

# Chapter 1

## Electronic Word of Mouth: Definitions and Concepts

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### ABSTRACT

*Because of its great impact on the consumer's behavior, electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM) has become an important concept for the researchers and during the last decade, a great deal of attention was paid to the concept of eWOM. However, despite the growing number of studies on the subject, related literature remains fragmented, possibly affecting the long term development of the eWOM research. Fragmentation of this research can be traced back to a lack of conceptualization of the term eWOM. Therefore, this chapter proposes to highlight the great impact of eWOM on consumer's behavior and to shed light on this concept. Then, this chapter will first introduce the context in which eWOM takes place, define the concept and distinguish it from other close concepts like traditional word of mouth, buzz marketing and viral marketing. At the end, the last section will focus on the importance given by consumers to eWOM.*

### INTRODUCTION

Electronic Word of Mouth or eWOM is a particular form of communication that has emerged with the development of Internet and especially with the advent and evolution of social media as well as user-generated content (UGC).

During the last decade, both researchers and practitioners placed a great deal of attention to eWOM (Dwyer, 2007) and several studies examined this concept. However, despite the increasing number of studies on eWOM, research on the subject remains relatively fragmented (Cheung & Thadani, 2012), which could - on the long run- hinder the development of the concept itself. The reasons for this fragmentation are many and various.

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Indeed, these reasons may relate to how researchers label eWOM phenomenon, as well as to how researchers use different terms such as Web of mouse, internet word of mouth, word of modem, online references, etc. to designate eWOM (Shin, 2008).

The great number of eWOM definitions that are suggested by researchers may represent a second reason to this fragmentation. In fact, the research trend on eWOM being somewhat new, thus it is possible to find within literature several definitions that describe the phenomenon.

The proximity of eWOM to other concepts such as the conventional WOM, buzz marketing, user-generated content, or viral marketing, has created some confusion in the use of the term eWOM, often confound with these concepts and used in synonymous ways. This represents a third reason to the fragmentation of research on eWOM.

The purpose of this chapter is, then, to identify and analyze - through a review of the literature - the main reasons leading to the fragmentation of eWOM research. Emphasis will also be placed on the issues around the development of research in this field as well as its impact on consumer behavior.

The chapter is structured into four sections. The first one tries to determine the reasons which led to the emergence of eWOM. The second aims at better understanding eWOM by defining it, explaining its different communication channels and by listing its different features. The third section tries to position the concept in relation to similar concepts which are often regarded as its synonyms. The last section argues the reasons why consumers prefer eWOM as a communication model.

## **THE ADVENT OF eWOM**

As explained by Dellarocas (2003), the advent of Internet has generated an evolution in the way communication is made between individuals. Since the early 2000's, the second generation of Internet-based applications (also known as Web 2.0) has emerged. Thanks to the opportunities that Web 2.0 offers, as well as the emergence of user-generated media, internet users have been enabled to generate information and control communication. Since then, this user-generated media are not anymore limited to be used as distribution channels, but used to facilitate the development and communication between Internet users. As a result marketing managers have lost control on marketing communication (Miller & Lammas, 2010).

Thanks to the shifting landscape of information and communication technology, users have begun to electronically exchange information about products and make known of their preferences and their consumption experiences through the technology offered by web 2.0 (Huang, Cai, Tsang, & Zhou, 2011). This marks the emergence of a new form of communication: the eWOM. Indeed, with the advent of Internet, consumers are gradually moving towards computer-mediated communication to obtain the information they need to make purchase decisions (Dellarocas, 2003; Kozinets, 2002).

In what follows, an overview of the different concepts that are at the origin of eWOM will be presented. These concepts include Web 2.0, user-generated content and social media. The second part will focus on the emergence of eWOM.

### **Web 2.0**

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define Web 2.0 as a term used to describe a new way with which software developers and end users access the Web. It refers to a platform in which the content and applications are no longer created and posted by some individuals only. With the advent of Web 2.0, content can be

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