *Face-saving* used in this thesis does not stem directly from Ting-Toomey's work (1988), but it rather is a conjunction and a resulting mix of many contribution in this field, from Ting-Toomey's contribution to Brown & Levinson's, from the literature in the field of Impression Management to the literature of self-enhancement.

As it can be extrapolated from the definition previously given, Face-saving is the act and the need of one person to try to protect his own image. This concept stems from Goffman (1967) and Brown & Levinson (1988); it, indeed, embraces the idea of maintaining and preserving one's public image, as they are expressed in the works above mentioned. In this scenario, the need of saving one's own face responds to the same mechanisms of Impression Management; not only it follows them, but it also extends said concept.

It is now easy to comprehend the connection between Face and Impression Management; in particular, self-enhancement motives and Face-saving needs, in this view, are complementary subjects. The willingness of enhance the self, and thus trying to present oneself in order to trigger a desired positive perception by others is completely in line with the need of saving, preserving, and maintaining self face; despite embodying slightly different meanings, they carry the same underlying notion.

Either if self-enhancement motives are *protective*, that is, self-presentation done in order to avoid bad reputation and social disapproval in general (Richins, 1983), or *acquisitive*, that is, self-presentation done in order to look good and seeking social approval (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt, 1988), they both respond and follow the person's need to save his/her own public image-face. In the experiment in Chapter 3, great importance has been attributed to the idea of face-saving, although conceptualizing the concept and keeping vividly in mind the building blocks of Impression management and self-

enhancement motives figuratively attached. Lastly, it is important to mention Brown's work on face-saving mechanisms (Brown, 1970; Brown & Garland, 1971). Brown tried to extend the concept of face-saving by implementing it with situation involving public humiliation or shame. He indeed found that individuals are even willing to sacrifice possible monetary remunerations in order to save their own face- avoid doing embarrassing things in public or humiliating tasks. L.R. Good and K.C. Good (1973), later commented Brown's experiment as follows: *"Although Brown's orientation has been to utilize experimental manipulations designed to induce face-saving behavior in all Ss assigned to the relevant treatment conditions, it is conceivable that fear of losing face or fear of appearing incompetent may constitute an important individual differences variables relating to a variety of social behaviors, with some individuals characteristically being much more apprehensive than others about the possibility of appearing incompetent in their interpersonal behavior"*. Good & Good (1973) focused more on the fear-of-appearing-incompetent aspect of face-saving, and they published, two years after Brown's work, *"An objective measure of the motive of appearing incompetent"*

The study of Chapter 3 will, thus, have at one of its core the variable face-saving, intended as the sum up of the notions expressed when analyzing self-enhancement purposes of Impression management as well as its implication in terms of self-esteem, and the notion expressed when analyzing the different definitions and view of Face, Facework and Face-saving mechanisms, ranging from Ting Toomey's reading to Brown's work on the matter, From Brown & Levinson's politeness theory to Good & Good's analysis of the fear of appearing incompetent.

## Chapter 3

### THE EXPERIMENT

The preamble in Chapter 1 and 2 was preparatory for the experiment in Chapter 3. The research, in fact, wants to shed more light on the matter of word of mouth valence in an online environment, by connecting Impression Management theoretical pillars and Face-saving mechanisms to the eagerness to share positive or negative content.

As we have previously mentioned, the experiment stems directly from the literature regarding Impression Management, and it wants to associate said dynamics with the essential characteristics of online platforms (in the matter of question, social network and e-mail) along with face-saving personality trait of a person so as to investigate the valence of the WOM that said person is more willing to undertake.

Does the need to save one's own face have an effect on one's willingness to share positive versus negative content and on the online platform chosen to do so?

We suggest the people with higher need to save their public image will ultimately be more willing to share positive content over negative content via a public post rather than a private message or e-mail.

#### **3.1 Empirical evidence in literature**

There are empirical evidence scattered in literature that support our thesis. These evidences are singular results and they are not, in any way, conjoint one another, but they still manage to give an early hypothetical proof on the hypothesis we ought to validate.

The first piece of evidence that is important to discuss in order to understand the choice of the two online platforms present in the study (e-mail



versus social networks-Facebook or Twitter) is contained in Barash & Berger's work (2014).

