Abstract

This study was a test of the utility of a diary-based methodology for revealing how word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing agents perceive their campaign and non-campaign-related WOM communication episodes. A modified version of the Iowa Communication Record, originally designed for presenting the "geography of everyday conversation," was the base for the collection of 2,088 self-reports of the agents' WOM episodes. Data were subjected to a principal components factor analysis. The resulting factors–communication quality, value, impact, relational change, and conversational control–served to gauge differences attributable to the institutional nature of the WOM, sex of respondent and conversational partner, relationship type, and day of week.

Key Concepts

word-of-mouth communication

word-of-mouth marketing

conversational geography

Iowa Communication Record

institutional interaction

Scholars have long known about the important role of interpersonal influence, whether in the context of media information flow and opinion leadership (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Weimann, 1994), organizational studies of informal networks and the grapevine (Cross & Parker, 2004; Davis, 1953), the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003), or word-of-mouth advertising and marketing (Arndt, 1967; Buttle, 1998). This long tradition, and especially the study of word-of-mouth (WOM), has attracted a renewed interest in the past few years as a result of dissatisfaction and distrust with more traditional forms of advertising, as well as the emergence of communication technologies that facilitate consumer-to-consumer interaction (Ozcan, 2004). Numerous popular books concerning WOM have emerged (for example, Balter & Butman, 2005; Gladwell, 2000; McConnell & Huba, 2003), and increasing media attention to word-of-mouth marketing practices, whereby organizations consciously seek to create or amplify word-of-mouth communication about their brands, products, or services (Walker, 2004), is in evidence.

In the 1960s, WOM researchers began to recognize the informal quality of consumer conversations (see Arndt, 1969). However, the actual conversations and communication patterns involved in WOM have received only limited attention (Buttle, 1998; Ozcan, 2004). In contrast, communication scholars have made considerable progress in understanding everyday conversations. Such talk began to receive systematic attention in the 1970s, as ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts sought to describe the normative and sequential features of conversation (for example, Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). In the early 1990s, a group of interpersonal and relational communication scholars set out to map the "conversational geography" of everyday conversation (Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991). By asking participants to keep a record of their commonplace interactions with individuals representing different

relationship types and on different days of the week, these researchers demonstrated that seemingly trivial, mundane communication is consequential in the conduct of daily life and helped to explain phenomena previously accounted for in terms of social-psychological variables (Leatham & Duck, 1990). More than a decade and a half later, an edited volume devoted to the explication of how everyday, routine interaction shapes our identities and quality of human relationships has been published (Wood & Duck, 2006). Inspired by the proposition that everyday talk forms the basis for a wide variety of phenomena of interest to communication scholars (Carl & Duck, 2004), the present study served to extend these insights to the realm of brand-related word-of-mouth communication. After distinguishing between two broad types of word-of-mouth communication, we elaborate on the "conversational geography" project (Duck et al., 1991) that we sought to replicate in the present study.

Everyday and Institutional WOM

Traditionally, WOM has been conceptualized as face-to-face communication about brands, products, and services between people who do not have a commercial affiliation (Arndt, 1967; Stern, 1994). However, WOM can also take place online (Mayzlin, 2006), include talk about organizations (Bailey, 2004), and is increasingly prone to corporate influence (for example, receiving rewards and incentives to refer friends and family members; see Buttle, 1998). In his review of WOM definitions, Buttle concluded that the only distinguishing feature of WOM may be that it "is uttered by sources who are assumed by receivers to be independent of corporate influence" (p. 243). In organized word-of-mouth marketing, however, in which people participate in corporate-sponsored programs, the purpose of which is to facilitate brand-related consumer-to-consumer conversations, the level of corporate influence intensifies, and even Buttle's distinction comes into question. To account for this, Carl (2006a) distinguished between

"institutional" and "everyday" WOM. "Everyday WOM" refers to "informal, evaluative communication (positive or negative) between at least two conversational participants about characteristics of an organization and/or a brand, product, or service which could take place online or offline," whereas "institutional WOM" refers to "WOM communication where the institutional identity or corporate affiliation of at least one participant may be salient" or the object of WOM maybe a product or service that is part of a word-of-mouth marketing campaign (p. 605). This difference is similar to the distinction that language and social interaction scholars make between "everyday" and "institutional" interaction, except it involves no claim concerning which of the two is foundational (see Drew & Heritage, 1992).

The distinction is consequential because of social and ethical concerns some forms of WOM marketing raise. Some of these concerns include whether or not those involved in the WOM episode know that one person may be affiliated with a marketing agency (either voluntarily or paid) and to what extent word-of-mouth marketing leads to the commercialization of chit-chat (Walker, 2004). By distinguishing between institutional and everyday WOM, researchers are able to compare and contrast the two kinds to determine if these concerns are indeed warranted. For example, if institutional WOM consistently contains more positive commentary than everyday WOM, this may be evidence of corporate influence and, thus, greater cause for concern that such influence is indeed affecting the nature of routine social interactions (Carl, 2006a; Kaye, 2006).

Academic research involving product or brand-related WOM and organized word-of-mouth marketing often takes place within a business or marketing frame. Existing WOM research tends to focus on its antecedents, moderators, and consequences (Buttle, 1998; Mangold, Miller, & Brockway, 1999; Nyilasy, 2006), as well as its frequency and valence (Bone,

1992; Richins, 1983; Swan & Oliver, 1989). In contrast, organized word-of-mouth marketing is an emerging area of inquiry with limited empirical work (Carl, 2006a; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Noticeably absent in existent research concerning WOM and organized word-of-mouth marketing is a communication perspective that attends to how it is embedded within routine, everyday conversations and relational interaction (Carl & Duck, 2004; Duck et al., 1991). That is, when people engage in product or brand-related WOM, they are doing so in the communicative context of their daily lives and relationships, such as helping a friend solve a problem, sharing the day's events, deciding where to go on vacation, etc. (Carl, 2006a; Mangold et al., 1999). Thus, communication researchers are well positioned to contribute insight and knowledge to the WOM and organized word-of-mouth marketing research, especially due to the discipline's continued interest in the relational, identity, and cultural implications of talk (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Fitch, 2003; Tracy, 1995;).

