

# The Conceptualization of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM) and Company Practices to Monitor, Encourage, and Commit to EWOM - a Service Industry Perspective

International Design Business Management (IDBM)

Master's thesis

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**The Conceptualization of Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM) And Company Practices to Monitor, Encourage, and Commit to EWOM - a Service Industry Perspective**

**Objectives:** The purpose of this Master's thesis is to clarify the different elements that conceptualize the phenomenon of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and analyze what may be the possible ways for service marketers to influence this recommendation-based communication.

**Data and methods:** This study applied realism as a research approach. The sample collection method of Breazeale (2009) was utilized to understand the main elements of eWOM and what actions companies could implement in relation to eWOM. In total 40 articles were analyzed. In the empirical part, nine Finnish listed consumer service companies (response rate: 82 %) were interviewed with a semi-structured protocol. First, these companies needed to answer an online questionnaire, and based on these responds, questions were asked in 30-minute interviews. The online questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively, interviews qualitatively with thematic analysis. In addition, these companies' online channel practices were analyzed to support the findings.

**Findings and conclusions:** Based on the literature review nine main elements were identified as part of electronic word-of-mouth: EWOM is opinion sharing between consumers about experiences (1) and opinion leaders have an influential role in the content sharing process (2). The interaction happens online via different platforms (3), is network-based, (4) and directed to multiple people (5). Electronic word-of-mouth is interaction without time and location constrains (6) and it can be anonymous (7). Because of the online environment, there may occur credibility issues that users consider (8). Still, Electronic WOM is increasingly present in consumers' decision process (9). EWOM is dynamic and distinct phenomenon.

It seems that there are ways for companies to get involved in eWOM and encourage online conversations between consumers. Based on the empirical semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, a framework was developed to understand current actions consumer service companies are implementing to increase eWOM interactions between the consumers themselves and the brand. Sixteen elements were identified that are or will be present in interviewed companies' actions to encourage eWOM conversations. All of these elements are categorized under three main levels of companies' eWOM actions: monitor, encourage, and commit.

**Meaning to the study program (IDBM):** This thesis sheds light on an international phenomenon. EWOM is essential for marketers worldwide because its effects do not have geographical constraints. Also, this study focuses especially on managerial issues, which is crucial part of IDBM. In addition, this study tries to find ways for service companies to design actions that could encourage consumers to eWOM communication. EWOM should be taken into consideration in service design.

**Keywords:** Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), Digital marketing, Company practices, International Design Business Management (IDBM)

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# 1 Introduction

The power of traditional marketing efforts seems to be declining (e.g. Sweeney et al. 2008, Gil-Or 2010) as consumers trust more in word-of-mouth (WOM), the two-way communication with other buyers, to make their purchase decisions (e.g. Arndt 1967, Herr et al. 1991, Jones et al. 2009). Consumers seek more credible and custom-tailored information, which explains the success of WOM as a marketing force (Wirtz & Chew 2002). WOM seems to have a strong impact on customer acquisitions and a considerably longer carryover than traditional marketing efforts (Trusov et al. 2009).

It has been argued that the power of consumers is increasing, because with the advent of the Internet, consumers have additional opportunities to interact with more people and for an extended period (Breazeale 2009). These online peer-to-peer recommendations are included in the phenomenon of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). EWOM is more of a modernized version of traditional WOM with its own features (Vilpponen et al. 2006). EWOM has been under the research scope only a decade (Breazeale 2009), which is why it is not yet seen as an exact concept among academics. Thus, eWOM is a valuable research area to further examine.

When consumers shift to communicate online, so do the companies. According to the research by eMarketer (2010), online advertising spending is growing at 11.9 percent compound annual rate and is expected to reach \$96.8 billion by 2014 despite the slow worldwide economic recovery. Participating in the electronic form of WOM intrigues marketers, as it is communication usually with significantly lower costs and fast message delivery (Trusov et al. 2009). There are not yet clear guidelines, what are the ways for companies to get involved in the WOM communication and encourage it.

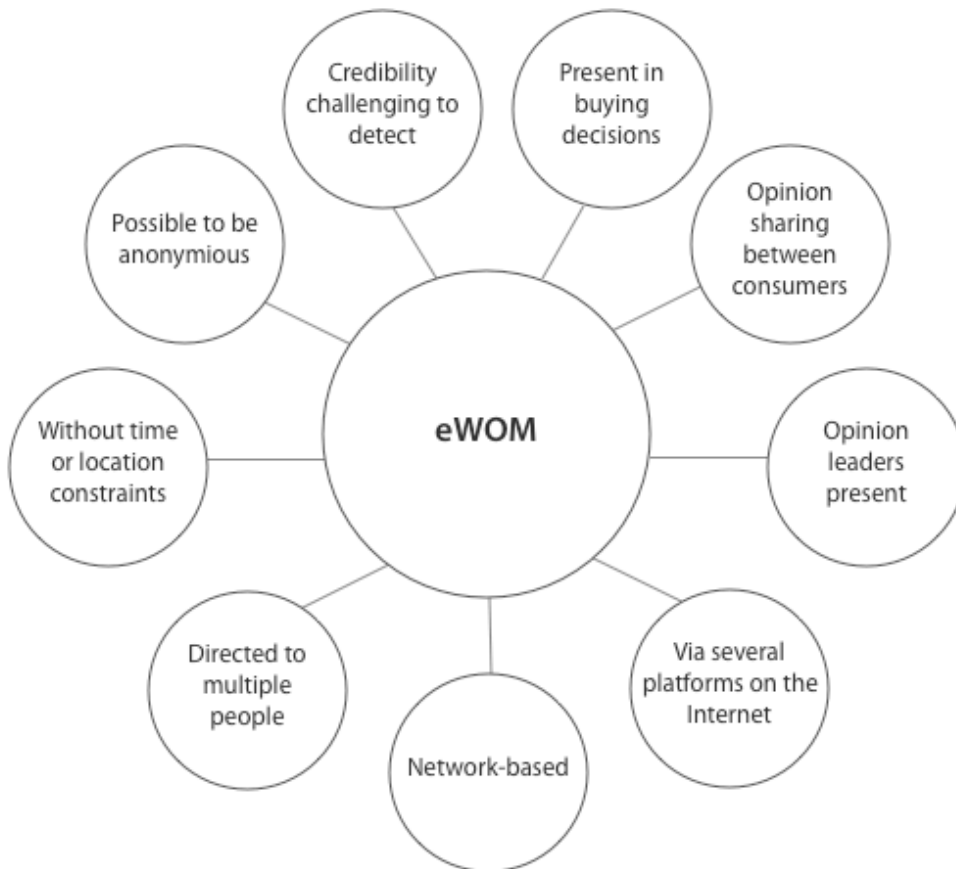
The purpose of this Master's thesis is to clarify the different elements that conceptualize the phenomenon of electronic word-of-mouth and analyze what may be the possible ways for service marketers to encourage this recommendation based communication. Given the theory closeness, also differences between traditional 'offline' WOM and its online counterpart, eWOM, will be discussed. Therefore, the primary research questions are:

*What is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and what are its main characteristics?*

*What are the ways for companies to get involved in eWOM?*

These questions in mind, the literature review adapted the sample collection method of Breazeale (2009) and analyzed 40 eWOM focused articles to understand the nature of electronic word-of-mouth. Based on the comparison made, nine elements were identified that characterize this online phenomenon (See Figure 1). Electronic word-of-mouth is opinion sharing between consumers about experiences (1) and opinion leaders have an influential role in the content sharing process (2). The interaction happens via the Internet through many platforms (3), is network-based, (4) and directed to multiple people (5). Electronic word-of-mouth is interaction without time and location constraints (6) and it can be anonymous (7). Because of the online environment, there may occur credibility issues that users consider (8). Still, Electronic WOM is increasingly present in consumers' decision process (9). When comparing with traditional WOM, It became clear that eWOM is a distinct phenomenon with its own implications.

**Figure 1: Elements Defining Electronic Word-of-Mouth**



Based on the article analysis, academic discussion seems to count eWOM as a part of companies' marketing strategies. However, there exists a rather inconsistent view among researchers about the extent of marketer's involvement in eWOM. In addition to the extensive literature review, this study conducted empirical semi-structured interviews with listed Finnish consumer service companies to answer the second research question.

These nine interviews (with the response rate of 82 percent) were thematically analyzed. Based on the literature review, a framework was developed, which was revised according to interview findings. The framework detects the main activities companies may adopt when trying to understand and influence eWOM. The three main levels of the framework are monitoring eWOM conversations (1), encouraging eWOM conversations (2), and being committed to these eWOM related actions: monitoring and encouraging (3). All in all, these levels consist of sixteen actions that the interviewed companies had put or are planning to put in action. Even though the sample of nine companies is rather small, this framework might be useful for consumer service companies trying to encourage eWOM conversations among their target audience.

First, this thesis concentrates on the literature review. It focuses on the concepts of traditional word-of-mouth, electronic word-of-mouth and differences between these two phenomena. The literature review ends with the exploration of companies' role in eWOM and a first version of a framework is presented. The research methodology is examined after that and findings discussed. In the end, conclusions are made – what characterizes eWOM and what possible company actions might be relevant to encourage eWOM interactions.

## **2 Literature Review Part 1: Traditional Word-of-Mouth**

This literature review is divided into three parts and it goes through the concept of traditional word-of-mouth, electronic word-of-mouth, and organizations' possible practices in relation to eWOM. The literature review is based on the article sample analysis that was first conducted by Breazeale (2009, see Chapter 'Research Methodology'). After the literature review, the research methodology is presented and the data collection of the literature review and empirical research are discussed.

The concept of word-of-mouth (WOM) has been under the spotlight for decades by academics and practitioners (Lee & Youn 2009). WOM is described as 'oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service' (Arndt 1967, p. 3). In 1966, Dichter thought WOM to be a marketing force that is often acknowledged as very powerful but is infrequently utilized. Similarly, Arndt (1967) expressed that favorable word-of-mouth increases the probability of a purchase.

Decades later, the phenomenon is described much in the same way. Word-of-mouth is present when one individual communicates to another any kind of information about a target object (Brown et al. 2005). That is, consumers' communication topics are a much wider concept than Arndt's (1967) definition suggests. Customers perceive WOM as credible and custom-tailored information source because the communication is expected to be generated without any commercial interest (e.g. Arndt 1967, Wirtz & Chew 2002, Kozinets et al. 2010). Due to the higher perceived credibility in the face-to-face interaction, the WOM communication often has a strong impact on product judgments (Herr et al. 1990).

At present, the marketing potential of WOM is still under research. The role of marketers is perceived more proactive in influencing and managing word-of-mouth (e.g. Wirtz & Chew 2002, Ryu & Feick 2007, Godes & Mayzin 2009, Kozinets et al. 2010). Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) is even seen as an important alternative to traditional marketing efforts (Trusov et al. 2009) because it adapts commercial information to a relevant form to different community members (Kozinets et al. 2010).

Next, a closer look is taken to the antecedents of WOM communication. In addition, WOM is compared with the concepts of viral and referral marketing which it is often related to.



## **2.1 Reasons for Consumers to Engage in Traditional WOM**

Brown et al. (2005) argue that academic understanding of the antecedents affecting WOM is still incomplete. However, the exchange theory has been applied to understand why consumers engage in the word-of-mouth communication (e.g. Wirtz & Chew 2002, Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Ryu and Feick 2007). According to Ryu and Feick (2007), engaging in WOM depends on perceived costs and benefits of the exchange. Consumers expect to gain something, or that they implicitly satisfy a desire when providing others with WOM (Wirtz & Chew 2002).

By engaging in word-of-mouth communication, participants may seek social support for the purchased object (Arndt 1967). Consumers may want to reduce post-purchase dissonance or control others' impressions of them (Ryu & Feick 2007). WOM is a social behavior, where the consumer interacts with various people from friends and family to acquaintances (Wirtz & Chew 2002) helping them to make better choices (Ryu & Feick 2007). The similarity between the message sender and the receiver may be especially important when new attitudes towards brands are formed (Godes & Mayzin 2009).

Consumers' commitment, satisfaction and identification with retailers exert the influence on positive WOM intentions (Brown et al. 2005). Anderson (1998) finds empirical evidence that there is a U-shaped relationship to the consumer satisfaction and the likelihood of engaging in WOM activities. That is, word-of-mouth activity increases as either the satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction increases. Once WOM is generated, Wirtz & Chew (2002) find that the valence of WOM is related to the satisfaction consumers experience.

From the receiver's perspective, the perceived high-risk enhances the probability to seek word-of-mouth information (e.g. Arndt 1967, Sweeney et al. 2008). In addition, Sweeney et al. (2008) identify that the receiver engages in the WOM activity to increase relief, confidence or when time pressure or interest in the product exists. Naturally, the possibility to be part of WOM activities is simply easier. WOM has become an even more powerful force due to a technology-driven development of the Internet (Lee & Youn 2009).

## **2.2 Word-of-Mouth as a Viral and Referral Marketing Force**

In addition to being an effective influence on consumer product judgments (e.g. Brown et al. 2005, Herr et al. 1990), the high volume of WOM seems to be beneficial to sales (Yong 2006). Having a powerful effect on consumers' attitudes and behavior (Sweeney et al. 2008), word-of-mouth is seen

increasingly as part of firm's marketing efforts, especially viral and referral marketing campaigns (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Ryu & Feick 2007). Although, both concepts function more effectively on the online environment, viral and referral marketing should not be restricted in the computer-mediated context (Vilpponen et al. 2006).

Viral marketing has allured marketers with its exponential growth potential in recent years, but there is not a clear understanding what it means or how it works (e.g. Eckler & Bolls 2011, Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). Phelps et al. (2004) view viral marketing as the process of encouraging an honest communication among consumer networks. This honest communication is easily perceived as a word-of-mouth activity. Cited by many scholarly reviewed articles, Modzelewski (2000) criticizes this generalization and believes that viral marketing differs from word-of-mouth because the value of the virus to the original consumer is directly related to the number of other users the message attracts. Individuals are seen more as vehicles for spreading communication (José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012).

By comparing the different definitions of viral marketing, Vilpponen et al. (2006) see the phenomenon as part of word-of-mouth communication when opinion leaders have a vital role in message delivery and the value of a recommended object increases as people use it. WOM seems to act both as a cause and effect of viral marketing campaigns (Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). Based on these notions, in specific circumstances, firms encouraging positive word-of-mouth behavior in consumer networks can be classified as viral marketing efforts.

Word-of-mouth has also been linked to referral marketing. In initial efforts to manage WOM, firms have introduced formal programs that are designed to encourage existing customers to make product recommendations (Ryu & Feick 2007). Kumar et al. (2010) define a referral as when a new customer enters into a transaction with a firm and conveys the motivation for the transaction to a current customer. In a referral marketing campaign, the occurrence of WOM may no longer be natural due to the presence of incentives given by the firm (Phelps et al. 2004). Therefore, essential to both concepts is the more influential role of a marketer. Word-of-mouth is not a synonym for viral and referral marketing, it is seen as a means to seed viral and referral marketing messages to consumers.

The ever-growing importance of the Internet is broadening the value and reach of WOM in the marketplace (Brown et al. 2005), which may be an additional justification for marketers to take part

in the word-of-mouth process. The Internet's influence on WOM has created a new distinct phenomenon, electronic word-of-mouth, that will be examined next in more detail.

### **3 Literature Review Part 2: Electronic Word-of-Mouth**

Top-level marketing journals started to publish research into electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) only about ten years ago (Breazeale 2009). Since the late 1990s, the Internet has rapidly developed and enriched consumers' communication surface (Okazaki 2009). Particularly, the Internet's extensive reach, transparency, and accessibility have given new meaning to word-of-mouth, which is why marketers are especially interested in getting involved in WOM (Kozinets et al. 2010).

Due to the fact that it is a recent research phenomenon, the definition of electronic word-of-mouth is not yet established. Recent developments in peer-to-peer communication technologies have aroused scholarly interest in the enigmatic process of electronic word-of-mouth (Sohn 2009). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) see eWOM communication "as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p.39). Thorson and Rodgers (2006) add that peer-to-peer online communication can occur on other levels as well. It is possible that the communicator is not a consumer at all (Breazeale 2009).

Xun and Reynolds (2010) criticize also the definition of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) by justifying that it constraints eWOM as a static conceptualization and the definition does not give enough value to the dynamic information exchange process eWOM has. Indeed, in recent academic publications, there seems to be more emphasis on consumers' opinion transmitting behavior in addition to opinion giving and seeking online. Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011) identify this dynamic nature of opinion passing as a specific characteristic of the eWOM communication. Also, Strutton et al. (2011) ask for a new conceptualization.

Similar to traditional word-of-mouth, the theoretical framework of eWOM is not clear. This complex phenomenon (San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012) is linked for example to viral marketing, Internet communication, user-generated content, word-of-mouse, stealth marketing, electronic word-of-mouth advertising or electronic referral marketing (Vilpponen et al. 2006). Li (2011) claims eWOM to be more of a Web 2.0 artifact. These conceptualizations also differ in terms of platform, communication objectives, and message type researched (Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011) To understand electronic word-of-mouth as a phenomenon and to arrive at further conclusions, this literature review tries to specify a definition for eWOM.

Therefore, next a sample of academic articles is analyzed to grasp the particular features that describe electronic word-of-mouth. After that a distinction between electronic and traditional word-of-mouth is made. Also, marketers' role in eWOM is analyzed further.

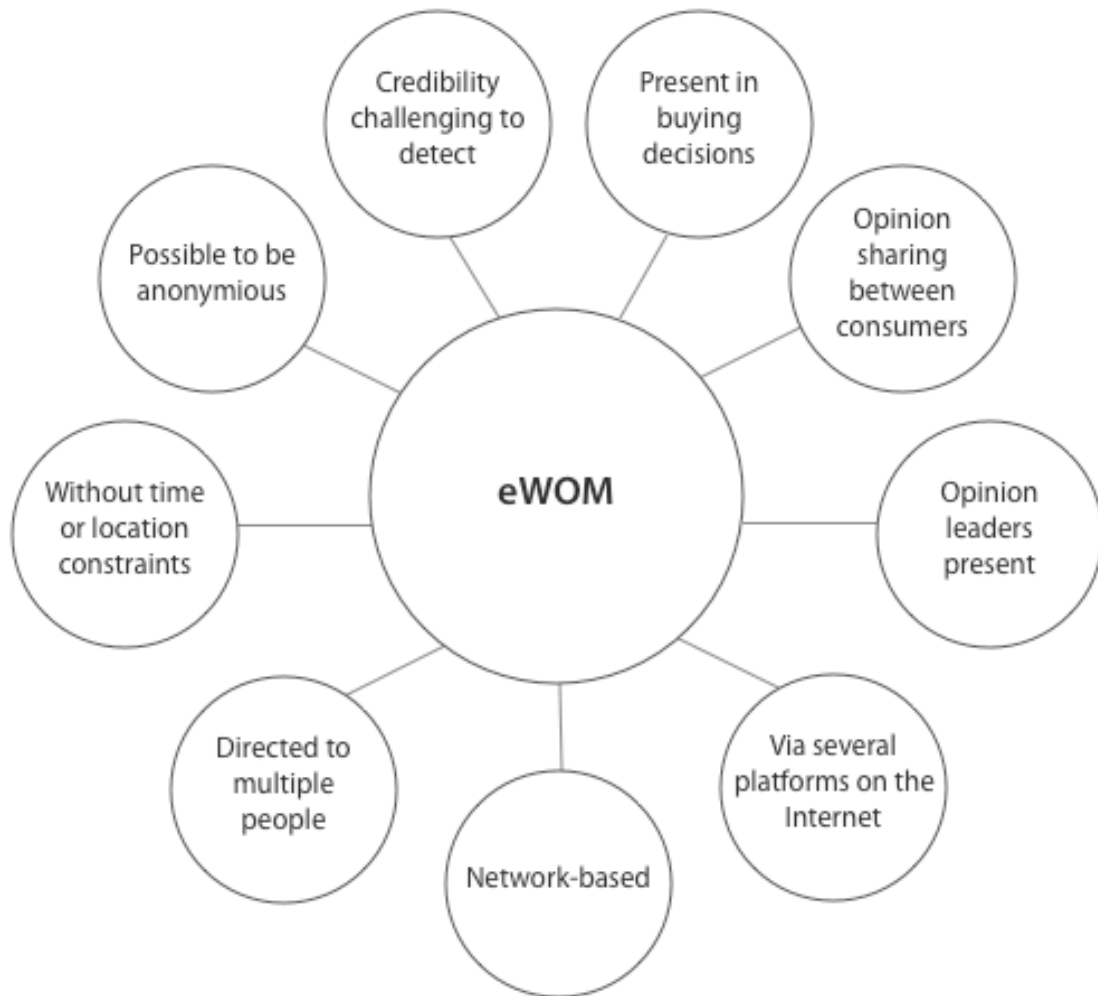
In this study is adopted the notion of Bronner and de Hoog (2010) who see online and electronic word-of-mouth as the same phenomenon.

### **3.1 Elements Defining Electronic Word-of-Mouth**

Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) highlight the importance of the eWOM investigation as an extension of the traditional face-to-face communication. Breazeale (2009) takes it further and sees that the Internet has changed the whole definition of word-of-mouth. A sample of journal articles is utilized to explore what electronic word-of-mouth actually is. As an example, this literature review adapts the sample collection method of Breazeale (2009). Breazeale (2009) analyzed what had been researched in the context of eWOM by conducting an EBSCO search. For more information, see Methodology chapter, part 5.2.1.

Based on this analysis, nine main elements for eWOM communication can be identified. Electronic word-of-mouth is opinion sharing between consumers about experiences (1) and opinion leaders have an influential role in the content sharing process (2). The interaction happens via the Internet/online through different platforms (3), is network-based, (4) and directed to multiple people (5). Electronic word-of-mouth is interaction without time and location constraints (6) and it can be anonymous (7). Because of the online environment, there may occur credibility issues that users consider (8). Still, Electronic WOM is increasingly present in consumers' decision process (9). Next, these nine eWOM elements (see Figure 2) are analyzed in more detail.

**Figure 2: Elements Defining Electronic Word-of-Mouth**



### **3.1.1 Opinion Sharing about Experiences**

The cyberspace gives a chance for consumers to exchange opinions (Jones et al. 2009). By means of engaging in electronic word-of-mouth, consumers can theoretically gather unbiased product information from other consumers and offer their own consumption related advice (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). EWOM works as a route for social influence - the process in which individuals make changes to their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors as a result of interacting with others online (Amblee & Bui 2011, Jobs & Gilfoil 2012). Goldsmith & Horowitz (2006) find that consumers seem to give and seek opinions online, similarly influencing the sales of many goods and services.

Many researchers identify the content distribution as a specific differentiator between WOM and eWOM communication (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Porter & Golan 2006, Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008, Chu & Choi 2011, Henke 2011, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). This is why one

of the presented eWOM elements is specifically opinion ‘sharing’, not only information giving and seeking, as in traditional WOM (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011) specify that the opinion-passing behavior occurs more likely in the online context, as the Internet enables multidirectional communication. Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) agree about the assumption and find that eWOM is the content conveyed by users. The person passing the eWOM message does not necessarily create the content shared.

The increasing complexity of products and services feed the need for sharing and reading opinions online (Gil-Or 2010). This shift to experience economy has its implications in the researched articles as well – almost all the authors claimed that consumers try to find and share information about experiences others have had (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008, Bronner & De Hoog 2010, Gil Or 2010, Burton & Khammash 2010, Chiang & Hsieh 2011, Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). Consumers seek the opinions of others online to reduce their own risk, to secure lower prices, to get information easily, to get pre-purchase information, because it is popular, or they are inspired by off-line inputs (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006).

According to Amblee and Bui (2011), motives for consumers to share their opinions are present when consumers have a concern for others and they want to enhance their own self-worth. Also people take part in eWOM because they want to get economic rewards, or because others do it too (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Burton and Khammash (2010) add that curiosity, need for entertainment, and consumer empowerment are reasons to share opinions online.

### **Opinion Leadership**

Like in traditional WOM, there are opinion leaders in the digital world as well (Xun and Reynolds 2010). A considerable number of the articles compared presented opinion leadership/expert power as part of electronic WOM (see Appendix B).

Bronner and de Hoog (2010) identify opinion leaders as ‘e-fluentials’ who spread information online. They are usually more experienced online users (Jiyao and Reynolds 2010) that influence other consumers in their purchase decisions by sharing information to opinion seekers (e.g. Fong & Burton 2006, Chu & Choi 2011). Through empirical study, Vilpponen et al. (2006) find that the opinion leaders have a significant role in innovation diffusion in online networks.

There is a possibility for a misperception that opinion leaders would be up for sharing almost any content online. Opinion leaders act as opinion transmitters and seekers too (Yeh & Choi 2011). Henke (2011) claims that product involvement influences on both pass-along probability and likelihood of attending a performance. Interestingly in her study, low involvement consumers were more active in sharing provocative content online than high-involvement consumers, who turn to safe and sound. San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) think the same and suggest that loyal users are not necessarily the most active in eWOM communication, as they require a higher level of trust.

Online opinion seekers are always outnumbered by the minority of opinion leaders (Jiyao and Reynolds 2010). In the study of Xun and Reynolds (2010), three top users in fact contribute to 23 percent of all the messages created on the forum. The restricted amount of opinion leaders may be explained with the specific characteristics these e-fluentials have. For example, Okazaki (2009) finds that stronger inherent novelty seeking, i.e. an individual's innovative personality and a cognitive style toward innovations, will lead to a stronger opinion leadership and content distribution.

### **Part of Buying Decisions**

The influence of traditional WOM on consumption is a thriving research area in the academic literature (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Cheung et al. (2009), Burton and Khammash 2010, Xun and Reynolds (2010), and Willemsen et al. (2012) believe that also electronic WOM is significantly starting to affect consumers' decision-making process. Amblee and Bui (2011) find in their study that sales of digital products were very poor without eWOM. The potential of eWOM to influence purchase decisions is also identified by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004). They propose that consumers may engage in eWOM communication because of a desire to help other consumers with their buying decisions.

Because consumers bring their own expectations and experiences to the online environment, eWOM is likely to have an even stronger impact on Internet commerce decisions than many other sources (Jones et al. 2009). Bronner and de Hoog (2010) verify the finding of Jones et al. (2009) with an empirical research comparing consumer and marketer generated sites: eWOM plays a more important role in experience-related consumer decisions. However, they see electronic word-of-mouth rather complimentary to other information sources than just replacing them.



Xun and Reynolds (2010) identify consumers' information seeking as an important component to validate their product judgments, especially for highly involving products (Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008). With the advent of the Internet and eWOM, search costs for information, one of the most important determinants of customer's decision-making process, are declining (Okazaki 2009). It seems that eWOM has its contribution to the information search process, thus becoming a part of consumer's purchase decision. Nevertheless, after finding what they want, consumers stop product information search quite quickly, because of the ever-rising cost of the information search (Amblee & Bui 2011).

The platform, where eWOM occurs, can be a potential factor in influencing consumers' product judgments (Lee & Youn 2009). In the study of Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008), the most effective eWOM platform for the participants to obtain user-generated recommendations is online discussion boards. However, Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011) see that in social networking sites users can help their social connections with purchase decisions by sharing useful information, because the recommendation source is more credible and trusted. Specifically, the quality of online reviews and also the quantity positively influence consumer's purchase intentions (Do-Hyung et al. 2007). EWOM statements that have stronger logical discourse are addressing buying concerns better (Xun & Reynolds 2010).

Exploring the effectiveness of blogs, Thorson and Rodgers (2006) find that when customers have the chance to share their opinions about brands online, it positively impacts the relationship between the brand and the individual who perceives the website interactive. For consumers, eWOM is an important venue to express their brand satisfaction (e.g. Jansen et al. 2009, Li 2011). Investigating the importance of brands in the consumer decision process, Fischer et al. (2010) find that the importance of brands increases relative to other purchase decision criteria. Brands offer an important means to reduce uncertainties and volatilities, which consumers want to avoid in their buying behavior (Fischer et al. 2010).