The Social network platform has been used to represent a broadcasting-type of communication, mainly addressed to people with whom the receiver has weak relationships, hence poor interpersonal closeness. The e-mail platform has been chosen for its peculiar one-to-one communication- narrowcasting, and it has been conceived as a mean through which communicating and sharing WOM with interpersonally close others. Berger (2014), indeed, describes Facebook or Titter as involving “(1) *written communication to share with* (2) *a large audience of* (3) *weak ties [...], unlike face-to-face communication* (4) *the audience is not physically present*” (Berger, 2014).

In analyzing point (2), Berger & Barasch (2014) had already found that broadcasting increases self-presentational content and decreases the number of negative events shared (Berger & Barasch, 2014, Study 1). Study 3b, of the same paper, emphasized their findings, as broadcasting has been found to decrease the willingness to share content that would possibly make people look bad – proxy of face-saving needs (Berger & Barasch, 2014). For what concerns interpersonal closeness, hence point (3) of Berger (2014), Bonezzi, Dubois, and De Angelis (2014), in experiment 2 and 3, arrived at the following findings (among many others): low interpersonal closeness often leads to self-enhancement mechanisms and the sharing of positive information and word of mouth; experiment 3, once again, proved the tendency of sharing positive information with perceived distant others. (Bonezzi, Dubois, and De Angelis, 2014). Experiment 2, in particular, is preparatory for this thesis since it proves the same hypothesis, but in an online environment characterized by low interpersonal closeness- LinkedIn. This last finding contributes for the second empirical evidence of this thesis' hypothesis.

The third preliminary empirical evidence originates from the politeness theory by Brown & Levinson (1987), and it encompasses evidences for which the need to face-saving may lead to the sharing of positive things. It is by employing politeness strategies that an individual succeeds in saving his face

and reducing any possible face loss (Brown & Levinson, 1987); in the matter of question, there are acts that are seen as threats to one's positive face such as complaining, criticizing, or disagreeing. (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Summing up, Brown & Levinson's politeness theory suggests that people may act in a positive and polite way in order to save face and decrease face losses, additionally Impression management mechanisms have been found to have more impact on online scenarios such as Social Networks (Berger, 2014). Speaking of Social networks as a proxy of a broadcasting channel, it is known that people are more willing to share positive WOM in such an environment (Berger & Barasch, 2014); findings that are consistent with the other fundamental characteristic of said platform: low interpersonal closeness.

### **3.2 Method**

Ninety-eight people took part in the study. (Mode age 24- 29 years old). The experiment took the shape of a questionnaire, and it was structured in the following way:

1. 17 items were chosen from an existing set of 36 items, in the form of true-false propositions. The original array of items has already been found to yield a reliability coefficient of 0.88. KR-20, indeed, showed an internal reliability estimate that indicates the successfulness in pooling together the propositions.

The 17 items picked from the pool of 36 serve the purpose of identifying the interviewed individual in terms of face concerns and in terms of face-saving needs. The 36 original propositions are contained in the report by L. R. Good & K. C. Good. "Fear of appearing incompetent and response to agreeing and disagreeing strangers". The scale contained in the paper was named "fear of appearing incompetent scale", Examples of the proposition presented are:" I would never worry about the possibility of saying

something inappropriate in a new social situation”, “I am prone to worry that others may regard my beliefs and opinions as incorrect or funny”, etc. The original dichotomous question “true”-“false”, has been replaced with a 7-point Likert scale based on the degree of the perceived appliance of the proposition on the respondent, and it ranged from “never applies to me” to “always applies to me”.

It is important to mention how the rationale behind item construction was of double nature: situations in which one could be worried about his competency, as a result of others’ judgment and attributes on which one could be worried about possible evaluation from others. The 17 extrapolated items in our experiment are, indeed, the ones that follow the last nature, because of their close connotation to the need of saving one’s own face

2. Respondents were then asked to recall a positive or a negative experience (randomly) they recently had in a restaurant and to briefly describe it in words. The choice of making the respondent write down the experience was done in order to emphasize the perceived feelings attached to the experience recalled.
3. A 7-point Likert scale presented a valence check, stressing the positivity/negativity of the experience they had just remembered, and it ranged from “very negative” to “very positive”.
4. Respondents were asked to evaluate their willingness to share their experience with others, expressing their eagerness on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely”.
5. Respondents were then presented with a dichotomous question: “Would you be more likely to share your experience with **people you know quite well** via private messaging (chat or e-mail), or with a

broader audience (**mostly made of people you barely know**) via a public post on a social network (Facebook or Twitter)”

Note that this question not only gives an out-out on whether to share the experience via a public post on a social network or via e-mail/private message, but it also makes the core characteristics of the platforms very clear in terms of interpersonal closeness (low for social networks and high for e-mails/private messaging) and in terms of reach/audience (broadcasting for social networks and narrowcasting for e-mails/private messaging).

