Firm-Created Word-of-Mouth Recommendation: Is it also worthwhile?

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ABSTRACT

One of the fastest-growing marketing tactics used to persuade and win customers is management of recommendations through incentives to participants. However, these initiatives can raise questions, including ethical problems about credibility of the recommendation. With the aim of measuring the factors that influence acceptance of a word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendation, we propose a model able to relate and measure the impact of elements on acceptance of recommendations and the effect of participation in an organized WOM marketing program. We conducted a survey among 350 participants, using an instrument with a retrospective approach and presenting a hypothetical scenario. As results of the model, we highlight the expertise of the recommender and the similarity of this person with the receivers of the elements related with the recommendation message and their consequent willingness to accept it. We also identified that the existence of an incentive does not prevent acceptance of the recommendation, but it does reduce it, suggesting caution in use of this marketing tactic.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth marketing program. Word-of-mouth recommendation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

S tudies of interpersonal influence have longstanding philosophical roots (Buttle, 1998). The fruits of these studies can be used by companies to persuade consumers about the qualities of products, services or ideas. Word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendation, until a few decades ago seen as a sociological phenomenon and investigated under the prism of other social theories (theory of interpersonal influence, theory of roles, theory of social relations), has in recent years been increasingly used as a marketing tactic to spread information, persuade and win new customers (TUK et al., 2009, RYU; FEICK, 2007).

Until the present decade studies about WOM have evolved from the perception of its importance to the diffusion, purchase and evaluation of brands, products or services (RICHINS, 1983, HAYWOOD, 1989), passing through evidence of its most important antecedents (BONE, 1995, BROWN et al., 2005, MATOS et al., 2008) and focus on the most recent developments: electronic spread over the internet (HENNIG-THURAU et al., 2004; ANDRADE; MAZZON; KATZ, 2006) and growing use as a marketing tactic, through induced programs to disseminate positive recommendations (CARL, 2008; GODES; MAYZLIN, 2009; TUK et al., 2009).

While Godes & Mayzlin (2009) empirically verified the potential of incentivized WOM programs, Carl (2008) questioned the credibility of recommendations when receivers know it is sponsored by the company.

In recent years, some studies have delved more deeply into the possible ethical dilemma of programs involving payment or other rewards for recommendation (KOZINETS et al., 2008, 2010; TUK et al., 2009; VERLEGH et al., 2004; CARL, 2008), since the spontaneity of the recommendation is replaced by a benefit supplied by the company, many times not revealed to receivers. These studies have evaluated the credibility of incentivized recommendations and the types of relationships that affect them, but have not measured their impact on acceptance of the WOM recommendation. Although this topic of study is still incipient, it is noteworthy that a new lens has been focused on WOM communications: the **vision of the receiver** of the recommendation.

Despite the impressive growth of academic knowledge about WOM recommendation – studies of this topic have been growing at more than twice the pace of publications on advertising in general in the past decade (PEREIRA, 2010) – there have been few studies about the perception of those receiving the recommendation, as stated by Sweeney, Soutar &

Mazzarol (2008, p. 344). Until those authors' study, no other one had managed to combine a representative set of elements that influence the **acceptance of positive WOM recommendations** to gain a more comprehensive understanding of reality.

Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol (2008) carried out the first study with that intention, and while on the one hand they identified and categorized sets of elements able to provoke positive responses to a WOM recommendation, on the other they did not manage to measure the influence of each one on the acceptance of the recommendation, suggesting this as a matter for future research. Also, the studies stressing the growing use of organized WOM marketing programs have not associated the effect of **participation in these WOM marketing programs** with the elements influencing acceptance of recommendations.

Our purposes here are twofold: (i) to **measure** the influence, in quantitative terms, of a broad set of elements on the willingness to accept a positive WOM recommendation; and (ii) to **evaluate** the impact of incentives to recommend on this acceptance. Based on the fast growth of WOM marketing programs (PQ Media, 2009), we intend to shed light on and measure the factors that influence the predisposition to **accept a positive recommendation received but not solicited** (characteristic of WOM marketing initiatives).

For this purpose, the recommendations evaluated were conveyed orally, face to face, rather than electronically. Despite the facility of online diffusion and its growing importance, more than 90% of WOM communications still occur offline, face to face or by telephone (BROOKS, 2011; LAIRD, 2011; TOUBIA et al., 2009), according to data from the United States. Since the proportion of people with internet access in Brazil is much lower than in the U.S. (ARAGÃO, 2012; BAIO, 2007), face-to-face recommendations are even more important here.

To achieve these objectives, we first present the main theoretical concepts involved in acceptance of WOM recommendations, whose proposed relations delineate the hypotheses posed. Then we detail the construction of the analytical model, followed by the validity tests and the results of the hypothesis tests. Finally, we discuss the conclusions about the proposed model, commenting on the implications for managers of companies that intend to develop organized WOM marketing programs.

2 ACCEPTANCE OF WORD-OF-MOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

The generation of positive word of mouth and the propensity to recommend a product or service have attracted a good deal of attention by researchers, and important marketing

indicators for companies have been developed (MANGOLD et al., 1999). An important finding is that the simple act of recommending does not assure the effectiveness of positive word of mount, or buzz, since the message sent needs to be received and translated to generate a positive reaction in the receiver (SWEENEY; SOUTAR; MAZZAROL, 2012). One current of studies on WOM has focused on understanding this phenomenon under the prism of the person who receives the recommendation, henceforth called the receiver. Some elements evidence the influence on the reception and acceptance of the recommendation, regarding:

(i) the relationship of the receiver with the issuer (or recommender) of the WOM (BROWN; REINGEN, 1987; BANSAL; VOYER, 2000; WANGENHEIM; BAYON, 2004; SWEENEY; SOUTAR; MAZZAROL, 2008; GODES; MAYZLIN, 2009);

(ii) the individual characteristics of the recommender (BONE, 1995; GILLY et al., 1998; BANSAL; VOYER, 2000; SWEENEY; SOUTAR; MAZZAROL, 2008);

(iii) the individual characteristics of the receiver (HERR et al., 1991; BONE, 1995; DUHAN et al., 1997; BANSAL; VOYER, 2000; SWEENEY; SOUTAR; MAZZAROL, 2008);

(iv) the form of presentation of the recommendation message (HERR et al., 1991; SODERLUND; ROSENGREN, 2007; SWEENEY; SOUTAR; MAZZAROL, 2008);

(v) the brand recommended (LACZNIAK et al., 2001); and

(vi) the risk of the category of products or service recommended (WOODSIDE; DELOIZER, 1976; BANSAL; VOYER, 2000; WANGENHEIM; BAYON, 2004).