### **3.1.2 Takes Place via Several Channels**

As the Internet transforms to a locus for consumption (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006), so increases the research on consumer knowledge sharing on its surface (Phelps et al. 2004). The role of WOM has recently become even more important with the advent of the Internet (Lee & Youn 2009) and it is changing and enriching consumers' environment to interact (Vilpponen et al. 2006). Now online conversations provide information on almost every area of consumption (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al.

2004, Jones et al. 2009) and therefore, the power in the marketplace is shifting from producers to consumers (e.g. Breazeale 2009, Jones et al. 2009, Burton & Khammash 2010, Willemsen et al. 2012).

On the Internet, it is possible to similarly be an opinion provider, seeker and transmitter (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011, Yeh & Choi 2011). Like the mass media, the Internet allows people to reach others in a one-to-many process, which Petrescu and Korgaonkar (2011) name as “viral potential”. Messages sent via the Internet can be personalized to the receiver like in an interpersonal communication process (e.g. Vilpponen et al. 2006, San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). The different channels of the Internet offer bidirectional and interactive communication through the eWOM communication (Okazaki 2009) – consumers and organizations can communicate with each other.

The Internet changes people’s behavior. Consumers seem to loosen up online and express their opinions more freely (Pinto & Mansfield 2011, Strutton et al. 2011, Yeh & Choi 2011). Younger generations consider mobile devices as necessities in life, and are even sleeping with these devices (Pinto & Mansfield 2011).

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) specify other distinct characteristics of the Internet communication: it is available to other consumers for an indefinite period of time and is anonymous. The Internet has drastically transformed the reach, scope and velocity of WOM processes (Strutton, et al. 2011, van der Lans et al. 2010). It eases indirect communications between people often distant and unknown (Jones et al. 2009). Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) add that in the online world, there are a variety of ways by which consumers can exchange information. The wide range of online channels includes blogs, microblogs, emails, consumer review websites, forums, virtual consumer communities, and social networking sites (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011, Strutton et al. 2011, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012).

Although, many interactive platforms identified, interesting is that almost a half of the compared articles research eWOM behavior in web-based consumer-opinion platforms, review sites, and online discussion forums (e.g. Xun and Reynolds 2010, Bronner & de Hoog 2010, Amblee & Bui 2011) (See Appendix C). However, it seems that research on social networking sites and microblogging is becoming more popular. An online discussion forum is a general concept of a platform, a virtual avenue, for consumers to share their opinions online (Cheung et al. 2009). More

specifically, web-based consumer-opinion platforms are focused on consumption related opinions and experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

On the Internet, eWOM occurs also through blogging (e.g. Thorson & Rodgers 2006, Wen I et al. 2009) and microblogging (e.g. Jansen et al. 2009). Thorson and Rodgers (2006) define blogs as online personal journals that website visitors are able to comment. A newer form of eWOM is microblogging, using web's social communication services, like Twitter. There, users can describe their interests and express attitudes in short posts (Jansen et al. 2009). These venues are not necessarily consumption related, as review-based forums, and thus eWOM may occur differently.

Microblogging has been identified as part of the hyped phenomenon of social media, that social networking sites are also part of (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Shu-Chuan & Yoojung (2011) define social networking sites more collaborative and social media for consumers to exchange opinions and brand preference along with their persona. These networks can be divided into more egocentric sites such as Facebook, or more object centric, such as Youtube with its video sharing (Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). As Gil-Or (2010) posits, messages that are transferred within a social network will not be distributed in the same way as a message in a more discreet network. Thus, it would be interesting to further research, how these different online platforms influence the phenomenon of eWOM.

Without empirical findings, Balter & Butman (2006) deny the role of the Internet in the WOM process stating that word-of-mouth is not dominantly Web-based. However, in ten years the use of the Internet has been in constant change and the ways to participate into eWOM are nearly endless. According to Okazaki (2009), the Internet has developed into one of the most important communications media, which is why it cannot be ignored.

### **Communication in networks**

Vilpponen et al. (2006) emphasize the interaction between parties in electronic networks that consist of members and relational ties that link these actors. Networks are an essential part of electronic word-of-mouth: an information network consists of the message exchange between the ties and similarly, the people create a social network when interacting with each other (e.g. Dwyer 2007, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012).

Dwyer (2007) defines networks further and identifies that communities can be modeled to networks. The collaboration and the community are important characteristics of the web development and are in key roles in social communication services (Jansen et al. 2009). In addition, in the scientific article of Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008), terms ‘community’ and ‘network’ are closely linked together: ‘Through virtual communities, consumers extend their social networks to people they have never met in person, then seek out these people regularly for their opinions about products and services’ (p. 6). Reflecting these findings, the occurrence of the term ‘community’ was identified as part of network-based communication within compared articles (see Appendix B).

Researchers have tried to identify network elements, i.e. centrality, density, tie strength, homophily that may have an effect to eWOM adoption behavior. Vilpponen et al. (2006) specify that the structure of an electronic communication network is different from the traditional one in that the centralized electronic network structure seems to lead towards early adoption via broad and open relationships. The network structure affects consumers’ eWOM motivation and information evaluation indirectly – Participants have a higher eWOM intention in a dense social network than in a non-dense one (Sohn 2009). Indeed, networks that are too large do not motivate sharing (San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012).

According to Lee & Youn (2009), tie strength describes the social relationship between a communicator and a receiver that varies from strong to weak. It is easily assumed that the strength of a tie is related to the message adoption behavior, which Vilpponen et al. (2006) discredit. They find that all connections in electronic networks are equivalent in their effectiveness. The asynchronous and connective characteristics of online networks allow weak ties to expand their potential influence (e.g. Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011, Wirtz & Chew 2002). All in all, in electronic networks the strength of a tie is not as prioritized by consumers as in the traditional face-to-face communication.

The effect of homophily on eWOM is not as straightforward. Homophily means the degree to which individuals share similar characteristics (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Dwyer (2007) claims that it is not an important driver of preferential attachment in electronic networks, while San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) say the opposite. Interestingly, perceived homophily was found to be negatively related to opinion seeking and opinion passing behavior in social networking sites (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Individuals identify more with the group-based motivations rather than emphasize their own distinctiveness (Okazaki 2009).

San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) identify three different layers to build one's social influence in networks: structure of connections (1), personal relationships (2), and shared meaning (3). Network members value the knowledge each of the members share. Community members aim to add value to their networks (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). By studying product-oriented Yahoo groups, Dwyer (2007) believes that the high-value content explains ten percent of the social network growth. Expertise is something the network respects.

### **Directed to Multiple People**

Through electronic word-of-mouth, individuals can communicate with a multitude of other consumers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) on a global scale (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Electronic word-of-mouth behavior seems to have enormous potential in coverage (Vilpponen et al. 2006). In 2012 over 2.4 billion of the world's population used the Internet (Internet World Stats 2013). The Internet has unique ability to proliferate (Porter & Golan 2006), which is why it cannot be ignored as a marketing channel (Jones et al. 2009). For example, the effort of sending an email to several contacts is only slightly greater than the effort of sending the message to just one receiver (Vilpponen et al. 2006). Consumers share their opinions with the click of a mouse (Simmons, et al. 2011) to a close-knit group of family members and friends to huge communities involving countless anonymous participants (Sohn 2009).

The extensive reach is one of the reasons motivating people to engage in electronic word-of-mouth. Consumers use public articulations as an instrument of power (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008). According to Goldsmith & Horowitz (2006), people engage in electronic word-of-mouth as others take the lead and do it.

The extensive reach probably intrigues many marketers, however, it also creates challenges. One dissatisfied customer's social circle can now reach outstanding proportions (Pinto & Mansfield 2011). In global social networks (e.g. Facebook), members also have different cultural backgrounds, a set of values and beliefs (Gil-Or 2010). The study of Fong and Burton (2006) is one of the first to research the eWOM behavior by focusing on the different cultures of discussants. Although having a small sample of participants from China and US, Fong & Burton (2006) recognize that US discussants have higher visit frequency and higher levels of information giving, but they are less likely to seek information. The lower proportion of Chinese respondents giving recommendations may suggest that social risk is weighed more heavily in their culture.

The global community is often regarded equal to a local physical one (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Thus, it is important also to understand eWOM as a universal phenomenon affected by cultural differences (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011, Chu & Choi 2011).

### **Interaction without Time and Location Constraints**

Electronic word-of-mouth is seen frequently as an asynchronous process whereby the sender and the receiver of information can interact without time and location constraints (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Vilpponen et al. 2006, Jones et al. 2009, Simmons et al 2011, Yeh & Choi 2011). EWOM improves the consumer-to-consumer communication possibilities (Vilpponen et al. 2006) to stay connected around the clock without geographical constraints (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). EWOM is also broadening its effect in developing countries, which even expands the growth potential of this phenomenon (Jobs & Gilfoil 2012)

Friends, family members and colleagues have conversations across 'global neighborhoods', which Strutton et al. (2011) also call as 'scale-free connectivity'. Easy accessibility to recommendations and the longevity of conversations explain why eWOM seems to be so popular among consumers when seeking purchase advice (e.g. Cheung et al. 2009, Burton & Khammash 2010, Strutton et al. 2011).

The permanence of online conversations (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006) may imply that eWOM communication tends to be static by nature. Xun and Reynolds (2010) deny this assumption by emphasizing the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process of eWOM. Messages can spread online quite spontaneously (Vilpponen et al. 2006). Due to the mobile communication technology development, the Internet is transforming to a portable communications channel. Thus eWOM is becoming more of a direct mode of communication (Okazaki 2009).

Because eWOM messages do not vanish instantly (Breazeale 2009), this qualitative data can offer new ways for academics and practitioners to research consumer behavior. Market researchers are beginning to use ethnographic market research technique, netnography, to collect otherwise perishable information (Xun & Reynolds 2010). In addition, Xun and Reynolds (2010) find that netnography can offer greater insight into the virtual space in relation to consumers' needs, wants and purchase choices.

### **3.1.3 Possibility of Anonymity**

Anonymity has been a distinct characteristic of the Internet communication (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). EWOM communication can occur between people who have little or no prior relationship with one another, i.e. weak ties (Lee & Youn 2009). These weak ties are developed because information becomes inexpensive and benefits are becoming common on the Internet surface (Vilpponen et al. 2006).

Amblee and Bui (2011) identify that there are three different roles consumers can adopt in online conversations that may impact the nature of eWOM: unknown to others (1), an expert (2), or a friend (3). When interacting online with strangers (Lee & Youn 2009), there is a possibility in the eWOM communication that the communicator has a commercial agenda (Breazeale 2009). Sun-Jae and Jang-Sun (2009) add that companies may strategically manipulate consumers on the online environment. This is because physical cues used to assess the identity of others are lacking (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Sohn (2009) also claims that when consumers communicate with people they do not know, they tend to give positive information than negative, which may falsify feedback.

Still, consumers tend to perceive the online network as vendor-free (Gil-Or 2010). Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) also notice that on online discussion boards, when reading posts, participants seldom evaluate the source of the content and believe that only users generate it. Sun-Jae and Jang-Sun (2009) and Xun and Reynolds (2010) find that participants have a strong reliance on the credibility of the eWOM messages. Consumers mostly believe in reviews and ratings when searching for particular product information – if they need more emotional guidance, consumers tend to turn to friends or family members (Amblee & Bui 2011).

The interaction between people who have never met is in power when eWOM messages are exchanged in electronic discussion boards (Fong & Burton 2006). This is why eWOM can be anonymous. However, due to the recent growth of social networking sites, where users generally interact in a more personal way (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011), the role of anonymous interaction is becoming less evident in the eWOM communication. Thus, eWOM does not necessarily involve an additional socialization process that is used when interacting with strangers (Okazaki 2009).

### **Source Credibility Challenging to Detect**

There is a lot of discussion whether the great extent of unfiltered information and users' anonymity increases online users' suspicion as to the information validity (Cheung et al. 2009). There is also a contradiction as online users mostly perceive their networks vendor-free (Gil-Or 2010) and marketers see eWOM as a valuable means to approach consumers. Sun-Jae and Jang-Sun (2009) find in their empirical study that if all of the eWOM messages are positive, it can damage the credibility of the site. Online users may assume that the site is utilized as a promotional channel.

An EWOM message is defined as credible when it is believable, true or factual to the receiver (Cheung et al. 2009). In the study of Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008), participants trust more in product information generated by consumers than information created by manufacturers. With trust consumers evaluate the source and value of information (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Especially, traditional marketing efforts are becoming less effective because consumers do not trust statements that companies present (Gil-Or 2010, van der Lans et al. 2010).

Sun-Jae and Jang-Sun (2009) posit that the evaluation of the eWOM source credibility may differ from the credibility evaluation in the traditional WOM context. Interestingly, in their study participants frequently have a strong reliance on eWOM message credibility, which Xun and Reynolds (2010) and Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) confirm. In online discussion forums and review sites this may be the case. When seeking advice from weak or non-existent tie sources, it is difficult for consumers to evaluate the credibility of the message and thus it may be a reason why consumers are not interested in evaluating it (Lee & Youn 2009).

However, contradictory beliefs exist, which is why credibility in eWOM should be further examined. Willemsen et al. (2012) and Yeh and Choi (2011) propose that trust is seen as a direct predictor of eWOM intention (Yeh and Choi 2011) and source credibility has a profound effect on consumers' judgment and choice (Willemsen et al. 2012). Perhaps these differences are a cause of user personality – other consumers require higher level of trust than others (San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo 2012).

When the anonymity is present in communication, eWOM participants focus more on information usefulness, provider's posting history, the layout of the message and the feedback from others to analyze the information quality (Xun & Reynolds 2010, Burton & Khammash 2010, Willemsen et al. 2012). In addition to content quality, Do-Hyung et al. (2007), Wen I et al. (2009) and Amblee



and Bui (2011) find that the quantity of messages replied is important to draw online user's attention. However, if the online message does not support prior beliefs, the receiver is then likely to suspect its credibility (Cheung et al. 2009). Cheung et al. (2009) add that normative influence cues, i.e. recommendation consistency and aggregate rating by other users, influence the perceived credibility.

The platform where eWOM occurs may impact the way in which users perceive the message. Trust is a more determinant factor in social networking sites where consumers interact along with their persona (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). On discussion boards, participants rarely make their identities known to others and the role of influencers is greater (Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008). Due to higher involvement in social media and mutual agreement to become friends, it increases the perceived credibility and the value for trust in one's social network (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). Social networking sites make more trusted information sources possible and increasingly influence customer brand perceptions and purchasing decisions (Jansen et al. 2009).

To transform discussion boards and review platforms more credible information sources, Cheung et al. (2009) suggest that site administrators should design message rating systems that allow users to evaluate messages in several attributes, such as argument strength, understandability and objectivity, instead of just providing a general evaluation score. In social networking sites, credibility issues also exist as anyone can create a profile or page, which they cannot do in the offline world. Hence, Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011) suggest that policy makers could make specific regulations to help consumers and brands to establish trusted long-term relationships.

### **3.2 Similarities and Differences between Online and Offline WOM**

Based on the article analysis, electronic WOM is differentiated from traditional WOM. Nevertheless, most of the publications refer to electronic word-of-mouth as the extension of traditional WOM (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Xun and Reynolds 2010, Vilpponen et al. 2006, Strutton et al. 2011, Yeh & Choi 2011). Electronic word-of-mouth is seen more of a modernized version of its offline counterpart. Because eWOM has enriched the ways to communicate, similarly the research on word-of-mouth has been updated (Vilpponen et al. 2006).

The distinctiveness of electronic WOM is justified with the evolvement of the Internet, the dynamic force changing offline WOM (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Hyuk

Jun & Morrison 2008). As a result, anonymity, the permanence of conversations, and the extensive reach of messages are named most often as the distinguishing factors between online and offline WOM (e.g. Vilpponen et al. 2006, Cheung et al. 2009, Yeh & Choi 2011). Traditional offline information sources are face-to-face connections such as family, friends and colleagues (Xun & Reynolds 2010). In the online world, influencers are a much wider concept: in addition to being an expert, the opinion leader can be also the best networker or the most attractive blogger (Gil-Or 2010).

Similar to eWOM and traditional WOM is that consumers seek and give opinions about different products, services, brands, companies and experiences. Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) posit that consumers seek and give opinions online in much the same way as they do offline. It is noted that eWOM participants can also pass opinions to others in networks via different online platforms, which is not possible in the offline context (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Porter & Golan 2006, Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008, Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011).

Consumers have a variety of means to participate in eWOM communication (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). In different platforms, eWOM may behave differently, which differentiates it from offline peer-to-peer conversations. Even though happening on the Internet, eWOM is not always computer-mediated. The information seeker and the message source can exchange information via mobile communication technology (Okazaki 2009). Strutton et al. (2011) interestingly claim that even though online and traditional WOM have their own distinct characteristics, it seems that they work in collaboration: “even in the internet age, e-WOM activities frequently may be initiated through traditional face-to-face (or phone-to-phone) exchanges” (p.579).

Both offline and online word-of-mouth are perceived as interactive ways to communicate about consumption related topics. Nevertheless, according to Breazeale (2009) the online counterpart is not necessarily as spontaneous as traditional word-of-mouth. This assumption is grounded by the asynchronous nature of discussions: eWOM makes it possible for users to participate in conversations in their own pace (Cheung et al. 2009). Due to the breakthrough in social media and the development of mobile technology, electronic word-of-mouth is becoming more spontaneous, more personal and a more direct mode of communication (Okazaki 2009). Likewise to traditional WOM theory (e.g. Kozinets et al. 2010), it seems that as a phenomenon eWOM is constantly evolving.

Electronic WOM conversations provide information on almost every area of consumption (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). As search costs decrease by means of eWOM, consumers can evaluate products before the purchase more easily and similarly, the price pressure on sellers increases (Okazaki 2009). Consumers have more power than before, which correspondingly companies need to accept and utilize in order to succeed (Breazeale 2009). While traditional word-of-mouth is not often a decision variable to companies (Do-Hyung et al. 2007), most of the eWOM articles compared posit that electronic WOM should be included in firms' marketing strategies (see Appendix B).

It would be intriguing to thoroughly examine the differences that online and offline WOM have in their effectiveness. The research of Steffes and Burgee (2009) for example, is one of the first to compare the value of online and offline WOM in the consumer decision-making process. In their study, recipients valued more the information gained from eWOM forum than speaking face-to-face with friends in the traditional WOM context (Steffes & Burgee 2009). Due to a small sample containing only students, this interesting finding needs further research. Do consumers see electronic information sources more credible as they become increasingly aware of the different ways to influence online?

#### **4 Literature Review Part 3: Companies' role in eWOM**

Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) note that the better marketers understand reasons why consumers engage in electronic word-of-mouth, the better they can contribute the way in which eWOM influences purchase decisions. EWOM can be 'a dual-edged sword for companies' – positive WOM can be the most powerful form of advertising as the negative one can be a nightmare (Sohn 2009). Consumers are increasingly in control of the delivery of advertising (Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) point out that eWOM deserves more attention from marketing professionals. It is seen as a necessary element of the promotional mix (e.g. Gil-Or 2010, Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011, Yeh & Choi 2011). Still, the extent to which marketers contribute to eWOM is not unanimously understood among academics.

Some researchers emphasize that firms should only reflect on the topics occurring in the electronic consumer-to-consumer communication in their marketing efforts (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog 2010, Xun & Reynolds 2010). Others identify a more active role of marketers in encouraging consumers to the eWOM behavior through interacting with consumers more directly. EWOM is seen as a means of mass personalization, where mass and personal communication are combined (San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012).

Based on different user motives, firms may need to develop separate strategies for encouraging eWOM behavior (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006), target opinion leaders (e.g. Vilpponen et al. 2006, Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008, Fong & Burton 2006, Li 2011), plan viral marketing campaigns (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Porter & Golan 2006, van der Lans et al. 2010), or interact in social media (Gil-Or 2010, Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011, Jansen et al. 2009, Pinto & Mansfield 2011). Marketing professionals are not anymore thinking whether they should get involved in this phenomenon, but rather how best to exploit it (Strutton, et al. 2011).

Next, three different models by Kozinets et al. (2010); organic, linear influence, and network coproduction model, are introduced. All of these models differently describe the role of a marketer in the electronic word-of-mouth. After that a framework is presented that is based on the literature review and showing the possible actions companies might get involved, when participating in eWOM. In the coming chapter, methodology is described in more detail.

#### **4.1 Organic Model – Marketers as Spectators**

The different views reflect the general development of the word-of-mouth theory. In the early stages of the WOM research, the marketer was seen as a spectator rather than an active influencer in the peer-to-peer communication between customers (Dichter 1966). The earliest and simplest understanding of the consumer WOM communication can be seen as "organic" without particular involvement from the marketer (Kozinets et al. 2010).

The organic point of view of Dichter (1966) is conducted in the eWOM research as well. Xun and Reynolds (2010) suggest that marketers can improve their practices by learning real consumers' language. Likewise, Bronner and de Hoog (2010) and Simmons et al (2011) advice marketers to continuously monitor eWOM discussions about a brand at consumer-generated sites and adapt these discussion topics to traditional marketing efforts.

Indeed, it is not enough to just follow consumer feedback, but companies should also act on it (Dichter 1966). Like marketing efforts, organizations could adapt consumers' information to product and service design as well (Xun & Reynolds 2010). Consumer online complaints should be seen rather as opportunities to identify and resolve problems and improve offering (Pinto & Mansfield 2011). In the organic model, companies do not have any control of eWOM conversations, which Dwyer (2007) proposes as well. However, he is more open to the suggestion of firms hosting a blog, whose content consumers can diffuse to their own communities.

#### **4.2 Linear Influence Model – Marketers Interact with E-fluentials**

Kozinets et al. (2010) identify also two other models that currently coexist with the organic word-of-mouth marketing, the model of linear influence and the network coproduction model. The linear influence model emphasizes the role of influential customers in the word-of-mouth process. According to Feick and Preis (1987) by targeting the best prospects, opinion leaders and early purchasers, manufacturers can improve initial sales. By being in contact with influential consumers, marketers' role is more visible in comparison with the organic peer-to-peer interaction.

In the academic publications of eWOM, the possibility to influence opinion leaders is identified. For example, Fong and Burton (2006) emphasize the importance of identifying opinion leaders as they may in turn influence other consumers in their purchase decisions. According to Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008), marketers can directly influence opinion leaders and indirectly persuade a larger number of consumers, who appreciate the reviews of these e-fluentials. Marketers might even

overcome negative user content with positive advertising about a brand targeted at opinion leaders (Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008, Yeh & Choi 2011). Vilpponen et al. (2006) state that reaching e-fluentials on the online environment is even more important than mass media for marketers and see online networks especially important for organizations to distribute innovation related information. However, practical implications to target these opinion leaders are not evident.

More aggressive and practical way to influence opinion leaders and their networks is often called viral marketing (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Porter and Golan (2006) particularly think that eWOM is known as viral advertising, where provocative content is sent from identified sponsors to motivate online peer-to-peer communication. Phelps et al. (2004) emphasize that companies need to address viral messages to as few as possible, to opinion leaders, who perceive the message relevant. This way the message has better chance to be forwarded. It seems that marketers may be too optimistic about viral potential – sometimes it happens, more often it does not (Strutton 2011). Increasing the probability of forwarding, viral advertisers are creating emotionally charged content without evident branding (Porter & Golan 2006).

When examining the different motives to generate eWOM messages, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) find that 34 percent of the respondents perceived economic incentives as one of their strongest motives to write eWOM related posts. Also, Do-Hyung et al. (2007) and van der Lans et al. (2010) see rewards for eWOM providers possible and encourage sellers to offer them to consumers who post good reviews. However, the effect of monetary incentives in the context of eWOM has not been researched enough. Phelps et al. (2004) posit that compensations could diminish the power of the recommendation if recipients found out of it. In the findings of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), 27 percent of participants' interest for economic rewards was limited. Therefore, marketers should pay extra attention to understand, which consumers are driven by economic incentives

### **4.3 Network Coproduction Model – Marketers Network Online**

Both the organic and the linear influence model (Kozinets et al. 2010) can be conducted in the offline communication environment as well. The network coproduction model is possible only in the online environment. The network coproduction model illustrates the fact that marketers are interested in directly managing WOM activities through targeted marketing programs (Kozinets et al. 2010). The diffusion that happens in the Internet changes the nature of WOM by increasing the average consumer's ability to make their voice heard, which is why firms attempt to manage and manipulate WOM (Breazeale 2009).

Through the development of social networking sites and microblogs, a company can have bidirectional communication with consumers on the online surface by maintaining its own social network structure (Gil-Or 2010). Through social networking sites, marketers can generate more personalized communication strategies and these sites are essential for building consumer-brand relationships (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung 2011). According to Jansen et al. (2009), company's microblogging account helps the marketer to both monitor brand discussions and to push information to consumers. Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011) add that by means of being interactive in social networks, advertisers can reach segmented audiences in a cost-effective way in comparison to other media channels. These social media venues have diminished the emotional distance that has been present between customers and businesses (Jansen et al. 2009).

The Internet has changed the fact that the company is the only one to control its own reputation (Breazeale 2009). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) define 'true altruists' as eWOM participants who are motivated to help other consumers as well as companies through online opinion sharing. As the power is shifting from producers to consumers (e.g. Jones et al. 2009), online users may use public negative opinions also as an instrument of power (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Thus, eWOM can be a tool for organizations to manage their reputation (Jansen et al. 2009).

By evaluating the progression of word-of-mouth theory, marketers' direct involvement in the online word-of-mouth process is becoming more accepted than before. According to Breazeale (2009) organizations use eWOM implications for many marketing activities such as brand building, customer acquisition and retention, product development and quality assurance. Vilpponen et al. (2006) encourage organizations to even manage peer-to-peer conversations.

Contrary beliefs also exist, and for example Balter and Butman (2006) believe that word-of-mouth can be measured and tracked, but not controlled by marketers. Even though scholarly reviewed, the lack of empirical research creates a credibility gap in the specific article. Still, companies need to thoroughly evaluate when to participate. As Gil-Or (2010) argues, companies can influence online conversation only by doing four main things: firms need to observe, moderate, mediate and only sometimes participate in the eWOM communication.

In the following, a closer look is taken to the possible eWOM actions companies might participate. A framework will be introduced that specifies potential actions in these three different models – the organic, linear influence, and network coproduction model.

#### **4.4 A Framework for Marketers Participating in EWOM**

Based on the literature view, the organic, linear influence, and network coproduction model have their distinct principles, however, they share some characteristics as well. These models include the notion that marketers can monitor eWOM communications, find ways to encourage these conversations, and commit to the actions related to eWOM by measuring and predicting. The differentiator is the closeness of the relationship between the marketer and the consumer. According to Kozinets et al (2010), in the organic model, there is no relationship between a company and a consumer. In the linear influence model, marketers try to influence opinion leaders, and in the network coproduction model marketers have direct interactions with consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010)

Based on the sample collection method of Breazeale (2009), 40 articles were analyzed to understand the actions marketers could take in the changing world of electronic WOM. The key identified actions were encouraging consumer feedback, integrating eWOM with other marketing activities, interacting with consumers online, targeting consumers online, designing content to activate consumers online, monitoring and adapting feedback online, measuring and predicting own and consumer actions online, rewarding consumers of being active online, recruiting opinion leaders, identifying consumer motives to share online, choosing the right channel online, building relationship with consumers online and segmenting consumers online (See appendix C). To help to understand the phenomenon of eWOM for companies, these actions were divided into three levels: monitoring eWOM, encouraging eWOM, and being committed to these eWOM related actions - monitoring and encouraging.

Drawn from the article sample analysis, main insights about companies' role and actions in eWOM can be identified in a framework (See Figure 3). The framework detects the main activities, companies may possess depending on the model they have chosen. The framework includes the three levels mentioned – monitoring eWOM conversations (1), encouraging eWOM conversations (2), and being committed to the eWOM related actions taken (3). Each model has its own interpretation about these levels. Next, these three stages will be described more in detail. After this section, the framework will be empirically researched with multiple sources of data (See Chapter 5).