Conversational Geography Project

Duck et al. (1991) noted that researchers must attend to the everyday, commonplace, and routine aspects of interaction if they are to understand the communication process in terms that apply to personal relationships. By mapping the "geography of everyday communication," those researchers could challenge a number of assumptions concerns how communication actually takes place outside laboratory environments. Through the use of a self-report diary method, the Iowa Communication Record (Duck, 1991), they have learned that explicit self-disclosure is relatively infrequent in everyday settings, that there are consistent sex differences in terms of communication quality across relationship types, and that conversations tend to vary by the day of the week (with conflict communication being most likely to occur on Wednesdays).

The emphasis in the present study was everyday and institutional WOM as related to four factors identified in Duck et al.'s (1991) original study: communication quality (such as relaxed, interesting, satisfying, level of conflict, etc.), interaction value (to the present and future), change (specifically, attitudinal, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational), and conversational control (separate versus mutual control of conversational initiation, topic choice, and termination). Their significant findings involved comparisons among sex of respondent, sex of conversational partner, relationship type, and day of week. Each of these is discussed below, with the addition of the distinction between institutional and everyday WOM described above, and how each led to hypotheses regarding the communication practices of word-of-mouth marketing agents.

Sex of Respondent

Duck et al. (1991) reported that respondent sex significantly affected ratings of communication value and relational change, which they interpreted as meaning that males were more likely to assume a stable relational future, independently of the particular conversation, whereas females were more likely to see conversations as consequential for relational change and more likely to monitor the relationship. In contrast to the wide spectrum of interactions about which participants in the study could report, we hypothesized that WOM episodes represent a narrower slice of conversational topics and ones that are less consequential for changing the relationship or increasing attraction to the conversational partner. Accordingly, we expected that no significant sex differences for changes in the relationship would surface. Consistent with Duck et al.'s (1991) findings, we anticipated that females would report higher levels of communication quality. Our justification stems from research by Carl (2006a) that indicates brand-related WOM episodes frequently occur when parties are discussing other mundane topics,

such as discussing plans for the weekend or reviewing the day's events, settings in which Duck et al. (1991) reported conversational quality to be higher among females than males.

H1: Females and males will report the same, relatively low amount of perceived relational change for WOM episodes.

H2: Females will report higher perceived levels of communication quality for WOM episodes than males.

Sex of Conversational Partner

Research involving sex differences among conversational partners has shown that females are regarded more positively than their male counterparts (Reis, 1986; Wheeler, Reis & Nezlek, 1983). Duck et al. (1991) built on this in arguing, and supporting empirically, that communication variables, specifically communication quality, are the source of this difference, as opposed to the mere presence of a female versus a male. Hence, we posited:

H3: Female conversational partners will report higher perceived levels of communication quality for WOM episodes than males, regardless of respondent sex.

Relationship Type

Conversational geography researchers have reported relationship type as varying significantly in respect to quality, change, value, and control (Duck et al., 1991). For example in one such study, interactions with acquaintances were the least valued (relatives the most valued); the lowest communication quality took place with strangers (the highest quality with best friends); acquaintances reported the least amount of mutual conversational control (best friends reported the most shared control); interactions with relatives were the least likely to lead to relational change (romantic partners were the most likely to change). Accordingly, we anticipated differences among relationship types across a variety of dimensions, especially between "weak-tie" relationships (acquaintance and stranger relationships) and "strong-tie"

relationships (friend, best friend, romantic, and familial relationships; Granovetter, 1973). Specifically,

H4a: Agents will report lower communication quality with strangers and acquaintances than with friends, best friends, romantic, and familial partners.

H4b: Agents will report lower interaction value with strangers and acquaintances than with friends, best friends, romantic, and familial partners.

H4c: Agents will report higher levels of relational change with romantic partners than with any other relationship type.

H4d: Agents will report higher levels of conversational control with strangers and acquaintances than with friends, best friends, romantic, and familial partners.

Day of Week

When respondents were unconstrained in reporting their interactions (meaning they could choose any interaction they wanted, regardless of day of week), Duck et al. (1991) uncovered significant differences relating to the day of the week for value, change, and quality factors. Specifically, the highest levels of communication quality reportedly occurred on weekends, with significantly higher levels of conflict on Wednesdays (conflict was assessed on the single item measure). Interaction value was lowest on Mondays. However, when respondents were to report an interaction each day of the week for a 14-day period, the single significant finding was that conflict was highest on Wednesdays. Because we did not expect WOM episodes to be high in potential for conflict, we did not expect there to be any significant differences for day of the week.

H5: Day of the week will not be a significant variable in accounting for changes in communication quality, interaction value, level of reported change, and mutuality of control.

H6a: Perceived conflict levels for WOM episodes will be lower than reported in Duck et al. (1991).

H6b: Perceived conflict levels for WOM episodes will not vary significantly by days of the week.

Institutional Nature of WOM

As described above, institutional WOM refers to WOM for which the institutional or corporate affiliation of at least one party is salient, or the WOM object (organization, brand, product, or service) is part of a word-of-mouth marketing campaign. Carl (2006a) discovered that of all the WOM episodes word-of-mouth marketing agents affiliated with a particular word-of-mouth marketing company reported, only 16% involved a WOM object tied to a marketing campaign; thus, more than 80% were "everyday WOM." Further, he reported both similarities and differences when comparing institutional to everyday WOM. For example, although word-of-mouth marketing agents were more likely than their conversational partners to make a recommendation, agents were even more likely to do so for institutional WOM when compared to everyday WOM (88% versus 71% of the time a recommendation was made). Further, differences in the reduced likelihood of *negative* commentary for institutional WOM were in evidence. Similarities were that the majority of both institutional and everyday WOM episodes were positive in nature, as well as that the majority of both types were spontaneous (nearly 75%), rather than pre-planned. Accordingly we expected to see both similarities and differences when comparing institutional and everyday WOM across the factors Duck et al. (1991) identified. Since agents are more likely to recommend products or services for institutional WOM, but are also more likely to be on the receiving end for everyday WOM, we anticipated agents' reporting lower levels of perceived change and lower levels of perceived mutual (versus individual) conversational control. Thus,

H7: Agents will perceive lower levels of mutual conversational control for institutional WOM than for everyday WOM.