The potential impact of word-of-mouth recommendation on the attitudes and behavior of consumers has prompted many companies to develop organized WOM marketing programs, by which customers are paid or otherwise rewarded to disseminate positive recommendations about products and/or services. The receiver's perception about this type of "motivation" of the recommender and its impact on the recommendation's credibility have been the focus of a good deal of academic investigation (VERLEGH et al., 2004; TUK et al., 2009; CARL, 2008, KOZINETS et al., 2008, 2010).

Although these studies have presented various elements that influence the reception of WOM recommendations, none of them have managed to combine a set of these elements in more comprehensive form, including participation of the recommender in an organized WOM

marketing program. The most thorough study in this respect was that of Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol (2008). Nevertheless, that study was exploratory in nature, aiming to gather a set of variables as adherent as possible to the reality perceived by receivers.

Supported by the literature review and aiming to fill in the gap represented by elements and their respective impacts on the receiver's reaction, here we propose a new model of research constructs and hypotheses.

3 MODEL AND HYPOTHESES FOR INVESTIGATION

The dependent construct we evaluate in this study (Influence of WOM Recommendation) was chosen to reflect the willingness of receivers to accept a recommendation. On receiving the recommendation, influenced by the preceding constructs, they consider its characteristics, interpret its reality and make a decision to accept it or not. In summary, this construct identifies the effect of the word-of-mouth communication, or the declared influence of the recommendation, translated into their willingness to accept it.

The likelihood of acceptance depends on various influences about the recommendation offered, found in different theoretical sources.

The theories on social relations tend to be based on exchanges of resources (tangible or intangible) between people (FRENZEN; KAZAMOTO, 1993). Their motivations can be based both on the social context of the exchanges and the individual interest of the participants. This context can be defined by the social distance between the two subjects and the respective cost-benefit related to it, defining different types of social relations. The type of interpersonal context, or type of social tie in the formulation of Granovetter (1973), influences the reception of an intangible resource like a WOM recommendation.

Strength of Social Ties

The concept of the strength of social ties is central to studies of interpersonal relations and can be defined in a function of factors such as amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, mutual trust and nature of reciprocity of the relationship (GRANOVETTER, 1973) – meaning the degree of connection between two people and the importance that the relationship has for each of them (BROWN; REINGEN, 1987).

Although a continuum of strength levels exists (FRENZEN; KAZAMOTO, 1993; BANSAL; VOYER, 2000), the dichotomy between strong and weak ties is generally used in marketing studies to assess the importance of interpersonal influences. Strong ties are recognized as those between family members or close friends, whose relationships are well-

established, lasting and highly committed. On the other hand, weak ties are defined as being present in more superficial relationships, such as between more distant friends or mere acquaintances.

The understanding of these ties in studies of WOM and interpersonal influence has indicated the importance of strong ties for acceptance of recommendations (ROGERS, 2003; BROWN; REINGEN, 1987; FRENZEN; KAZAMOTO, 1993). Relationships of commitment and trust generate greater belief in the information received, and hence greater willingness to accept the recommendation (BUTTLE, 1998).

Since proposal of the idea of the strength of weak ties advocated by Granovetter (1973), there have been discussions about the role of these ties in dissemination of information. However, the studies that have demonstrated this influence (GODÊS; MAYZLIN, 2009; DUHAN et al., 2007) also differentiate its role as a "bridge" for the flow of information versus the potential of strong ties to promote flows of persuasion and influence.

Since our aim is to assess the degree of credibility and influence of this element on the message of a WOM recommendation and its acceptance, we expect that stronger ties will have a greater impact (the stronger the social tie, the greater the influence of the recommendation), leading to the following hypothesis:

> *H1: There is a positive and significant relation between the Social Tie Strength and Influence of WOM Recommendation.*

Perceived Similarity

Besides the type of social tie between the recommender and receiver, demographic and psychographic traits of each subject can affect the reception of the recommendation.

Also known as homophily (BROWN; REINGEN, 1987) or homogeneity (ALMEIDA, 2009), the concept of similarity represents "the degree to which members view themselves as having few differences" (ZELLMER-BRUHN et al., 2008, p. 41). This implies a process of identification in which the subjects perceive the congruence of their personal characteristics, both demographic and psychographic, such as values, opinions, preferences or lifestyles (GILLY et al., 1998).

Studies about interpersonal influence, advertising and consumption (GATIGNON; ROBERTSON, 1985; FEICK; HIGIE, 1992) have demonstrated that the identification between actors facilitates the influence process. The perception that the sender of information

has the same needs and preferences as the receiver makes the latter more likely to believe and/or accept that information. That influence happens in WOM, since recommenders perceived as similar tend to generate stronger belief in the recommendation transmitted and propensity to accept it (BROWN; REINGEN, 1987; WANGENHEIM; BAYON, 2004) (the greater the similarity, the stronger the recommendation message), suggesting the following hypothesis:

> *H2: There is a positive and significant relation between the Perceived Similarity and the Strength of the Recommendation.*

Despite investigations demonstrating the contribution of similarity to the acceptance of a determined message, Simons et al. (1970) also identified cases in which dissimilarity can have a greater impact on credibility and change of attitude. These cases normally occur when the sender is perceived as having greater expertise than the receiver about a determined subject, product or service (FAZIO, 1979). This implies that in WOM recommendations, the influence of the recommender's experience or expertise should also be considered.