Figure 3: A Framework for Companies Practices in EWOM Communicat

	MONITOR					ENCOURAGE					COMMIT		
<b>ORGANIC MODEL</b>													
<b>LINEAR MODEL</b>	Choose platforms	Get feedback		Opinion-leaders		Adapt feedback	Integrate with mar. comms	Design content		Recruit		Measure & Predict	
<b>NETWORK MODEL</b>			Identify motives	Segment					Target	Reward		Interact	Build relationships

#### **4.4.1 Monitor EWOM Conversations**

Due to the increasing importance of eWOM, Bronner and de Hoog (2010) ask for a more agile and flexible marketing strategy through constant monitoring of eWOM conversations. Electronic WOM gives control opportunities of some sort compared with the traditional form – because of the transparency of the Internet, organizations can access customer reviews online (Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). This progress has transformed marketing more “listening-led” (Li 2011), which is why monitoring is seen as a necessary element for companies considering eWOM (Simmons et al 2011).

Based on the article analysis, five steps have been identified that may be included in the monitoring phase. Marketers choose the platforms which to monitor (1) and get consumer feedback (2). If the company is pursuing the linear or network model, they may identify consumer motives for sharing information online (3), and segment consumers based on these motives or something else (4). Especially in the linear model, marketers try to identify opinion leaders (5) (Kozinets et al. 2010).

#### **Choose Platforms and Get Consumer Feedback**

The platform, where reviews are posted, can have an effect on consumer judgment (Lee & Youn 2009). As Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) notion, platforms differ in their purpose – for example Facebook is for friends and Twitter for engaging with supporters. People have preferences, as in which platform they want to use – for example, Jobs and Gilfoil (2012) find that people in developing nations are more eager to use Twitter than Facebook when comparing with industrialized countries. Jones et al. (2009) suggest that the impact on consumers is the greatest when the favorable postings are located on third-party websites rather than websites operated by the brand. It seems that the platform makes a difference when trying to get valid feedback and consumers activated. Because there are so many platforms online (San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo 2012), marketers should choose platforms where to act.

In these online platforms, companies should monitor consumer feedback (e.g. Dwyer 2007, Jansen et al. 2009, Wen I et al. 2009, Bronner & de Hoog 2010, Gil-Or 2010, Simmons et al. 2011). Positive or negative eWOM reviews can financially impact an organization (Simmons et al. 2011). Because there are so many different platforms and consumers, managers need to find ways to quickly process feedback (Simmons et al. 2011). In addition to Simmons et al. (2011), Dwyer (2007) adds that this process should be automated to identify the information that attracted the most

customer attention and the members who most often provided the information. Xun and Reynolds (2010) and Bronner and de Hoog (2010) see this phase as a new way of conducting market research. Companies can also get valuable content and product improvement ideas (Jansen et al. 2009). Chen (2011) and Bronner and de Hoog (2010) ask companies to adapt this feedback to their marketing, communications and offering, which will be discussed in the encouraging phase (See Section 4.4.2).

### **Identify Consumers Online**

If marketers hope to provide interesting content for consumers online, they need to first understand, what drives their behavior (e.g. Fong & Burton 2006, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Consumers are not homogenous when seeking information online (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). Identifying motives to share and read online messages and addressing them, companies can design more customer-oriented experience (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, Burton & Khammash 2010). These motives can consist for example of desires to have fun, entertainment, to help others or to increase one's social power (See Section 3.1.1) Companies may categorize, i.e. segment, users based on these motives (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006), or based on their level of involvement by using click-stream data (Do-Hyung et al. 2007), based on demographics (Okazaki 2009, Phelps 2004) or based on their culture (Jobs & Gilfoil 2012, Chu & Choi 2011).

There are many different notions in the article sample about influencing opinion leaders online (See appendix C). This thought corresponds to the linear influence model (Kozinets et al 2010). In order to engage with opinion leaders, they need to be identified first (e.g. Phelps et al 2004, Fong & Burton 2006, van der Lans et al. 2010, Yeh & Choi 2011). Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) justify this notion by stating that opinion leaders have an affinity for media, are sizable in numbers, and provide a good investment for marketers. The ways to identify these opinion leaders are not yet clear in eWOM research. Phelps et al. (2004) imply that identification could be possible with demographic, psychographic, and behavioral proxies, but they do not describe them more specifically. Chen (2011) encourages assessing psychological characteristics, such as technology readiness, optimism, and innovativeness to find these influential consumers.

### **4.4.2 Encourage EWOM Conversations**

Amblee and Bui (2011) and Wen I et al. (2009) recommend companies to encourage eWOM conversations, since the amount of these messages seems to be linked to increased consumer

attention and sales. Again, the organic, linear influence, and network coproduction model have their own implications for encouraging consumers to eWOM conversations.

As the organic model sees a marketer as a spectator rather than participator (Dichter 1966), there is no role for companies directly encouraging eWOM conversations among consumers. This does not necessarily mean that companies should not do anything at all. Marketers can adapt consumer discussions online to their other more traditional marketing efforts (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog 2010, Dwyer 2007), and this way design the content of its marketing messages. Nevertheless, Sun-Jae and Jang-Sun (2009) and Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) are concerned about marketers' interaction in eWOM and categorize it as manipulation rather than mediation.

The linear influence model's focus is on encouraging a few influential consumers to spread a company's promotion to other consumers in their network (Kozinets et al. 2010). This process is many times referred as viral marketing (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Van der Lans 2010, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). Marketers try to target and in a way recruit potential opinion leaders as vehicles for their campaign (Hyuk Jun & Morrison 2008). This is usually executed with personal, emotional and even provocative content (e.g. Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011, Porter & Golan 2006). These viral messages may work in collaboration with other marketing efforts, as traditional media influence in the early stages of the diffusion process by providing more precise call-to-action where as personal sources are utilized later (Vilpponen et al. 2006, Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2010).

The network coproduction model comes into the picture, when marketers want to have the most direct interaction with their customers online (Kozinets et al. 2010). This has closed the emotional distance between companies and their customers (Jansen et al. 2009). This kind of encouraging – engaging people and updating regularly requires more time than in the other models (Bulearca & Bulearca 2010). Interacting in these social networks implies that companies can directly answer consumer feedback (Chen 2011), and these networks should be part of overall marketing strategy (e.g. Jansen et al. 2009, Chu & Yoojung 2011). By providing exclusive information and promotions to the company's followers, the company can reward its consumers (Yeh & Choi 2011). This increased interactivity in the eWOM communication may encourage consumers to build new kinds of relationships with companies (Thorson & Rodgers 2006).

Based on the framework (see Figure 3) and the analysis (See appendix C), encouraging eWOM conversations may include the following steps: adapt consumer feedback (1), integrate eWOM as part of marketing communications (2), design content to activate eWOM (3), target consumers to participate in eWOM (4), reward consumers of active participation in eWOM (5), recruit influential consumers to be vehicles of eWOM (6), and interact with customers in eWOM (7). Now these potential company practices will be discussed.

### **Adapt Consumer Feedback**

If marketers are monitoring feedback, they also need to learn from it (Simmons et al. 2011, Xun & Reynolds 2010). However, there are different levels of involvement. Companies can adapt these consumer comments to their operations and offering (e.g. Xun & Reynolds 2010, Bronner & de Hoog 2010, Pinto & Mansfield 2011) or they can also have an even more direct relationship by answering consumer feedback online (e.g. Jansen et al 2009, Bulearca & Bulearca 2010, Chen 2011). Real understanding about consumers might result in the ability creating offering consumers desire (Dwyer 2007) and differentiation from others by winning consumers' trust (Xun & Reynolds 2010).

If the company is pursuing the organic or linear influence model, it may constrain of having direct relationships with a larger group of consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010). In this way, they can adapt these consumer discussion points to communications, marketing and offering design, but they cannot give immediate solution to consumers, which is possible in the network coproduction model (Kozinets et al. 2010). As Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) find, "Being on Twitter will at least give you the opportunity to have your say about what other people are saying about you" (p.304). Chen (2011) emphasizes that companies should answer these complaints and see them as a way of engaging with consumers.

Both ways are paths to engage with consumers; with the network coproduction model it is just more immediate and interactive. Feedback should be viewed as opportunity to get consumers engaged and encouraged toward the direct voice (Pinto & Mansfield 2011).

### **Integrate Online Messages with Marketing Communications**

Electronic word-of-mouth does not make other marketing communication activities obsolete; instead they seem to work in collaboration (e.g. Bronner & de Hoog 2010, Chiang & Hsieh 2011). As Strutton et al. (2011) ask for a new conceptualization of eWOM, they also imply that companies

should fuel this phenomenon both in traditionally as well as socially networked channels of communication. By spreading brand messages in different media, marketers can stimulate consumers to talk about their brands (e.g. van der Lans 2010, Li 2011).

Electronic word-of-mouth should be part of an overall marketing strategy (e.g. Jansen et al. 2009, Chu & Yoojung 2011). The traditional marketing mix needs new ways to be more interactive and get consumers involved (Chen 2011). Maintaining one's presence in these social channels is increasingly part of companies' branding (Jansen et al 2009), which justifies the importance of the network coproduction model. Traditional channels are the most vital in the organic model (Kozinets et al. 2010), where advertising is adapted to consumer discussions online (Bronner & de Hoog 2010).

Also, in the linear influence model, where opinion leaders are targeted, the traditional ways of marketing matter. Vilpponen et al. (2006) believe that mass media is extremely important in the early stages of a diffusion process, i.e. convincing early adopters, whereas personal information sources come later into the picture. In viral campaigns, which are especially related to early adopters, the focus should be in engaging the customer, rather than presenting a call to action, which is traditional marketing channels' task (Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011). Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) suggest that companies might overcome negative consumer online feedback with positive advertising aimed at opinion leaders.

### **Design Engaging Content**

Companies need to design attractive content and contextualize it (San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). According to San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012), this contextualization means that firms need to establish consumers who will receive the online message, the place where the message will be read and then address these notions. Strutton et al. (2011) see that currently this is not the case – messages are not pass-along worthy.

It seems that personal and concise communication might make messages more worth to share. Even though San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) are talking about viral email messages, their instructions could be valid on other eWOM channels as well. They advice that the subject must grab the reader's attention, messages should be short and thought-provoking phrases, personalized with not too heavy images and include some kind of call-to-action. Strutton et al. (2011) also emphasize message personalization and a less commercial approach to content design,

but they do not suggest any ways to do that. Another important factor in message design is time. Chiang and Hsieh (2011) ask for real-time conversations, availability and Gil-Or (2010) for dynamic content. If companies want to build relationships with consumers online, this might mean that companies need to allocate more time to dynamic and up-to-date content development.

Chiang and Hsieh (2011) and Dwyer (2007) also add that persuasiveness of a message is usually related to the expertise of the presenter and the popularity of the message source. If the company possesses some kind of online forum, rating system, or possibilities for users to comment, it could guide users on how to provide good quality review with the ready-made templates of products or services aspects (e.g. functionality, performance, aesthetics) (Cheung et al. 2009). Burton and Khammash (2010) recommend that companies should provide both short and long consumer reviews so that consumers can find a review based on their needs and time they have reserved for information search. Companies could also help consumers' information search by giving summary statistics to the majority opinions or ratings (Cheung et al. 2009).

The organic, linear influence, and network coproduction model differ in ways on how to design content for consumers interacting online. If Kozinets et al. (2010) notions are applied to this context; in organic model marketers should design traditional marketing messages so that they encourage consumers to WOM conversation online. For example, Dwyer (2007) concludes that companies should consider hosting a blog, so that they can be more active in injecting content to their user communities. According to Wen I et al. (2009), one way for companies to increase the hit rate of blogs is to create more emotional topics to trigger consumer opinions.

Then again, in the linear model, where marketers try to target early adopters, messages are designed for creating a viral effect. In viral advertising, the main idea is to design unique, emotive, and even provocative messages (e.g. Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011, Porter & Golan 2006). If a company is pursuing the network coproduction model, it is designing messages for directly interacting and networking with its fan base and consumers online (e.g. Jansen et al 2009, Gil-Or 2010, Bulearca & Bulearca 2010). However, these notions seem to require further research.

### **Target the Most Important Consumers**

Burton and Khammash (2010) find that untargeted marketing is not only ineffective, but it will create frustration and subsequent cynicism among future consumers. Based on article sample analysis, there are different ways to target people – by motivation (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al 2004,

Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Burton & Khammash 2010), by involvement (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Gil-Or 2010, Henke 2011), by demographics (e.g. Burton & Khammash 2010, Strutton et al. 2011) and by behavior (e.g. Sohn 2009, Chu & Yoojung 2011, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012, Vilpponen et al 2006). Targeting is more vital in the linear influence and network coproduction model, where companies try to get in contact with influential consumers or consumers in general (Kozinets et al. 2010).

Because there are many different motivational segments (See Section 3.1.1), strategies for encouraging and appealing to these dominant motives should be developed (Hennig-Thurau et al 2004, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Burton & Khammash 2010). If marketers want to target consumers' intrinsic motivations (Van der Lans 2010), they can appeal to desires for entertainment and social power (Phelps et al. 2004). For example, people can be given possibilities to do charity or help others by online participation. If marketers hope to target extrinsic motivations, they need to somehow reward the customer (Van der Lans et al. 2010). Consumers may find the information based on utilitarian reasons, e.g. finding lower prizes (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006).

Consumers can be targeted based on their level of involvement. Henke (2011) suggests companies to identify low- and high-involvement consumers, because they act differently to marketing messages – low involvement consumers want more provocative content than high-involvement customers. Finding people who are interested in what company has to say (Phelps 2004) and are aligned with in terms of company culture (Gil-Or 2010), is important in encouraging electronic word-of-mouth. Interestingly, San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) find in their research that non-loyal users may be more effective targets for WOM campaigns. This contradiction may spring from the fact that San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) are researching viral emails, where more provocative content is often utilized.

In the researched articles, demographics are also put into the pedestal when discussing about targeting consumers. In this research, consumers have been divided for example into different generation groups, age groups, gender groups and geographical groups. Phelps et al. (2004) find that women are more likely to share messages than men. Strutton et al. (2011) research generational differences, but interestingly do not find further conclusions as to how generation X and Y really differ from each other. Chu and Choi (2011) discuss about cultural sensitivity and they find that Chinese consumers seem to act differently online than American people.



Marketers target individuals also based on their online behavior. Especially important this is in finding opinion leaders, where companies are reaching people who are willing to hear one's message and share it online (Phelps et al. 2004). There is not a clear picture yet in which way these influential individuals should behave. Sohn (2009) suggests that strong social ties should be targeted; then again San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) find that people who have closely knit networks should be reached. Reaching these consumers with highly central positions is a must for online marketers according to Vilpponen et al. (2006).

### **Reward Consumers Online**

Gil-Or (2010) suggests that giving benefits to targeted consumer groups could create more active groups. There are basically two views among researched articles on how to reward consumers. Consumers can be encouraged by rewarding them with better social status or with monetary incentives. An interesting finding is also that marketers can reward consumers by developing a brand community where consumers can get exclusive information about products and services (Lee and Youn 2009, Yeh & Choi 2011). Again, rewarding is probably more in the interest of managers who are pursuing the linear or network coproduction model, as these models are more open to directly encouraging consumers online (Kozinets et al. 2010).

If consumers post high-quality reviews when thinking about writing style and content, they could be rewarded with scores (Amblee & Bui 2011). Likewise, Do-Hyung et al. (2007) encourage marketers to offer rewards for consumers posting high-quality reviews, which the company can order by quality rather than date. Both Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Burton and Khammash (2010) suggest that consumers should be given the opportunity to post some personal profile information to increase the attractiveness of the platform. In these ways, managers can improve the source credibility reputation, as reputable contributors are being recognized (Cheung et al 2009).

Amblee and Bui (2011) see that financial incentives could radically increase the volume of reviews. Van der Lans et al. (2010) see also prizes and monetary incentives possible for seeding viral emails. However, marketers should be careful when compensating consumers, because these actions might arouse consumer suspicions about the real quality of the offering (Lee & Youn 2009).

This is why Jones et al. (2009) are suggesting that favorable postings should be located on third-party websites. On the contrary, Lee and Youn (2009) find that a positive review on the brand's website is as persuasive as the one on the independent review website. They propose that

companies should create their own brand forums where consumers could share their product experiences. In these brand communities, marketers could reward consumers by offering exclusive product information to the whole community and this way increase group-based trust (Yeh & Choi 2011).

### **Interact with Consumers Online**

Thorson and Rodgers (2006) claim that for years companies operating in e-commerce have been interested in the persuasive impacts of interactivity online. In addition, Chen (2011) asks companies to develop new strategies for interactive marketing. In traditional media, the information flow is indirect, but with the advent of social media, blogs and other online channels, a new way of interactivity has emerged that some businesses have made profitable use of (Chiang & Hsieh 2011). Some conclusions can be drawn from the descriptions of Kozinets et al. (2010) on how interactivity is part of organic, linear influence, and network coproduction model.

As the organic model does not include any direct relationship with the company and consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010), interactivity is present only in Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) conversations online. Dwyer (2007) believes that companies should just restrain themselves from trying to control consumer communities and let these consumers be the guiding force. Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) are also concerned that companies start to plant their comments on discussion boards, and claim this ‘tactic’ likely to have a negative impact towards the brand. Sun-Jae and Jang-Sun (2009) have quite a negative perception as well about companies’ involvement in eWOM and see companies’ participation mostly as “manipulating the voice of general consumers with intentional interruptions in C2C communication”.

In the linear influence model, marketers are interacting with a limited group of consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010). As Phelps et al (2004) put it; marketers should send messages to as few as necessary to minimize the amount of people in touch with the company. However, other authors see a more dominant role of the marketer when interacting with influential consumers. Both San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) and Van der Lans et al. (2010) find that firms must actively persuade and manage this viral process, and turn consumers as the vehicles of marketing. Hyuk Jun and Morrison (2008) describe this process as ‘indirectly swaying consumers who look to opinion leaders’. Perhaps in this linear model, the marketer is somehow seen as a recruiter rather than an equal communicator to consumers.

The network coproduction model is tackling this issue. In this model, a company is one element in the consumer interaction network (Kozinets et al. 2010) and adapting social networking functionalities to encourage interactions among consumers (Yeh & Choi 2011). Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) see that social media channels offer opportunities for networking with “like-minded people”, for interacting with future clients or with current customers. With this bidirectional interaction (Gil-Or 2010), companies can deliver information about new offering to interested consumers online (Chen 2011). Bronner and de Hoog (2010) see this interaction with customers from buying decision to using the product or service as an opportunity to better understand user needs and develop relationships. However, Gil-Or (2010) proposes that companies should only sometimes participate in eWOM conversations, but does not clarify what this implication actually means. Increased interactivity in the eWOM communication may encourage consumers to build new kinds of relationships with companies (Thorson & Rodgers 2006), which will be discussed next.

#### **4.4.3 Commit to EWOM Actions**

Okazaki (2009) claims that one of the main elements in identifying with a group is affective commitment. Yeh and Choi (2011) add that online communities need special attention and careful examination. Because in the current ‘attention economy’, where brands constantly compete the attention of potential consumers (Jansen 2009), companies may not have any other choice than get more and more committed with consumer interactions online. This action can be seen as an ongoing social relationship and information exchange process (e.g. Gil-Or 2010, Xun & Reynolds 2010, Li 2011).

In addition to building consumer relationships online, there is an increasing need to measure and predict companies’ eWOM activities to develop them in the long-term (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Dwyer 2007, Li 2011). In a way, companies are becoming more committed to track their own and consumers’ eWOM actions and learn from them. Especially, there are measurement implications that fit to the linear influence model (e.g. San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012), but also Dwyer’s metric (2007) can be used in the organic and network coproduction model as well. Jansen et al (2009) also identify the need to utilize data from social media in the marketing development.

Managers should embrace EWOM communication rather than fear it (Burton & Khammash 2010). If pursuing a linear influence or network coproduction model, marketers hope to build some kind of

relationship with consumers online (Kozinets et al. 2010). This can be done perhaps by developing trust in the community (e.g. Yeh & Choi 2011, Bulearca & Bulearca 2010), and with profound commitment (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Thorson & Rodgers 2006).

Based on the literature review, companies can commit to eWOM activities in the long term by measuring and predicting their own and consumers' activities (1) and by building relationships with consumers (2). In the following, these actions will be examined.

### **Measure and Predict**

Marketers have acknowledged a need to measure customer-generated media in addition to traditional marketing metrics (Dwyer 2007). This development of interactive marketing calls for measures to refine its effectiveness (Li 2011, Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Dwyer 2007). According to Amblee and Bui (2011), one of the most problematic issues in measuring eWOM is the endogeneity of this phenomenon – eWOM is both a cause and outcome of sales.

However, there are some approaches on how the impact of eWOM could be measured. Xun and Reynolds (2010) believe that authority (ethos), emotional appeal (pathos), and content (logos) should be used as “lenses” to measure eWOM effectiveness. Van der Lans et al. (2010) express the importance of accurately measuring customer actions and suggest doing it for example based on the opening time of the message and the pages, which customers visit. Dwyer (2007) asks for measuring the importance of eWOM with an APR metric (Adapted Page Rank). With this metric, marketers can identify the information that got most customer attention and the members who most often offered this content (Dwyer 2007).

Measuring could be also utilized in targeting consumer groups. San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) propose that companies could target potential consumers by measuring their activities in encouraging eWOM with attitudinal conversion rates or the interest generated. Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) focus on the motivations behind reading messages and develop a scale, which managers could use to identify and target consumer motivations to seek eWOM. Their measures concentrate on the behavior of buying online, the perceived importance of getting opinions online and future intentions to get opinions online. Vilpponen et al. (2006) rely more on analyzing network structures. It seems that measuring the centrality of networks is important for online marketers in reaching these highly central actors (Vilpponen et al. 2006).

The purpose of the linear influence model is to target the right consumers (Kozinets et al 2010), and there seem to be ways to measure these activities (e.g. Vilpponen et al. 2006, San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). Because in the organic model the main focus is in listening to the consumer feedback (Kozinets et al. 2010), marketers could use for example Dwyer's (2007) metric to identify content that gains most consumers' attention. There is not yet extensive measurement implications for the network coproduction model within the researched articles. Of course, in this model, measurement that helps targeting can be utilized, but also Jansen et al. (2009) identify that "microblogging as eWOM is a promising measure for companies to use for competitive intelligence" (p.2178). Perhaps this interaction with consumers in social networks could be seen as some kind of consumer ethnography. According to Xun and Reynolds (2010), this kind of 'netnography' is still quite undeveloped by marketers, but could be utilized both to get quantitative as well as qualitative data.

Amblee and Bui (2011) see that companies can both predict buying decisions and cause a change in sales by influencing consumers online. In their research, the more a digital microproducts had recommendations, the more it is going to affect on sales. Jansen et al. (2009) also acknowledge that by exploring microblogs, marketers can track consumer trends within the given marketplace. It seems that marketers need to predict what causes consumers to seek (Cheung et al. 2009, Fong & Burton 2006) and share information online (Chu & Choi 2011). To be able to achieve the goals of the campaigns, marketers need to forecast the reach as early as possible and understand how this reach is affected by marketing activities (Van der Lans et al. 2010). Unfortunately, Van der Lans et al. (2010) note that there are no tools for forecasting yet, probably because not enough is known about what predicts consumers to engage in eWOM (Yeh & Choi 2011). However, Yeh and Choi (2011) interestingly find that a direct predictor of eWOM intention is trust in the online community, which is an outcome of long-lasting relationships.

Due to the increasing online interaction, companies are storing large databases about customer behavior (Van der Lans et al. 2010). In order to understand this online phenomenon in the long run, companies need to trust on automated methods of predicting and measuring eWOM activities (Jansen et al. 2009, Simmons et al. 2011).

### **Building relationships**

With the advent of linear and network coproduction model, marketers may be going towards building customer relationships online. Chu and Choi (2011) believe that global marketers are more

and more developing eWOM strategies for building stronger consumer relationships on the Internet. If a company starts to interact with consumers online, it should commit to it by creating long-lasting relationships (e.g. Thorson & Rodgers 2006, Jansen et al. 2009, Gil-Or 2010, Simmons et al 2011, Chu & Yoojung 2011). There are ways for marketers to build these online relationships stronger – by developing trust in the community (e.g. Yeh & Choi 2011, Bulearca & Bulearca 2010), and with profound commitment (e.g. Phelps et al. 2004, Thorson & Rodgers 2006).

According to Yeh and Choi (2011), marketers can help building trust among and between community members. Based on their research, by offering exclusive content to the community members, companies can enhance group-based trust. Also, Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) emphasize the importance of trust in building customer relationships and suggest companies to improve their image of expertise in social media, so that customers feel more confident.

Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) also highlight the importance of the management buy-in, passion, and commitment in eWOM actions. Phelps et al. (2004) claim that viral marketing only rewards those companies who offer great service and encourage customers to say their opinions every day. Indeed, increased interactivity and providing customers with the ability to share opinions, impacts positively on the relationship between consumers and brands (Thorson & Rodgers 2006). Pinto and Mansfield (2011), Bulearca and Bulearca (2010), and Simmons et al. (2010) encourage marketers to use social media as a crisis management tool. By turning dissatisfied customers into loyal ones, companies can develop long-term, value-added consumer relationships (Pinto & Mansfield 2011).

In conclusion, this literature review enhanced understanding of the concept of traditional WOM, electronic WOM, and the possible ways for companies to get involved in eWOM from the academics' perspective. All these possible eWOM actions were presented in the framework (Figure 3) and they were divided into three parts: monitoring, encouraging, and being committed to these actions. In the next chapter, research material and methodology will be introduced. After that, the research findings will be provided and conclusions made.

## **5 Research Methodology**

In order to understand the ways in which organizations can get involved in the ambiguous electronic word-of-mouth, the research of this study focuses on companies whose operations count on consumer interactions. As Bronner and de Hoog (2010) present, eWOM plays an important role especially in consumers' buying decisions that are more experience determined. Gil-Or (2010) also finds that eWOM is critical for service companies because of their intangible experiences.

It seems that companies working in the field of consumer services, might be the ideal choice for research. Based on the literature review findings, nine qualitative semi-structured interviews and quantitative mini-surveys were conducted with Finnish listed consumer service companies' marketing professionals. Also, the selected companies' online channels were analyzed during a two-week time period.

In the following chapter, the research material and methods are introduced. In the beginning, the research approach is discussed, then collection of the data and analysis are described in more detail, and finally, the quality of the research is evaluated.

### **5.1 Research Approach**

Qualitative and quantitative research serve different purposes – in general, quantitative methods numerically test theories with large samples and qualitative research tries to find meanings to build new theory with smaller samples (Sobh & Perry 2005). Indeed, qualitative research focuses on generating new theories and it embodies the ways in which individuals interpret the reality around them (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 25-26). Because there has been research on electronic word-of-mouth for only about a decade (Breazeale 2009), eWOM is based on consumers' social interactions (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), and the nature of the phenomenon is quite complex (e.g. San José-Cabezudo & Camarero-Izquierdo 2012), qualitative research is the base for the research methodology for this study.

Sobh and Perry (2005) make a distinction between four different scientific paradigms: positivism, realism, constructivism, and critical theory. A paradigm is a general conceptual framework about basic beliefs, which a researcher is utilizing (e.g. Sobh & Perry 2005, Brennan et al. 2011). This research operates within the realism paradigm.

In the realism paradigm, the reality is ‘real’, but only imperfectly comprehensible (e.g. Sobh & Perry 2005, Brennan et al. 2011). Realism shares some features with positivism: a belief that the natural and the social sciences should apply similar approaches to data collection and an analysis, and a view that there is an external reality that is separate from people’s descriptions to it (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 15).

The realism paradigm tackles the issues of positivism, which tries to validate regularities from empirical data, and other qualitative paradigms that deny any possibility to generalize understanding about individual phenomena (Blundel 2007, p. 66-67). Scientific realism, the most widely accepted epistemology among current philosophers (Baum & Dobbin 2000), sees that the social world consists of real objects that exist independently of our knowledge, and whose mechanisms are often quite complex (Blundel 2007, p. 52). In comparison to critical theory and constructivism, in realism a person’s perception is “a window” to reality, which should be triangulated with multiple perceptions, i.e. several data sources (Healy & Perry, 2000). Therefore, realism has been utilized in researching ambiguous social phenomena (Healy & Perry, 2000, Blundel 2007, p. 54), which is why it can be seen as an appropriate approach also to investigate eWOM.