H8: Agents will perceive greater levels of their own attitudinal, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational change for everyday WOM than institutional WOM.

Expected scores for communication quality and value are less straightforward. Presumably, agents could rate both communication quality and value as high (or low) regardless of the institutional nature. Agents affiliated with this particular word-of-mouth marketing company volunteer to participate in a campaign so they might be more likely to report higher levels of quality and value because they have self-selected into a campaign. Equally likely, however, is that word-of-mouth marketing agents volunteer to engage in word-of-mouth because they enjoy the process and are, thus, likely to report equal levels of both quality and value. Hence,

H9: Agent scores for communication quality and interaction value will not vary between the institutional (campaign-related) and everyday (non-campaign-related) forms of WOM.

Methods and Instruments

Instruments and Procedures

Word-of-Mouth Communication Log. For each of three WOM episodes, the participants completed the "Word-of-Mouth Communication Log" (WOMCL) survey as soon as possible after it occurred. They could choose which WOM episodes they wished to report. The 44-item WOMCL was an adaptation of the Iowa Communication Record (ICR; Duck, 1991; Duck et al. 1991). Support for the validity and reliability of the original ICR can be found in Duck et al. (1991). The original ICR indexed: age and sex of individuals and conversational partners; the time, place, and length of the interaction; relationship factors, such as the length of time the respondent and individual knew one another, as well as the nature of their relationship (acquaintance, friend, lover, etc.); role of the talk, what activities occurred before, during, and after the interactions, as well as subjective perceptions of the conversational quality; impact,

value, and the potential for change to the relationship; and attraction to the partner. The WOMCL included all of the original ICR items plus items to determine: co-worker status; perception of self and partner's knowledge of the WOM object being discussed (Gilly et al., 1998); valence of the WOM episode (positive, negative, or neutral; Spangenberg & Giese, 1997); presence of referral or recommendation; media tracings (that is, reference to other media forms, such as TV, print, or online advertisements; McMahan, 2001); and whether or not the WOM-episode about which they were reporting was part of an active word-of-mouth marketing campaign. A copy of the instrument appears in Appendix A, and shows the type of data and the response continua. The data were collected in a manner consistent with the institutional review procedures of the authors' university and in accordance with the existing policies and procedures of the word-of-mouth marketing company.

Participants

All participants in the study were affiliated with a word-of-mouth marketing company based in the northeast United States; however, agents were geographically distributed across the United States and Canada. At the time of the data collection, the firm ("Agency") had upward of 70,000 individuals voluntarily acting as word-of-mouth marketing agents ("agents"). All agents had participated in a word-of-mouth marketing campaign before or during January and February 2005. A campaign typically involves a client contacting the Agency to build buzz about a product. The client and Agency then collaborate in preparing a guide book that explains the facts and interesting information about the product to be "buzzed" and suggested ways for the agents to introduce the product in conversations (the guide book does not go as far as scripting interactions, and agents are encouraged to generate their own ways of talking about a product).

Through the Agency's website, campaigns are introduced to a particular set of agents, who self-select into one they are interested. The agents who participate receive a free product sample, an accompanying guide book, and instructions to use the product and then share their honest opinions (positive or negative) with others in their social network. Participating agents in our study were encouraged to disclose their identities as word-of-mouth marketing agents based on an honor system. After an institutional WOM episode, the Agent logs into the company's website to file a report about the episode and the feedback from the other person. Each Agent receives an individual response from internal Agency staff, and the report is evaluated by the staff member on such criteria as thoroughness and creativity (more points are awarded for creative WOM and thorough reporting of the episode; some agents do nothing with the points, some redeem them for prizes, and some donate them to charity). In turn, the Agency compiles the reports and presents the results to the client company. It is not uncommon for agents to continue buzzing a product after a campaign ends. Further, agents routinely engage in WOM for organizations, brands, products, and services that are unrelated to a campaign or their institutional affiliation with the Agency.

All agents were eligible to participate in the study, and 3,287 indicated a willingness to do so. If a participant completed the entire study, he or she was eligible to win an Apple iPod. Consistent with existing organizational practices, the person also received one point for each survey completed. The number of submitted WOMCL surveys was 2,108. Of these, 2,088 WOMCL surveys were complete and contained information about a WOM episode. The sample was representative of the larger Agent population in respect to all available demographic variables: sex, age, ethnicity, education level and income levels. Eighty-three percent of the sample was female; ages ranged from 13-72, with 45% being 18-29; approximately 90% self-

identified as white or European-American; 54% had some college or a 4-year college degree; and approximately 65% reported incomes within the range of $20,000 - $80,000 per year (26% reporting over $80K and 9% reporting under $20K).

Sixty-one percent of the agents' conversational partners were female. WOM episodes were unevenly distributed across the seven relational types (listed from highest frequency to lowest, with data missing for three cases): Friends (*n* = 676, 32.4%), Relatives (*n* = 375, 18.0%), Best Friends (*n* = 256, 12.3%), Romantic Partners/Spouses (*n* = 252, 12.1%), Acquaintances (*n* = 241, 11.6%), Other (*n* = 184, 8.8%), and Strangers (*n* = 101, 4.8%). Except for Friday, WOM episodes fell evenly across all days of the week: Sunday (*n* = 274, 13.1%), Monday (*n* = 293, 14.0%), Tuesday (*n* = 308, 14.8%), Wednesday (*n* = 274, 13.1%), Thursday (*n* = 305, 14.6%), Friday (*n* = 359, 17.2%), and Saturday (*n* = 275, 13.2%). Eighty-four percent of the agents' episodes were everyday WOM, meaning that the product or service discussed was *not* part of a word-of-mouth marketing campaign. The campaign-related WOM episodes could include a range of client products, such as books, electronic devices, fragrances, or clothing.