Expertise of the Recommender

Irrespective of the relationship between the receiver and recommender, if the latter is identified as a reference about what is recommended, his or her indication will tend to generate greater attention to the message conveyed (PRICE; FEICK, 1984).

The expertise of a determined source of information can be identified by factors such as experience, occupation, formal training (SCHIFFMAN; KANUK, 2000), professional prestige (SIMONS et al., 1970), competence or skill to perform specific tasks successfully (ALBA; HUTCHINSON, 1987) or ability to offer accurate information about a particular product or service (MCCRACKEN, 1989, cited in FEICK; HIGIE, 1992).

Recognized knowledge of the recommender generates belief and trust in the information, reducing its uncertainty and thus enhancing its influence on acceptance of the recommendation. Studies in the areas of interpersonal influence, persuasion and WOM recommendation have identified that sources with greater expertise exert a stronger influence or persuasion and thus are more likely to change attitudes and buying behavior (DHOLAKIA; STERNTHAL, 1977; GILLY et al., 1998) (the greater the recommender's expertise, the stronger the recommendation message). Based on this evidence, we propose that:

H3: *There is a positive and significant relation between the Recommender's Expertise and the Influence of WOM Recommendation.*

Even though the recommender's expertise works in favor of credibility of the recommendation, the impact also depends on the knowledge the receiver has about the indicated product/service. If the latter's expertise is substantial, the judgment of the recommendation will tend to be more careful or will be perceived as less relevant (BANSAL; VOYER, 2000), possibly reducing the acceptance of the recommendation.

Expertise of the Receiver about the Product/Service Category

Each person who receives a recommendation about a certain product/service assimilates the information based on the existing knowledge he or she has about that product/service and whether that knowledge is congruent with the recommendation received. This implies there are two elements that influence the judgment of the recommendation: how much the receiver already knows about the product/service, and the valence of this opinion, whether positive or negative.

The literature on consumer behavior, more specifically on buying decisions (HOWARD; SHETH, 1977; BLACKWELL; ENGEL; MINIARD, 2008), indicates that the less that is known about the desired product/service, the greater the risk associated with the buying decision will be, and consequently the greater the cognitive effort to find information to make a decision (ALBA; HUTCHINSON, 1987). On the other hand, the greater the advance knowledge is, the less need there will be to seek information from various sources, reducing the importance of WOM recommendation (GILLY et al., 1998; BANSAL; VOYER, 2000) and the attention paid to it for making a decision. This idea was verified by Herr, Kardes & Kim (1991), but Gilly et al. (1998) and Bansal & Voyer (2000) did not obtain statistically significant results in their surveys.

Receiver knowledge not only brings this possible independence from the WOM recommendation, it also enables a more careful analysis of it, since more expertise about a determined product/service category makes it easier for the receiver to organize, evaluate and store alternative options (MITCHELL; DACIN, 1996) in comparison with the recommendation received.

With the intention of checking the influence of the receiver's expertise about the product/service category, in light of the inconclusive findings in the literature (SWEENEY; SOUTAR; MAZZAROL, 2008), we formulated the following hypothesis for testing:

H4: *There is a negative and significant relation between the Receiver's Expertise and the Influence of WOM Recommendation.*

Besides the specific knowledge the receiver may or may not have about what is recommended, strong brands are recognized by a larger number of people, a phenomenon that tends to generate more favorable predispositions.

Strength of the Recommended Brand

A brand's image or strength in the market also affects the perception of WOM messages and their acceptance. Brands are considered among firms' most important assets, with a strong effect on consumers' preferences and buying behavior (CHRISTODOULIDES; CHERNATONY, 2010; COBB-WALGREN et al., 1995). It can thus be expected that brand strength will exert an effect on the acceptance of WOM, with recommendations of strong brands being more readily accepted.

We did not find any specific studies of this influence, but Marshall & Woobong (2003), in their study of strong and weak brands, found a positive effect of brand strength on the messages sent by different communication media. Applying this idea to WOM recommendation, we expect a positive brand evaluation to influence the perception of the message received (the stronger the brand, the greater the strength of the recommendation message), as follows:

H5: *There is a positive and significant relation between Brand Strength and the Influence of WOM Recommendation.*

All the elements indicated above (brand, social ties, similarity, degree of expertise) influence the perception of the recommendation received and the predisposition to follow it or not.

Stimulus: Participation of the Recommender in a Sponsored WOM Program

The positive results brought by personal recommendations of friends and acquaintances have prompted many companies to develop sponsored WOM marketing programs. In this context, the recommender's motivation, whether or not he/she would recommend the product/service spontaneously, becomes the benefit received by the company.

The literature indicates various motives for consumers to make spontaneous WOM recommendations. This can involve a natural concern to help others with whom they maintain some type of relationship (RYU; FEICK, 2007) or the ability of manage impressions.

Providing information in a certain way confers a superior position, be it by demonstration of knowledge or the possibility of helping others (GATIGNON; ROBERTSON, 1986). It can also serve to reduce the cognitive dissonance of a purchase, by obtaining support and justification for the buying decision, since others may make the same choice (ARNDT, 1967).

In the sponsored version, the incentive offered by the company is added to these motivations, which are often hard to isolate and measure. Despite the growing use of marketing tools like recommendation programs (or WOM marketing programs), this type of arrangement can give room for ethical questions, since the difference of WOM should be the fact that consumers, in contrast to institutional initiatives, are not motivated by commercial reasons (KOZINETS et al., 2008). When rewards are offered for making recommendations, the base for the credibility of WOM can be undermined. This possibility has attracted attention from companies and researchers.