The aim of realism research is to create a “family of answers”, which encompass many contexts and different participants, however imperfectly (Healy & Perry, 2000). Even though perceptions can result in knowledge about the external world, it does not mean that this knowledge is certain – some observations are more accurate than others (Baum & Dobbin 2000). Aiming to maintain objectivity in science (Baum & Dobbin 2000), realism is interested in the underlying mechanisms, contextual and process issues, of a phenomenon (e.g. Healy & Perry, 2000, Blundel 2007, p. 53).

Sobh and Perry (2005) suggest that the realism paradigm is as its best in a two-stage approach, where the first stage builds a conceptual framework, and one or more stages confirm or disconfirm the model. Due to the complexity of existing phenomena, the researchers need to utilize multiple sources of data (e.g. Sobh & Perry 2005, Blundel 2007, p. 56). Healy and Perry (2000) acknowledge that interviews and focus group methodologies are the most common for the realism approach, but Blundel (2007, p. 56) also encourages utilizing ethnography, observation, historical evidence, as well as quantitative evidence. This thesis applies the indicated methodology – a framework for companies’ actions in eWOM has been developed based on the literature review, and



this framework will be researched with several semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and observations to understand underlying structures and mechanisms of the phenomenon. With triangulation, and especially asking questions of a similar kind from different interviewees, the aim is to see whether they respond with the same perceptions (Sobh & Perry 2005). Different perceptions should be viewed as ways to advance understanding about the reasons for the complexities behind a phenomenon (Sobh & Perry 2005).

By using theoretical and literal replication, the researcher can ensure that the information is obtained from appropriate sources (Patton 1990). The selection of these interviewees should be done based on analytical rather than empirical generalization, which is why the selection might include some extreme cases that have experienced major transitions (Blundel 2007, p. 56). The selection of interviewees is described in the 'Data Collection' section in more detail.

To sum up, Healy and Perry (2000) identify six different quality criteria for the realism approach in their research: ontological appropriateness (1), contingent validity (2), multiple perceptions (3), methodological trustworthiness (4), analytic generalization (5), and construct validity (6). Ontological appropriateness (1) indicates that the research problem should address complex social phenomenon, and contingent validity (2) refers to generative mechanisms, that do not have traditional cause-and-effect (Healy & Perry 2000). In addition, the reality is build through multiple perceptions (3) that basically means triangulation from many data sources (Healy & Perry 2000). Methodological trustworthiness (4) refers to the extent to which the research can be audited and analytic generalization (5) indicates the focus on the theory building rather than testing (Healy & Perry 2000). Finally, construct validity (6) incorporates on how well information about the elements in the theory being built is measured in the research (Healy & Perry, 2000). These criteria guide the research and they are especially utilized when the quality of the research is evaluated.

Realism as a research approach has received some critique as well. Baum and Dobbin (2000) believe that positivist see realism as "fraught with subjective bias and no means of self-correction, and claim the resulting plurality of perspectives has led to an overabundance of discourse". Indeed, this imperfect knowledge seems to be a central tension in realism (Blundel 2007, p. 55, Baum & Dobbin 2000). However, Blundel (2007, p. 58) sees that realism can create the much-needed contextualization of social phenomena and ease theoretical integration between disciplines and several levels of analysis.

## **5.2 Data Collection**

In this chapter, the data and its collection methods are described more precisely. First, methods applied to literature review will be presented. After that, this section takes a deeper look into the methods of empirical research. In general, the present study utilizes multiple data sets, from Breazeale's (2009) article sample collection method to online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and companies' online channel analysis. The goal of this study is to obtain information related to the research problems of this thesis and research the framework done based on literature review.

### **5.2.1 Literature Review**

A sample of journal articles is needed to explore what electronic word-of-mouth actually is and what kind of actions companies can do in the field of eWOM. The literature review of this thesis adapted the sample collection method of Breazeale (2009). Breazeale (2009) analyzed what had been researched in the context of eWOM by conducting an EBSCO search with a few limitations. Also, Vilpponen et al. (2006) have run through a similar method in their research.

Likewise in this study, the search for articles was done with EBSCO, choosing all its databases. As a keyword, the 'electronic word of mouth' was used. The list was filtered by selecting only scholarly reviewed articles available in English and in full text. This search yielded 50 articles (retrieved on 23rd January 2013). Like Breazeale (2009), in this literature review editorials and introductions were not examined. Also, some authors had more than one article presented in the search list, so the newest ones were selected to grasp the most current explication of eWOM. Therefore, the sample contains 40 articles that are used as a basis of this literature review to understand electronic word-of-mouth as a marketing phenomenon.

All articles include the definition of electronic word-of-mouth as part of their studies and have been published between 2004-2012. 30 percent of these articles (in total twelve) refer to the definition of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), one publication cites the definition of Jansen et al. (2009), and one the definition of Porter and Golan (2006) (See Appendix A). To be able to do a comparable analysis, 26 articles and their particular definitions for eWOM were compared (see Appendix B).

The general elements defining eWOM can be found in Appendix B and the possible actions companies may take in relation to eWOM in Appendix C. Now, this chapter focuses on empirical research methods.

### **5.2.2 Empirical Research**

The data sets of the empirical research consist of online questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and online channel analysis of the selected companies, nine Finnish listed corporations, operating in consumer services. Many data sets were utilized due to the complexity of the phenomenon, eWOM. In realism approach this triangulation is needed to understand the underlying structures of the phenomenon (Blundel 2007). First, the selected companies for research are described, then methods presented. After this section, the focus is on the data analysis.

#### **Research Context**

Electronic word-of-mouth is critical for service companies (Gil-Or 2010), because of the intangible nature of their business (Bronner & de Hoog 2010). As said earlier, consumers try to find and share information about experiences others have had via eWOM (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006, Jones et al. 2009, Burton & Khammash 2010, Petrescu & Korgaonkar 2011) to reduce risk and justify their purchase decision (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). It seems that eWOM has become one of the most efficient approaches to consumers to gain information not just about products but also about new services (Chen 2011). Phelps et al. (2004) acknowledge that eWOM only rewards those who offer great service and encourage customers to publicly pass judgment. Therefore, this study focuses on researching companies, whose business builds on consumer services to possibly get new insight about organizations' participation in eWOM.

As Blundel (2007) recommends, the selection of interviewees should be done based on analytical rather than empirical generalization, and this is why extreme cases, listed consumer service companies, have been chosen for research. According to NASDAQ OMX Group, the world's largest exchange company (NASDAQ OMX Nordic, 2013), there are in total eleven listed companies in Finland that operate in the sector of consumer services. Listed companies seem to be a good selection for empirical research, as they are committed to more transparent communication with their stakeholders. All of these consumer service companies were contacted via email and phone for the empirical research. In total nine of these eleven companies (with the response rate of 82 percent) agreed to participate in a questionnaire and in a face-to-face interview.

These companies' professionals were contacted based on their field of knowledge – Marketing, Information Technology, Communications, or New Business. Basically, when contacting the listed companies, they were advised to inform a professional inside the company, who has knowledge

about the firms' efforts at the electronic word-of-mouth. Based on NASDAQ OMX Nordic (Retrieved 2, April 2013), companies' capital ranges from small to large, business from local to global, and they are located in different parts of Finland. This gives a comprehensive take on the subject. The companies function in the field of media, travelling, and retail. Table 1 summarizes the relevant information about the participants.

**Table 1. Summary of the selected companies**

Interviewee	Company	Field of business	Company capital	Position	Number of informants	Date of the interview	Duration
1	Company A	Media	Mid	Web, Director	2	May 20 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	27:24 min
2	Company B	Media	Mid	Communications, Director	1	May 21 <sup>st</sup> , 2013	27:56 min
3	Company C	Retail	Small	Marketing, Director	2	May 22 <sup>nd</sup> , 2013	30:04 min
4	Company D	Media	Mid	Web, Manager	1	May 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 2013	45:19 min
5	Company E	Media	Large	New Business, Manager	1	May 28 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	25:04 min
6	Company F	Media	Small	Web, Manager	1	May 29 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	36:35 min
7	Company G	Travelling	Mid	Marketing, Director	1	May 31 <sup>st</sup> , 2013	39:57 min
8	Company H	Travelling	Mid	Marketing, Manager	1	June 6 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	27:59 min
9	Company I	Media	Small	Web, Editor in chief	1	June 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2013	28:07 min

The following subsections present more thoroughly, how these companies were researched.

### **Online Questionnaire**

Before the interviews, all the interviewees were sent an online questionnaire immediately after they had signed up for the interview or they wanted to know more about the questions. With this survey, the aim was to get information about what kind of actions these companies do currently online and related to eWOM. The questions were based on the framework earlier presented in this study. In the

realism approach, it is preferable to develop a framework first, which is then researched in multiple ways (Sobh and Perry 2005).

To get more insight about the phenomenon of eWOM and how the companies are involved in it, a seven-point Likert scale was used in the survey to assess the importance of the asked actions to the companies. This scale was chosen instead of smaller Likert scales to get more variance to the answers and instead of larger scales to keep the survey as easy to grasp as possible. If the companies did not carry out some of the actions asked in the survey, they could also select this kind of option on the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was done with Google Forms tool, and a link was sent to the interviewees. Also a reminder email was sent to the interviewees usually two days before the interview. From nine companies, seven answered the questionnaire in advance. Only two of the participants had to fill in the survey at the beginning of the interview.

This questionnaire consists of twelve questions and they are presented in Appendix D. The online questionnaire eased the interview process, as many answers were received in advance and this knowledge was utilized in the interviews. This step was important for the whole data collection, as the interviews themselves usually were only 30 minutes in duration. With this survey, it was possible to ask more in-depth questions in the actual interview and construct the interview guide based on the answers of the respondents.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

The realism approach sees individuals' perspectives as "windows" to reality (Healy & Perry 2000). When the emphasis is on the perception of respondents, using highly structured procedures seems to distract participants by withdrawing them from the situations in which they usually act (Sapsford & Jupp 2006, p.112). Therefore, qualitative interviewing is more flexible in comparison with quantitative methods of finding the emerging issues on how the interviewee frames and understands patterns and forms of behavior (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 342).

Because the realism approach tries to generalize the understanding about individual phenomena (Blundel 2007), a semi-structured interview method is used in the present study. Due to the framework is researched, fairly specific topics need to be answered, and semi-structured interviews seem to be good for this purpose (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 343). Bryman and Bell (2003, p. 343)

add that for the most part, even though the interviewee has a great deal of flexibility in how to reply, all the questions will be asked and similar wording used from interviewee to interviewee. By interviewing occupied business professionals, a specific interview guide makes it possible to conclude the interview in a limited timeframe of 30 minutes.

All nine semi-structured interviews with business professionals were conducted between May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and they were in duration between 25 to 45 minutes (See Table 1). The average length was approximately 32 minutes. The interviews were done face-to-face and carried on in the setting the interviewees hoped, mostly in their office. All interviewees were professionals and had relevant work and educational experience in marketing, communications, IT, or business development. In two of the interviews, there were two informants instead of just one. The interviews were carried out in respondents' primary language, Finnish, so that they can communicate effectively (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 356). These interviews were recorded and right after verbally transcribed. In total, these interviews concluded 73 pages of transcription for the analysis.

Questions in the interview were specifying in their nature and based on the online questionnaire completed beforehand. The topics of the questions are based on the developed framework (See Figure 3, Section 4.4.) and the interview guide can be found in Appendix D. To conclude, the goal of these interviews was to obtain information related to the research problems of this thesis and evaluate the framework done based on the literature review. The multiple interviews and perspectives definitely enrich the perceived value of the findings.

### **Analysis of EWOM Practices**

The data of this study also includes analysis of the electronic WOM practices of these nine consumer service companies. The companies' own websites and social media presence were chosen as the most relevant channels to observe analytically during summer 2013. To get comparable, relevant data, these companies' online channels were analyzed intensively during two weeks between May 31<sup>st</sup> and July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

From each company were especially examined, what kind of sharing options they have, what online channels are in use, how they inform about them, if they have blogs, online communities, and how they interact with users in social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. These two social media networks were chosen, as all of the companies seem to use them at some level.

In addition, because this study is researching listed companies, it is necessary to investigate both the corporate site and brands' online channels. To avoid data overload, one to two brands were selected for observation. This selection was based on the interviews – those brands were observed, which the interviewees took as an example.

The main purpose for conducting this kind of analysis is to grasp the current state of eWOM activities in these companies, to understand the findings of the interviews, and to bring multiple aspects to the research. Appendix D sums up the relevant information about this data. Now, a closer look is taken to the methods of data analysis.

### **5.3 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data is attractive because of its richness, however, finding analytical paths through that richness is quite challenging (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 425). In comparison with quantitative research, in qualitative research the analysis of the data is iterative – the analysis starts already when the data is collected, and it shapes the next steps in the data collection process (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 425, Holliday 2008, p.90). In this section, data analysis is specified.

In the present study, a thematic analysis is applied for analyzing the collected qualitative data. The thematic analysis is utilized in the systematic process of encoding qualitative information and identifying the themes or patterns of cultural meaning (Boyatzis 1998, p. 5, Mills et al. 2010, Hartman & Conklin 2012). Thematic analysis is extensively used, but the definition itself is not well understood – thematic analysis is not a research method, but rather an analytic approach to making meaning (Mills et al. 2010). Thematic analysis seems to work in the complex context of eWOM. Boyatzis (1998, p. 6) implies that this analytic approach is in suitable use when trying to understand a phenomenon and especially in business research, when analyzing market trends, a company's desired strategy, or a corporate culture.

Codes and themes are essential in the thematic analysis. According to Boyatzis (1998, p. 4), a theme is a pattern found in the collected information that at minimum describes and organizes observations and at maximum interprets the elements of a phenomenon. A list of themes is created by utilizing an explicit code (Hartman & Conklin 2012), i.e. categorizing usually textual data (Mills et al. 2010). These thematic structures are interpreted by looking for commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles (Mills et al. 2010).

Holliday (2008, p. 90) describes the process appositely: first the overall data is scrutinized and then natural divisions searched. After that, the essential of each division is determined (Holliday 2008, p. 90), but usually the coding categories are several times re-conceptualized before the creation of themes can start (Given 2008). First when developing themes, suitable headings need to be found for these divisions and then grasped how far the headings help in making further sense of the data (Holliday 2008, p. 91). Several data sources can be used in thematic analysis, from interview transcripts, field notes, and memos, to documents and digital files (Mills et al. 2010). In this study, in addition to interview transcripts, observational notes from companies' digital channels were examined by means of thematic analysis.

It is important for the analysis, that the coding is separated from the original context and labeled in some way (Given 2008). This way, the researcher is taking distance to social reality and may find the latent meanings from the data. As Hartman and Conklin (2012) and Boyatzis (1998, p. 4) acknowledge, themes can be directly observable or an underlying phenomenon.

Arriving at these themes can be results of a formal data analysis deductively or also developed from what has been observed during the data collection inductively (Holliday 2008). When the identification of themes is done deductively, the basis is on theoretical constructs that the researcher investigates (Mills et al. 2010). However, Mills et al. (2010) note that the rigidity and premature closure are risks of a deductive approach, which the inductive thematic analysis tries to avoid. Because this study is researching the framework presented earlier in the literature review, the thesis is utilizing more the deductive approach. However, to avoid the risks, the analysis will also incorporate the findings from the data collection to the themes. According to Given (2008), codes may come from a conceptual model, a literature review, or a professional experience in the beginning, however they are converted through re-conceptualization from heuristic to more analytic categories.

Thematic analysis provides the researcher with a greater variety of information about a phenomenon than a typical quantitative study (Hartman & Conklin 2012). However, Mills et al. (2010) acknowledge some critique: the positivists may think that because of the flexibility in the process, the approach is seldom explained clearly enough for replication. Also, they point that breaking written data into parts and labeling them can distract the coherence and the contextuality of the data. Still, the aim of organizing data this way is to serve and structure the argument in the written study and these emergent themes can help make further sense of the data and reform the



argument (Holliday 2008, p. 96). Thematic analysis is used widely across qualitative research in general due to its power to yield new insightful interpretations with wide variety of information that are contextually grounded (Boyatzis 1998, p. 6, Mills et al. 2010).

#### **5.4 The Evaluation of the Quality of the Research**

In this section, the quality of the present study is discussed. The evaluation of qualitative and quantitative research differs from each other. In quantitative studies, reliability and validity are important criteria in assessing the quality of quantitative research, where measurement is a major preoccupation (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 286). As the research is essentially based on qualitative methods, the main quality indicator, trustworthiness, (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 288) is used to evaluate the study. Also, due to applying realism as a research approach, six quality criteria developed by Healy and Perry (2000) help in assessing the quality of the research.

According to Bryman and Bell (2003, p.288), trustworthiness can be divided into four criteria: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. This set of quality criteria is combined with the one of the realism approach introduced in the beginning of this chapter. Healy and Perry (2000) have identified six different quality criteria for realism: ontological appropriateness, contingent validity, multiple perceptions, methodological trustworthiness, analytic generalization, and construct validity. Due to the parallelism of these concepts, eight criteria in total are utilized for evaluating the quality of this study.

Bryman and Bell (2003, p.288-289) explain internal validity as the way of ensuring that the research is carried out according to good scientific conventions and findings submitted to the members of the social world, who were studied. The focus is on the links between the theories and observations of the research. To answer these requirements, this study details all the necessary steps in the research. The research framework is described explicitly and it presents the most important concepts and their connections in this thesis. Also, the findings have vaguely come across in the interviews, so that the interviewees have gotten some understanding about the topic. However, they have not explicitly confirmed the findings, and the author takes full responsibility for situations where the original meaning might have been changed due to translation errors, for instance.

External validity refers to the degree to which findings can be generalized across social settings (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 288-289). This quality criterion has also been identified by Healy and Perry (2000), who link it to analytic generalization. Analytic generalization emphasizes the focus on

the theory building rather than testing (Healy & Perry 2000). External validity is an important criterion for this research also because eWOM is a relatively new phenomenon with a complex process (San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo 2012). Regardless of a small study setting of nine company participants, this thesis can be mainly described as possessing good external validity. This is because the findings are triangulated with multiple data sources, i.e. surveys, interviews, and observations. These multiple perceptions are another quality criterion of Healy and Perry (2000). Especially, the response rate of these listed consumer service companies in Finland was relatively high, 82 percent. In addition, as this study researches listed companies, their communication is a regulated field and quite similar globally. Therefore, the findings related to activities concerning eWOM may be applied to other context to some extent.

Reliability indicates the extent to which the research can be replicated, i.e. audited (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 288). Healy and Perry (2000) call a similar concept as methodological trustworthiness. This study enhances the transparency by detailing the most crucial research methods it utilizes in its research process. However, the interview transcripts are not provided with the study because of the great extent of the material. Still, all the main citations are presented in the findings. Also, the analysis of the selected companies' eWOM practices are not presented in detail in this research, because this kind of material is interactive in nature and its scale is huge. To avoid this, all the means of observation should have been provided digitally, whose actual worth might have remained imprecise. Nevertheless, the most essential elements of the study are presented in this thesis.

The researcher needs to show that she/he has acted in good faith, i.e. not allowed personal values or theoretical tendencies sway the research process and the findings arriving from it. This quality criterion is usually referred to as objectivity (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 288-289). Rather than being value-free as in positivist view or value-laden as in the constructivist approach, in the realism approach the aim is to acknowledge those values (Healy and Perry 2000). Again, multiple data sources advance triangulation, which contribute to the objectivity of the research (Healy & Perry 2000). In addition, the researcher did not work for any of the participated companies to avoid a biased approach and the interview and survey questions were designed to be as objective as possible, even though they were mainly planned by one author. Therefore, it is suggested that the degree of objectivity in this study is highly appropriate.

As noted, the realism approach has its own quality criteria. Healy and Perry identify ontological appropriateness and contingent validity as important ways to assess the quality of the research.

Ontological appropriateness indicates that the research problem should focus on complex social phenomenon and contingent validity refers to generative mechanisms that do not have traditional cause-and-effect (Healy & Perry 2000). This suits rather well to the phenomenon of eWOM – it has been researched only for a decade (Breazeale 2009) and the views of the process of eWOM stay rather inconceivable (e.g. Vilpponen et al. 2006, Strutton et al. 2011).

Like external validity, construct validity refers to generalization. However, construct validity indicates on how well information about the elements in the theory being built is measured in the research (Healy & Perry 2000). Because qualitative research is not that focused on measurement (Bryman & Bell 2003, p. 287), the way to approach this criterion is to think whether the methodology is appropriate for the selected research questions. Because this thesis is studying unambiguous phenomenon, qualitative research methods and especially triangulation is essential for the research (Healy & Perry 2000). Also, this study incorporates some quantitative data as well to get insightful results. The methods themselves seem to be highly appropriate for this kind of research.

### **Other Limitations**

Although the findings of this literature review have potential implications, several limitations exist. The sample of articles is quite small in size and only retrieved from EBSCO host. As a new phenomenon, electronic word-of-mouth has several synonyms. Therefore, important articles might have been left out, because only the “electronic word of mouth” as a keyword was used and full texts were selected. It should also be noted that studies in the compared articles were conducted in different cultural settings, which might have caused additional difference in results. Interestingly, many of the articles used limited demographic groups (e.g. university students) as their sample, which might restrict the generalization of these findings.

Also, the empirical research has its limitations. In addition to small study setting, the researcher conducted the interviews and developed the questions alone, which might have affected the objectivity of the research. However, in course of the interviews, the research questions were slightly adjusted when new interesting elements were found to get the most relevant findings. The researcher aimed to work as unbiased as possible.

In conclusion, the trustworthiness of this study was considered on the following factors: internal validity, external validity, reliability, objectivity, ontological appropriateness, contingent validity,

multiple perceptions, and construct validity. Although, there were some limitations identified, in general, this study has been conducted with appropriate scientific conventions. Next, the findings of this study are explained in more detail

## 6 Findings And Discussion

In the following chapter, the findings of this study will be presented in more detail according to the research questions. Previously presented in the introduction, the research questions of this study are:

- (1) *What is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and what are its main characteristics?*
- (2) *What are the ways for companies to get involved in eWOM?*

This chapter has been divided into subchapters based on the research questions. Subchapter 6.1 presents the findings of the first research question, which are based on the literature review (see chapters 2 and 3) and the article analysis. This study also focuses on the possible actions consumer service companies are now practicing in eWOM in subchapter 6.2. This thematic analysis is based on the framework presented in subchapter 4.4. Finally, in the end, a closer look is taken to the revised framework, which is essential part of the findings.

### 6.1 The Characteristics of EWOM

Adapting the sample collection method of Breazeale (2009), forty articles were compared to understand the nature of eWOM. Electronic word-of-mouth is relatively new phenomenon with an incoherent definition (e.g. Vilpponen et al. 2006), which the literature review attempts to clarify.

Nine main elements were identified as part of electronic word-of-mouth. Based on the article analysis, electronic word-of-mouth is opinion sharing between consumers about experiences (1) and opinion leaders have an influential role in the content sharing process (2). The interaction happens via the Internet/online through different platforms (3), is network-based, (4) and directed to multiple people (5). Electronic word-of-mouth is interaction without time and location constrains (6) and it can be anonymous (7). Because of the online environment, there may occur credibility issues that users consider (8). Still, Electronic WOM is increasingly present in consumers' decision process (9).

Electronic word-of-mouth is closely linked to traditional word-of-mouth. Drawing on research on traditional WOM and virtual communities, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) create the first definition of eWOM. Still, the evolvement of the Internet has given distinct characteristics to electronic WOM and eWOM is seen more of a modernized extension of traditional offline WOM. Between these two

concepts, major differences can be found. Especially, the chance to interact anonymously, the different platforms to interact, the extensive reach of messages and their permanency are most often the distinguishing factors included in the phenomenon of electronic WOM.

What is also a characteristic of eWOM is the possibility to share messages. Electronic WOM is not just opinion giving and seeking – participants can pass along the content of other online users that is not possible in offline word-of-mouth. Traditional WOM is seen more spontaneous, as it happens face-to-face and vanishes instantly. However, due to the permanence of messages, the ultimate reach and the wide range of consumption related information, eWOM has empowered consumers. The company is not the only one to control its own reputation (Breazeale 2009). This may also be a reason to explain why companies are intrigued to get involved in the eWOM process.

Similar to WOM theory, as a phenomenon, eWOM seems to be evolving. At the beginning, eWOM occurred only in online discussion groups and review sites, then it started to attribute through blogs and now it is also a key element of social media, where user's persona and brand preference interact. Electronic WOM is not just an anonymous channel to communicate, it can be also a more credible, mobile, and personal way to interact than earlier publications have suggested (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). As Shu-Chuan and Yoojung (2011) emphasize, different eWOM platforms have their own social implications and ways to have an influence on consumers. Next, Finnish consumer service companies' practices are examined more thoroughly.

## **6.2 Service Companies' Practices to Encourage EWOM**

It seems that the proposed framework in the literature review is rather consistent with the interview findings. The model's levels 'Monitor', 'Encourage' and 'Commit' seem to be essential in the flow of companies' eWOM actions. However, the empirical interviews help to acknowledge that there are also some essential elements that are missing from the framework. In the following, all the revised framework's elements will be presented according to the literature review and empirical findings.

### **6.2.1 Monitor**

Companies are monitoring consumer opinions online, but the level of intensity varies to some extent. Some of the interviewees are relying on following their own sites and Facebook, some have bought expensive tools to monitor opinions all over online media. Channels to monitor are chosen based on target groups' preferences and what is the goal of the channel. When asking interviewees

about following consumer opinions online, also profiling users comes into the picture. Segmentation does not yet have so distinct role online and especially on social media channels, but still companies are profiling their users and trying to find the channels their customers would be the most comfortable with. After conducting a theme analysis, it was possible to find a common theme for segmenting, identifying motives and opinion leaders - i.e. profiling. Therefore, the revised framework's monitoring phase includes three elements: choosing channels which to monitor, getting feedback, and create the profiles of users. In these following subchapters, these three elements are discussed.

### **Get Feedback from Distinct Channels**

Companies seem to value the feedback they get online. According to the online questionnaire, all the interviewed companies are following consumer opinions online, and they rated its importance high (Mean 6, scale 1-7). The interviewees mostly rely on direct feedback channels on their website, but also all of them are monitoring at least one social media channel online.

*We are monitoring from many directions. -- Of course we get a great amount of feedback, which is directed to our common mailbox, where we read feedback, and react accordingly. Then, when thinking in a smaller scale, naturally we are following for example Facebook, how the number of visitors develops, and also what people comment. We monitor what kind of information we get from the people. (Company A)*

For all the company participants, it seems clear that different channels are used online for different purposes. Channels differ in terms of the target audience, content, and aim of the message. As Company E's representative expresses it:

*It depends on the service, but still Facebook is the most important from all the social media channels. – Actually, people do not comment so easily to the site, Facebook is easier for them – Twitter and Facebook are so different from each other – the content and the angle are totally different.*

Still, this does not mean that companies have put this thought into action. As there are multiple channels online, companies mostly choose, which to monitor. Company D's representative has acknowledged this challenge:

*We chose rather to be fully present on Facebook than somehow present in all the social media channels.*

The interviewee admits that even though the company has an account on Twitter, they are not actively monitoring it. It seems that many of the companies, for example the company H and A, have focused more on observing their own sites and Facebook, and leaving other online channels out of focus justifying it with lack of resources. However, about a half of the companies interviewed had solved this problem by utilizing payable services to monitor online content. For example, the company C is utilizing these tools and the emphasis is on searching information about their company, offering, and competitors. The same way, the company G can operate in multiple social channels because of the tool:

*Almost all social media channels that people are using, we are also utilizing -- with the tool, it is possible to see about what is discussed, the level of intensity, volume and location.*

In addition to volume, companies are monitoring the overall atmosphere, location and the main topics, on the chosen channels. Still, the interviewee from the company G adds that also monitoring with a human eye is crucial to all the employees as the tools are not always that trustworthy. These tools are usually quite expensive:

*Currently, we are monitoring for example blogs with Google alert, which sends me an email, if my product has been mentioned in some blog. Then I go there to read it and comment on it. Now we are not utilizing payable social media tools, because we do not get that much feedback and these services are rather expensive. (Company E)*

It is clear that monitoring online discussions takes a great amount of resources. Both representatives from the company C and E confirmed that they are monitoring channels, especially Facebook, during evenings and weekends. Furthermore, most of the companies conduct a monthly meeting and a report about the results of these follow-ups.



