



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Word of Mouth Theory Revisited: the Influence of New Actors on Seeding Campaigns

Benjamin Koeck, University of Edinburgh Business School, UK

David Marshall, University of Edinburgh Business School, UK

This study provides a more detailed account of online WOM by examining the relationship between marketers and tech-bloggers. Those bloggers are found to be a socially embedded entity involved in constant and multichannel interactions which moves beyond the understanding of seeding campaigns resulting in a modification of WOM theory.

[to cite]:

Benjamin Koeck and David Marshall (2015) ,"Word of Mouth Theory Revisited: the Influence of New Actors on Seeding Campaigns", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 43, eds. Kristin Diehl and Carolyn Yoon, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 374-378.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019408/volumes/v43/NA-43>

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

Word of Mouth Theory Revisited: The Influence of New Actors on Seeding Campaigns

Benjamin Koeck, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

David Marshall, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT:

This study provides a more detailed account of online WOM by examining the relationship between marketers and tech-bloggers in the consumer electronics sector. Tech-bloggers are found to be a socially embedded entity involved in constant and multichannel interactions with other bloggers, their audience and marketers. This collaboration extends beyond seeding campaigns and has implications for how we model online WOM.

INTRODUCTION

The growth in online platforms such as blogs and social networking sites (SNS) has resulted in significant changes to information distribution and marketing communications. These new social media channels provide a way for individuals and companies to gather and spread information about products and services through online Word of Mouth (WOM) communication (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Due to the nature of WOM online, information can diffuse more quickly, has a wider reach and, due to the written format, is more persistent than traditional WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Godes and Mayzlin 2004, Berger and Schwartz 2011). Research has shown that online WOM can have a critical effect on sales of products such as television shows (Godes and Mayzlin 2004), games (Zhu and Zhang 2010) and or books (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006).

The aim of this research is to empirically examine the emerging category of 'tech bloggers' and how they use WOM in an online blogging environment. This paper revisits traditional WOM and considers online WOM (Kozinets et al. 2010) and the use of blogs as part of seeding campaigns in marketing communications (Hinz et al. 2011). It focuses on the tech-bloggers ecosystem and explores their relationship and cooperation with companies that see blogging as a viable online marketing communications channel.

BLOGGING AS WOM

Most of the studies to date have looked at aggregated information such as volume or valence neglecting individual variations of influence in online WOM (Moe and Trusov 2011). As the impact of WOM depends on who is talking to who there is a need to get a better understanding of key individuals involved in online activity (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). These key individuals, identified in traditional WOM as opinion leaders (Arndt, 1967), market maven (Feick and Price, 1987) or social hubs (Goldenberg et al. 2007), are considered to be highly influential as they gather information from a variety of sources and diffuse that information via advice to others in their social nexus (Weimann, 1994). McQuarrie et al. (2013) argue that bloggers, as one category of online influencer, have the potential to attract large audiences to influence the behaviors and attitudes of others through their online communication channels. However, they are critical of the use of existing offline WOM concepts noting that "[o]ne could label the phenomenon electronic word of mouth and call these bloggers opinion leaders or market mavens (Feick and Price 1987; Kozinets et al. 2010), but this obscures what is new and different about their consumer behavior." (2013, p. 137)

This study provides an alternative account for blogs by adapting Vaast et al. (2013) notion of 'tech-bloggers' as an "emerging actor category" within online environments, comprised of individuals that "create and disseminate news, opinions, reviews, advice, and other

information developments via the internet using blogging and associated technologies" (2013, p. 2). Tech-bloggers diffuse news and evaluate products such as smartphones, notebooks and tablets on a regular basis. Readers ask for advice, consult them in complex decision making and participate in an established online community built and maintained by these emerging actors. More importantly they are seen as a credible source of information compared to other forms of reviews and are able to engage with their audience in various ways. As a result, they construct a sizeable online audience and transform their leisure pursuit into a time and resource intense activity. Contrasting the notion of "blogs" as a tool for personal use (Blood 2004), these tech-bloggers have emerged from online activity centred on personal displays to create an online presence that extends to the public arena. The public display and large numbers of followers makes them more attractive for marketers (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Given the discursive nature of blogs (Blood 2004) and the increased influence from marketers, bloggers do not evaluate products independently but are socially embedded in an emerging and continuously changing system where practices are formed.