Although friendship and business relationships generate different expectations, it is not impossible or even improbable for friends to rely on each other for commercial purposes. This can happen legitimately, when it is clear that one person is relying on others because they are true friends, not just taking advantage of feigned friendship for personal gain (GRAYSON, 2007). Nevertheless, when there is a lack of clarity in these roles, consumers can perceive induced WOM as a source of conflict between friendship and self-interest (KOZINETS et al., 2010), generating effects contrary to those desired for these corporate initiatives.

Studies about the perception of company-sponsored WOM marketing programs have produced inconsistent results. While some authors have found mistrust in the recommendation when the recommender is encouraged (VERLEGH et al., 2004; SHIN, 2006), others have identified credibility of the recommendation and even greater repercussion when it is revealed in advance to the receiver, although this is more likely when there is a close relationship between recommender and receiver (CARL, 2008; TUK et al., 2009).

Because of the relative lack of evidence and the possible conflicts inherent to stimulated recommendation initiatives, we also analyze the impact of whether or not the recommender is part of an organized WOM program. We expect that, as indicated by Grayson (2007), the effect of a spontaneous recommendation (characteristic of strong or weak friendship) conflicts with the more utilitarian objective of receiving a reward (business characteristic). This leads to the following hypothesis:

> **H6:** *The relation between the antecedent constructs (Social Tie Strength, Perceived Similarity, Recommender's Expertise, Receiver's Expertise and Brand Strength) and the Influence of WOM Recommendation will be weaker when the recommender is participating in a WOM marketing program (post-stimulus scenario) than when not (pre-stimulus scenario).*

The hypotheses proposed and their relations are organized in the conceptual model shown in Figure 1. The model proposed was formulated based on the qualitative-exploratory study of Sweeney, Soutar & Mazzarol (2008). We chose that study because it is the only one to identify, in a qualitative process, a broad set of constructs that increase the chances of a person who receives a WOM recommendation to be influenced by the information received. Besides the basic elements of the model, we added the participation of the recommender in a sponsored WOM marketing program to check the possibility of that factor influencing the acceptance of the recommendation, as discussed by Verlegh et al. (2004), Shin (2006), Carl (2008) and Tuk et al. (2009).
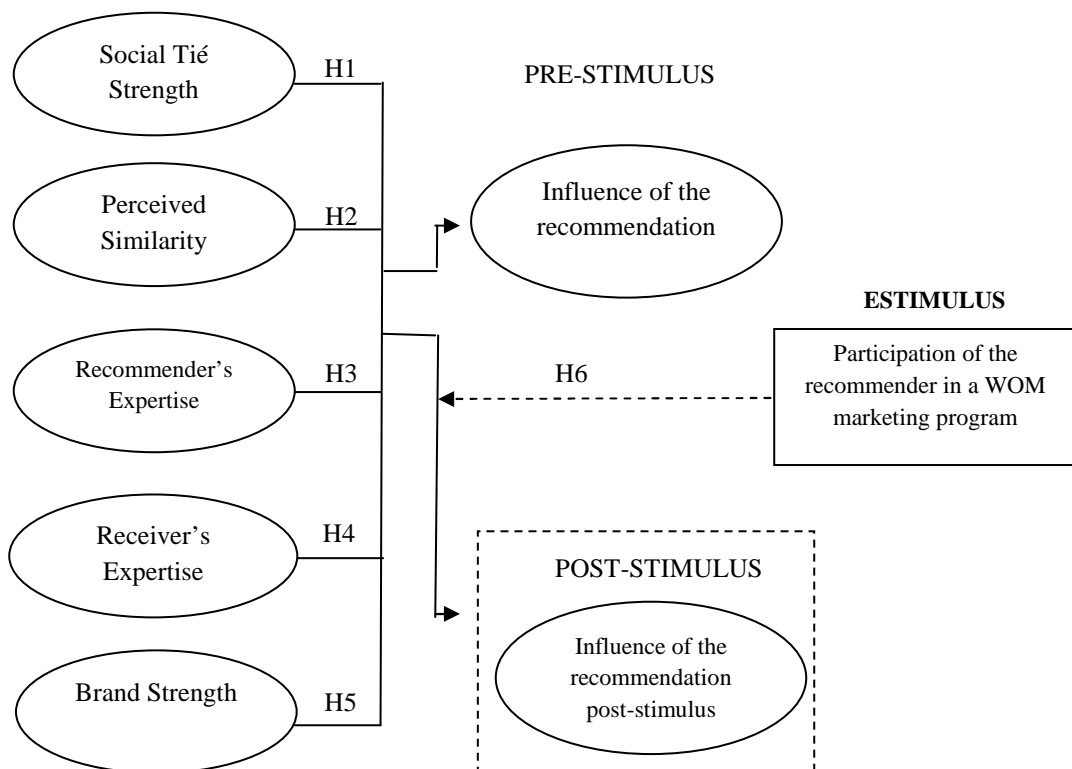
Figure 1 –Conceptual Model of the Elements that Influence Acceptance of a Word-of-Mouth Recommendation

The logic of the model is based on a set of **antecedent** constructs (Social Tie Strength, Perceived Similarity, Recommender's Expertise, Receiver's Expertise and Brand Strength), which leads to the **consequent** effect of the influence on acceptance of the recommendation received. According to this framework, a set of characteristics of what is recommended, who

recommends it and who receives the recommendation implies a willingness to accept the recommendation or not, which can be recognized as an effect of word of mount.

Besides this, we added to the conceptual model the participation of the recommender in a sponsored WOM marketing program, as a test stimulus, to assess the alterations on the influence for acceptance of the recommendation.

4 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

To compose the indicators of each construct of the model, we used the scales employed in the studies of Brown & Reingen (1987), Gilly et al. (1998), Bone (1995), Bansal & Voyer (2000), Wangenheim & Bayon (2004) and Christodoulides & Chernatony (2010). We chose these studies because they present detailed scales that have been tested empirically. They are shown in Table 1.