*Once a month, we get a report from the Webmasters, what has happened both online and on Facebook. Daily real-time moderation is done only on my behalf if something critical has happened. (Company H)*

Monitoring is not just done for understanding current status. According to many of the interviewees, eWOM should be utilized to adapt content and customer service to address consumer needs in terms of offering and communications. According to the online questionnaire, all of the companies are forecasting future trends based on the online discussions, but this action is not necessarily a priority to them (Mean 3,67, Scale 1-7). However, Company C sees monitoring eWOM as a way to predict future consumer trends:

*With monitoring, we try to find possible topics for consumer complaints, the amount of which is luckily quite small in scale, but also if customers praise some product, it might turn into a future trend.*

To conclude, companies are monitoring online channels at least at some level. All of the companies are at minimum monitoring their site and Facebook profiles. The amount of channels that are monitored differs on resources and they seem to be chosen based on companies' target audience and the aim of the channel. It is interesting that companies may be present in many channels and have an account, but they are not actively monitoring the content people share there. Perhaps, the great amount of needed resources has surprised some of the companies. Therefore, about a half of the interviewed companies have expanded the monitoring of different channels by using payable real-time monitoring tools, which emphasis is on observing volume, general atmosphere, and topics discussed. However, in addition to these expensive tools, the employees should follow online discussions themselves and in the long run understand how to satisfy consumer needs.

### **Profile Based on Interests**

In the literature review, segmentation and identifying consumer motives to share are one of the core practices that academic journals suggest to follow. Therefore, these two practices were identified as part of the framework, presented in the subchapter 4.4. However, based on this empirical research, the view of the importance of segmentation varies a great deal among interviewees. The selected company representatives were asked to rate the importance of segmenting consumers in social media and other online channels (Mean 4.22, Scale 1-7). It is interesting that the standard deviation

is rather high, which means that the responses differ a lot. It seems that segmentation may not have as a clear role in these companies' actions as academics have suggested.

*On Facebook, the content is produced for everybody. I do not know if it is even possible to segment or target on Facebook. Probably, you can target your status, but that we have not yet implemented. – Of course we see how many people and what kind of age groups there are, but that information is not utilized for anything. (Company D)*

Even though company D's representative does not see segmentation to have any role on Facebook, the company has created profiles for specific age groups: youngsters and students. Why is this not seen as part of their segmentation? Similarly company A and I claim that the content is designed for everybody – however both of these companies have a specific target group based on either geographical location or occupation on their own sites.

*Our target groups are really specific, they are professionals in finance, technology, or law -- We are soon launching a chargeable content service, which core is strong people profiling. -- Then it is even more crucial that we know our consumers and what they are interested in, and we can offer them targeted content in these segments, and we can give them better service. -- Social media is maybe more for everybody -- I don't see any big changes there. (Company I)*

Most of the interviewees, who see segmenting as unnecessary in social media, are media companies. This might be because media companies are all in for publicity and hope to have everybody's attention. However, company F that works also in the media industry, acknowledges the importance of segmenting in social media as well:

*We do not have yet exact reader profiles, but still we know what kind of readers we have and that directs the way in which we write the content. -- And then on Facebook we know that our followers are quite geographically focused in Joensuu and that they are really interested in Joensuu related topics. There we try to create that kind of content -- because that is what arouses conversation and we develop stronger relationships with our readers. Geographical segmentation is really important on Facebook.*

In addition to demographic segmentation, consumer motives and interests are seen as possible variables to segment people in online context. In our online questionnaire, the importance of identifying consumer motives to recommend services was rated online quite high (Mean: 5,78, scale 1-7, Standard deviation < 1). However, this was not as visible in the interview answers. Some of the companies identified customer motives or interests, but they were mainly focused on buying the product, not recommending or sharing it online. For example, the company C works in retail and its segmentation is based on its core customer groups' buying interests and company G is in the future considering taking travelling motives part of its segmentation:

*We have done a lot of research about needs and motivations, where the aim was to find out people's thoughts and profiles. -- These profiles we have not yet been able to launch in social media -- currently we are doing different language versions, so we are segmenting based on nationality. What we would want to do is to launch multiple actions so that we could have different emphasis on different platforms, because target groups differ in each media. (Company G)*

How are then the selected companies identifying opinion leaders? Only one of the respondents sees that they are not profiling opinion leaders and others find opinion leaders among active bloggers, discussion forum participants, or on Twitter. The company B for example is organizing face-to-face events to identify new opinion leaders and to generate tweets. The company I's interviewee explains that profiling opinion leaders is usually feeling-based:

*Our brand has had a discussion forum at the end of nineties, which has been more or less active during the years, where people interact with their own names, so in that sense, it has been pre-social media: there we profile and target people a lot. And also on Twitter we are perhaps utilizing it so that we have contacts with some people, to whom we give a hint about a topic we want to spread at a certain level. We do not want it to look like spam. We send these hints to about three people and they are identified more based on a feeling than a statistic analysis.*

To sum up, segmentation has not yet gained a strong position among researched companies. For example, the company D's future goal is to know better consumers online, but it is only to be used in its own websites advertisement, not e.g. on Facebook, which the company is using. Many of the interviewed companies find that social media channels and their content are designed for

everybody, even though they may acknowledge that the goal, target group and message are different in each online platform. Company G explains this justification by saying that many social media are free of charge and that is why segmentation is not so evident:

*In social media, there is not the same pressure because these channels do not cost that much even though allocating resources and time cost. -- So it is good if the post is seen by as many as possible and arousing conversation, so it may create customers for us.*

If companies are using segmentation online in social media, it seems it is either based on demographics or consumers' buying interests. Also, in a sense these segments are quite broad - e.g. the company C is using two main segments, and the company F just one based on location. None of the interviewees mentioned during the interviews that they would create messages based on consumers' motivations to share content, and this could be a new guideline perhaps for companies to think about the segmentation also on social media channels. Based on the online questionnaire, many companies are targeting opinion leaders online, but the identification of these e-fluentials is still vague and feeling-based. Mostly these opinion leaders are identified as active bloggers, online forum discussants, or twitter users.

Now, after identifying how the selected companies are monitoring online channels and profiling consumers, next a closer look is taken on how companies are encouraging eWOM behavior online.

### **6.2.2 Encourage**

Encouraging consumers seem to be a multi-phased task. Based on the interviews, the framework was revised and six new elements were added in total to the framework. Next, these actions that companies have taken to encourage eWOM activity are introduced.

Companies seem to be trying to create the sense of consumer power by offering platforms. They are also actively trying to react to the feedback they get online. Brands might have their own personality and it is starting to show in the content as well. Electronic WOM does not happen alone, it needs multiple, also traditional marketing channels to be generated. The interviewed companies are recruiting opinion leaders as messengers in social media and this way currently targeting consumers. All of the companies are also rewarding consumers with different ways - by giving

special accesses or by organizing competitions. This all asks for dynamic interaction by the brand and its employees.

### **Increase the Sense of Power by Offering Platforms**

*It s the most crucial that you get the community around it. Whatever service it is.*

(Company B)

One element that is not identified as part of the earlier presented framework, is to offer consumers platforms for interaction and similarly, the feeling of power. With the help of thematic analysis, it is possible to notice that all the interviewees acknowledge the importance of offering consumers many venues to say their opinion. Company A's community blog is one example of this kind of "platform-thinking":

*Our community blog is a place for communities and clubs to write about their activities. A consumer is influencing in the background always, and s/he actively writes the blog. So we want to offer a platform for these consumers, where content sharing is endless. -- As a big media, we have this kind of platform-thinking, we can connect different actors together.*

Similarly, Company D expresses that the company wants to offer a platform for opinion sharing - currently they have twenty thousand people in a week visiting their online discussion forum. Many of these media companies have their own discussion forums or another way for consumers to comment, but they have also found new ways to give consumers the sense of power:

*On Pinterest, where our brand has its own page and boards, -- we invite consumers to these boards. (Company E)*

Company E's representative describes the way in which active consumers are given special access to create content to the brand's public channel. In addition, more these kind of special accesses have been granted by company A and I, who give consumers accesses to private development groups that may operate also in social media.

Interestingly the retail-focused company C and the company H that works in the travel industry, both have created loyalty club for their consumers, but interactive communities are not implemented around them. However, both of these companies are planning to change this:

*We are planning that they (consumers) could give their opinion about coming offering and vote -- it could be some kind of discussion panel, maybe on Facebook*  
(Company C)

*Loyalty club is an informational channel for us currently. It (community) is one of the proposals, we could develop.* (Company H)

The company H has decided to broaden consumers' power by giving them the possibility to rate. This kind of "expert power" can be seen on other companies' actions as well. Based on the observations, also the company F's offering can be rated with stars and many of these companies rate their users on discussion forums based on the content they share online and give credit to encourage messaging.

*The web development project I mentioned, there one element among many others, is to -- give consumers power to rate our services and then others can see it too. If everything goes as we hope, this will be implemented in a year.* (Company H)

It seems that many of these platforms give consumers possibilities to participate in companies' offering development. The company G has created a distinct program, which aim is to launch consumers' ideas that they generate with the company via social media and face-to-face events.

*This whole process started from the idea that we wanted to grasp the possibilities of social media in product innovation. -- We have launched a brand development program, which innovation is major part of, and all this work we do in these face-to-face workshops as well as openly in social media, those ideas are documented and they go through a certain process in our company and hopefully, all the best ideas are launched as service elements.* (Company G)

It seems that these development programs might be win-win situations for both the customer and the company. As the company G's representative mentions, openness is an important part of giving

consumers the sense of power and easy access to these platforms. The company A and F for example have very strict registration policy that diminishes the amount of interaction.

*Our discussion forum is quite in a bad situation online, as users need to register first and write with their own names. -- Of course we have observed what our competitors do, so now we are thinking - should we make it more open? There always are moderation challenges then. (Company A)*

The needed openness creates challenges for companies. For example, during the two-week observations, it was found that companies B, D, and H had restricted Facebook features, so that consumers could not for example post messages on the wall or send private messages probably due to the lack of resources. Extra resources are needed for moderation and the flow of conversations are hard to handle. Many of the companies feel somehow afraid of losing the power to consumers:

*It requires a lot of work to go there (adapt social media), it is full-time, -- You cannot stop it, you need to take care of it and you need to keep an eye on it. -- You cannot control it. -- Traditional marketing versus building a community, who believes in the product, discusses about it, recommends to friends, so balancing between these two subjects is an extremely hot topic and recommendation is the direction, where we are going and handling that also commercially is getting more and more input. This development is clearly visible. (Company G)*

In conclusion, all of the interviewed companies are offering or planning to offer interactive platforms and communities to consumers. From early discussion forums to online communities and rating the services and giving expert power to active participants, companies have given new opportunities for consumers to show their power and interact with each other online. An important part of offering platforms is their openness - anyone can participate easily. This means that companies need to have enough resources and the courage of loosening their control.

### **React to feedback**

All of the interviewed companies are reading the feedback, but reacting to it seems to differ among them. Again, through thematic analysis, adapting to feedback was changed to reacting in the revised framework, as most of the interviewees used this expression. Reacting to consumer feedback might be just forwarding the message to the right person, customer service, giving attention to consumers,

part of crisis management, or getting ideas for long term planning. Based on the online questionnaire, all of the companies utilized online consumer feedback and the importance of this action was rated on average as 5.44 (scale 1-7, standard deviation 1.24).

Many of the respondents acknowledge that in their company the feedback is reacted by forwarding the message to the relevant person. However, after this there are no guarantees that anything visible will happen.

*If some critique arises, it is forwarded to the right media (Company B)*

*Above all, we utilize feedback when producing new content, but if there is something related to customer service, the message is forwarded to the right person. (Company F)*

The company C's representative also tells that they get multiple new ideas related to sourcing and marketing, which are forwarded to these departments. However, in addition to forwarding the message, they answer these messages directly:

*We have a strategy and a goal that we answer all the messages and feedback in social media and of course via our own websites. If there is a thread in some online discussion forum about our brand, which requires communication or responding, so we answer them, the positive things and of course the negative complaints, which will be all taken care of. We have taken quite an active role in the communication.*

Some of the companies seem to answer outside their own channels as well. The company E's interviewee comments on outside blogs and sees important that every feedback is answered:

*We answer consumer feedback with our own names. Of course we implement them if they sound reasonable or fix something that is not working. -- We got many messages for example asking if we could organize a physical event related to one brand - and now we have organized those events -- Always when users comment, we try to respond and ask more, so that the dialogue continues.*



For the companies C and E, the goal is to react consumer feedback on any of the online channels. However, this is not the case for all the interviewed companies. The company F sees that it is more appropriate to comment users' feedback on Facebook than in the company's own discussion forum - "it is a too strong message". Also, according to both the company F and G, there seems to be fine line when the critique should be answered.

*We have a guideline that if questions or negative feedback arise, we react to those actively. Of course it is a matter of style, so if there is some vulgar feedback, then it is probably better not to react. -- There is a fine line, when to stop commenting.*  
(Company G)

From all the interviewed companies, the company H had the most distant view on reacting to consumer feedback, which might be reflected in the customer relationship as well:

*It depends on the situation, when we need to react. We have a lucky situation, because we have so many loyal customers. -- Our own consumers defend us so easily even if there is somebody commenting critically, so we do not have to react.*  
(Company H)

The views on reacting seem to somehow differ much and this is also shown in the two-week analysis period. During the two weeks observed, the most active companies to react were definitely company C and E, who are the most open to utilize consumer feedback. It is also interesting that the company H was actively commenting and liking users' comments, even though in the interview the representative said that they are not reacting that much. It seems that some companies are responding more on good feedback, such as the company F, or just criticism, like the company A. As the representative of company C notes, there should be a balance - the brand should react to both positive and negative feedback and show that they care. The company E sees that the brand needs to show it takes comments into consideration:

*Rewarding consumers, it is very simple, for example on Facebook you can just like consumers' comments or answer directly. Courtesy is the word.*

In summary, the companies need to react to consumer feedback to show their consideration for consumers' opinions. The ways to react differ, in social media the company representative can use

special platform functions, such as Facebook liking or Twitter retweeting, and comment to users' suggestions or forward the message to a relevant person who then answers the feedback. Also, companies can react to feedback outside their own channels, if consumers' comments seem to need responding. Some of the companies feel that there is a fine line, which comments should not be answered such as vulgar critiques. However, it seems that there should be a balance between answering both positive feedback and negative critiques. By reacting to comments, the company E tries to build a dialogue with its customers. This aspect will be described more in the element of interaction.

### **Showing The Brand's Personality when Designing Content**

*We have regulated quite specifically, how our brands should sound like online. --  
All the brands have their own personality. (Company E)*

The company E's notion is quite revealing on how companies could design content for different online media. Creating a personality to a company's brand could create the needed differentiation between the multiple messages of the online platform. Creating a personality to brand is a new addition to the revised framework that is presented in the end of this chapter. Perhaps by creating a personal touch to a brand's messaging could increase the closeness between the brand and a consumer.

*I believe that the message in social media needs to speak personally, these  
generic messages do not activate. (Company I)*

What are the possible ways then for brands to create personality? For example, the company A, local media company, takes the most important guidelines from its own industry and adapts them to social media. They see their brand as a dynamic news medium that provides news from a local and interesting aspect:

*In our business, we are focused on local news, which means that social message  
content has a similar logic as writing a news flash. So it needs to be well  
headlined, so that is interesting directly. -- We try to find highlights, so that we  
get consumers to visit our site. -- The headline cannot be indicating in any way to  
the tabloid press, it needs to be purely focused on the news. -- The most important*

*thing in our content is trustworthiness. We are a local newspaper, so in a way, we need to plot things that interest our customers locally.*

Many of the media companies interviewed, such as the company D and F, refer to the same idea that the messaging needs to be genuine and trustworthy. As the company D's interviewee expresses it, these messages are windows to their content, even though marketing is avoided at all cost in social media:

*We have used Facebook very little for marketing. -- Of course it is a window to our content. -- We need to be genuinely present, take others into consideration, it is a bidirectional channel. That is what needs to be understood - don't push information, be open and trustworthy. (Company D)*

When comparing for example the company A's and D's responds, the company A seems to be more open to provide direct benefits to the consumer, and then again the company D sees messaging as a way to encourage open dialogue between its readers. The interviewed media companies seem to avoid direct promotion on online consumer channels, but encourage consumers to comment by asking questions in posts. Interestingly, when shifting to the retail industry, the company C's representative emphasizes visual identity, interesting offers, and inspiration:

*There are different messages with different goals. It can be a marketing message, where the aim is to promote a campaign, and then the product and its price are in the main role. It can be also a DIY (do-it-yourself) instructions, where the aim is different, it is the process of making it, a beautiful outcome, and a picture and a link to the instructions are the core of that kind of message. -- Blogs need to have some kind of end result that produces happiness and willingness to do it.*

The company E's representative describes also that an important part of their content on Facebook is inspiring. However, as a media and game company, they naturally emphasize that the message content should have as many media used as possible to catch readers' attention:

*It would be beneficial to get as much different media to a blog post as possible, because pictures catch the interest, -- text is great if the user does not want to see*

*the video. -- Twitter has more emphasis on news, Facebook is more a place where you can just inspire people. (Company E)*

Indeed, all of the selected companies have acknowledged that different channels need to have different message content, even though some of them are not implementing the idea. For example, Facebook is more feeling-based and quick interaction, Twitter has even shorter post and it is more of an informative channel, and blogs provide more background, opinions, and in-depth content. Also, based on the online questionnaire results, designing online message content to activate consumers was seen as the most important action from the given list of items (Mean: 6.44, scale 1-7, standard deviation: 0.73). Based on the company C's and H's observations, Twitter is currently in Finland more targeted to press and companies with its compact textual content, and Facebook for consumers, which provides a broader range of possibilities to interact.

In addition to channel and target audience, message design is starting to take into consideration culture as well. Local newspaper companies, such as the company A and F, sometimes use a local dialect when writing statuses. For a global travelling industry, cultural understanding seems to be even more important and they have tried new ways to get people excited about their brand:

*Cultural understanding is necessary. -- Our industry seems to interest people generally. For example, when we had two flight captains in live chat on Facebook, it was a huge success - we try to come up with something new. (Company G)*

One notion that speaks on behalf on personalizing brands and their message content is the observations made during the two week analysis. Because in the empirical research listed consumer service companies are as a sample, it means that all of these companies have a corporate identity as well. Based on the observations, the corporation's social media activity was totally different in comparison to their brands' messaging. Just a few of the companies even mention about social media activity on their investor site and the emphasis is usually on Twitter. For example, the corporate site of the company E does not even have an updated Facebook account. The company C's representative acknowledges:

*It is valuable to distinct investor communication from our communication online, we are focused on consumer communication, -- and financial department is responsible for communication to investors.*

Also, designing content in social media involves thinking about the brand's visual identity. When making the observations for example on Facebook, the profile picture is usually the brand's logo and then the cover photo is something more dynamic and seasonal. The company C is mostly using inspirational photos from its offering, many of the media companies use seasonal, local photos, and for example, the travelling company G has many pictures of its active personnel. The amount of media and pictures also differ between the selected companies' accounts. The companies C and E for example, who both see Facebook as an inspirational channel, also used the most pictures on the content during the analysis period.

Another way for companies to create content is to crowd-source consumers to do it. Several examples of competitions exist, where consumers can send their photos, their own DIY-instructions, or give travelling tips to other consumers online. This usually means that rewarding consumers is necessary. Consumer rewarding is discussed later in this chapter.

To sum up, brands can differentiate, if they broaden their personality to the content they are sharing online, including visual cues. The brand's account should be separate from companies' general accounts, so that personalization and creating closer relationships with consumers could be easier. It is possible to create inspirational content for example with photos, special offers for fans, live discussions, cultural approach, dynamic content and crowd-sourcing.

### **Integrate Multiple Channels**

*I am a great fan of the multi-channel approach - all the channels should be given attention, and electronic channels are a great part of it, but not the whole part. Most of our services are offered in face-to-face consumer touch points and it is our best marketing asset if we get satisfied customers, who then recommend us either electronically or traditionally. (Company H)*

As it can be understood from the opinion of the company H's interviewee, digital marketing is not enough. Consumers still need face-to-face touch-points, especially when they are buying an

intangible service. According to the online questionnaire, integrating online messages to other marketing activities was seen as the second most important action from the given selection (Mean: 6.11, scale 1-7, standard deviation: 0.93). The company B organized a campaign for the liberty of speech day, and they ran it through multiple media, both digitally and traditionally. An interesting point is that web actions were utilized longer than traditional marketing actions:

*We had print ads in our magazines during the official day and also online ads that ran a little longer. Then we had a campaign site, where we had an online survey and this kind of “sensurator”, where the user could write one line, and this machine would remove some words. This message could have been posted on Facebook. -- We had also some internal guerrilla marketing that targeted our personnel. -- I must say that social media and eWOM were in a big role, because it had a quite good reach.*

In addition to digital and traditional marketing, many of the interviewees gave examples on how electronic and traditional word-of-mouth work in collaboration. This is something that was discovered by Strutton et al. (2011) and it is also discussed in the literature review. They believe that these two modes of WOM work in collaboration. For example, the company B’s representative tells that they are organizing face-to-face events for opinion leaders, such as politicians, to generate buzz and tweets on Twitter. In a similar way, the company G is combining face-to-face workshops with active dialogue in social media. Also, the company E’s interviewee has many ways to contact influential bloggers:

*We try to keep in contact with them - I email, call, and organize events, which are really important.*

Interestingly, many of the interviews warned that social media should be avoided from promotional spam. Social media channels, where eWOM takes strongly place, are not described directly as sales channels, rather they work for distribution.

*Social media channels function more as distribution channels than just as a media. (Company E)*

The selected media companies add always a link in their social media posts that direct to their own news site. The retail company C guides people from social media to its club blogs. It seems that these different media should work in collaboration, but the message differs, as expressed in the earlier subchapter.

In conclusion, it seems that campaigns get into their potential, when the campaign message is promoted on multiple channels, both traditionally and digitally. Electronic WOM can be boosted by organizing face-to-face events. Social media channels are not directly used for promotion, which increases the importance of the multi-channel approach. These social channels should be utilized to distribute the message, not to sell it.

### **Target and Recruit**

Targeting was one of the actions, which importance was rated inconsistently (mean: 4.89, scale 1-7, standard deviation: 2,47). Most of the companies expressed in the online questionnaire that they are targeting different consumer groups online and in social media, but in the interviews targeting did not seem to be that important.

Many of the companies acknowledge that they are targeting on websites and social media, but this has more to do with advertisements. For example, the company D did not know if it is possible to even target consumers on Facebook. Similarly, the company E's interviewee tells that they are not utilizing targeting in social media. In social media, targeting is mostly related to advertisement banners and promotion:

*On Facebook, we do a lot of advertisement, for example we always target based on the theme of the competition. -- There targeting is so much easier based on the age, gender or interests. -- There we can identify different consumer groups.*  
(Company C)

However, the company B sees that targeting is possible to extract to social media content as well:

*Our company is interested in targeting LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health And Sustainability) consumers. We try to design our content and use channels that this consumer group actually is interested in. By reaching the consumer group online, we want more dialogue with them.*

It seems that currently, targeting is more related to advertisements and identifying opinion leaders. Targeting shared content is coming in the future or it is not yet acknowledged. As the company G's representative explains, it is going in the same direction as the company B, designing the channel, message and activation based on the target audience, in the near future.

Recruiting opinion leaders happens still currently more via face-to-face. According to the online survey, eight out of nine companies target opinion leaders, and the importance of this action was rated not as high as other listed actions (mean 3.67, scale 1-7, standard deviation 1.87). Also, the interviewees of companies B, G, and I told that Twitter is turning into a channel for targeting opinion leaders.

*And of course on Twitter, we have a massive reach, it is about 40 million people, who see the invites to our innovation workshops. (Company G)*

The companies' representatives tell that they organize special events, and even call to these opinion leaders. Targeting opinion leaders can be seen as some kind of recruiting. This is why recruiting is no more a separate step in the revised framework.

To sum up, the companies have used to target online advertisements, but not necessarily other content they share to consumers online. Some of the companies have realized that the channel and the messages should be targeted based on their target audience. Targeting is more evident in recruiting opinion leaders, which is one of the actions in the framework. Interestingly, the company G's representative tells that targeting is not seen that necessary in social media, because the channel does not cost itself.

Still, to get the most relevant content to consumers, which all of the selected companies are looking for, targeting might be a way to get there. During the interview, it became evident that social media resources are not endless in these companies, and therefore targeting may assist in utilizing those resources effectively.

### **Reward with Competitions and Special Accesses**

Rewarding consumers seem to be one of the main activities to encourage eWOM conversations. Even though rewarding did not get the highest ratings in the online questionnaire (mean: 4.88, scale: 1-7, standard deviation: 1.17), this action was highlighted many times during the interviews.



Based on the interviews, there are many different ways to reward consumers: offer special accesses; give attention to consumers' opinions, competitions based on speed or activity, and possibilities to share content.

As notified earlier, consideration and giving attention to consumers' opinions are the most important ways to reward consumers according to the company E's interviewee. The representative also mentions that they are no more launching campaigns, because normal interaction in social media seems to be enough. In addition, the company E's brand is giving access to Pinterest to the ones, who are socially active. Indeed, these special accesses to development groups, such as in the company B's and I's case, or exclusive promotions, such as the company C, and G, seem to allure consumers.

Indeed, companies and their brands should create consumers the feeling of power. By offering them chances to create content is one of the examples to reward. Similarly, in the online discussion groups, active consumers can be given special status based on the content they share. According to online observations, for example the company D is utilizing stars in rating the users' amount and the quality of the content.

The most normal way for companies to reward consumers is to organize competitions or raffles. Some of the companies, e.g. the company I and F, are just organizing competitions on their own brand site and linking it to Facebook. However, based on the online observations, companies have started to organize competitions on Facebook by means of apps. Usually, these apps somehow encourage consumers to create content, like in the company C's and G's case. Usually, prizes are their own offering or somehow related to the brand. Also, some of the companies, D and E, are organizing competitions, where speed and attentiveness matter.

*On Valentine's Day, we had a competition on Facebook where we donated several surprise presents. We published a picture on Facebook, and the picture had a clue where our staff had hidden the surprise. The one who first commented, where the surprise is, won it. -- This campaign activated people to comment. -- It was not a raffle, it was a speed competition. We have organized similar competitions during ice hockey world championships. (Company D)*

In summary, the selected companies usually reward consumers through competitions. Almost all the companies have organized raffles, but also there are new ways to select winners - through active participation. These competitions usually focus on the idea that consumers are developing content. Offering this kind of platform might be categorized as a way to reward consumers. In addition, social media makes consumer rewarding even easier - showing that the brand cares, by utilizing social media features such as likes, commenting, can be enough. An important way to reward consumers is to give special access to communities, development groups, content sharing, or secret information.