6. The last part of the questionnaire has been devoted to demographics question and questions relative to the frequency of social network average usage.

Appendix A contains an example of the questionnaire handed out to the respondents.

### 3.3 Results and Discussion

We first calculated the average value (from 1 to 7), for each respondent, of the first 17 propositions.

In order to do so, some answers had to be calculated by reading the values as symmetrically opposite; for example, if a respondent answered with a value of 2 to the proposition “I am never concerned about the possibility that others may regard me as being somewhat odd or strange”, the value has been read as 6 by symmetry, since the proposition was written in negative wordings, in this case, “I am never...”.

In order to insure that the manipulation check made respondents recalled the positive/negative experience as they were asked, we introduced a valence check question. We computed the valence check scores.

A one-way ANOVA on the valence check score was consistent with the manipulation check. People that had to remember positive experiences considered said message, indeed, positive (Mean = 6.23, SD = 0.954), and

the results for those who had to a remember negative experience were consistent as well (Mean = 2.37, SD = 1.49), ( $F(1,1) = 255,858$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0$ ).

After having computed the score of need to face-saving, we regressed the dependent dummy variable, private message/e-mail versus public posts, on the independent variables: score of face-saving need and the manipulation check (that is, if the respondents had to recall a negative or a positive experience).

The interaction between the two independent variables was found to be marginally significant (coefficient = 0.33,  $p\text{-value} = 0.1171$ ).

By dividing the face-saving need score into three macro areas, whose mean score was respectively 2.74, 3.79, 4.84, we found out that, for the group with the highest face-saving need score (Mean = 4.84), the effect was found to be significant: those who scored highest in terms of face-saving need, resulted in having higher willingness to share positive word of mouth on a social network, when they had to recall a positive experience. (High-coefficient = 0.56,  $p\text{-value} 0.0816$ ). The other two groups of respondents who scored low or medium in terms face-saving need, do not result in any significant effect. (Medium- coefficient = 0.21; Low- coefficient- -0.14).

The primary finding of the main experiment is that when respondents with high need of saving face attached were forced to a positive memory recollection, their propensity to share the experience via a public post was ultimately higher, with respect to private messaging/e-mail. The opposite effect, however, has not been found. Those with low concerns about face loss, did not result to follow any specific behavior pattern, nor in terms of willingness to share, nor in terms of platform choice. Also, those presented with a negative experience did not show any significant propensity to share word of mouth via a more discrete platform (chat or e-mail), even though their higher willingness to use private messaging was expected since it would have been the opposite effect with respect positive experience recollection.

In other words, the results show that people who worry more about their perceived public image and seek to maintain their face, are more willing to generate word of mouth (an experience just had, an opinion on a certain

matter) in a positive way via public posts on Social Networks. This result suggests that they do so in order to maintain and preserve their face; being positive may lead others to have a positive impression on them, hence, the choice of social network sharing platform amplifies the desired effect, due to the broader audience reached.

The findings are also consistent with the empirical evidence in literature. People with high face-saving needs were found to be more prone to express their positive experiences experience –consistent with Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory.

Social media platforms are more likely to host positive experiences and messages, due to their core essential characteristics -consistent with Bonezzi, Dubois, and De Angelis (2014) and Berger & Barasch (2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

This thesis' purpose was to enquire whether or not one's propensity to worry about public social image would have impact on the way he or she communicates with other individuals. The main goal was to investigate the nexus between word of mouth valence (i.e. the sharing of positive or negative experiences) and that person's wish to maintain and save public face. We projected the study onto an online scenario, because of its large use in recent times and because of the peculiarities of the most used sharing platform.