The study of Brown & Reingen (1987) was one of the first to consider the influence of the recommendation as a specific construct, by measuring on a scale the perceived influence of the receiver. However, they only associated this with the strength of the social tie.

CONSTRUCT	INDICATORS	AUTHORS
Social Tie Strength (degree of connection between two people and importance the relationship has for each one)	(1) Proximity of the relationship (2) Probability of sharing confidences/intimate information (3) Probability of providing help in any situation (4) Probability of spending free time together (5) Importance given to the relationship	- Bansal & Voyer (2000)
Perceived Similarity (degree of congruence between two people, in terms of attributes, values, preferences and lifestyles)	(1) In general we have similar preferences (2) We have similar preferences in relation to the product/service in question (3) We have similar values (4) In general, we are similar people (5) We've had similar experiences	- Wangenheim & Bayon (2004) - Gilly et al. (1998)
Recommender's Expertise (degree to which the recommender is perceived able to provide correct information based on experience or training)	In comparison to the majority of people, how much do you believe the person who gave you the recommendation: (1) has extensive knowledge of the type of recommended product/service? (2) has extensive experience using the recommended product/service? (3) is a reference to consult about the recommended product/service?	- Bansal & Voyer (2000) - Wangenheim & Bayon (2004) - Gilly et al. (1998)
Receiver's Expertise (degree to which the receiver of the recommendation perceives him/herself as knowledgeable about the product/service)	In comparison with the majority of people, how much do you think that you: (1) have extensive knowledge of the type of recommended product/service? (2) have extensive experience using the recommended product/service? (3) are a reference to consult about the recommended product/service?	- Bansal & Voyer (2000) - Gilly et al. (1998) - Bone (1995)

Brand Strength (perception of the receiver of the product/service)	The brand of the recommended product/service is: (1) known. (2) reliable. (3) a mark of quality. (4) valuable.	- Christodoulides & Chernatony (2010)
Influence of the Recommendation	(1) The recommendation positively influenced my decision to buy or consume the recommended product/service. (2) The recommendation caused me to recommendation me think positively about the recommended product/service. (3) The recommendation made me want to try the recommended product/service.	- Bansal & Voyer (2000) - Wangenheim & Bayon (2004) - Brown & Reingen (1987)

Table 1: Indicators of the model of acceptance of a WOM recommendation.

We translated the items of the scales identified in the literature into Portuguese, considering the characteristics of the original studies and the model proposed in this article. We then presented the survey instrument to a group of specialists, formed of researchers in the marketing area (professors holding doctorates at Rio Grande do Sul Federal University, University of the Federal District, University of São Paulo and Paraná Federal University), to receive critiques and suggestions. The final questionnaire was structured on a Likert scale of seven points, contemplating the proposed constructs.

The analysis of the effect of stimulus, to consider the recommender's participation in an organized word-of-mouth program, was carried out by presenting a hypothetical scenario in the questionnaire answered by the respondents, asking them to state whether or not they would change their behavior if they knew the recommender was rewarded for making the recommendation, i.e., whether they would not accept the recommendation received (if they had accepted it in the real retrospective experience) or would now accept the recommendation (if they had not accepted it in the real experience). This design, which can be considered quasi-experimental (SELLTIZ et al., 1987), was necessary because of the still incipient presence of this type of induced recommendation in Brazil. In cases where it is not possible to guarantee random distribution of the subjects or create control groups, it is still possible to identify cause-effect relations (COOK et al., 1990), as in this study, with a pre-test-post-test (stimulus) design.

After applying the pre-test with 150 individuals in the city of Rio de Janeiro, we refined the questionnaire and applied it to a total of 350 respondents (both sexes, with ages between 17 and 35 years and household income greater than five times the minimum monthly wage[1]). This was done by the same team of interviewers who had applied the pre-test, in the period

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[1] In dollar terms, about R$ 40000,00

between March 21 and April 3, 2012 also in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The number of respondents was in line with the suggestion of Hair (2005), of between five and ten respondents for each estimated parameter, and a minimum of 200 cases (KLINE, 1998).

To define the sample, we used the intercept technique (BUSH; HAIR JUNIOR, 1985), at points of pedestrian flow. The inclusion of only people between the ages of 17 and 35 was due to the greater receptiveness of people in this age range to new ideas or suggestions, such as a WOM recommendation (BORGES, 2006). The income cutoff was due to its correlation with the level of schooling, since the pre-test results indicated that people with more years of schooling had better comprehension of the questions and thus provided more representative responses.

We applied tests of normality, reliability (Cronbach's alpha, composed reliability and extracted variance) and validity (discriminant validity) to the data, before estimating the structural model by maximum likelihood, normally used in structural equation modeling (KLINE, 1998, ANDERSON; GERBIN, 1988; BREI; LIBERALI NETO, 2006) by generating more robust patterns, mainly when the data are normally distributed.

5 RESULTS

After preparing the database – replacing two missing values by the average of their variables, eliminating univariate outliers (Z-score) and multivariate outliers (D^2 of Mahalanobis) and verifying normality by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, along with tests of kurtosis and asymmetry – the final sample was composed of 315 people (62% men, 38% women). This served as the base for the proposed structural model, revealing preponderance of services (59%) in the recommendations received (mainly education, fitness centers and food), as well as technology/informatics products.