Results

Factor Analysis

Data for the items included in the WOMCL survey were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with Varimax rotation. Although this study tested some previously determined constructs (see Duck et al., 1991), exploratory factor analysis (EFA) appeared to be warranted because we added items to the original ICR survey (Roberts, 1999). Seven factors (with eigenvalues of higher than 1.00) that best reproduced the variables under maximum likelihood conditions emerged from a total of 27 variables and accounted for 61.4 % of the variance (see Table 2). Determining what factors to retain entailed a number of considerations,

including eigenvalues, Cattell's scree test, and the factor loadings. Components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 provide superior summarizing power than an original variable and should, therefore, be retained, but only those having an eigenvalue greater than one and two or more items with a substantial loading, above .50 on the factor, should be kept (Zwick & Velicer, 1986). The scree test is a visual test with the eigenvalues plotted and a straight line fit though the P-m smaller values; those falling above the line are retained. The pertinent data warranted retention of all seven factors (Zwick & Velicer, 1986). However, when we considered conceptual coherence, we eliminated the final two factors. Both factors six and seven essentially explicated non-task purposes for the talk. Specifically, factor six consisted of items relating to perceptions of the interaction as formal, impersonal, and task-related. Factor seven tapped the purpose of the talk: a social objective, to facilitate the relationship, or no purpose at all. To further substantiate our rationale for dropping the last two factors, Cronbach's alpha showed low internal consistency for both factors (-.047 and .395, respectively). Therefore, only the first five factors accounting for 50.6% of the variance of this model were retained.

The first factor retained was strikingly consistent with the communication Quality factor Duck et al. (1991) identified. Nine items assessing various dimensions of quality, including level of relaxation, attentiveness, smoothness, understanding, level of conflict, the degree of communication breakdowns, level of interest, and satisfaction, represented the factor. The second factor, Value, encompassed three items relating to the present and the future value of the interaction to the respondent, as well as the depth of the interaction. Duck et al. (1991) explained the conceptual association between depth and value as conversations perceived as having greater depth would also be perceived as holding more value to a conversational partner. However, the Value factor was distinct from Duck et al. (1991) in that the talk-task nature did not load in the

present study. The six items comprising the Change factor from Duck et al. (1991) represented two factors, which we labeled Impact and Change. Our third factor, Impact, reflected items relating to attitudinal, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive change. The fourth factor, Change, comprised two items: strength of change in attraction for the respondent's conversational partner (either positive or negative) and level of change in the relationship due to that interaction. The fifth factor, Control, embodied three items relating to who controlled the interaction and to what degree: who initiated the conversation, who decided the topic of the conversation, and who ended the interaction.

Cronbach's alpha for the nine measures of the Quality of the interaction was .91. The three relating to the perceived Value of the interaction had a Cronbach's alpha of .77. Alpha for the four items tapping the Impact of the interaction was .62, the Change factor had an alpha of .78, and the items measuring Control revealed a Kendall's W = .061, $p < .001$. These results indicated internal consistency within factors, but no significant inter-factor correlations.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Respondent and Partner Sex (H1 – H3)

Three hypotheses concerned sex differences for respondents and their conversational partners. The pertinent statistical analyses to test H1-H3 were two-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA). H1 concerned whether or not male and female agents would both report the same low levels of relational change. H1 received partial support. On items ranging from 0 [no change] – 9 [great change], males and females reported low amounts of relational change (M = 1.17, SD = 2.27 versus M = 0.92, SD = 2.01, respectively). Although males reported slightly greater amounts of change in relationships than females, and this difference was statistically

significant, there seemed to be little meaningful difference between the sexes ($F = 5.93$, $df = 1$, 2076, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .002$). Hypothesis 2 advanced the predictions that females would report slightly higher levels of communication quality for the WOM episodes; this hypothesis received support ($F = 27.75$, $df = 1$, 2076, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .013$; see Table 3). However, Hypothesis 3, which posited that female conversational partners would receive slightly higher communication quality scores, did not (see Table 3).

Regarding respondent and partner sex, there were interesting interaction effects for Quality, Impact, and Change evidenced by the two-way ANOVA tests. For the Quality factor, there was a significant interaction effect between sex of respondent and the sex of partner ($F = 4.16$, $df = 1$, 2076, $p < .05$). The interaction effect revealed that same-sex dyads reported slightly higher quality interactions than cross-sex dyads. For Impact, there was a significant interaction effect between sex of respondent and the sex of partner ($F = 4.38$, $df = 1$, 2076, $p < .05$; cross-sex dyads reported greater impact). For Change, there was a significant interaction effect between sex of respondent and the sex of partner ($F = 18.21$, $df = 1$, 2076, $p < .001$). The interaction effect indicated that cross-sex dyads reported greater levels of relational change.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Relationship Type and Day of Week (H4 - H6)

Hypotheses four through six concerned relationship type and day of week, and the relevant statistical analyses for H4-H6 were two-way ANOVAs. The series of four hypotheses for H4 suggested that relationship type would show significant variation for the measures of Quality, Value, Change, and Control, especially as it concerned weaker-tie relationships (stranger and acquaintance) when compared with stronger-tie relationships (friend, best friend,

romantic partner/spouse, and relative). There was partial support for this series of four hypotheses as relationship type was significantly related to the Quality of the WOM episode (F = 4.81, df = 6, 2048, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .013$), the Value of the WOM episode (F =10.79, df = 6, 2048, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .030$.), and Control of the WOM episode (F = 3.96, df = 6, 2048, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .011$). The only factor for which relationship type was not significant was the level of relational Change. The Impact factor, which was rolled up into the Change factor in Duck et al. (1991), and for which we did not have a specific hypothesis as a result, also showed significant differences by relationship type (F = 10.79, df = 6, 2048, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .008$). Specific comparisons among the relationship types are reported in Table 2 and will be explored in the discussion section.