The experiment proved, indeed, that there exists a connection. The study conducted tells us that people who worry the most about others' judgment are more likely to take counteractions in order to comply with their sensation. In terms of WOM, it means that they are more inclined to share experience and events containing positive connotations. In an online environment, this results in the publishing of posts on Facebook, Twitter, and similar social networks, due to the fact that the positive message can reach many barely-known people, to whom the post can provoke a positive impression regarding the sender.

Facebook, as well as other similar sites, often seems to host only positive experiences from our 'friends'; the finding of the experiment does not want to interpret all the posts as a result of Face-saving mechanisms, but it surely is able to explain the rationale behind part of the positive word of mouth we see on social networks.

In conclusion, we can state that there is a tight causal nexus between how much individuals care about others' opinion and their behavior on social networks and on how they pass on the word.

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# APPENDIX A

Dear Respondent, thank you for taking part in this study that will only take you few minutes to complete. Please understand that there are no right or wrong answers, we are only interested in your opinion. The information included in this study is not for commercial use. Privacy and confidentiality will be guaranteed. This survey is for research purpose only.

>>

You will now be asked to read 17 propositions, and to rate them on a scale from 1 (NEVER, This propositions does not apply to me in any way) to 7 (ALWAYS, This proposition completely applies to me)

>>

I would never worry about the possibility of being judged a fool in some activities

never applies

always applies

I tend to be concerned about not being effective enough in my dealings with others

never applies

always applies

After having had a conversation with someone, I have a tendency to worry about having said something inappropriate

never applies

always applies



I am almost never concerned about the possibility of being regarded as spastic or clumsy around others  
never applies        always applies

I would never worry about my adequacy in sexual relationships  
never applies        always applies

I might be inclined to avoid criticizing someone else's judgement for fear of appearing to be in the wrong  
never applies        always applies

I am prone to worry that others may regard my beliefs and opinions as incorrect or funny  
never applies        always applies

I would never worry about the possibility of saying something inappropriate in a new social situation  
never applies        always applies

I am not prone to be apprehensive or worried about my ability to do a task well  
never applies        always applies

I am frequently prone to take actions to counteract previous bad impressions which I believe I made  
never applies        always applies

I am never concerned about the possibility that others may regard me as being somewhat odd or strange  
never applies        always applies

I rarely worry about being considered by others to be misinformed or ignorant about certain things  
never applies        always applies

I have a tendency to worry that others will consider my behaviour in some activities to be inappropriate or tactless  
never applies        always applies

I have a tendency to worry that others will laugh at my ideas

never applies

always applies

I am rarely concerned about whether others will take me seriously enough

never applies

always applies

I would never worry about the possibility that others might feel I have poor judgement in some situations

never applies

always applies

I have a tendency to worry that others will laugh at my ideas

never applies

always applies

>>

Please now recall a **negative experience** you recently had in a restaurant and briefly describe it in the space below; if nothing comes to your mind, briefly describe a **negative experience** you recently had with a more generic product or service (anonymity of your responses will be guaranteed)

>>

How negative/positive do you rate the experience you just described?

Very negative

Very positive

How likely would you be to share your experience with others?

very unlikely

very likely

Would you be more likely to share your experience with **people you know quite well** via private messaging (chat or e-mail), or with a broader audience (**mostly made of people you barely know**) via a public post on a social network (Facebook or Twitter)

private messaging

public post

>>

the questionnaire is almost over! Please, fill in you personal details and you will be done

>>

**Gender**

- male
- female

**age**

- less than 18
- 18 - 23
- 24 - 29
- 30 - 34
- 35 - 39
- 40 - 44
- 45 - 49
- 50 - 54
- 55 - 59
  
- 60 - 64
- 65 - 69
- 70 - 74
- 75 - 79
- more than 80

**occupation**

- Unemployed
- Student
- Full time employed
- Part time employed
- Homemaker
- Retired

**Education**

- less than high school
- High school
- Bachelor
- master's degree
- Doctoral degree

**Marital status**

single

living together/married

divorced/separated

**How much time, on average, do you spend on social networks?**

less than 10 mins    10-30 mins    30 mins-1 hour    1-2 hours    2-4 hours    more than 4 hours

                  

**How often do you post content on social networks**

Never    1 post every 3 months    1 post every month    1 post every week    1 post every three days    1 post everyday    More than 1 post everyday

                      



**The questionnaire is over!**  
**We appreciate your contribution**  
**THANK YOU**



Note that for every symbol depicted below corresponds a page break in the questionnaire.