Validity of the constructs

The validity and purification of the constructs were checked by reliability tests, as suggested by Hair et al. (2005) and Kline (1998), by calculating Cronbach's alpha (Alpha), composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2- Validity of the Constructs of the Proposed Model

Construct	Loadings	Alpha	CR	AVE
STS - Social Tie Strength	STS1 → 0.894 STS2 → 0.894 STS3 → 0.843 STS4 → 0.739 STS5 → 0.834	0.916	0.924	0.710
SIM - Perceived Similarity *	SIM2 → 0.661 SIM3 → 0.744 SIM4 →0.929 SIM5 → 0.738	0.851	0.855	0.600
SE - Recommender's (Sender's) Expertise	SE1→ 0.774 SE2→ 0.831 SE3→ 0.893	0.869	0.872	0.696
RE - Receiver's Expertise	RE1→ 0.855 RE2→ 0.858 RE3→ 0.884	0.897	0.900	0.750
BS - Brand Strength	BS1→0.855 BS2→0.858 BS3→0.884	0.782	0.814	0.600
INF – Pre-stimulus Influence	INF1→ 0.640 INF2→ 0.934 INF3→ 0.720	0.812	0.823	0.611
INFPOS – Post-stimulus Influence	INFPOS1→0.976 INFPOS2→0.992 INFPOS3→0.970	0.986	0.986	0.959

* with exclusion of one item

The tests indicated representative loadings between the items and constructs (Hair et al. (2005) suggest a minimum of 0.30 for this sample size), evidencing the convergent validity of the constructs employed in the model. The reliability tests also assured validity of the constructs, with results that satisfied the expected criteria for Alpha (>0.7), CR (>0.7) and AVE (>0.5).

Discriminant validity

The discriminant validity was assessed according to Fornell & Larcker (1981) to verify that no measure of a construct was strongly correlated with measures of other constructs, to assure distinct measures for different constructs (BAGOZZI et al., 1991). All the values satisfied this condition, thus guaranteeing the discriminant validity of the constructs of the proposed structural model. The results are presented in Table 3, in which the main diagonal indicates the variance extracted from each construct and the other cells contain the shared variance by the squared correlation of the constructs.

Table 3 – Discriminant Validity: Indicators of the Proposed Model

	STS	SIM	SE	RE	BS	MSG	INF	INFPOS
STS	**0.710**							
SIM	0.585	**0.599**						
SE	0.015	0.057	**0.695**					
RE	0.002	0.013	0.062	**0.749**				
BS	0.021	0.018	0.047	0.078	**0.600**			
MSG	0.073	0.173	0.295	0.100	0.091	**0.553**		
INF	0.018	0.062	0.130	0.085	0.060	0.373	**0.611**	
INFPOS	0.021	0.030	0.025	0.067	0.089	0.073	0.065	**0.959**

Note among the constructs a high correlation between Social Tie Strength and Similarity, possibly because these involve the degree of proximity between the recommender and receiver, be it due to mutual trust or identification between the two. Nevertheless, that correlation does not compromise the model's discriminant validity, guaranteeing higher extracted variance than shared variance among the constructs (FORNELL; LARCKER, 1981), as well as correlation coefficients below 0.8 (KLINE, 2005; GARSON, 2007), ruling out problems of multicollinearity.

After verifying the validity and reliability of the scales, with the adjustments made, we tested the complete structural equation model with its constructs and hypotheses.

Evaluation of the structural equation model and hypothesis testing

The constructs and proposed relations between them generated the model presented in Figure 2, containing the hypotheses presented previously and the presence of the hypothetical stimulus (INFPOS).
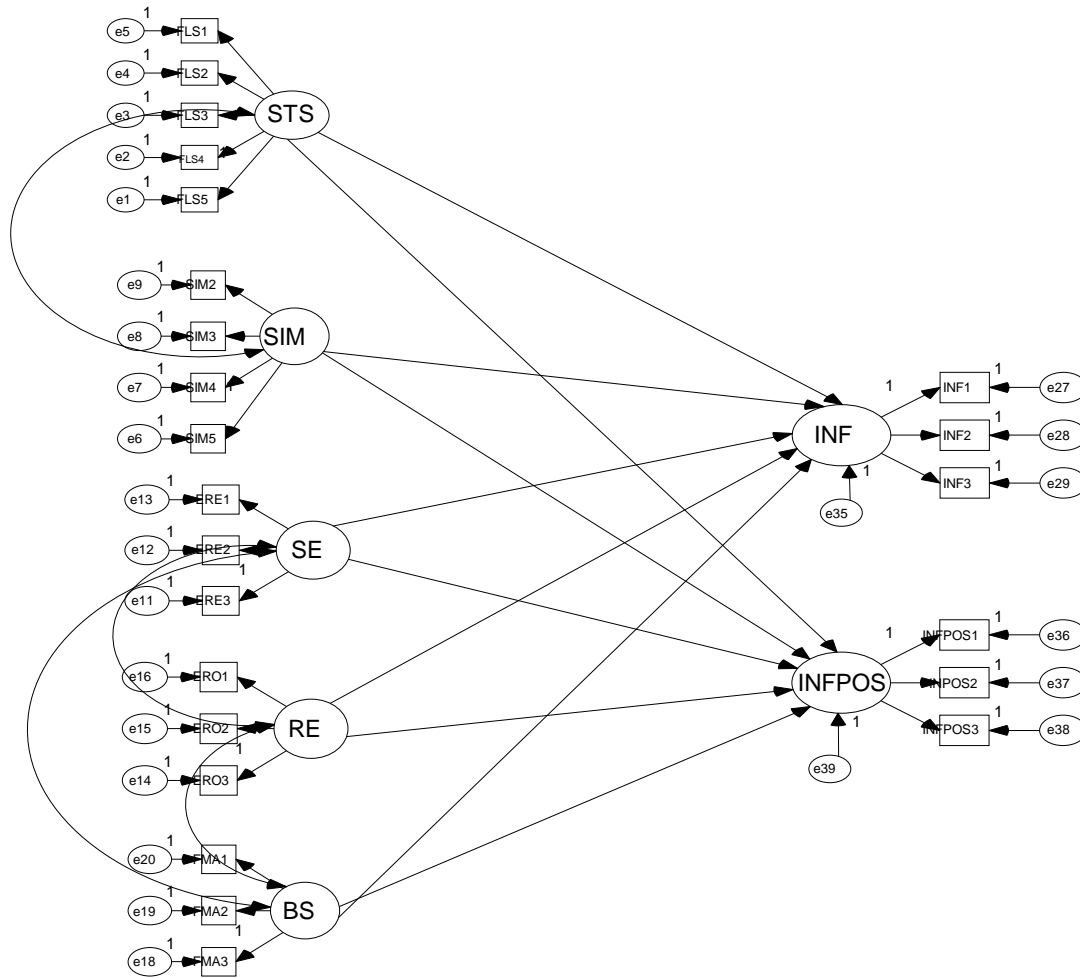
Figure 2 – Design of the proposed model, tested with the AMOS 16.0 software.