### **Dynamic Interaction by Brands and the Staff**

*We would like to interact with our customers more, but we have not found good ways to do that - to get consumers activated towards our brand. (Company A)*

Many of the interviewed companies expressed it in a similar way as the company A - “We would like to interact with our customers more”. However, the lack of resources and disappeared creativity seem to be barriers to deeper interaction. Also, too strict regulations and registrations to write a comment can be disruptive:

*When thinking about the activity to comment, there is a great barrier, because everybody needs to write with his/her own names. -- Even nowadays, people are registering with their bank accounts -- this is why, there is this barrier diminishing the amount of people to interact. (Company F)*

All the interviewed companies are interacting with their customers online. Based on the online questionnaire, the importance of interacting with consumers online was rated high (mean: 6.0, scale: 1-7, standard deviation: 1.0). The activity to interact still differs a great deal. The company C and E for example, are interacting with consumers on multiple channels also outside their own platforms if it is related to their brands. Then again, the company F and H see that the only way for them to interact is Facebook, the company F describing it as “the natural setting for interaction”. The company H’s representative even claims that it does not have to take part in conversations, because its loyal consumers defend the company. They do not have a need to keep a dialogue with consumers as for example the company E has:

*We hope that the dialogue will continue. So if somebody writes us, we try to continue the conversation. We like the post and perhaps ask additional questions.*

(Company E)

These thoughts could be noticed during two weeks of observations as well. Most of the selected companies interact with consumers daily on Facebook, however, the company H and I a couple of times a week. Especially, the media companies were the most active to post with several posts per day. For example, the company A posted on average over nine posts per day, also during weekends. These companies' business and customer expectations are closely related to the dynamic content, which shows especially on Facebook. The most active actors to comment and show their consideration to consumers' thoughts were probably the company C and F, who asked for users' voting, opinions, and liked and commented on consumers' comments and questions.

*If somebody sends us a private message on Facebook, we try to answer as quickly as we can, for example 24 hours is too long time to wait. It is quite challenging during weekends, but we still try to answer. -- On Facebook answering should be immediate, even two hours of waiting can feel too long for the consumer.*

(Company E)

Indeed, some of the companies have restricted the interactive features on social media. For example, consumers cannot send private messages to the company D's brand and the company H does not allow consumers to post on the brand's wall. However, the company D's representative sees that it could be possible to empower customer service so that the private messages could be reacted.

Through observation it was also possible to notice that a company's own profile differs a lot from its brand's profile. Brands seem to also interact more with consumers than the companies. The interaction is different and this should be also thought about when thinking about the aim of interaction:

*We have a brand strategy - our company's brands are directly interacting with consumers and then our company is there in the background, supporting these consumer brands. -- We do not have a need to have direct dialogue with*

*consumers, but in corporate responsibility and in planning the future this kind of interaction could be very fruitful. (Company B)*

With this allocation, companies might try to bring brands closer to consumers. Also, especially media companies have started to sign the posts, which was mentioned in many of the interviews as well. This way interaction may feel more personal and similarly, the staff is branded as well.

*The most important is to be genuinely present. -- There is no sense in interacting as the whole organization or talking at the upper level. (Company D)*

In conclusion, the selected companies are interacting with consumers online and mostly on multiple channels. The lack of resources and strict registration seem to disrupt interaction. According to the company I's and G's representatives, social media have started to work as customer service channels and this expectation comes from customers. This means that more resources are needed to have dynamic dialogue with consumers daily. Some companies try to thrive those discussions by being active discussants themselves and keeping the dialogue alive by asking additional questions. Even though interactive features can be restricted for example on Facebook, the companies see that this is not an option or that they are moving away from this kind of behavior.

Most of the interviewed companies have different profiles for the company and brands and their interaction differs a great amount. The brand is more close to consumers and employees are starting to sign the post to reflect this idea.

*The expectation comes from our customers - they want to be in interaction with us and share things they have created and this is basically the main element for our communications as well. We need to be online and utilize it. (Company C)*

In the following subchapter, is analyzed, how companies may be able to commit to the actions they are implementing online related to eWOM.

### **6.2.3 Commit**

During the interviews, it became evident that monitoring and encouraging eWOM is a long-term commitment. Companies have started to set strategies and goals on how the company, its brand and employees should behave online and encourage online conversations.

Talking about the employees, their empowerment is highly important. After setting the goals, companies have begun to follow and measure if they can actually achieve these goals. By developing long-term plans, many of the selected companies see that online world can be a new customer service channel and a touch point with customers and their networks. Engaging in eWOM activities can be a way to build stronger relationships with customers. All of these actions will be discussed next. In the end, the models - organic linear influence, and network coproduction, and their role in the interviewed companies' practices are reviewed and the revised framework presented.

### **Set goals**

*It (consistent presence online) is quite new to us. Overall, our digital business organization is quite new. And we founded our digital customer service about a year ago in September, and after that we have started to moderate actively and designed a strategy for both social media and our digital business as well.*

(Company C)

Strategy was one of the words that popped out many times during the interviews. Companies seem to understand that at least at some level social media actions need to be planned as the digital presence overall. Somehow it still feels that these two sides are far away from each other. EWOM activation might not be thought as a whole.

*Facebook is always an easy example. -- We have done an easily-readable strategy, about two pages, which focuses on what should be shared there content-wise and it is based on those things that have already worked there.* (Company F)

The company F seems to focus on Facebook with its examples, which might indicate that other channels and ways for consumers to be active are not as well scrutinized, even though the brand has an account on Twitter. The company F is not the only one, who has created guidelines for its employees. However, these guidelines seem to differ greatly:

*We have not made a guideline in purpose. -- It is better to be in social media and make a mistake than not to be present because h/she is afraid what others think.*

*So that is why we have not wanted to make any guideline. And I don't even know what this kind of guideline would be. (Company D)*

*Of course we have been informed that each of us work as a representative of the company. We need to think on our own Facebook profile, what to write. If I write something negative about the firm, I could be fired in the worse case.*

*(Company H)*

When asking about guidelines, most of the interviewees referred to the guidelines that inform all the staff what is allowed in social media and what is not. Only a couple of the companies, C, F, G, and H see that they have a strategy in social media, especially focused on content, what to share. Companies should design both of these guidelines and involve other channels as well in the strategy than just social media, and typically Facebook.

Especially many companies admit that they are lagging behind. Measurement is not goal-oriented at all, or it is used just in one of the companies' online channels, or the information about these goals is rather implicit than explicit. For example, the company F acknowledges that they have goals related to Facebook, but they are not explicit for everybody. The company B's interviewee directly says that their measurement is not goal-oriented and it is not yet that advanced. However, e.g. the company C's representative sees goals important:

*The goals that we have set are exactly as I explained earlier - based on our measurement. And precisely focusing on our own sites and social media. -- Measurement based on goals is a lot easier online than on radio or on TV.*

The companies also have goals to develop their online presence, targeting, and interaction with consumers. Both the company G and H's representatives for example told about future development programs, which focus on the earlier mentioned areas:

*We have not been able to broaden this new segmentation to social media, but I believe that when we get it ready by next fall, it is quite comprehensive. -- What I hope we will do is that we have different emphasis on different online platforms, because their target groups are different from each other. (Company G)*

To sum up, companies are building new strategies and goals for social media interaction, but it seems that usually social media has its own direction compared with other online channels. In addition, the companies seem not to think about the whole picture - how to encourage online conversation on other channels as well. The selected companies may be for example on Facebook and Twitter, but only Facebook has goal-oriented measurement and strategy. Goals should be made explicit to everybody working in digital communications. Views about guidelines differ, but it seems that there should be guidelines - for the content and for the personnel's own online interaction. As the digital world is extremely dynamic, companies may need to take this into consideration in their strategy and revise it from time to time.

### **Empower the staff**

All of the interviewed companies pointed out that resources are the key to make a difference in companies' online actions. The employee engagement to online interactions seems crucial and therefore it needs special attention in the revised framework. Empowering staff asks for long-term dedication and planning, which is why it is added to the 'Commit' category.

Many of the companies have taken some actions related to their staff during the past few years. For example, the company A and C have created special teams for social media and digital marketing and it starts to show:

*Now we have special web team, grounded at the beginning of this year and it starts to show. We reach more people, for example through Facebook, and we have received many questions, comments, and conversations there. (Company A)*

It seems that dividing responsibility to the employees with the right attitude is on the companies to-do list. Many of the companies' representatives wondered, why acting in social media frightens some of the staff. The company D's interviewee tells that their employees are afraid of their bosses' reactions. Similarly, the company I's representative emphasizes that those people should interact in social media, who have a custom to it and it is natural for them. It seems that the company F have not had so many of these people:

*Last time when we had a meeting together about the things we should do in social media, means that what tools we have and how everybody should be involved in it, part of the employees are just doing that and part of the staff, who should be*

*more interacting there, they should understand why to be there and what is their role. They are the representatives of our firm even if they would not want it to. I do not know if being afraid is the right term, but a great amount from our staff are against of these social media interactions, so it feels that our company has some growing pains. (Company F)*

The personnel's and the executives' willingness to interact in social media is a great advantage, because this interaction is constant. The representative of the company E points out that social media channels and the customers require a 24/7 attendance. Similar says the Company C's interviewee:

*If something happens there (in the social media) in the evenings or on weekends, which requires reaction, so that is what we are doing. (Company C)*

The most online active employees seem to work as brand evangelists. Based on the observations, the companies are following their own employees' tweets on Twitter, they are writing the company blogs or interacting in Facebook or discussion groups by their own names. Many of the interviewees emphasize that they always ask employees to sign posts, so that the message feels more personal and close to the customer.

*Clearly also in Finland, branding employees is becoming a trend. As our journalists are on Twitter, they also represent the place, where they are working. We have some great examples, who are known for their active participation online. (Company I)*

It seems that active employees who are enthusiastic to interact online are great assets for the company. Companies should find ways for dividing responsibility, but also give some kind of reward from it. The company I's interviewee presents the opportunity to reward employees based on how active they are in social media and online. Social online interaction requires multiple resources from inside and outside the company:

*We have one social media manager, she has been working for us two years and she is the only one fully in charge of social media. -- Then ten people from our customer service have been trained to Facebook, so when it is hectic, they know*



*how to answer. Also, in the marketing department, we are in total eight people, and basically everybody is working with social media -- in the designing phase. -- Then we have partners through which all manual work is done. We have quite a broad network of marketing and public relations agencies. -- So there are about two hundred people, who work for us externally. (Company G)*

Many people interacting in social media might mean strict policy. However, these instructions differ a lot. Some companies have just one to two people, who can update the company and brand's channels, and then there are companies, where anybody can answer. By not excluding people to act in social media, companies might encourage people to interact online.

In conclusion, giving responsibility to people is crucial, as online interaction demands constant and dynamic interaction. One person may not be enough, companies have had good results for grounding special teams to interact in the digital world. There should be some carrots to allure people to act in social media, a rewarding system or easier access to update information. The staff's attitude counts, and the selected companies' emphasize employee branding in the digital world. People are currently afraid of the work communities' reactions, which makes the interaction online challenging. Companies need to have external partnerships as well that help in creating content, especially during hectic periods. Most of the companies admitted that they have invested in outside resources and partnerships that may lead to interesting content that allures consumers.

### **Follow Up by Measuring**

*It (social online interaction) needs to be systematic, -- if five posts are shared per day, they need to be followed up and reacted. (Company I)*

The companies' online actions require a follow up, especially when the aim is to encourage online conversations between consumers. It needs to be scrutinized, what works for the selected consumer group, and how they react to specific initiatives. The interviewed companies have acknowledged this fact and they also rated measuring online actions that activate people online as one of the most important in the given list (mean: 6.0, scale: 1 to 7, standard deviation: 1.4). The company F for example has created specific content guidelines for its employees that are based on the earlier actions that have worked.

Following consumer reactions to companies' online interactions requires some kind of measurement. Companies are mostly relying on Google Analytics on their website and the social media channels' own tools to analyze these reactions. However, many of the companies, for example the company B, C and G, have invested in real-time measurement tools, which help them to get insightful data.

*Almost anything can be measured online. We follow weekly and monthly conversations online and make reports on how our Facebook group for example has behaved - how it has grown, what topics there has been, what has been the reach, and how much discussion there has been about our brand. -- In social media, we utilize payable and licensed tools, our website is examined with Google Analytics (Company C)*

Indeed, companies are mainly interested in the volume and reach of the content, but also the quality. The company B is investigating the overall atmosphere on Facebook. The company G's representative clarifies, what quality means in this context:

*In social media in addition to volume, we try to understand the quality, and especially the topics of these conversations, and we draw graphs, but this kind of measurement is not as exact. Still, we get a quite good picture, how much people talk about us and what kind of conversations they have. (Company G)*

Similar to the company C, all of the selected companies do a monthly follow up by reporting the most common topics discussed. Also, the most read posts are relevant to these reports. These reports are then presented in a meeting to the employees working with online content. In the long-run, these follow-ups could be accompanied with specific measurement goals for each online channel, so that everybody knows where the companies try to head to. This is something, where companies need to start to pay attention to and get committed. Many of the companies, which measurement is not goal-oriented admit that it should be:

*Well, Facebook has quite advanced tools for measurement and from time to time I run this data to excel. It should be followed up more strictly. But basically, we check how many people our messages have reached and how much they are*

*talking about us. However, we have not set any goals for this measurement, so this follow up is still in its early stages. (Company A)*

It becomes clear that all the channels have their own measurement indicators, e.g. Facebook has the amount of shares, likes, comments, Twitter has retweets, Pinterest pins, websites' visits and comments and so on. Many of the companies might have goal-oriented measurement in place on Facebook, but other channels' follow-up is lagging behind. Perhaps companies should create a measurement portfolio for all the online channels and follow the development of online discussions in other media as well as in Facebook and their own websites. This could give companies also new insights to manage their online channels and encourage people in eWOM interaction.

In summary, the companies actions online are in a need of a follow-up and goal-oriented measurement. Companies have somehow prioritized their measuring to just a few of their online channels, not even all they are utilizing. Goal-oriented measurement gives companies' staff a clear direction and may help in allocating responsibility. All the channels have unique features, which means that they should not be measured in the same way as other channels. Mostly the selected companies are interested in volume and the quality of these actions. Each of these companies report monthly about their findings, and they should present these findings and indicators in meetings with other employees, so that they understand that also digital and social media actions count.

### **Build relationships**

*It (Facebook) is more like a channel that gets people committed - our loyal fans get marketing information, but also general information. (Company H)*

Digital channels can function as means to build relationships with consumers. As the company H's representative identifies, consumers get more committed to the brand when they talk to each other online and get valid information from the company and its brands. Probably this is why, the company G's interviewee believes in eWOM's power:

*Our business seems to interest people in general. -- we try to come up with interesting stuff, and as I represent the commercial side, our aim is to build this way customer loyalty and sales. (Company G)*

The company G's interviewee also identifies that their customers have started to require customer service digitally. Especially, social media and Facebook have created a suitable setting for customer service according to the interviewees. According to Company E's representative, companies must be close to customers also in digital media, be genuine and personal, because people do not want to buy from distant and cold organization.

*Many people see Facebook and Twitter as the official customer service channel, and we follow if we need to do something there. (Company I)*

If customers really have this kind of assumption, it means that companies need to interact even more digitally. This kind of increased interaction may in turn lead in closer relationships. With this interaction, companies might be building closer relationships with their customers in the long run.

*Our media's Facebook and Twitter accounts are quite active. There we can ask for feedback, ideas, and critique and in general create community feeling. (Company B)*

Interestingly, many of the companies seem to be again more engaged on Facebook when building relationships with consumers. It would be interesting to examine, what could be the ways for companies to build customer relationships via their online discussion blogs, viral emails, or blogs. This is something that should be further investigated.

In conclusion, companies have an understanding that customer relationships can be managed and build also digitally. Consumers have started to demand that also social media works as a customer service touch point. Through open, active dialogue with consumers and creating community feeling, brands may be able to develop even stronger relationships with consumers online in the long run.

#### **6.2.4 Models work in collaboration**

Based on the notions in the interviews, it seems that all of the selected companies seem to utilize all of the models, organic, linear influence and network coproduction model. This observation supports the research of Kozinets et al. (2010) that all these three models still coexist and each is used for different circumstances. In hope for effective marketing, the company G's interviewee sees that companies are setting up brand communities instead of just targeting opinion leaders.

*We are going in the direction of recommendation and constantly we are putting more resources commercially to the digital side. (Company G)*

The company C is an example of managing all of the models. They have their own brand community online and they are quite actively present on Facebook, where they directly interact with consumers. They are also influencing opinion leaders, especially bloggers to get visibility. However, they are, in addition, monitoring online conversations closely to forecast consumer trends and future reclamation topics. Similarly, the company G and E have a special community for the most active online, they are contacting bloggers to get visibility and they are forecasting consumer needs according to general online conversations.

Indeed, companies do not choose a specific model; instead they need to master each one of the models. It seems that the companies are already implementing organic and linear influence, but they are not using their full potential in direct interaction and in building interactive communities. The company representatives might be somehow afraid of the latest model and causing spam, and they are specifically planning when it is suitable for interacting online and in which channel.

*There is a fine line when an online conversation should be participated.*  
(Company F)

*I cannot say anything else about our online interaction other than what we are doing on Facebook. Of course, we observe what bloggers may comment about us, but I would not say that we are actively commenting on those online.*  
(Company H)

In conclusion, it seems that models work in cooperation and all of the interviewed companies are at least at some level utilizing all the models' practices in their digital marketing. Interesting is to notice that these models utilize different channels. The organic model takes broader scope on what people are talking online about company brands, the linear influence model is conducted mixes online and offline WOM via face-to-face channels and events, and currently the network coproduction model is focused on Facebook. It would be interesting to further investigate how to interact in a broader range of online channels than just social media and also, when companies should participate in interaction: what the fine line of interaction actually means.

### **6.2.5 The Revised Framework**

Based on the findings presented in this chapter, a revised framework can be developed. All of the elements in the framework; monitor (1), encourage (2), commit (3), evolved based on the findings of the interviews. This way, the next framework has been created based on extensive literature review and empirical interviews with the Finnish listed consumer service companies.

In the monitoring phase, marketers seem to choose channels, which to monitor. Different people use different platforms, and therefore companies need to try to find channels, where their key customers are interacting. Getting feedback is also important especially for service companies, who have intangible offering. By collecting feedback and monitoring consumer conversations, companies may predict future consumer trends, create competitor and general business analysis, and identify possible future complaints. It seems clear that companies need to understand their consumers well to find their online feedback and add possible venues for interaction. This means that users are profiled so that companies can offer them the best online service.

To encourage people to interaction is not probably simple, but companies have found some ways to do it. One of the sub-elements that clearly popped out during the interviews was that companies seem to create consumers the sense of power by for example offering them platforms to interact or special accesses. Another way of conveying such a feeling is to react consumers positive and negative feedback and continue the dialogue. Because companies have a great need to get consumers to interact with each other about the company brand, the brand needs to have a personality also online and it should be in line with other marketing messages. Companies can also encourage consumers by rewarding them; organizing competitions based on activity and get them create the content. Interaction needs interesting content, which can be solved by designing content for consumer needs and targeting the specific messages to the specific consumers. By offering also online consumer service, companies can themselves take part in consumer conversations.

All of the interviewed companies value electronic word-of-mouth and want more interaction with their consumers. This kind of commitment seems to require empowered employees, clear goals, extra resources, and long-term follow up. All of the companies have started to measure their online activities at some level to grasp what consumers want from the online interaction. By encouraging consumers to interaction online, companies believe to build stronger customer relationships. The

new revised framework can be found from Figure 4 and it involves all of the levels presented earlier in this chapter.

Figure 4: The Revised Framework for Companies Practices in EWOM Communications

		MONITOR			ENCOURAGE							COMMIT					
ORGANIC																	
	LINEAR	Choose channels	Get feedback	Profile	Give people the sense of power	Offer a platform	Adapt feedback	Make a brand personal	Integrate with mar. comms	Design content	Reward	Recruit	Interact	Set goals	Empower staff	Follow up & measure	Build relationships
												Target					
NETWORK																	



## 7 Conclusions

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to examine the phenomenon of electronic word-of-mouth and find elements that determine these online peer-to-peer conversations. Additionally, this study sheds light on the company's role in the eWOM communication and the possible actions that might be relevant to consumer service companies. The research questions are:

(1) *What is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and what are its main characteristics?*

(2) *What are the ways for companies to get involved in eWOM?*

Next, this section will focus on the main conclusions of these research questions. First, the characteristics of eWOM and the differences between traditional WOM and eWOM will be discussed. After that, a summary is given about service companies' possible actions related to eWOM. In the end, managerial implications, suggestions for future research and study contributions are detailed.

### 7.1 The Main Characteristics of EWOM

Adapting the sample collection method of Breazeale (2009), 40 articles were analyzed to understand the nature of eWOM. Electronic word-of-mouth is a relatively new phenomenon with an incoherent definition (Vilpponen et al. 2006). Based on the literature review analysis, nine main elements were identified as part of electronic word-of-mouth. EWOM is opinion sharing between consumers about experiences (1) and opinion leaders have an influential role in the content sharing process (2). The interaction happens online through different platforms (3), is network-based, (4) and directed to multiple people (5). Electronic word-of-mouth is interaction without time and location constraints (6) and it can be anonymous (7). Because of the online environment, there may occur credibility issues that users consider (8). Still, electronic WOM is increasingly present in consumers' decision process (9).

EWOM is closely linked to traditional word-of-mouth. Drawing on research on traditional WOM and virtual communities, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) create the first definition of eWOM. Still, the evolution of the Internet has given distinct characteristics to electronic WOM and eWOM is seen more of a modernized extension of traditional offline WOM. Between these two concepts, major differences can be found. Especially, the chance to interact anonymously, the different platforms to

interact, the extensive reach of messages and their permanency are most often the distinguishing factors included in the phenomenon of eWOM. These characteristics have empowered consumers. However, this does not mean that eWOM and WOM could not work in collaboration. According to the empirical interviews presented in this thesis and the findings of Strutton et al. (2011), this might be the case, especially when recruiting opinion leaders.

Also, eWOM might be more prone to changes as a phenomenon because of the dynamic online environment. EWOM is constantly evolving. It is no more just computer-mediated communication - through the development of mobile technology, users can interact online anywhere, anytime. Hence, electronic WOM is becoming more spontaneous and a direct mode of communication (Okazaki 2009). With the help of mobile applications, eWOM can occur very near purchase decisions and thus, it seems it has significant implications for the success of businesses (Jansen et al. 2009).

## **7.2 Companies' Possible Practices in EWOM**

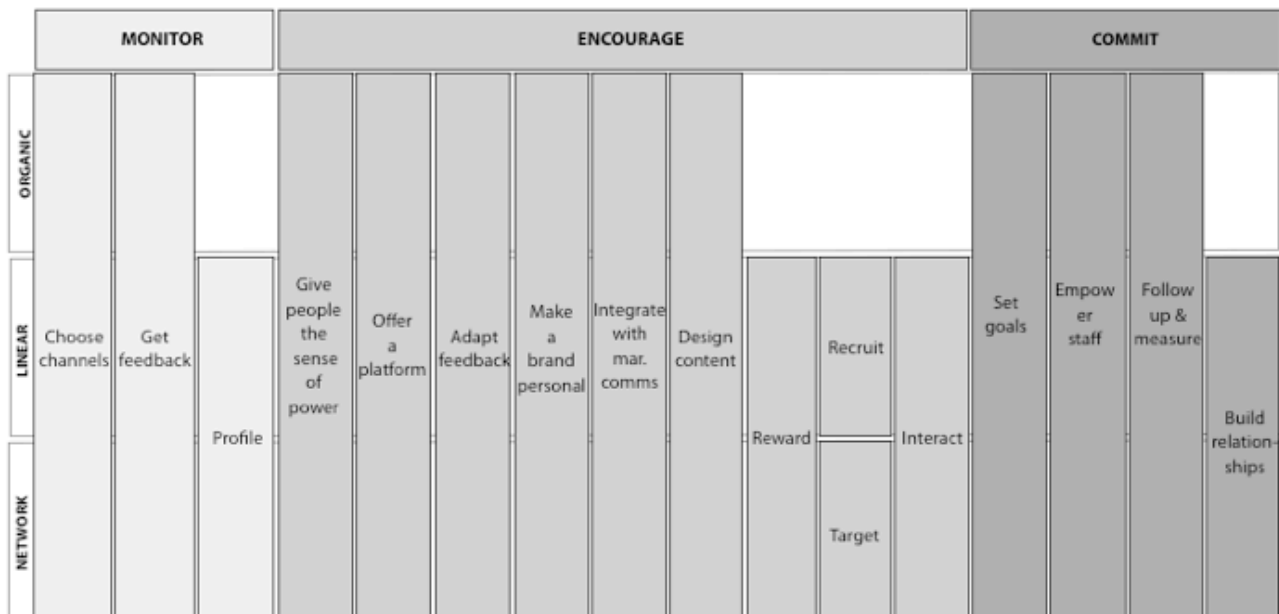
Interestingly, even though eWOM is seen as the opinion exchange process between consumers, it seems that it is also valued by marketers as an important part of companies' actions. The obvious contradiction may be the reason to explain why the extent of marketers' contribution to eWOM is not seen unanimous among academics. Marketers' direct involvement in the online word-of-mouth process is becoming more tolerantly reviewed, which is also reflected in the literature review and empirical interview findings.

Based on the article analysis, this research focused on understanding, how the academic community sees company's participation in eWOM and what could be the possible actions taken related to this phenomenon. Based on all the notions, a framework of possible company's eWOM actions was developed based on the article analysis and examined through empirical interviews, surveys, and by analyzing company practices online.

This study interviewed nine Finnish listed consumer service companies (response rate 82%). Based on these empirical findings, the literature reviews' framework was evolved and a new revised version presented (See Figure 5). Through the empirical research, it was possible to find new actions related to eWOM that had not been taken into consideration in the analyzed scientific articles. In conclusion, the main actions companies are currently doing in relation to eWOM are threefold. The interviewed companies are all monitoring or planning to monitor consumer

conversations online (1), they also try to encourage these conversations in some way (2) and the representatives acknowledged that these actions need to be committed (3) so that they actually have an impact. These three main levels are divided into more specific actions. Monitoring seems to be about choosing channels, getting feedback and profiling users. Companies are encouraging eWOM by giving consumers the feeling of power, offering platforms, designing messages according to a brand’s personality, integrating marketing channels, rewarding consumers, targeting them and interacting with them. To get committed to all these actions, organizations are setting goals, empowering consumers, measuring all the actions taken, and in general building stronger customer relationships. The revised framework summarizes companies’ possible practices in eWOM. Next, the managerial implications are discussed.

**Figure 5: The Revised Framework of Service Companies’ Possible Practices in EWOM**



### 7.3 Managerial Implications

The framework presented illustrates managers many implications on how to monitor, encourage and commit to eWOM. In the monitoring phase, it could be wise to choose which channels to invest in. Different customer groups use different platforms, and therefore marketers need to try to find channels, where their target groups are interacting. Service companies have intangible offering and therefore it seems to be extremely important to collect feedback. By receiving feedback and monitoring consumer online conversations, companies may predict future consumer trends, create competitor and business analysis, and identify possible future complaints and trends. It seems clear that managers need to understand their consumers well to find their online feedback and create

suitable venues for interaction. Companies want to offer better online service, which means that managers need to profile their users to understand who needs to be satisfied when and where.

To encourage people to interact is not probably simple, but managers have some ways that can be implemented. Managers can create consumers the sense of power by for example offering them platforms to interact or special accesses. Another way of conveying such a feeling is to react consumers' positive and negative feedback and continue the dialogue. Because companies have a great need to get consumers to interact with each other about the company's brand, managers need to invest in creating their brands' personalities also online and it should be in line with other marketing messages.

Companies can also encourage consumers by a multichannel approach and rewarding them; organizing competitions based on activity and get target group to create the content. Interaction needs interesting content, which can be solved by designing content for consumer needs and targeting these specific messages to these specific consumers. The brand's personality should be present in designing content and reflecting the uniqueness of the brand. By offering also online consumer service, marketers themselves can take part in consumer conversations.

All of the interviewed companies value electronic word-of-mouth and want more interaction with their consumers. This kind of commitment seems to require empowered employees, clear goals in all online channels, extra resources, and long-term follow up. It seems to be also beneficial to measure company's online activities to understand what works for the selected target group and what they especially want. By committing to monitoring and encouraging consumers to interaction online, stronger customer relationships might be built.