WOM THEORY

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1945) introduced the "two-step flow of communication", that includes "opinion leaders" as information conduits who filter information and pass it to their peers via WOM with their own interpretations. The "multi-step flow of communication" (Robinson 1976; Weimann 1982; Burt 1999) developed this idea adding that: 1) individuals obtain information from multiple sources including mass media, influential individuals such as opinion leaders or other sources. 2) Opinion leaders not only assess information from mass media, they exchange and include information from other opinion leaders and information recipients (Robinson 1976, Troidahl and Van Dam 1965).

The linear marketer influence model includes marketers as important actors in the flow of communication attempting to influence individuals through targeted advertisements and promotions via credible sources who simply evaluate the product (Kozinets et al. 2010). Information is then disseminated without any alteration (Engel, Kegerreis and Blackwell 1969) or amplified (Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Unlike the linear model organic WOM develops as a naturally occurring conversation when an individual wants to share experience about a product (Kozinets et al. 2010). Thus, the role of the marketer is transformed as messages are "co-produced", as opposed to simply shared, by the recipients. Kozinets and colleagues (2010) looking at WOM in online communities, introduce the "the network co-production model" where marketers provide further information or products to review and encourage individuals to talk about them. They focus on the use of blogs and seeding campaigns in online communities (centered on smartphones) where marketers provide further information or products for review and encourage individuals to talk about them. Looking at 83 blogs for six months they categorize bloggers as acting nodes (consumers directly influenced by a marketer) who play a central role in diffusing information to consumers. Kozinets et al. (2010) found that the influence from marketers can lead to a 'dual role' and some commercial-communal tension arising from what may be seen as a 'conflict of interests'. Thus, bloggers have been found to be equally influenced by marketers and other bloggers or

consumers. However, the network co-production model represents those bloggers as highly individuated and ignores the various forms of communication that could develop among bloggers. For instance, Kumar et al. (2004) found a high density of communication between blogs in terms of comments and linkage creations resulting in a fairly homogenous group. Moreover, McQuarrie et al. (2013) highlight that bloggers do not form an alternative community – rather they are embedded in the traditional marketplace that includes mass media (e.g. journalists).

WOM MARKETING AND SEEDING CAMPAIGNS

Marketers use a number of different approaches to seeding. One indirect approach is to “engineer” WOM among their customer base and increase the number of conversations that take place (Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Another more direct approach, one that is marketer initiated but consumer diffused, is to target product samples at selected consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010). These seeding campaigns (Lehmann & Estaban-Bravo 2007) aim to target product sampling to selected consumers. Thus these are product specific campaigns are scheduled over a certain period of time. Often interchangeably used, WOM marketing (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009) has a similar focus on specific individuals but is less formulated in terms of duration and focus (Kozinets et al. 2010).

Both WOM marketing and seeding campaigns are developed to help marketers to exploit new audiences by attracting a group of targeted customers to adopt and review the product at an early stage in the product lifecycle with the hope of attracting other consumers (Libai, Muller & Peres, 2013). As the information in these campaigns is diffused by the targeted individuals this tends to be more cost efficient than using traditional mass media advertising (Hinz et al., 2011). Thus, increased attention has been paid to seeding campaigns as a new tool that could add or even replace traditional media advertising particularly with a younger target group (Godes & Mayzlin, 2009). According to Hinz et al. (2011) there are four factors that have a major influence in the success of a seeding campaign: First, the type of content can be either product advice or news. Second, the structure of the network should contain a large audience to reach more potential consumers. Third, marketers have to find individuals who are willing to participate in the review process and share content. Finally, an incentive must be given to those influential individuals to participate in such seeding campaigns. However, in these studies seeding campaigns are often limited to empirically capture single campaigns with one specific product (Kozinets et al., 2010). This fails to capture the dynamics of the relationship between marketers and bloggers within the networked environment and examining the nature of relationships is essential to understand the profitability of such seeding campaigns (Libai, Muller and Peres 2013). Moreover, assuming that bloggers become a permanent member of the marketplace it raises further questions about the nature of WOM marketing in seeding campaigns.