Hypothesis five, which held that day of the week will not be a significant variable to account for changes in the five factors, received support (see Table 3). The two related hypotheses (H6a and H6b) regarding conflict levels of WOM also received support. Conflict levels of WOM were low (M = 1.80, SD = 1.451) and lower than reported in Duck et al. (1991; M = 2.79). This difference may be a result of the fact that earlier research sampled from a broader range of interactions and that talk about and/or recommendations for organizations, brands, products and services is generally not a site for contentious disagreement. Further, in contrast to the Duck et al. (1991) finding that conflict levels were higher on Wednesdays, the level of conflict for WOM episodes did not vary by day of the week (F = .866, df = 6, 2085, p = .519).

Institutional Nature of WOM (H7 - H9)

Hypotheses seven through nine concerned the institutional nature of the WOM episodes. Multiple *t*-tests were used for the five different factors to reveal whether there was a significant difference when agents engaged in everyday WOM (E-WOM) versus institutional WOM (I-

WOM; a WOM episode in which the conversation made reference to a product that was part of a word-of-mouth marketing campaign).

Hypothesis seven was that agents would perceive lower levels of mutual conversational control during I-WOM versus E-WOM. This hypothesis received support as agents reported their own perception of lower levels of mutual conversational control during I-WOM (M = 2.13 for I-WOM versus M = 2.30 for E-WOM; t = -3.70, df = 1, 2084, $p < .001$).

In H8, we predicted that agents would report less change in their own attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors when engaging in I-WOM than in E-WOM. This hypothesis received no support, as there was no significant difference between agents' I-WOM and E-WOM for the Impact factor (see Table 3).

For H9, we proposed that communication quality and interaction value would not differ significantly on the basis of the institutional nature of WOM (see Table 3). This hypothesis was supported. The results indicated that agents perceived both everyday and institutional WOM equally and as having high quality and moderate value to their present and future lives.

Regarding relational change, significant differences between E-WOM and I-WOM in the Change factor were in evidence (t = 2.50, df = 1, 2084, $p < .05$). Agents perceived greater feelings of relational change (closer or more distant) with their conversational partner during institutional WOM (M = 0.91, SD = 1.97 versus M = 1.21, SD = 2.45). However, given the large sample size and significance threshold ($p < .05$) there may be little meaningful difference.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide an initial description of how WOM marketing agents perceive communication quality, value, impact, relational change, and conversational control in both everyday and institutional WOM episodes. Agents' perceptions provide a

preliminary mapping of the conversational geography of WOM marketing episodes, such that researchers and practitioners can better understand their conversational dynamics. The following variables–respondent and partner sex, relationship type and day of week, and the institutional nature of WOM–represent multiple layers of this map.

Respondent and Partner Sex

Sex differences have been of ongoing interest to communication scholars (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997; Wood, 2005). The same interest in sex differences applies to WOM research. For example, various studies have shown that women are more likely to be market mavens, or people who have information about a lot of different products, shopping venues, and general information about the marketplace, who start discussions about shopping or market-related information with other consumers, and who are also highly responsive to requests for this information (Feick & Price, 1987; Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987). The results of the present study suggest that although there were statistically significant differences between males and females, either as respondents or as conversational partners, the differences were too small to be meaningful. There were, however, significant interaction effects for communication quality, impact, and relational change. In view of findings from earlier research (Duck et al., 1991), we hypothesized that communication quality would be highest when one interacted with a female conversational partner, regardless of the respondent's sex. However, we only found this perception of higher quality when female agents reported their interactions with other females. Agents rated male to male interactions higher than male (respondent) to female (conversational partner) interactions or vice versa. Agents reporting about cross-sex interactions perceived greater change in their own thinking than same-sex partners, but with no significant differences between cross-sex and same-sex dyads for attitudinal, emotional, or behavioral change. Finally,

as may be expected, agents in cross-sex dyads perceived greater levels of relational and attraction change as a result of the WOM episode. Interestingly, when males reported their conversations with female partners, the level of perceived relational change was double that for male-to-male episodes. In contrast, when females reported conversations with males, perceived levels of relational change were only slightly larger.

Since there are a disproportionate amount of females who participate in organized WOM marketing programs for the company studied (about 80%), one may be tempted to infer that females and males would be different in terms of how they perceive the WOM episodes. But beyond these interaction effects discussed above, the absence of large sex differences is noteworthy because it suggests that male and female word-of-mouth marketing agents perceive similar quality and value, report similar amounts of impact outcomes, and perceive similar levels of conversational control during WOM episodes. Future research should compare these results with those for non-agents to determine whether the lack of meaningful sex differences applies to a broader population. It is likely that the fact that someone has volunteered to affiliate with a word-of-mouth marketing company has a homogenizing effect on communication quality, value, impact, control, and value.

Relationship Type and Day of Week

Consistent with existing research involving the geography of everyday communication, relationship type appears to be a robust variable in explaining differences in WOM communication and should continue to be included in future research. Relationship type significantly related the perceived levels of quality, value, impact, and conversational control for WOM episodes. The level of relational Change was the only factor for which no effect emerged. There were mean differences among the relationship types (such as .71 for strangers versus 1.17

for romantic partners or spouses), but they were not statistically significant. Further inquiry is needed to determine why relationship type apparently does not significantly affect perceived changes in relational closeness or attraction to the conversational partner. We suspect that the reason involves the lower levels of relational and attraction change present in WOM episodes.