Because of conceptual characteristics, some constructs appeared to be more strongly correlated, such as Social Tie Strength (STS) and Similarity (SIM), due to proximity between recommender and receiver. Recommender's Expertise (SE), Receiver's Expertise (RE) and Brand Strength refer to experiences and relations with the brand and category of recommended product/service, also being proposals with correlations in the model tested.

We tested the goodness of fit of the model, with acceptance based on: (1) the degree of correspondence between the structure of the theoretical model and the observed data, which were within the expected values of the goodness-of-fit indexes, and (2) the strength and statistical significance of the loadings or estimation parameters for the proposed hypotheses.

The goodness-of-fit indexes, presented in Table 4, satisfy the criteria normally used in structural equation modeling, indicating good explanatory power of the proposed model.

Table 4 – Goodness-of-Fit Indexes for the Proposed Model, Before Presenting the Stimulus

Indexes	Results	Criterion
X^2 / DF	2.23	< 5
GFI	0.88	> 0.8
AGFI	0.84	> 0.8
TLI	0.94	> 0.9
NFI	0.91	> 0.9
CFI	0.94	> 0.9
RMSEA	0.07	< 0.08
SRMR	0.07	< 0.08

Source: Survey data, 2011. Criteria: Hair Junior et al., 2005.

Since the model proved to be a good reflection of reality, we evaluated the factor loadings of the constructs, as shown in Table 5. The analysis of the hypothesis tests, in the natural WOM recommendation scenario (recommender does not receive incentive to give advice), indicates that the relations proposed in the model were significant, except for Social Tie Strength → Recommendation Influence, so that hypothesis H1 was not confirmed.

Table 5 – Tests of Hypotheses for the Proposed Model, Before Presenting the Stimulus

Hypothesis - Relation				Coefficient		Result
				Not Standardized	Standardized	
H1 (+)	STS	--->	INF	-0.07(ns)	-0.43	Not supported
H2 (+)	SIM	--->	INF	0.21 *	0.14 *	Supported
H3 (+)	SE	--->	INF	0.26 ***	0.16 ***	Supported
H4 (-)	RE	--->	INF	0.18 ***	0.10 ***	Not supported
H5 (+)	BS	--->	INF	0.13 *	0.16 *	Supported

*p<0.05; **p<0.01;*** p<0.001 ns= not significant
Source: Survey data, 2012.

The non-significance of Social Tie Strength, although it runs counter to some theoretical evidence (BANSAL; VOYER, 2000; BROWN; REINGEN, 1987), can demonstrate a less relevant role of this antecedent when inserted in a universe with more variables regarding

acceptance of a WOM recommendation. All the same, the high correlation between Social Tie Strength and Similarity (0.762) wound up impairing the impact of the former, removing its significance. This result should not be taken as belittling the importance of the social tie between the recommender and receiver. Rather, it only suggests it is not the trigger that generates willingness to accept the message.

The Recommender's Expertise and Similarity with the receiver are the relations most strongly associated with Recommendation Influence of WOM. Being sufficiently knowledgeable to make a recommendation, as well as having the same lifestyle and concerns as the receiver, is what most causes willingness to accept the recommendation according to the evidence of the structural model.

Unlike the expected inverse relation between Receiver's Expertise and Recommendation Influence, they were directly and positively related, thus not confirming H4 and suggesting new interpretations are necessary for this relation.

The test statistics confirmed the model's validity and the all but one of the hypotheses, so we then evaluated a scenario of hypothetical stimulus to recommend, where the receiver knows the recommender had received some incentive to give the advice. After this stimulus scenario was presented to the respondents, they were again asked to answer the questions on the influence of the recommendation.

The new hypothesis tests confirmed the impact of this stimulus, as shown in Table 6, based on the non-significance between the antecedent constructs Similarity (SIM) and Recommender's Expertise (SE) and the construct Recommendation Influence (INFPOS), the former being exactly the constructs with strongest influence in the natural WOM scenario.

Table 6 - Hypothesis Tests for the Proposed Model After Presentation of the Stimulus Scenario

Hypothesis – Relation				Coefficient		Comparative Result
				Not Standardized	Standardized	
	STS	--->	INFPOS	0.04 (ns)	0.03 (ns)	(ns) = (ns)
	SIM	--->	INFPOS	0.14 (ns)	0.10 (ns)	0.10 (ns) < 0.21*
H6	SE	--->	INFPOS	0.06 (ns)	0.05 (ns)	0.05 (ns) < 0.26***
(INFPOS < INF)	RE	--->	INFPOS	0.20 ***	0.18 ***	0.18 *** = 0.18 ***
	BS	--->	INFPOS	0.62 ***	0.23 ***	0.23*** > 0.13*

*** $p<0.001$ ns= not significant
Source: Survey data, 2012.

In the scenario of natural WOM recommendation (no incentive), the results of the hypothesis tests indicated that the recommender's similarity (similarity between the

recommender and receiver) and the receiver's expertise account for most of the influence of the recommendation, regardless of the type of social tie, since this did not have a statistically significant impact.

Nevertheless, under the induced scenario, with presentation of a hypothetical sponsored WOM marketing program, the similarity and recommender's expertise lost significance, evidencing the negative impact of the incentive. In this case, the brand of the product/service and expertise of the receiver were the only important positive factors.