METHODOLOGY

Existing studies on blogs (Zhao and Belk 2007, Kretz 2010, McQuarrie et al. 2013, Vaast et al. 2013) primarily focus on blog content due to the convenience of data collection. Thus they do not provide insight to the context and overall shaping of bloggers and blogging as an activity. This research attempted to provide a conceptually grounded and methodologically comprehensive qualitative study that explored the views and experiences of tech-bloggers in online WOM. The research combined an empirical enquiry of bloggers and marketers they are working with qualitative interviews. This has required purposive sampling to identify key participants

within the consumer electronics sector in Germany. This geographical focus addresses the difficulties outlined elsewhere in drawing on a random sample of blogs. Sampling was conducted using blog rankings (Zhao and Belk 2007, Lawson-Borders and Kirk 2005) to identify blogs in the product category with a sizeable audience and blog aggregators (Vaast and Davidson 2009, Kretz 2010, McQuarrie et al. 2013). The sample was refined by eliminating blogs where a main author could not be clearly identified. Qualitative interviews were the primary source of data. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted either face to face or online with ten bloggers identified through the sampling process and five marketers that cooperate with those bloggers. Within blogger interviews we applied a snowballing technique to identify marketing experts these bloggers mostly work with and ranked those by the number of mentions in blogger interviews.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Blogger to Blogger relationships

All ten bloggers claimed that in the early stages of establishing their blog they actively sought out other popular bloggers and learn by imitating other blogs, replicating practices from more established bloggers. Once established they began to develop their own practices to distinguish themselves particularly notable in blog format and writing style. Establishing a close connection with an established blogger has been very beneficial as established bloggers can give advice, introduce new bloggers to marketers or help them construct and build their audience. Introducing other bloggers on their blog or constantly linking to each other and interacting is one means of attracting and building audiences (Kumar et al. 2004). However, bloggers claimed that interaction is much more goal oriented and this is reinforced by the fact that interaction between bloggers is concentrated in the early stages of blog development. Among bloggers we obtained shared practices that include validating and citing sources, funding transparency and maintaining interaction formed and negotiated amongst bloggers. This seems to create little conflict among the bloggers and is in fact mutually beneficial in building audiences and reputation.

A community of practice – As part of the interaction between bloggers they read and observe other blogs within the same product category. A shared practice that has been established is to acknowledge work from other blogs by regularly citing them. Tech-bloggers need to validate their sources in order to be taken seriously and regular citations or links to other established blogs is one way of doing this, as Alexander notes (see table 1). This both facilitates information exchanges between blogs and gives credibility to the blogger and the information. This is seen as an active attempt of professionalization by applying journalistic practices (Hass 2005) to their repertoire. Thus, they are not consumers in a traditional sense as they express expertise and become more professionalized.

As part of their professionalization, bloggers need to assert their independence and overcome the problem of “dual role of consumer–marketer colors” in appealing to both their audience and marketers (Kozinets et al. 2010, p.83). As blog audiences grow and interaction with marketers is increasing (McQuarrie et al. 2013) bloggers devise ways to retain their independence while cooperating with marketers. This includes posting a separate page where all forms of support and their purpose is listed (Sascha) or publically acknowledging the commercial nature of the blog (Fabien). The need for funding transparency is highlighted by Carsten (see table 1).

Reinforcing practices – The findings emphasized the importance of bloggers to align with such shared practices. Those blog-

gers who do not conform to these practices (e.g. making funding sources transparent) find themselves ostracized as established bloggers distance themselves from the non-conformists. This is further expressed in a public critique of non-confirmative behavior (e.g. not citing others).

Blogger to Marketer relationships

As bloggers develop links with marketers they become significantly more attractive to readers as they are able to report better. As this cooperation becomes more formalised it reduces the uncertainty of return from a marketer’s perspective. Thus, it may be assumed that marketers prefer cooperating with bloggers they know or that are coherent with practices such as transparency of funding.

New ways of interaction – As a consequence of marketer’s interest in blogs in expanding their marketing communications bloggers have formed relationships with companies that grant them further access to information and new products for review. This might include direct communication in advance of launch or direct access to individuals in the company As a Microsoft marketer noted cooperation is preferred where messages are authentic complying with the overall narrative of the blog (Kozinets et al., 2010). Marketers encourage and support ongoing communications with specific actors (bloggers) for certain campaigns often selecting from a pool of influencers they know or have worked with. Thus it is noted that relationships between bloggers and marketers are sustained beyond individual seeding campaigns.