#### **7.4 Suggestions for Future Research**

In future research, it would be interesting to examine, if electronic WOM is actually part of other companies' marketing strategies than just consumer service companies. In addition, it could be interesting to compare how for example consumer service and product companies' eWOM actions differ or business-to-business and business-to-consumers practices vary. Furthermore, differences that online and offline WOM have in their effectiveness should be researched more thoroughly, but also how eWOM and WOM could work in collaboration. Future research should also examine the evolvement of the eWOM theory and how different platforms and devices affect its appearance.

## 7.5 Study Contributions

The main contribution of this study is the framework that illustrates the possible eWOM practices service companies may take. Especially, by revising the literature review's framework with empirical findings developed the most interesting findings. Through interviews, surveys and analysis it was possible to find new actions that have not been discovered in the literature review's article analysis. It seems that these actions - profiling users, giving consumers the sense of power, offering platforms for interaction, creating a brand personality, empowering consumers and setting specific goals for measurement - are not that evident among academics but are present in companies' practices. Also based on the interview findings, the companies do not seem to have a clear strategy for all the digital channels - currently they are focusing more on social media. It seems that companies need to have a more comprehensive take on their digital strategies. With this framework, companies are able to evaluate their current situation in relation to eWOM and plan new actions to encourage eWOM.

Also, the literature review summarizes the main characteristics that are currently seen as part of eWOM among academics. This is also an important contribution, as EWOM is seen quite as a complex phenomenon, and views on its appearance and main elements differ. However, some commonalities exist that was noted during the article analysis.

Even though traditional and electronic WOM seem to be distinct phenomena with their own characteristics, some support for Strutton et al. (2011) finding was found. They propose that eWOM and WOM might work in collaboration, not in isle. This came evident also during this study's empirical interviews, as many of the companies seemed to combine face-to-face activities with digital practices.

It seems quite clear that companies cannot dismiss the phenomenon - interviewed companies seem to value eWOM highly important for their business.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: The Analysis Made to the Determinants of Electronic WOM

Authors	ANALYSIS OF THE DETERMINANTS OF EWOM										Many different platforms	Credibility	Experiences
	Opinion/ sharing between consumers	Via Internet	Network-based	Directed to multiple people	No time or location constraints	Anonymous	Effects on the customer decision process	Opinion leadership	Part of firm's marketing strategy	Differentiated from offline WOM			
Amblee & Bui (2011-2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bronner & de Hoog (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Bulearca & Bulearca (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Burton & Khamash (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chen (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cheung et al. (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chiang & Hsieh (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Chu & Choi (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Do-Hyung et al. (2007)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Dwyer (2007)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Eckler and Bolls (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Fong, J., & Burton, S. (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Gil-Or (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Goldsmith & Horowitz (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Henke (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hyuk Jun & Morrison, (2008)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jansen et al. (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jobs and Gilfoil (2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Jones et al. (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lee & Youn (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Li (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Okazaki (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Petrescu & Korgaonkar (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Phelps et al. (2004)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pinto & Mansfield (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Porter & Golan (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Shu-Chuan & Yoojung (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Simmons et al (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Sohn (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Strutton et al (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Sun-Jae & Jang-Sun (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Thorson & Rodgers (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Van der Lans et al (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Vilpponen et al. (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Wen I et al. (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Willemsen et al. (2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Xun and Reynolds (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Yeh & Choi (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
					=	The article has its own viewpoint to eWOM							
					=	The article uses the definition of Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004							
					=	The article uses the definition of Jansen et al. 2009							
					=	The article uses the definition of Porter & Golan 2006							
				x	=	The factor occurs in the article							



## Appendix B: The Final Sample Used in the Analysis

### 7.5.1 The Different Definitions of Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Authors	The definition of Ewom
Amblee & Bui (2011-2012)	“Word-of-mouth communications have been shown to influence awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavior [19]. They can be either positive or negative, and there is a strong incentive for consumers to gain something for nothing by reading reviews from others who share the same interest in order to help make a decision [3, 20]. Reviews and ratings can be written or read by a consumer who is unknown to others, an adviser or expert, or a close and trusted friend. -- eWOM communications via online customer reviews act as routes for social influence [33]. Social influence is the process by which individuals make changes to their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or behaviors as a result of interaction with individuals or groups who are perceived to be similar or desirable or with experts who are recognized by the community of buyers as knowledgeable about the product. -- research has shown that, in reality, consumers will perform a product information search but will stop short of becoming perfectly informed, due to the rising cost of the information search
Do-Hyung et al. (2007)	“an on-line seller generally provides consumers with two types of product information. It can offer seller-created product information via its Web site or other traditional communication channels such as advertisements, and it can also offer consumer-created product information by allowing consumers to post comments on its Web site.”-- “Consumer-created information describes the usage situations and product advantages from the consumer’s perspective. It is more understandable and familiar because it represents consumers’ personal feelings and satisfaction about the product”. -- “It can be subjective information, consisting mainly of emotional expressions”
Dwyer (2007)	“Word of mouth is a network phenomenon: People create ties to other people with the exchange of units of discourse (that is, messages) that link to create an information network while the people create a social network” -- “Word of mouth is a common example of an involvement response.” -- “Wang and Fesenmaier (2003) found that enduring involvement was the major reason for online community participation. Wang and Fesenmaier (2003) found the secondary motives of seeking benefits for oneself (for example, information) and offering help to others to be the other important precursors of community word of mouth.”--” In a virtual community network a member gains prestige by posting messages that inspire others to post replies, thus creating incoming ties.”--”all acts that entail risk. Bart et al. (2005) note that community features are a factor driving trust in Web sites, especially those characterized by information risk (the risk associated with revealing personal information).”
Fong & Burton (2006)	“The important influence of peer recommendations on consumer purchases has been strongly established. However, recent growth in electronic discussion boards has increased the potential for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) between people who have never met.”-- “ particularly strong when a consumer is considering the purchase of a new product or service”--”However, with the advent of the Internet, consumers are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information to use in their decision- making process” -- “Discussion boards in particular, present an opportunity for participants to share their experiences, opinions, and knowledge with others on specific topics, and thus allow eWOM between like-minded people to take place.” -- “as well as to gain emotional support, social comparison, and camaraderie. The brides used the discussion board to exchange marketing-related information, recommend websites, and share stories, thus resulting in eWOM for other brides.” -- “his information giving and seeking behavior can result in both positive and negative eWOM, and may influence the subsequent purchase decisions of participants.”
Gil-Or (2010)	“The use of viral marketing and electronic word of mouth is the main strength of the .social networks as members are connected to each other in a way that increase the trustworthiness of the messages that are transferred among friends.” -- “As the concept of social media matures, its business potential is becoming very attractive to many companies.” -- “Still there is a difference between companies with large marketing budgets that are using the social media in combination with traditional marketing tools (such as advertisement, public relations and sales promotion tools), and companies with smaller marketing budgets that are using the social media as their primary marketing tool!” -- “Word of mouth is the ancient phenomenon of passing information from one person to another. Word-of- mouth marketing is a wide umbrella of different marketing approaches that include: blogs, buzz marketing, viral marketing, social media marketing, consumer communities and others. The messages that are delivered by word of mouth are usually more credible, as the receiver has the reason to believe that the sender of the message got no benefit for transferring the information. Thus, it is extremely effective in supporting service businesses such as restaurants. Electronic word of mouth became very popular with the flourishing of the electronic social networks. The social networks are becoming the facto standard in today’s communication between friends and are exchanging other communication tools such as: face to face, phone, mobile and even electronic mail.” -- “Information that is shared or exchanged within the social network is visible to many people, not necessarily people that are supposed to be exposed to this information.” -- “Word of mouth and specifically positive word of mouth can really make a difference in the launch of a new product. Negative word of mouth or no word of mouth can either delay the diffusion of the product or even lead into a failure in its launch.” -- “nother method that is relevant for transferring commercial information in social networks is viral marketing. In Viral marketing, the company is creating an attractive content that is being published within the network from one member to another (like a virus).”
Goldsmith & Horowitz (2006)	“The unique asynchronous and interactive nature of cyberspace gives consumers unparalleled access to information, wide product and brand choice, the ability to make price and quality comparisons as never before, and the opportunity to interact with companies and with other consumers in many different ways (Negroponte and Maes 1996). These interactions are conducted via e-mail, instant messaging, homepages, Blogs, listservs, forums, online communities, newsgroups, chat rooms, hate sites, review sites, and social networking sites (Goldsmith 2006). Consumers clearly have a variety of means to communicate with each other online to share information and feelings about products and brands. Thus, the venerable topic of personal influence now includes its extension into cyberspace as online interpersonal influence or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).” -- “What is different about cyberspace are the: (1) variety of avenues or means by which consumers can exchange information, (2) anonymity and confidentiality online through which consumers don’t have to reveal their identities when seeking and giving advice, (3) physical cues used to assess the identity of others which are lacking, (4) freedom from geographic and time constraints that make cyberspace a global community paralleling the local physical one, and (5) permanence of online conversations (Gelb and Sundaram 2002; Kiecker and Cowles 2001). Thus, eWOM deserves investigation as an extension of traditional interpersonal communication into the new realm of cyberspace.” -- “The music industry has been especially aggressive in encouraging eWOM through viral marketing, web postings, and product sampling (Humphries 2004).” -- “Recommendations for the experience product (wine) was were more influential than the recommendations for the search product (calculators).”
Henke (2011)	“a global Internet audience which has the opportunity to participate in the promotion and distribution process by passing along recommendations, links, or files of the content itself to others via electronic communication.” “Viral marketing, or electronic word-of-mouth communication about brands, or in this case bands, can help artists break through the clutter when consumers make positive recommendations about an artist.”



Authors	The definition of Ewom
<b>Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)</b>	<p>“The advent of the Internet has extended consumers' options for gathering unbiased product information from other consumers and provides the opportunity for consumers to offer their own consumption-related advice by engaging in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Given the distinct characteristics of Internet communication (e.g., directed to multiple individuals, available to other consumers for an indefinite period of time, and anonymous)” -- “Existing publications tend to be predominantly practice oriented and deal with what is often referred to as “viral marketing” (i.e., using consumer communication as a means of multiplying a brand's popularity through customers spreading the brand name of a product or name of a company).” consumers come together in an online environment with the purpose of interacting with others who share their interests and passions (Granitz &amp; Ward, 1996).” -- “in this article we refer to eWOM communication as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet. eWOM communication can take place in many ways.” -- “Given the conceptual closeness of eWOM and traditional WOM communication, consumer motives that have been identified in the literature as being relevant for traditional WOM also can be expected to be of relevance for eWOM.” -- “eWOM communication on Web-based opinion platforms may be initiated because of a desire to help other consumers with their buying decisions, to save others from negative experiences, or both. Thus, such communication can include both positive and negative consumer experiences with a product or company.” -- “eWOM communication to give the company “something in return” for a good experience.” -- “the source of imbalance comes from either a strong positive or negative consumption experience. Balance can be restored by writing a comment on an opinion platform. Based on the WOM communication literature, we have identified two motives that are associated with homeostase utility: expressing positive emotions and venting negative feelings.”</p>
<b>Hyuk Jun &amp; Morrison, (2008)</b>	<p>“These changes have induced marketers to find optimal ways to use cyberspace when promoting their products and encouraged scholars to study the Internet from the perspectives of their disciplines.” -- “Although UGC has been closely aligned and often confused with eWOM, the two differ depending on whether the content is generated by users or the content is conveyed by users. For example, footage on YouTube that is generated and posted by users is UGC. However, an Internet user who sends her friends a link to a YouTube site is engaging in eWOM. If the content conveyed has been generated by users, it can be both UGC and eWOM.” -- “Thus, though UGC and eWOM are distinct concepts, they are related; to be successful, eWOM depends on the dissemination of content, and UGC has less influence without eWOM.” -- “When UGC is negative, it can have harmful implications for building and sustaining a brand's equity, an issue compounded by the fact that readers of UGC may consider it more credible than content that originates with the producer (e.g., brand advertising).” -- “When consumers pass along product-focused information to others, WOM (and its online equivalent, eWOM) becomes a key factor for marketers.” -- “The influence of WOM is particularly strong when consumers consider purchases of new types of products or services with which they have no prior personal experience (Engel, Blackwell, and Kegerreis 1969).” -- “Aspects of the Internet also lend themselves well to eWOM communication. Through virtual communities, consumers extend their social networks to people they have never met in person, then seek out these people regularly for their opinions about products and services.” -- “When marketers present a new product or a newly launched brand, they consider both traditional and nontraditional media in which to place advertising.”</p>
<b>Lee &amp; Youn (2009)</b>	<p>“the power of WOM has recently become even more important with the advent of the internet (Bickart &amp; Schindler 2001; Dellarocas 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Sun et al. 2006). Product review websites (e.g. consumerreview.com), retailers' websites (e.g. amazon.com), brands' websites (e.g. forums.us.dell.com), personal blogs, message boards and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace) are all examples of the types of online WOM platforms (Bickart &amp; Schindler 2001). Although similar to the traditional form, electronic WOM (eWOM) has several unique characteristics. eWOM often occurs between people who have little or no prior relationship with one another (e.g. strangers or fellow consumers) and can be anonymous (Dellarocas 2003; Goldsmith &amp; Horowitz 2006; Sen &amp; Lerman 2007). This anonymity allows consumers to more comfortably share their opinions without revealing their identities (Goldsmith &amp; Horowitz 2006). The unique characteristics of eWOM encourage consumers to share their opinions with other consumers, thus increasing the volume of eWOM (Chatterjee 2001). As a result, there is a greater likelihood that consumers will find other consumers with product expertise on the eWOM platforms (Duhan et al. 1997).” -- “However, the anonymous nature of eWOM can make it difficult for consumers to determine the quality and credibility of the eWOM” -- “The strength of the relationship between a communicator and a receiver is one of the most distinctive differences between WOM and eWOM”</p>
<b>Li (2011)</b>	<p>“Electronic word of mouth (WOM) is more of a Web 2.0 artifact.” -- “new form of user-generated content.” -- “online WOM played a significant role in generating offline brand advocacy” -- “advertisers could stimulate consumers to talk about, and say good things about, their brands.” -- “What consumers say about products, what they share, and even what they search for online have made current a “listening-led” approach to advertising and marketing.”</p>
<b>Okazaki (2009)</b>	<p>“Since the late 1990s, the rapid proliferation of the internet has enabled consumers to spread their post-purchase experience through such online communications as email lists, website bulletin boards, Usenet news-groups, chat and blogs, among others. Such PC-based eWOM (hereafter pcWOM) has become increasingly popular as, in the last decade, the internet has become one of the most important communications media.” -- “In recent years, the rapid growth of mobile communication has expanded the availability and importance of eWOM in a ubiquitous context; here, ‘ubiquitous’ refers to ‘anywhere, anytime’” -- “the social influence model proposed by Dholakia et al. (2004) is adopted. This model postulates an individual-level driver (‘desire’) and a group-level driver (‘social intention’) as antecedents of consumer decision making and participation in a virtual community.” -- “As a result, search costs, which are one of the most important determinants of buyers' decision-making process, will drastically decline. This will increase consumers' ability to evaluate a product prior to purchase, and increase price pressure on sellers. Hence, unequal information exchange between buyers and sellers will decline. Given this unprecedented ability to connect individuals by spreading words online, buyers will abandon their traditional passive role as mere recipients of firm-generated information, and will exercise greater control over the communication they receive, generate and share.”</p>
<b>Phelps et al. (2004)</b>	<p>“Although some (e.g., Modzeiewski, 2000) argue that viral marketing is not merely an internet-era replacement for word-of-mouth advertising, many agree that turning customers into a marketing force is crucial for viral marketing.” -- “disagreement exists about its definition. Some (e.g., Pastore, 2000) view it as word-of-mouth advertising in which consumers tell other consumers about the product or service” -- “Based largely on Shirky's and Rosen's perspectives, the current article views viral marketing as the process of encouraging honest communication among consumer networks, and it focuses on email as the channel.” -- “social and communication networks, opinion leadership, source credibility, uses and gratifications, and diffusion of innovations can provide insights into viral marketing processes and participants' motivations.” -- “According to Rogers, mass media channels are relatively more important for learning about an innovation, whereas interpersonal communication is especially important for persuasion.”</p>
<b>Pinto &amp; Mansfield (2011)</b>	<p>“This study is particularly interested in the complaint response category of negative word-of-mouth and the means by which this behavior is communicated. When initially conceptualized as a response category, most negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) was communicated person-to-person. However, new technological advances have provided opportunities to communicate the NWOM, more broadly, via the Internet or via social networks. Complaints through electronic media such as the Internet have increased dramatically and will most likely continue to do so in the future (Tripp and Gregoire 2011; Strauss and Seidel 2004). No longer are complaints merely person-to-person, but person-to-network providing a forum for exponential growth in the negative consequences of customer comments. One dissatisfied customer's circle of influence can now reach unprecedented proportions.”</p>
<b>Porter &amp; Golan (2006)</b>	<p>“Viral advertising is unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others.” -- “Often referred to as network-enhanced word-of-mouth, viral advertising relies on the Internet for its unique ability to proliferate.” -- “viral advertising is personal”</p>



Authors	The definition of Ewom
<p><b>San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012)</b></p>	<p>“E-mail viral marketing is today perceived as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) advertising in which firms use provocative content to motivate unpaid peer-to-peer communication of persuasive messages from identified sponsors. -- “electronic peer-to-peer referrals have become an important phenomenon, and advertisers have sought to exploit their potential through viral communication campaigns” -- “electronic word-of-mouth (or eWOM) communication has helped give rise to different types of online interpersonal networks” -- “The Internet also enables message personalization,” -- “WOM is not a new concept;” -- “new media technology has changed conventional interpersonal communication (sender-message-recipient) by introducing a new form of communicator: a forwarder or transmitter (Gumpert and Cathcart 1986). The emergence of information technology (IT) and virtual networks have led to the concept of viral marketing (or eWOM advertising)” -- “Its supporters point to eWOM's enormous capacity to influence attitudes and behavior” -- “anonymity among communicators” -- “Of the various kinds of eWOM on the Internet (e-mail, discussion groups, blogs, nanoblogs or social networks, to mention the most important), for Pavlov, Melville, and Plice (2008), e-mail viral marketing is the most powerful, as it is the only method that spreads the message among groups of all kinds.” -- “It is through networks of people and organizations that social capital is exchanged.”</p>
<p><b>Shu-Chuan &amp; Yoojung (2011)</b></p>	<p>“The emergence of Internet-based media has facilitated the development of WOM online – that is, electronic word-of-mouth (referred to as eWOM hereafter). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as ‘any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet’ (p. 39). eWOM occurs on a wide range of online channels, such as blogs, emails, consumer review websites and forums, virtual consumer communities, and SNSs” -- “Through these interactions, consumers voluntarily display their brand preference along with their persona (e.g. name and picture), which can engender eWOM communication.” -- “. Voluntary exposure to brand information in SNSs is important because consumers are seeking ways to interact with brands and other consumers, which enables truly interactive eWOM. Another important characteristic that makes SNSs unique from other eWOM media is that users’ social networks are readily available on these sites.” -- “In cyberspace, however, interactivity enables dynamic and interactive eWOM where a single person can take on the multiple roles of opinion provider, seeker and transmitter.” -- “Strong ties, such as family and friends, constitute stronger and closer relationships that are within an individual’s personal network and are able to provide substantive and emotional support (Pigg &amp; Crank 2004). Weak ties, on the other hand, are often among weaker and less personal social relationships that are composed of a wide set of acquaintances and colleagues, and facilitate information-seeking on diverse topics (Pigg &amp; Crank 2004).”</p>
<p><b>Simmons et al (2011)</b></p>	<p>“Web of blogs and content sharing, has created an environment where consumers can share their opinions with wide audiences with the click of the mouse. -- “With substantial advances in electronic communication and increased use of the Internet, the term eWOM is now used to describe electronic WOM [Keller]” -- “Organizations are now moving from pure economic analysis to sentiment analysis (i.e. opinion mining)” -- “In eWOM, members of electronic forums or social networks can discuss products and services or comment on news stories. These discussions can lead to encouraging or discouraging purchasing decisions. Positive or negative eWOM reviews can financially impact a product manufacturer, service provider, or hosting organization. Managers must find ways to quickly read and process comments left by consumers. It is difficult and time consuming to identify trends and interpret comments individually. This study illustrates how CAINES (Content Analyzer and Information extraction System) can be used by practitioners to effectively and efficiently acquire eWOM comments and interpret them for decision making.” -- “Before the Internet, the exchange of opinions among viewers was very limited mainly because of the geographical barrier [34].” -- “Dellarocas et al. [15] found that in contrast to “offline” word-of-mouth communities where opinions may “disappear into thin air” online communities maintain a persistent, public record of all posted opinions. Hennig-Thurau et al. [27] report that consumers articulate themselves online in an eWOM approach due to a consumer’s desire for social interaction, economic incentive, concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth. Thus, a consumer’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction may be displayed through their eWOM desire for economic incentives and their concern for other consumers’.”</p>
<p><b>Sohn (2009)</b></p>	<p>“The role of individuals in information diffusion has been studied extensively for decades (Rogers, 2003), and recent developments in peer-to-peer communication technologies have revived scholarly interest in the mysterious process of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM; e.g., e-mail, BBS, blogs). The formation of eWOM intention has been studied in two different ways. While some previous studies have characterized eWOM as an outcome of the psychological motives and antecedents such as opinion leadership or innovativeness (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, &amp; Gremler, 2004; Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, &amp; Raman, 2004; Sun, Youn, Wu, &amp; Kuntaraporn, 2006), others viewed it as a function of the strength and distribution patterns of social ties among individuals on the Internet (e.g., Steyer, Garcia-Bardidia, &amp; Quester, 2006; Vilpponen, Winter, &amp; Sundquist, 2006).” -- “the Internet allows people to get involved with far more diverse social settings than ever before, from close-knit groups consisting of family members and friends to huge communities involving countless anonymous participants.”</p>
<p><b>Strutton et al (2011)</b></p>	<p>“More recently, the diffusion of e-connectivity has radically transformed the reach, scope and velocity of WOM processes - and created myriad settings where WOM might yield even greater value” -- “Advertisers no longer deliberate whether they should exploit this phenomenon, but rather how best to exploit it.” -- “whether delivered face to face or transmitted electronically - are powerful promotional weapons.” -- “In the internet age, the reach of WOM has expanded considerably. Friends, family members or co-workers now exchange information easily across global neighbourhoods. The internet features ‘scale-free connectivity’ (Smith et al. 2007, p. 387), characterised by large numbers of networked users among whom information and messaging flows quickly, freely and openly.” -- “Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication has been defined as ‘any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet’ (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39).” -- “and transmitted via any combination of WOM communication channels on- or offline. The lightning speed and global reach of e-WOM allows cleverly created advertising messages to reach ever expanding networks of recipients directly. Previous studies suggest that creative elements such as distinctiveness, enjoyment and celebrity appearance may increase the likelihood of viral forwarding” -- “e-WOM behaviours are influenced by socio-cultural and personality attributes. Studies suggest that propensity to seek and provide e-WOM is influenced by factors such as culture:”</p>
<p><b>Sun-Jae &amp; Jang-Sun (2009)</b></p>	<p>“WITH THE EMERGENCE OF THE INTERNET, eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) has become an important influence on consumers’ product evaluation. Prospective customers visit Web sites and read reviews from other customers (eWOM) to learn more about a product before making a purchase.” -- “Because of its anonymous nature and wide range of contents, the power of eWOM is expanding. There are several critical antecedents of eWOM effects. First, the direction of eWOM messages (positive-negative) affects the customer’s (reader’s) response: customers are more likely to rely on eWOM messages if the direction of the messages are all the same. The consensus in eWOM represents the degree of agreement between two or more users regarding a product or its performance.2 Therefore, the eWOM messages with higher consensus can be more persuasive and powerful than messages with lower consensus” -- “consumer-related factors, such as involvement with and prior knowledge about the product, greatly influence word-of-mouth effects.”</p>



Authors	The definition of Ewom
<b>Van der Lans et al (2010)</b>	<p>"In a viral marketing campaign, an organization develops a marketing message and encourages customers to forward this message to their contacts" -- "These two examples illustrate a new way of marketing communication in which organizations encourage customers to send e-mails to friends containing a marketing message or a link to a commercial website. Because information spreads rapidly on the Internet, viral marketing campaigns have the potential to reach large numbers of customers in a short period of time." -- "Because messages from friends are likely to have more impact than advertising and because information spreads rapidly over the Internet, viral marketing is a powerful marketing communication tool that may reach many customers in a short period of time (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). Furthermore, the nature of the Internet allows marketers to use many different forms of communication such as videos, games, and interactive websites in their viral campaigns." -- "However, marketers need to actively manage the viral process to facilitate the spread of information"--"In viral marketing campaigns, marketers may use two types of strategies to influence the spread of information. The first focuses on motivating customers to forward marketing messages to their contacts (Chiu et al. 2007, Godes et al. 2005, Phelps et al. 2004). As suggested by Godes et al. (2005) motivations to forward messages are either intrinsic or extrinsic. The former can be triggered by the content of the marketing message." -- "These websites usually facilitate the viral process by providing tools to easily forward e-mails to friends, such as "Tell a Friend" or "Share Video" buttons. Examples of extrinsic motivations to forward marketing messages are prizes and other monetary incentives" -- "Finally, besides online seeding tools, marketers may still use "traditional" offline advertising to seed their campaigns"</p>
<b>Vilpponen et al. (2006)</b>	<p>"Based on the discussion above, we define viral marketing as word-of-mouth communication in situations where positive network effects prevail and where the role of the influencer is active due to positive network effects." -- "Third, the growth in computer-mediated and networked communications can facilitate information exchange among people of various backgrounds (Van Alstynne and Brynjolfsson 2005)." -- "literature review on electronic word-of-mouth behavior revealed that the terminology for this relatively new phenomenon has not yet been established"</p>
<b>Willemsen, Neijens &amp; Bronner (2012)</b>	<p>"User-generated content moves advocacy away from traditional one-way mass communication in which a central sender addresses a mass audience. Using today's interactive media, people formerly known as "the audience" (Rosen, 2006) are increasingly dictating product information themselves. The opportunity for people to engage actively in the public information process with regard to products and services provides consumers with a rich and varied set of electronic word-of-mouth messages, often posted in the form of online product reviews. User-generated product reviews are a persuasive source of information in shaping consumers' attitudes and their purchases" -- "Review sites allow anyone to post anything about any product" -- "eviewers construct a persona of expertise from the outset ("In my line of work, wedding and special event photography, durability and adaptability are critical"), or the lack thereof ("I am not an expert on digital cameras or digital photography"). The presence of such claims in online reviews has also been observed in a number of other studies. For example, Otterbacher (2011, cf. Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, &amp; de Ridder, 2011) found that almost a quarter of online reviews makes reference to the reviewer's level of expertise. "research on electronic word of mouth has found source credibility to have a profound effect on consumers' judgment and choice" "Moreover, consumers are inclined to trust people whom they perceive to be homophilous to themselves"</p>
<b>Xun and Reynolds (2010)</b>	<p>"As the marketing paradigm shifts from purely product-focused analyses, centring on concepts such as the four Ps (product, price, place and promotion), in an attempt to understand and address the more experiential considerations of consumers (such as their 'fun, feelings and fantasies') -- "designed to shed light in particular on consumer experiences" -- "individuals may be more open online than they are in real life." -- "eWOM is a modified online extension of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM)." -- "Hennig-Thurau et al 38 define eWOM as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet' (p. 39). However, this constrains eWOM as a static conceptualisation, leaving its potential as an information exchange process unexplored." -- "Although eWOM can also be defined as 'peer consumers' statements made online',<sup>35</sup> this study, rather than adopting a constrained interpretation of the term, takes eWOM as a dynamic and ongoing information exchange process." -- "pricy tech-electronics' is the number one product consumers bought after reading related eWOM." -- "like traditional WOM, there are opinion leaders in the digital world as well. They are usually more experienced users of the forum and respond to posts within a few hours." -- "eWOM seekers are generally pragmatic, and their attention is not so much on assessing credibility and authenticity – as traditional eWOM theory suggests. Rather it is focused on the usefulness of an eWOM provider's posts in addressing a particularly question, their posting history, the presentation of the written posts, feedback from other members of the forum, and (in this case) using the reputation power index as a proxy for quality."</p>
<b>Yeh and Choi (2011)</b>	<p>"While word of mouth (WOM hereafter) is a long-standing form of communication, it has recently gained mounting attention and popularity as an effective means of disseminating marketing information and as a driver of consumer trials and purchases of brands (Plummer 2007). At the hub of the recent growth of WOM is the widespread adoption of the Internet, which has drastically facilitated WOM with a range of communication channels such as emails, instant messaging, online discussion boards and blogs. The Internet is said to open up a new era of WOM, that is, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM hereafter) by enabling consumers to freely and swiftly share information and opinions with peer consumers with no geographic or time constraints. eWOM is defined as a specific type of WOM that transpires in the online setting and shares the fundamental characteristics of WOM (Dwyer 2007). Yet the landscape and magnitude of eWOM is significantly different from that of traditional WOM (Mangold and Faulds 2009). In the era of digital media, a consumer can spread the word at the speed of light by telling thousands of other consumers with a few clicks. No wonder marketers strive to capitalize on the emerging power of eWOM and increasingly employ viral marketing" -- "Despite the absence of face-to-face communication, online communities serve as an effective platform for the formation and maintenance of social relationships (Rheingold 1993; Walther 1996) and provide a social venue for dynamic, engaging, interactive eWOM among like-minded people (Hung and Li 2007)." -- "Most remarkable is that members of a brand community often serve as brand evangelists and champion the brand by disseminating positive information on the brand, referring the brand to others and cultivating the brand culture (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001)." -- "interactions in the context of online communities are dynamic and bidirectional as the members take on multiple roles in the process of eWOM (Allsop, Bassett, and Hoskins 2007). They are information givers, obtainers and spreaders." -- "Trust in virtual groups or communities has been found to significantly influence the way information sharing and communication operates among their members" -- "individuals often turn to limited symbolic cues to form stereotypical impressions of others"</p>

### 1.1.1 Elements Conceptualizing Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Authors	ELEMENTS RESEARCHED IN THE ANALYSIS										Differentiated from offline WOM		
	Opinion/ sharing between consumers	Via Internet	Network-based	Directed to multiple people	No time or location constraints	Anonymous	Effects on the customer decision process	Opinion leadership	Part of firm's marketing strategy	Many different platforms		Credibility	Experiences
Amblee & Bui (2011-2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Do-Hyung et al. (2007)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x
Dwyer (2007)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Fong, J., & Burton, S. (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Gil-Or (2010)	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	
Goldsmith & Horowitz (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Henke (2011)	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x
Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Hyuk Jun & Morrison, (2008)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lee & Youn (2009)	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Li (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
Okazaki (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Phelps et al. (2004)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Pinto & Mansfield (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
Porter & Golan (2006)	x	x	x	x	x		x		x		x	x	x
San José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Simmons et al (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
Shu-Chuan & Yoojung (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Sohn (2009)	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x		x	
Strutton et al (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Sun-Jae & Jang-Sun (2009)	x	x		x		x	x			x	x		x
Van der Lans et al (2010)	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x			
Vilpponen et al. (2006)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Willemssen et al. (2012)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	
Xun and Reynolds (2010)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Yeh & Choi (2011)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
					=	Elements determining eWOM							
					=	EWOM's relationship to traditional WOM							
				x	=	The factor occurs in the article							





## **Appendix D: Methodology**

### **1.1.1 The Online Questionnaire - Questions**

#### EWOM – Electronic word-of-mouth marketing in your organization

The aim of this research is to get better understanding of how electronic word-of-mouth can be utilized in marketing services. The results will be anonymous. Based on this survey, a 30-minute interview will be made, where more in-depth questions will be asked.