The results concerning relationship type suggest that, in comparison to weak-tie or acquaintance relationships, agents perceive their WOM episodes with strong-tie relationships (best friends, romantic partners/spouses, and relatives) to have higher conversational quality, more value to their present and future life, and more of an impact on their attitudes, feelings, and/or behavior. These results contribute to our understanding of WOM communication processes in two ways. First, the higher perceptions of quality, value, and impact might partially explain existing findings showing that people are more likely to engage in WOM episodes with strong-tie relationships (Arndt, 1967; Carl, 2006a). Second, the results pose a challenge for organized attempts to stimulate WOM in social networks. Existing research suggests that firms need to stimulate WOM in weak-tie relationships to generate incremental WOM that spreads beyond the WOM that has already occurred within a social network (Granovetter, 1973; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). However, it is these weak-tie interactions that agents perceive as having less communication quality and value, which as stated above, may be one reason why they occur less frequently. If one goal of a WOM campaign is to get the word out about a brand, product, or service to as many people as possible, and if weak-tie relationships are important to that process, then firms may want to consider ways to help agents increase the quality and value of the interaction between agents and their weak-tie conversational partners.

In contrast to relationship type, day of week was less interesting, as it did not illuminate meaningful differences in WOM practices. As a single explanatory variable, the only significant

and interesting findings for day of week related to previous research (Carl, 2006a), and they concern frequency of total interactions, not WOM episodes or the percentage of total interactions that include a WOM episode (or, the episode-to-interaction ratio). For WOM episodes and E/I Ratio, day of the week was only significant when considered in conjunction with relationship type (for example, co-workers have fewer WOM episodes on the weekend than during the weekdays, or romantic partners and spouses are more likely to engage in WOM towards the end of the week and on the weekends). Given the possibility of such interaction effects, we suggest collecting day-of-week data in future research involving the conversational geography of WOM, but are not optimistic about its value in predicting meaningful differences in isolation.

Institutional Nature of WOM

Research by Carl (2006a) has shown the institutional nature of WOM episodes to be an important, but under-explored, variable for WOM research. The results of this study are in line with this conclusion, providing some expected and unexpected findings. First, we concluded that agents perceived higher levels of individual control, as opposed to mutual control, for institutional WOM than everyday WOM episodes. During institutional WOM, agents perceived that they were more likely to initiate interaction, to decide topics, and to end it. We believe our hypothesis received support for the following reason: when buzzing a product or service, agents would view themselves to be the ones seeking to influence others and would, therefore, be more likely to perceive themselves as controlling the flow of topics during the interaction, and/or initiating or ending the conversation. This leads one to wonder whether greater levels of individual conversational control for I-WOM correspond to others' (i.e., the conversational partners) perceptions that agents are being more "strategic." To the extent that conversational partners perceive such differences between I-WOM and E-WOM, there is evidence to suggest

that the WOM practices of word-of-mouth marketing agents may be affecting social interactions as some commentators have suggested (Walker, 2004).

We also uncovered a second difference between I-WOM and E-WOM regarding the slightly higher amount of positive relational and attraction change for I-WOM. Subsequent analysis revealed that the direction of this relational change was positive; that is, agents reported feeling closer to their conversational partner after I-WOM. Since agents generally perceived the WOM episodes to be of high quality and of some value to their life it is not surprising to see some levels of greater relational closeness occurring after a WOM episode. And although the institutional quality and value scores were slightly higher for I-WOM, they were not significantly different (.09 and .07, respectively). Thus, it is not clear at this time why greater relational change occurs in institutional WOM.

Third, there were no significant differences between E-WOM and I-WOM regarding changes in agents' attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behavior. This finding was unexpected, as we felt I-WOM would have *less* impact on the agents because we assumed that agents would be the ones seeking to influence others during I-WOM and, thus, be less susceptible to others' influence. In fact, the mean scores, although not showing a statistically significant difference, suggest the opposite trend: agents reported *more* change in their own attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behavior for I-WOM. Thus, even though agents are more likely to make a recommendation during I-WOM (Carl, 2006a) and are more likely to initiate conversation, control topics, and terminate interaction (as reported above), we suspect that the non-significant difference between I-WOM and E-WOM reflects the fact that conversation is an interactive process whereby both parties are susceptible to mutual, reciprocal influence. However, we

suggest that further inquiry and/or replication of this study is necessary to provide a more complete explanation.

Limitations of Study and Implications for Future Research

There are at least five limitations to the study that should be addressed in future research. First, the study was designed as an initial description of WOM communication practices and, like Duck et al. (1991), entailed perceptions of only a single person rather than dyadic or network perceptions. Subsequent research should include the perceptions of all conversational parties to provide a more complete mapping of the geography of WOM communication. Carl (2006b) discusses a promising design, whereby agents would invite their conversational partners to report about the same episode, but completing their own version of the web-based WOMCL survey. Rather than relying on just the agents' reports about interactions, collecting both parties' perceptions may prove to be more valuable in determining the effects of agents' conversational practices on others.

Second, there is a need to compare the results of the word-of-mouth marketing agents to a broader sample of "everyday people" (i.e., non-agents). This is especially important in assessing sex similarities and differences as well as in teasing out the differences between the everyday WOM of agents and, by definition, the non-institutional nature of WOM for most people.

Third, the outcomes used in the ICR are not specific to WOM communication, but relational interaction more generally. Appropriate outcome variables for WOM episodes include changes in thinking, likelihood and actual instances of seeking out additional information, passing along commentary or a recommendation to someone else, and the probability of purchase and actual purchase behavior (Carl, 2005). Using "intent" variables (such as intent to purchase, intent to make further inquiries, and intent to pass along information to others) help

overcome limitations in the research design whereby respondents are asked to complete the WOMCL survey as soon as possible after the WOM episode occurs.

Fourth, we suggest that in view of the robustness of the institutional versus everyday distinction in earlier research and reinforced in this study, researchers should continue to inquire into these similarities and differences. The research design should more systematically reflect this distinction by constraining agents to report on these interactions with equal frequency (Duck et al., 1991). Relationship types, as well as their interaction with day of the week, also proved to be useful in providing insight into WOM communication as they occur in everyday interactions. Finally, the concept of conversational control could be further refined. Future versions of the WOMCL survey should distinguish between who initiates *interaction* and who initiates the *WOM episode*. This is potentially important because the interaction could have been initiated mutually but the brand-related talk could have been initiated by the agent rather than the agent's conversational partner.