Continuous interaction – Although much of the cooperation is centered on specific campaigns (Kozinets et al. 2010, Hinz et al. 2011), there is a continuous interaction between bloggers and marketers. Clearly much of the activity is centered on specific campaigns where there is a lot of activity around the launch of new devices but relationships include ongoing access to information from the company, and invitations to participate in conferences and events. Funding support can include travel reimbursement to these events or allowing bloggers to keep devices following the review where they can use these to increase readership, for example by building their own promotion around the device. This continuous interaction is central to building relationships particularly in the early stages of the relationship as Lutz noted (see table 1).

Establishing more permanent relationships – As a result of these relationships that develop between marketers and bloggers it has become apparent, during the empirical investigation that opportunities for more permanent relationships with marketers emerged leading to the creation of occupations specialising in seeding strategies. Marketers in this study referred themselves as influencer relations or blogger relations - specialists that are the main contact with bloggers. They could be employed internally in marketing or public relations departments or externally such as consultants or campaign manager which serves implications to the current understanding of marketer communications.

Table 1 – Summary of empirical themes

<i>Blogger – Blogger relationship</i>	
<p>Validating and citing sources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communal practice highlighting the acceptance of other bloggers. 	<p>“References are incredibly important to me because it verifies my work. It is sad to see if other blogs take exclusive information from one of my articles and do no link. This is unacceptable.” (Alexander)</p>
<p>Transparency in terms of funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Justify for interaction with marketers Prerequisite for a relationship with marketers and other bloggers. 	<p>“I do not take money from any company that wants to have their products presented. Usually devices are loaned for a period of time and this is clearly labelled as such and is not interfering with my opinion in any kind of way.” (Carsten)</p>
<p>Reinforcing practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A topology of bloggers involved in shaping practices. 	<p>“We have to fight really hard to be perceived as credible. Everyone that is misbehaving is like a stab in the back.” (Sascha)</p>
<i>Blogger – Marketer relationship</i>	
<p>New ways of interaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple conversations across multiple channels Personal and closer interaction 	<p>“If a manufacturer releases new devices, there are pre-press releases via e-mail. But I also have the spokeswoman of Samsung on Facebook, so I contact her directly. They are very sincere. You would think that it is totally formal, but I have found it to be very personal.” (Jan)</p>
<p>Continuous interaction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships built beyond campaigns. Further collaborations apart from seeding campaigns. 	<p>“Some of those people I know for more than five years now, so I know that everything runs smoothly. But with new ones you have to be in continuous interaction and send little reminders to be considered when new devices are in. If it goes well for the first few times, it becomes more relaxed.” (Lutz)</p>
<p>Establishing more permanent relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of marketer roles involved in communications One specific point of contact. 	<p>“Some manufacturers are now represented by an agency or new relations people, which transform the nature of communication as we don’t connect with companies anymore; we connect with people within or around the firm.” (Felix)</p>

A modification of WOM theory

The proposed model (figure 1) builds on the network co-production model which depicts a direct influence from marketers to targeted consumers diffusing to final consumers. In contrast, the modified network co-production model attempts to capture the complexity of the relationship between marketers and bloggers, the relationship between groups of market intermediaries (blogger to blogger) as well as the relationship between bloggers and their readers (consumers). It offers a further account of the nuances of members in the ecosystem.

As well as the marketer interaction identified by Kozinets et al. (2010), there are various marketer roles (influencer and blog relations either internal or external) involved in social interaction with bloggers. Following Vaast et al. (2013) we refer to bloggers as actors as they emerged from traditional bloggers based on their specific practices as a result of their interaction. Due to their close interaction between them, they form a fairly homogenous group which we refer as an actor category. Due to their professionalization, their practices diverge closer to traditional market members such as journalists (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Thus the actor category is positioned among known concepts of traditional markets (journalists and bloggers).