6 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Measuring the sources of influence for acceptance of a WOM recommendation was the main objective of this study, with the aim of filling a gap found in the theory, to: (1) compare and quantitatively measure a broader set of antecedents for predisposition to accept a recommendation; and (2) assess the specific impact of WOM through an induced marketing program.

The results of the model's hypotheses point to the following main conclusions:

(1) The Recommender's Expertise, Perceived Similarity and Receiver's Expertise are the elements with the strongest influence on acceptance of a WOM recommendation in the natural (not induced) scenario. This means to say that the extent to which the recommender understands the recommended product/service (is a Reference) and how much that person has similar choices/needs as the receiver (Identification) are the elements with the greatest effect on the willingness to accept the recommendation. These results corroborate those of studies on interpersonal influence based on expertise, already identified by Gatignon & Robertson (1986), and in situations of WOM recommendations, by Bansal & Voyer (2000) and Wangenheim & Bayon (2004). The influence of homophily or similarity between sender and receiver confirms the credibility and propensity to accept the message conveyed, as also found by Brown & Reingen (1987) and Gilly et al. (1998).

(2) The Receiver's Expertise was proposed as inversely related to the Recommendation Influence, considering theoretical arguments of independence of receivers with respect to recommendations received. This means to say that when people receiving advice already have relatively good knowledge of the recommended product/service, they will naturally "discount" or not pay attention to this recommendation. This proposition was not confirmed in this survey, possibly suggesting that contrary to the feeling of independence that receivers may obtain from their own knowledge, or as indicated by Herr et al. (1991), the feeling of less

trust they have in the opinion of others than in their own, the indication can still generate specific interest and attention to the recommended product/service.

This result suggests a new understanding of the idea of lack of need for a recommendation. It might be that in cases where the recommendation is requested, as in the study of Gilly et al. (1998), that inverse relationship holds, since someone who already has good knowledge of a product/service could disregard a recommendation or not pay heed to it. However, in cases of spontaneous (unsought) recommendation, it appears the advice causes interest, and can add information to that already possessed or prompt questions, in any event generating attention and desire to verify the recommendation received.

(3) Unlike the theoretical proposal, the Social Tie Strength was not significantly related with Recommendation Influence. Although we expected the recommender's expertise and similarity with the receiver to be important antecedents, the non-significance of the relationship between the recommender and receiver is an unexpected finding, considering that this involves values like trust and credibility, as identified by Rogers (2003), Smith et al. (2007) and Bansal & Voyer (2000). It can be argued that it is not enough to trust the person recommending something to accept this advice, but from this trust factors like recommender's expertise and perceived similarity are able to instigate willingness to accept it. This finding suggests the need for future studies to better understand this relation.

(4) In the scenario of the sponsored WOM marketing program, the main antecedents lost strength, showing the fragility of this model and the need to care in applying such programs. In these situations, the brand strength and receiver's expertise stood out in our results, demonstrating specific aspects of what is known about the recommended product/service that do not depend on trust or the relationship with the recommender. These results make sense, since as argued by various authors (VERLEGH et al., 2004; GRAYSON, 2007; TUK et al., 2008), the trust of a relationship is more sensitive when the person who recommends something has receive a reward for doing so. In these cases, receivers naturally tend to place more trust in the strength of the recommended brand and their own knowledge and discernment.

The main contribution of this study is the development of a quantitative model to analyze WOM recommendation that joins various elements already studied separately, in the same empirical reality. It also permits, in pioneering form in a single model, assessment of the impact of sponsored word-of-mouth marketing programs, and confirms the importance of

reference and identification between sender and receiver for acceptance of a WOM recommendation.

The analysis and purification of the constructs, as well as the validation of the structural model, offer scales that are validated in the Portuguese language for studies of WOM recommendation.

The design of the data collection instrument, with a retrospective approach and inclusion of the incentivized recommendation scenario, also contributes with different approaches in constructing questionnaires, using quasi-experimental resources in the application of traditional surveys.

Finally, the results of the hypotheses provide greater insight into the effectiveness of word-of-mouth recommendations.

6.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The first limitation of the study involves the design of the approach, model and data collection instrument, since we were unable to find offline WOM marketing programs with high penetration in the population to serve as research targets. Hence, we had to use a retrospective approach, combined with a quasi-experimental design with presentation of a test scenario. Retrospective designs produce satisfactory results, especially in studies of services (MATOS et al., 2008), as does application of scenarios in experimental studies. Nevertheless, it would have been better to investigate the proposed hypotheses among target receivers of an incentivized WOM marketing program.

Also, the scale of post-stimulus influence (INFPOS) presented a significant correlation index between its indicators. Although this did not impair the model's fit, and was the same scale used in the pre-stimulus scenario for effects of comparison, to a certain extent there was a uniform comprehension of the indicators, suggesting further research to better identify this perception.

These limitations, together with the findings, suggest opportunities for new approaches and deeper research.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

The current trend in marketing by companies has been to shift investments from more traditional above-the-line initiatives, such as mass media advertising, to below-the-line initiatives, with alternative approaches using the internet, mobile phones, public interventions and word-of-mouth communication (PQ Media, 2010).

The growing recognition of the results brought by WOM recommendations has prompted companies to organize sponsored programs, with the expectation of more efficient returns than from traditional marketing initiatives.

Within this scenario, studies that support the construction of more effective formats for WOM recommendation programs are important. Specifically, this study contributes to the design of programs for recommendations to end consumers, suggesting care in choosing the target receivers and considering the profile of the recommenders (they need to be perceived as knowledgeable and have identification with the receivers in their choices and preferences). Also, by evidencing the negative impact of encouraged recommendation, these results demonstrate the need for careful planning of these initiatives, in terms of communication, values, formats, occasions and profiles of the participants who receive these incentives. Finally, this study reveals some initial indications for construction of sponsored WOM marketing programs, but suggests that each organization needs to identify specific relevant points for distinct categories of products and/or services.

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