Along with communication quality, value, impact, and relational change, the concept of conversational control can serve to illustrate the value of mapping the conversational geography of WOM marketing communication, as all of these are features of everyday communication in which brand-related talk emerges (Arndt, 1967; Carl, 2006a). The present study revealed that agents perceived higher levels of individual conversational control in their campaign-related WOM episodes and, more specifically, that they were more likely to initiate the interaction, decide what topics to discuss, and end the interaction. To the extent that conversational partners also perceive the conversation to be controlled by one individual, rather than by both parties, the sense of mutuality that characterizes everyday conversations may be undermined and lead conversational partners to interpret such conversations as more of a "pitch" rather than a

conversation composed of trustworthy and relevant information being shared between peers, which is a well-known characteristic of effective WOM (Murray, 1991; Tuk et al., 2005). In these circumstances, conversational partners might be more likely to "tune out" such conversations, decreasing the effectiveness of the organized WOM marketing program, and also feel that their relationship is being compromised by the agents' participation in the marketing program (Walker, 2004; Vranica, 2005). By employing diary-based studies of WOM marketing communication practices, and inviting all parties to the interaction to complete such surveys, researchers will be better positioned to track the societal and commercial effects of organized WOM marketing programs.

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Table 1

Factor structure of principal components

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
Quality: Attentive	.732				
Quality: Breakdown Free	.791				
Quality: Conflict Free	.756				
Quality: Interesting	.628				
Quality: Open	.687				
Quality: Relaxed	.765				
Quality: Satisfied	.756				
Quality: Smooth	.843				
Quality: Understanding	.800				
Quality: In Depth		.609			
Value: Now		.839			
Value: Future		.826			
Impact: Attitude			.748		
Impact: Behavior			.708		
Impact: Thinking			.671		
Impact: Feelings			.727		
Change: Attraction				.796	
Change: Relationship				.834	
Control: Topics Decided					.739
Control: Ended					.646
Control: Initiated					.736

Table 2

Eigenvalues and variance explained for original seven values in factor analysis

Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative Percent
1	5.476	20.28	20.28
2	2.494	9.237	29.517
3	2.349	8.701	38.218
4	1.792	6.638	44.856
5	1.562	5.784	50.640
6	1.487	5.506	56.146
7	1.412	5.229	61.375

Table 3
Mean Score and Univariate F and t for Main Effects

	Quality	Value	Impact	Change	Control	Conflict
Sex of respondent						
Males						
M	7.70	5.72	1.57	1.17	2.30	2.17
SD	1.14	2.17	2.11	2.27	0.82	1.70
Females						
M	8.05	5.97	1.43	0.92	2.26	1.72
SD	1.01	2.22	2.01	2.01	0.73	1.38
F	27.75***	4.36*	*ns*	5.93*	*ns*	26.88***
Sex of partner						
Males						
M	7.89	5.98	1.51	0.99	2.27	1.95
SD	1.10	2.23	1.99	2.09	0.72	1.56
Females						
M	8.05	5.90	1.42	0.93	2.27	1.70
SD	1.00	2.20	2.05	2.04	0.76	1.36
F	*ns*	*ns*	*ns*	6.95**	*ns*	15.87***
Relationship Type						
Stranger						
M	7.81	5.18^{abc}	1.60	.71	2.19	1.58
SD	1.15	2.39	2.17	1.63	0.66	1.32
Acquaintance						
M	7.72^{abcd}	5.39^{def}	1.10^{ab}	.93	2.16	1.88
SD	1.13	2.23	1.68	1.78	0.71	1.47
Friend						
M	8.03^{a}	5.81^{gh}	1.57^{a}	.96	2.33^{a}	1.79
SD	0.92	2.14	2.19	2.00	0.76	1.41
Best Friend						
M	8.07^{b}	6.27^{adi}	1.66^{b}	1.14	2.34	1.82
SD	1.05	2.04	2.08	2.33	0.75	1.55
RPS						
M	8.02^{c}	6.47^{begj}	1.62	1.17	2.33	1.98
SD	1.12	2.16	2.05	2.54	0.73	1.59
Relative						
M	8.12^{d}	6.34^{cfhk}	1.23	.81	2.15^{a}	1.68
SD	1.04	2.14	1.84	1.96	0.75	1.32
Other						
M	7.88	5.43^{ijk}	1.40	.91	2.28	1.76
SD	1.07	2.39	1.96	1.88	0.76	1.46
F	4.81***	10.79***	2.95**	*ns*	3.96***	*ns*
Institutionality						
I-WOM						
M	8.08	5.99	1.50	1.21	2.13	1.70
SD	1.10	2.21	2.23	2.45	0.76	1.47
E-WOM						
M	7.97	5.92	1.45	0.91	2.30	1.81
SD	1.03	2.21	1.99	1.97	0.74	1.44
t	*ns*	*ns*	*ns*	2.50*	-3.70***	*ns*

NOTE: Day of Week was *ns* on all factors. For Relationship Type, those means sharing a common superscript within a column are significantly different from each other (for example, for Quality, Acquaintances are significantly different than Friends, but not significantly different from Stranger or Other). Standard deviations are shown in parentheses.

* $p < .05$
** $p <. 01$
*** $p <. 001$

Appendix A

Word-of-Mouth Communication Log

Please describe your word-of-mouth communication (WOM) episode. An episode is considered to be informal communication, positive or negative, about characteristics of an organization, and/or a brand, product, or service. Use a new log sheet/entry for each episode. Visit [URL] to enter your data from this worksheet.

Your I.D.:_____ Age:_____ Sex: M or F

1. Date of Interaction: Month:_____ Day:_____
2. Time of Interaction: Hour:_____ AM or PM
3. Length of Interaction: Hour:_____ Minute:_____

NOTE: Enter the length of time for the whole interaction with this person, which may include talk about other topics besides the word-of-mouth episode.