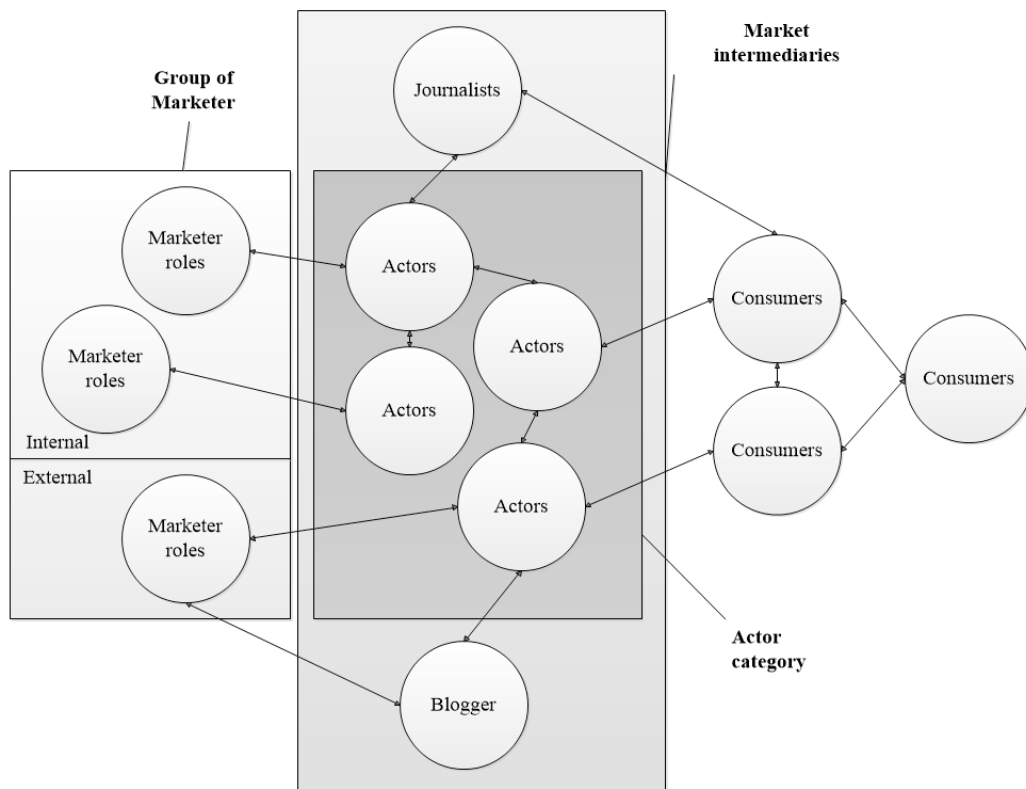
involves both actors and consumers contribution to the co-production of information.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides a more detailed and nuanced account of online WOM by investigating product seeding in relation to tech-bloggers within the sector of consumer electronics. A key issue is the role of actors as co-producers of information (Kozinets et al., 2010) along with consumers as well as marketers and other actors (as Robinson, 1976 discussed in relation to opinion leaders). By foregrounding the position of actors and looking at the nature of their relationships with companies and other bloggers we are able to identify the ways in which these individuals can influence WOM in an online environment. Importantly it highlights the role of tech-bloggers as emerging actors in online WOM communication.

We found that sustaining relationships with marketers evolve beyond individual seeding campaigns as a need emerges for more specialised roles to facilitate the changing nature and increasing complexity of communication between marketers and actors. It further illustrates the complexity of interaction over various communication channels. Thus, there is a need for these specialists to

Figure 1 – A modification of the network co-production model



The model portrays the actor not as a single receiver and diffuser of information (Engel, Kegerreis and Blackwell 1969) but rather as a multi-connected entity acting on the information (Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Our evidence suggests that actors are less isolated than previously assumed. They have multiple connections and channels to communicate receiving information from marketers, mass media including journalists and consumers. This information is processed, evaluated and shared in consideration with other members of this system. The actor at the center of these multiple conversations

acts as an intermediary between consumers and marketers. Thus we propose that those actors are not only a channel of marketer initiated messages - they are a powerful entity engaging in a multiplicity of conversations through multiple channels. Consequently, these actors play a key role in marketing communication and information exchange. The co-production of information is not restricted to consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010) but involves other actors (e.g. tech-bloggers) and marketers. This transforms the communication from a one way diffusion of information to a two way conversation that in-

react to those new ways of interaction over a longer period and establishing longer term relationships. Though, these findings generate several propositions for further testing. Within the relationship between marketers and actors we obtained a variety of collaboration formats apart from seeding products that could lead to a grey area of practices. As shared practices are continuously transformed, it is not clear how these forms of cooperation and these relationships will develop. Given the transforming form of interaction between marketers and actors, future collaboration may be challenging as blogs may become fully sponsored by marketers. Any shift to externally managed communications is likely to demand even more transparency. Moreover, a limitation of this study is an underrepresentation of consumers as part of the developed model. Future research might capture the consumer's account and potentially unveil a perception gap among consumers, marketers and bloggers.

REFERENCES

- Arndt, J. (1967). Role of Product-Related Conversations in the Diffusion of a New Product. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 4(3), p.291.
- Berger, J. and Schwartz, E. (2011). What Drives Immediate and Ongoing Word of Mouth?. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48(5), pp.869-880.
- Blood, R. (2004). How blogging software reshapes the online community. *Commun. ACM*, 47(12), p.53.
- Burt, R. (1999). The Social Capital of Opinion Leaders. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 566(1), pp.37-54.
- Chevalier, J. and Mayzlin, D. (2006). The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book Reviews. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43(3), pp.345-354.
- Christoph, V., Lazarfeld, P., Berelson, B. and Gaudet, H. (1945). The People's Choice. *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, 6(3), p.188.
- Davidson, E. and Vaast, E. (2009). Tech Talk: An Investigation of Blogging in Technology Innovation Discourse. *IEEE Trans. Profess. Commun.*, 52(1), pp.40-60.
- Engel, J., Kegerreis, R. and Blackwell, R. (1969). Word-of-Mouth Communication by the Innovator. *Journal of Marketing*, 33(3), p.15.
- Feick, L. and Price, L. (1987). The Market Maven: A Diffuser of Marketplace Information. *Journal of Marketing*, 51(1), p.83.
- Godes, D. and Mayzlin, D. (2004). Using Online Conversations to Study Word-of-Mouth Communication. *Marketing Science*, 23(4), pp.545-560.
- Godes, D. and Mayzlin, D. (2009). Firm-Created Word-of-Mouth Communication: Evidence from a Field Test. *Marketing Science*, 28(4), pp.721-739.
- Goldenberg, J., Han, S., Lehmann, D. R., & Hong, J. W. (2009). The role of hubs in the adoption process. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(2), 1-13.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K., Walsh, G. and Gremler, D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet?. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1), pp.38-52.
- Hinz, O., Skiera, B., Barrot, C. and Becker, J. (2011). Seeding Strategies for Viral Marketing: An Empirical Comparison. *Journal of Marketing*, 75(6), pp.55-71.
- Kozinets, R., de Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. and Wilner, S. (2010). Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(2), pp.71-89.
- Kretz, G. (2010). Pixelize Me!?: A Semiotic Approach of Self-digitalization in Fashion Blogs. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 37, p. 393-399
- Kumar, R., Novak, J., Raghavan, P. and Tomkins, A. (2004). Structure and evolution of blogspace. *Commun. ACM*, 47(12), p.35.
- Lawson-Borders, G. (2005). Blogs in Campaign Communication. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(4), pp.548-559.
- Lehmann, D. and Esteban-Bravo, M. (2006). When giving some away makes sense to jump-start the diffusion process. *Marketing Letters*, 17(4), pp.243-254.
- Libai, B., Muller, E. and Peres, R. (2013). Decomposing the Value of Word-of-Mouth Seeding Programs: Acceleration Versus Expansion. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 50(2), pp.161-176.
- McQuarrie, E., Miller, J. and Phillips, B. (2013). The Megaphone Effect: Taste and Audience in Fashion Blogging. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(1), pp.136-158.
- Moe, W. W. and Trusov, M. (2011). The value of social dynamics in online product ratings forums. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 48(3), 444-456.
- Robinson, J. (1976). Interpersonal Influence in Election Campaigns: Two Step-Flow Hypotheses. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40(3), p.304.
- Troldahl, V. and Van Dam, R. (1965). A New Scale for Identifying Public-Affairs Opinion Leaders. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 42(4), pp.655-657.
- Vaast, E., Davidson, E. J., & Mattson, T. (2013). Talking about technology: the emergence of a new actor category through new media. *Mis Quarterly*, 37(4), 1069-1092.
- Weimann, G. (1982). On the Importance of Marginality: One More Step into the Two-Step Flow of Communication. *American Sociological Review*, 47(6), p.764.
- Weimann, G. (1994). *The influentials*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Zhao, X., & Belk, R. W. (2007). Live from shopping malls: Blogs and Chinese consumer desire. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 34, 131.
- Zhu, F., & Zhang, X. (2010). Impact of online consumer reviews on sales: The moderating role of product and consumer characteristics. *Journal of marketing*, 74(2), 133-148.