4. Length of WOM episode: Hour:_____ Minute:_____

NOTE: Enter the length of time talking about the brand, product, or service. Do not count the length of time for the whole interaction. If the brand, product, or service came up again, or repeatedly, then include the total length of time talking about the brand, product, or service. If the whole interaction consisted entirely of the word-of-mouth episode then the length of time for this question and the previous question should match.

5. Partner: Initials:_____ Age:_____ Sex: M or F
6. Length of time you have known partner:
   Year: _____ Month: _____
7. How would you describe the nature of your relationship?

   Stranger Acquaintance Friend Best Friend

   Romantic Partner/Spouse Relative Other:_____
8. Is this person a co-worker? Yes or No
9. How close or intimate is your relationship?

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

   Very close/intimate Not very close/intimate

10. What type of communication?

Face-to-face Phone E-mail

Instant Messaging Chat Room Other: _____

11. Would you consider the interaction public or private (circle one and state place)?

Public Private Where:_____

12. Were others present? Yes or No If so, how many?

13. What was the role of talk? Indicate the extent to which you agree with the following:

This was talk for talk's sake.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strong Agreement Strong Disagreement

Main purpose of talk was to accomplish some task.
(Such as gaining information to complete a project, or solve a problem.)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strong Agreement Strong Disagreement

Main purpose of talk was to facilitate some social objective.
(Such as talk surrounding sports activity or party.)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strong Agreement Strong Disagreement

Main purpose of talk was to facilitate the relationship.
(Such as talk to become better acquainted or resolve differences.)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Strong Agreement Strong Disagreement

14. Describe the main topic of talk:_____

_____

15. If the word-of-mouth episode was about one or more specific organizations, brands, products, or services, identify these below (separate each by a comma):

_____

_____

16. Was the talk about the brand, product, or service generally positive, negative, or mixed?

-3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3

Very negative Neutral Very positive

Other: _____

17. What is *your* level of knowledge about the brand, product, or service being talked about?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Very knowledgeable								Not knowledgeable at all

18. What is your perception of the partner's level of knowledge about the brand, product, or service being talked about?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Very knowledgeable								Not knowledgeable at all

19. Were there other topics? Yes or No
(If yes, indicate the number of topics you think were addressed in the talk):
_____

20. During the word-of-mouth episode, were there references to other media forms besides word-of-mouth (such as a TV advertisement, billboard, newspaper review, etc.)

Yes or No

21. If yes, indicate which media forms.

Newspaper Ad	Magazine Ad	TV Ad	Radio Ad
Movie Theatre Ad	Web Advertisement (i.e., banner)		
In-store Advertising	CD	DVD	TV Show
Movie in Theatre	Direct Mail	Outdoor (Billboard, etc.)	
Newspaper Article	Magazine Article	Online Article	
Yellow Pages	Coupons	Other: _____	

22. What activity were you doing right *before* the conversation occurred? (circle one or more)

Working	Eating	Driving	Studying
Childcare	Housework	Watching TV	Reading
Listening to music	Talking to someone else	Shopping	Browsing internet

Other:_____

23. Were you involved in any activities *during* the conversation?
Yes or No (If yes, please indicate which of the above)
_____

24. What did you do *after* the conversation? (as above)
_____

25. Was the interaction: *Planned* or *Unplanned*

26. If planned, indicate the extent to which you were looking forward to the meeting:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Looking forward to meeting Dreading meeting

27. Who initiated the talk? (circle one)

You Partner Seemed Mutual Accidental Not Clear

28. Who seemed to control the conversation; for example, who decided topics of discussion?
You Partner Seemed Mutual Accidental Not Clear

29. Who made moves to end the conversation?

You Partner Seemed Mutual Accidental Not Clear

30. Was a specific recommendation or referral made by either party?
Yes, by me Yes, by partner No

31. Describe the quality of communication:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Relaxed									Strained
Impersonal									Personal
Attentive									Poor listening
Formal									Informal
In-depth									Superficial
Smooth									Difficult
Guarded									Open
Great deal of understanding									Great deal of misunderstanding
Free of communication breakdowns									Laden with communication breakdowns
Free of conflict									Laden with conflict

32. Indicate the extent to which you think the talk was interesting:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Interesting									Boring

33. Indicate the extent to which you came away satisfied with the interaction:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Satisfied									Not satisfied

34. How valuable was this conversation to you for your life right now?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Extremely important									Not important

35. How valuable was this conversation for your future?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Extremely important									Not important

36. Indicate the extent to which you felt the other person took your needs into consideration:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Strongly considered my needs									Did not consider my needs at all

37. Indicate the extent to which this talk resulted in a change of your attitude:

-3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3

Negative change None Positive change

Describe attitude change:_____

_____

38. Indicative the extent to which this talk resulted in a change of your behavior?

-3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3

Stopped behavior None Increased behavior

Describe behavior change:_____

_____

39. Indicate the extent to which this talk changed your thinking or ideas?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

No change Great change

Describe change in thinking/ideas:_____

_____

40. Indicate the extent to which this talk resulted in a change of your feelings?

-3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3

Negative None Positive

Describe change in feelings:_____

_____

41. Indicate the extent to which this talk resulted in a change of your relationship?

-3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3

More distant None More close

42. Indicate the extent to which this talk changed your attraction toward partner?

-3 -2 -1 0 +1 +2 +3

Decreased None Increased

43. On an average day how many people do you talk to? _____

44. Out of the total amount of time you spend conversing per week, what percentage of that time do you think is spent talking with this person _____%

Adapted from the "Iowa Communication Record" as it appears in Duck et al. (1991). Some evident truths about conversations in everyday relationships: All communication is not created equal. *Human Communication Research, 18*, 228-267. © S. W. Duck and G. Leatham. Adaptation: © Walter J. Carl, Ph.D.