Please mark in the questionnaire your opinion about the importance of the following actions, in which your company is participating. The scale is from 1 to 7 (1 = not at all important, 7 = extremely important).

Fill in your company's name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How important in your organization is to follow consumer opinions online? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not following)
2. How important in your organization is to utilize consumer online feedback in developing marketing and/or a service? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not utilizing)
3. How important in your organization is to segment consumers in social media and other online channels? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not segmenting)
4. How important in your organization is to target online messages to selected consumer groups in social media and other online channels? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not targeting)
5. How important in your organization is to target online messages to opinion leaders? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not targeting to opinion leaders)
6. How important in your organization is to identify consumer motives – why they recommend your products/services online? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not identifying)
7. How important in your organization is to integrate online messages to other marketing activities? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not integrating)

8. How important in your organization is to design online messages' content to activate consumers? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not designing)
9. How important in your organization is to reward consumers for being active online? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not rewarding)
10. How important in your organization is to interact with consumers online? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not interacting)
11. How important in your organization is to forecast consumer trends based on online discussions? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not forecasting)
12. How important in your organization is to measure online activities based on consumers' online activity? (Scale to answer from 1 to 7, also possibility to answer: we are not measuring)

Comments/Questions? \_\_\_\_\_

#### 7.5.4 Online Questionnaire – Answers

##### COMPANIES' ANSWERS

Scale 1-7 (1= not at all important, 7 = extremely important, 0 = not doing the action)

QUESTIONS	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Mean
1. Follow consumer opinions online	5	7	7	6	7	7	5	5	5	6.00
2. Utilize consumer feedback in marketing, development	5	5	6	3	7	7	6	5	5	5.44
3. Segmentation	0	3	5	7	6	3	4	4	6	4.22
4. Targeting	0	4	6	7	7	2	7	5	6	4.89
5. Targeting to opinion leaders	0	6	5	3	6	4	3	3	3	3.67
6. Identifying motives to share	5	6	6	5	7	6	6	6	5	5.78
7. Integrating online activitie with other mar comms	6	7	6	6	7	6	6	7	4	6.11
8. Design online content to activate consumers	6	5	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6.44
9. Rewarding consumers for being active online	4	5	6	5	7	4	5	3	5	4.89
10. Interacting with consumers online	6	6	7	5	7	7	6	4	6	6.00
11. Forecast consumer trends based on online discussions	2	4	6	3	5	4	3	4	2	3.67
12. Measure online activities based on consumers' activity	7	7	6	7	7	5	7	5	3	6.00

### **7.5.5 Interview Guide**

The interview guide has been divided into three steps based on the framework developed in the literature review (See chapter 4.4.).

#### **Monitor**

- Which online channels do you rate as the most important to reach your clientele? Why?
- How do you follow consumer opinions online?
- How do you segment online consumers? How about social media?

#### **Encourage**

- Please tell how are you activating consumers to share their opinions online? How about social media?
- How do you utilize consumer feedback? E.g. in marketing, communications, product development. Do you have any examples?
- How do you react to critique on social media, or in other online channels?
- How do you target opinion leaders? Can you tell more about that process?
- What are the most important elements, when thinking about online message content? Tell me how do you see it in social media? In blogs?
- Do you have guidelines for your employees on how to interact in social media?
- How do you reward the consumers for being active online? Examples?
- Tell me about the process, how do you interact with consumers?
- Can you give me examples on how your company has integrated online marketing messages (social media) with other marketing activities?

#### **Commit**

- How do you measure your online activities based on consumer activity? How about social media? Do you see it as goal-oriented?
- What do you think are the motives for your consumers to share opinions online?
- Tell me about the role of eWOM in designing services and in marketing.
- Tell about your team? Who are handling these kinds of issues?

## 1.1.2 Data Table of Observing Selected Companies' Practices in eWOM

OBSERVATIONS OF THE SELECTED COMPANIES' EWOM PRACTICES						
Company	Corporate website	Brand website	Discussion forum	Facebook	Twitter	Other
<b>A</b>	No indication about social media or eWOM activity on the site	Brand website: Twitter activity indicated on the frontpage: "Follow Tweets about the local music festival". The site has been divided into four sections - one of which is "follow and participate". There the user can find blogs and communities - however no social media channels. All articles can be recommended, shared via different social channels, and commented but the user needs to register and write with real identity. In the opinion section, the reader can find the brand's recent Facebook feed. Bloggers are local communities or active locals. Readers can send their pictures and all of them are shown in a gallery. Own video channel, however, users cannot comment videos or share them.	No forum - users can directly comment articles on the site with real identity.	Brand: Facebook-profile for the brand - newspaper. 1881 likes, 295 talking about. Named as a website.  Functionalities: App: Readers' pic - no gallery, just instructions. Events (nothing new since 2011), videos: only one promotional video, pictures. Users can post comments and sent messages.  Most of the post have a link to news, promotion, twitter. They are either related to the news articles or they are promotion, benefits for the ones who order. Smileys used, writers by the brand showing their opinions, feelings when writing. Questions utilized, writers are not hidden behind the brand - telling their names.  During the given time period (May 31st - June 13th, 2013), 9.5 posts per day. All of the post do not have text, and if they do, they are quite short. Reader can clearly see, which of the posts are promotional, as promotional messages are not signed by anyone. Users' comments have been commented couple of times, mostly related to errors in posts.  Visual identity: logo and slogan as a profile picture, promotional picture as a cover photo: a child in action.  No profile for corporate, only its brands have a profile.	Editorial staff has their own Twitter accounts. Tweets based on events: one great discussion about wolves and one local summer festival. Because of the festival there is 24 tweets between 12th-13th of June. No other tweets during the time period. Short descriptions used about a situation, links to pictures, news, a music videos. Local language dialect used. Not always tags used.	Mobile app: no commenting or sharing options.
<b>B</b>	Youtube videos, photo blog, commenting is not possible, press releases can be shared via Facebook and Twitter, Facebook & Twitter access to share in every website bottom part, no feed shown. Career videos linked to Vimeo account, where videos can be commented, liked, and shared.	Brand: All articles can be shared via multiple social media platforms, there is a link for consumers to follow the brand on Facebook and a link to separate discussion forum. In the forum, the day's most discussed and the newest threads are in the top of the page, people can write with pseudonym. Number of blogs by politicians and celebrities. The blogs can be directly commented. Own video channel, which videos can be recommended on Facebook, tweeted, google +, and sent to friends via email (some videos can be found from Youtube). Style and travelling section can be also commented by using Facebook account. Most read articles can be found, but not most commented from the website. People can sent their pictures, but they are not collected anywhere to be seen.	Own thread for feedback, where both the brand and its employees comment on consumer feedback justifying their decisions.  People need to register, but only with pseudonym.  People have profiles, which tell the time, when they have registered, the amount of messages, they have sent, the amount of messages per day (average), all sent messages, all open threads. People can tell their location, Interest, Biography, and occupation.	corporate and brands have different profiles.  The brand: Over 117 000 fans, 10980 talking about the brand. Post usually consist of a short text about a news, link to the news, a question, no author name, links to website competitions, readers' pictures, no sales promotion with prices. People cannot post comments, but they can send a message. "Most recent news" app, which news can be liked or sent via fb messages.  The brand has not commented on consumers' comments when taking a time scope of two weeks (May 31st - June 13th, 2013). Every day from two to seven posts, on average 4.3 posts per day  Logos used both in the cover photo and profile picture. Provocative images used, where people and emotions are present.  Corporate: likes 551, 18 talking. Events, videos, and photos can be seen, links to competitions, events, knowhow, recruitment, responsibility, questions. Always picture or link and name of the writer, linking to other channels: blogs, liking comments, but there are only few comments. 7 posts in the given time period. Profile picture logo, and cover photos - people in action. Interestingly, compared to the brand's profile, Users can post a comment, comment and send a message.	corporate and brands have different accounts.  The brand: 16 349 followers, 48293 tweets, 5 following. Tweets more informative - news headlines + first phrase + link to the news on the website. 54 tweets per day on average (May 31st - June 13th, 2013). No <u>hashtaging</u> .  Two journalists tweeting also with their accounts.  Visual identity mainly logos.  Corporate: Twitter account hard to find. Only 4 followers, 13 following and 2 tweets in the last 20 hours. Posts are shorter than in Facebook. Visual identity: logo, and cover with an active person. Following own personnel who tweet.	Mobile: articles can be only shared on Facebook. Videos can be accessed and shared on Facebook
<b>C</b>	No indication about social media on the site, the user can order a newsletter to email.	All social media connections mentioned in the bottom banner: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, email mentioned. Facebook emphasized: On the frontpage, a teaser encourages users to like the brand on FB. Products cannot be rated or shared via social media. DIY/Handcraft instructions can be liked on Facebook, Tweeted, or shared on Google +. The brand has a club, where registered consumers can get informed of the campaigns first, the club is also linked to blogs. Blogs cannot be commented. In the information about the brand section, no social media channels have been mentioned.	There is not any online forum for users to exchange opinions. Not in the club.	One profile: 28917 likes, 602 talking about this. Functions: Photos, Registration to loyalty members club, Summer competition app, Ordering a newsletter, feedback form. Users can post, comment and send messages to the brand. Posts usually related to promotion: campaigns, new stores, regular customer recruitment, competition (FB app). Facebook offers. Also links to DIY instructions in the blog. The posts mainly consist of short text - 'you' pronoun is used, a picture, not necessarily a link, if a link it goes to regular customer registration, fb competition, blogs.  During the given time period: 11 posts = 0,78 posts on average every day. Post every day except weekends. The brand comments user's questions and likes users' posts. Comments are not usually signed by the employees.  Visual identity: logo as a profile picture, cover photo: offering.	One account: 33 followers, 81 tweets, 0 following. Tweets mostly differ from FB posts in length. In the given time period, just links to pictures. Tweets usually have <u>hashtags</u> . Seven posts between May 31st and June 13th, 2013. Visual identity: concentrated on logos.	<u>Pinterest</u> : Boards divided based on offering and public events. Pictures usually have just descriptive text of few words. 39 followers, 38 following. Usually in pictures the product in a natural setting.



D	No indication about social media or eWOM activity on the site	Facebook presence only mentioned on the front page. First a banner, how many friends like and then in the bottom part activity - not that visible. Also, the most commented selection cannot be found on the front page. All articles can be commented with pseudonyms in a forum - suitable thread is linked in the article. All articles can be shared via different social media, but the main focus is on Facebook - articles can be recommended and send a message on FB. From community section, readers can find blogs, forum, readers' pictures, events. 6 different blogs written by journalists, blogs can be commented, but the bloggers do not interact with commenters. All the sent readers' pictures are placed in a gallery - competitions related. Own video channel - videos can be commented and shared via social media.	Users have their own profile, pic, rating based on activity, registration day, number of posts written, number of threads written, interests, bookmarks. Most commented and newest ones can be found from the forum's front page. Editorial staff has their own profile and they have answered user's questions and comments. Sent messages over 400.	Corporation has its own Organization page, where the brand's Facebook page and twitter account are mentioned as well as people working in the company.  The brand's FB-profile: likes 8139, 482 talking, 149 were here. Functions: Photos, Videos (4 videos -making of, promotional company presentation), map. Users can comment, send posts, but they cannot send messages. Post usually related to local happenings, they consist of a link with a picture, and there is a short text. All the posts are signed by a journalist. Smileys used in posts. Also posts about crisis management (website not working), internal happenings (the boss bought a cake) and competitions leading to own website. Not that much promotion in itself - one post related to news that the brand has 8000 likes. During the given time period, 3.9 posts per day on average. Couple comments and liking by the brand to own posts in the given period. Not that much reactions to user send posts, one like to a new news idea. Posts more declaratory than asking - only four questions to the community in posts during the given time period. The channel is used also for finding suitable people for interviewing - users are asked to use traditional channels: phone/email.  Visual identity: profile picture is part of the logo, cover photo indicates the given season - nature or pictures from editorial staff.  The company has also profiles for young people (81 likes) and students (169 likes). The amount of fans is quite little.	Three twitter accounts: one for event postings (now only posts related to presidential elections 2012), one for news only (all news come as a feed), and one for general account.  General account: 2910 people followers, 38904 tweets, 88 following. Same posts as in FB, the posts are signed, and link to the news on the website. Twitter is not used as a channel for interaction, <u>hashtags</u> are not used, and users comments not replied. Own journalists are being followed.	Mobile app: no commenting or sharing options.
E	Facebook, Twitter are clearly visible in each site's right top column, the user can share via icon the site on social media. Twitter is more emphasized on the site - the corporation encourages readers keep up to date by following on Twitter on the frontpage, feed on career site and media site. Own social media section on media site - concentrates on Twitter and its feed. Videos on the website come from the company's own platform, videos cannot be commented, in contact section, no additional mention about social media presence.	Brand 1 - games: Facebook integration on the front page. Users can also go through player profiles - the ones who are online, the ones who have a great rating, and the newest ones. After finishing a questionnaire/game, the user can share the results on Facebook or get added to email list. On the bottom of the page, the user can see the games, other users have recommended. Users can make their own questionnaires in the community questionnaires section and the games can be rated with a star system (logo instead of a star). Community build around the game, users have profiles and they can be contacted. Also, a online forum for users to send messages.  Brand 2 - beauty: Facebook teaser on the front page's bottom part, as well as icons with links to other social media channels (FB, Twitter, <u>Pinterest</u> , Youtube). All the products inside the box can be liked and send via Facebook, but not rated or commented. There is also a blog with cosmetic tips, updated a couple of times during a week. Blogs can be commented, tweeted, liked, pinned, google plused. In the contact details, people are encouraged to sent message via <u>Facebook</u> . No closed consumer group for interaction.	Brand 1: has an online community, where users can build profile and interact with each other, a friends list (people do not have to be added, the list shows the ones you have clicked). Profile tells the year born, sex, living location, time when registered, the number of times visited, the number of times the profile has been watched, if the user is online or not, the activity of the user and rating, and a guest book where other users can write, and a user name & profile picture. All users can write their own blog. Blogs can be commented and shared via social media. Best players have their own trophy section on the forum.	Corporate: An organization page can be found, but not a real profile. Still old logo.  Brand 1: 3399 likes, 15 talking about. Apps: Photos and questionnaires. Post usually have a link to a game and a short text that promotes the game. Some general wishes and congratulations as well, posting is not done daily, just 4 posts in the given time period - basically once or twice a week. Posts consist usually of statements and a question. Earlier in Easter, competitions that have an enigma. The one who solves the quickest and comments, wins two movie tickets. No comments to posts during the given time period, but post by consumers have been responded. Liking some comments on FB (good feedback).  Visual identity: the profile picture consists of full logo, the cover photo has also the slogan and offering presented.  Brand 2: 2212 likes, 452 talking. Functions: photos, tutorial videos, <u>Instagram</u> , <u>Pinterest</u> , Twitter. Users can post, comment, and send a message. Posts have always text, and a photo or video, and sometimes link to the brand's blog. Posts activate people with questions, competitions, <u>gallaps</u> . They are also used to ask people's opinions about the offering. The brand interacts a lot with its users, liking and commenting almost to every post, also when users write their post on the wall. Facebook works as a customer service channel. <u>Pinterest</u> linked to Facebook as well. Posting almost daily, except weekends. 12 posts in the given time period.  Visual identity: profile picture full logo, cover photo related to cosmetics.	Corporate twitter account, countries accounts, brands' accounts  Corporate: 2765 followers, 620 tweets, 1234 following. Tweets promote, little news with short text and link. Encouraging people to open link with you pronoun and suggestions. Using hash tags and replying to users. This happens via employees' own account. However, general tweets are done by the company. Tweeting almost every day, except weekends. During the given time period = 13 tweets in total - 0,93 tweets per day.  Visual identity: part of corporate logo and color - grey  Brand 1: One account is found, but it's not actively used. Only two tweets and 12 followers - last tweet in 2010.  Brand 2: 38 followers, 73 tweets, 61 following. Tweets focus on giving tips, promoting competitions, linking to blogs, news. Active community, the brand is at least <u>retweeting</u> user's tweets, but also replying if questions. Different media used, video, pictures, link. Hash tags used mostly. Visual identity: logo and <u>coverphoto</u> follow the same style as on FB, also a background picture the same style. In the given time period 7 tweets.	video not linked to youtube, in Belgium they have their own youtube channel. Different brands use different social media.



F	No indication about social media or eWOM activity on the site	The brand: On the frontpage, there is a separate teaser, where icons for Facebook and Twitter and text "Follow us". Also on the frontpage separate banners for new photos and new videos. All the post can be commented via discussion forum, and they can be shared via social media: FB, Twitter, Google + g+ by email. Also, all the articles can be liked on FB, which indicates emphasis on Facebook as a social media channel. In addition, users can rate all the articles. All the videos linked to Youtube and on the site they can be rated and shared via social media. From the opinions section, users can find blogs and online forum. Ten different blogs mainly written by own journalists from handcraft to nature, cooking, local events etc.	Users cannot see comments to the related article if they are not registered via online bank account. When registering, the real name of the user, social media accounts (FB, Twitter) and picture are collected. In the forum, the users can see the comments without registering. The profile consist of picture, the amount of messages sent, and if the user is currently online, living location, and sex.	<p>Corporation account/profile cannot be found.</p> <p>Brand profile: 1882 likes. 277 talking about, 12 were here. Functions: Photos, Map, Events (3 events, last from March 2013). Users can share posts, write comments, and sent messages. Topics for posts are quite diverse: links to news, blogs, editorials, competitions, events suggestions (imperative). Users are also asked help to collecting ideas for articles, and shown pictures about internal events. Posts may consist of text, links, pictures, questions, local dialect, citation. Surprisingly a lot of post just have a link to news and no text. The posts are not signed by the author.</p> <p>In the given time period (May 31st - June 13th 2013) 70 posts were shared by the brand, and in average 5 posts per day were posted. There were three days (during weekend) when no messages were posted. From these messages, in total 26 messages did not have text, only link to the news. Only couple of times, three times commented to own posts, where users are commenting. The posts that users have sent to the wall, the brand has responded only once and to a good feedback. Users' suggestions have not been answered.</p> <p>Visual identity: profile picture part of the logo, cover photo from local beautiful summer scenery, where people active. Cover photo pictures time related, local scenery, people, events.</p>	<p>Two twitter accounts: one for general news, one for sports.</p> <p>General: 505 followers, 983 tweets, 63 following. Topics from news', columns', editorial's headlines. The tweet consist of short text and a link, and mostly has a hash tag/s. In the given time period: 49 tweets → on average 3.5 tweets per day. No replies have not been answered. Own journalists are being followed.</p> <p>sports: No recent posts in the given time period - last from 28 of May, 176 followers, 163 tweets, 45 following.</p>	Own Youtube channel. All the videos linked there, which can be commented.
G	All the social media channels mentioned in the bottom bar: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, blogs and Foursquare (is not mentioned on the brand's website). No commenting enabled. Press releases cannot be shared.	Own columns for social media activity in Twitter and Facebook - shows the user's friends that follow the brand. All the social media channels mentioned in the bottom bar: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and blogs. Twitter is the only one that speaks to the reader: "Follow us on Twitter". None of the sites: News, flying destinations.. cannot be commented or shared via social media. Newsletter can be ordered. Web Shop offering is linked to Facebook - users can like the products, and send message about them via fb. No clear path to the specific online development program.	No forum incorporated to website or the customer club.	<p>company profiles for different regions.</p> <p>206000 likes, 2901 talking about. Apps: Competition: Blog and win a trip to Tel Aviv. Another Competition Summer Trip tips - participants can win every week a 300 euros gift card by giving the best tip. Tips can be shared and special offers for fans. Loyalty members have their own app, where they can get to know all the benefits. Photos &amp; Videos. People can send messages, post comments, post.</p> <p>Posts are used to tell news, promotion, recruitment, crisis management. Post usually have a link, a photo, a video, a question, or a questionnaire. The brand uses smileys, the writer of the post is not indicated. Some of the posts are in Finnish or English.</p> <p>During the given time period (May 31st - June 13th, 2013) The brand is commenting with a person's name ("Aku") and liking only some comments and questions related to crisis management - being late, flights cancelled etc. Users posts are notified in one post - in a post reads: "And this time we got the airport code (HEL) right, thanks for pointing it out!" Users can post and send a message. However, when users post their comments, feedback, questions on the wall, the brand seems to respond by signing and like users' comments mostly.</p> <p>All the post are quite long, even many paragraphs. The brand posted in this given time 10 posts. Mostly liked and shared post - special offers for fans.</p> <p>Visual identity: cover photos about active staff and one picture about new service offering. Profile picture a logo.</p> <p>The specific online development program community: a development channel for consumers, 316 likes, 37 talking about. Post contain at least a link, photo or question. Relate to the atmosphere and experience in the airport. Smileys used. linking to other eWOM platforms: blogs, Program mostly likes the posts people share, but does not comment. Users can post comments as well, and these the program has mostly commented. No names are indicated, who is writing the posts. During the given time period (May 31st - June 13th, 2013) 10 posts have been provided by the company.</p>	<p>12616 followers, 2395 tweets, 2233 following. Twitter acts more as a customer service channel, but also as news channel. The company is retweeting and ranking tweets into favorites. It is answering by a person - name indicator. Also, linking to other channels, e.g. blogs.</p> <p>Visual Identity: logo, and plane with flowers.</p> <p>During the given time period (May 31st - June 13th, 2013), tweets: 5 tweets per day on average.</p> <p>Also, own channel for company news. 3127 Followers, 24 following, 819 tweets. Informative, a short post with a link, linking with blog - 8 posts in the given time period. Only a logo.</p>	<p>Own Youtube channel, videos can be commented.</p> <p>Own site for blogs Blogs with comments, Blogs can be commented and shared via social media. Readers are encouraged to visit other channels: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Foursquare. No blogs written for a month. Writers own employees from different fields. Blog comments are being responded.</p> <p>The specific online development program: Site consists of blogs, which the community can comment and suggest own ideas. Writer are personnel. The blogs can be shared via social media (like - Facebook, Twitter, Google +, also Pinterest). Blog post about development program's f2f workshop. Comments are sometimes commented by program. 4 blog post during the time period of two weeks,</p> <p>foursquare</p> <p>social Facebook based service, which helps you to communicate with others on the flight</p>

H	Social media channels indicated in the bottom bar: "Follow us:" Facebook, Twitter, Youtube. Press releases cannot be shared, but other sites can be shared via different social media platforms.	Social media channels indicated in the bottom bar: "Follow us:" Facebook, Twitter, Youtube. Press releases cannot be shared, but other sites can be shared via different social media platforms. Loyalty members club does not have any interactive forum, just works with newsletter. No blog found from the site.  EWOM channels are more present in one newer brand's international website. There users can comment articles with Facebook connection. The site also contains blogs. All articles can be also tweeted, liked, and google +. On each sub site, the first teaser encourages to follow the brand on FB & Twitter.	No discussion forum.	Country organizations and brands have their own profiles Country profile: Finnish profile has 46232 likes and 328 people are talking about. Functions: Photos, Videos, App: Booking a trip/service. Users cannot post a comment, but they can comment the company's posts and send a message.  Post relate to promotional campaigns, news and it is used for crisis management. Post usually have a link and a picture, and they are not signed by anyone. The company is actively commenting and liking users' posts. In the given time period, there were 3 posts, so interacting is not daily. Visual identity: part of the logo, cover photo: offering, the newest ship.  The brand: 27596 liking 215 talking about. Functions: photos. Interestingly, users can write a post and comment a post, but users cannot send messages. More inspirational than functional posts, as they don't consist a link, just pictures and short text - promotion about performers and coming service improvements in English. One post directs to blog on the brand's website. 5 posts during the given time period - couple times a week. The brand is actively answering user's comments and liking them actively. Also using smileys. Not signing the posts. The visual identity does not differ from the company's identity.	The company and the new brand have different accounts.  Country account (Finland) - 52 followers, 2 tweets, 1 following + Company profile - 511 followers, 334 tweets: Promotion about service offering, news in Finnish, Short text Linking to press releases, pictures, Facebook posts. No hash tags used. During the time period 5 posts. Visual identity: Logo, offering, and beautiful scenery.  The brand: 324 followers, 85 tweets. Twitter account not recently updated, last post from April. Tweets are done sometimes English and sometimes Finnish, and hash tags are used, but only sometimes. Visual identity is mainly ensured with the logo.	
I	No indication about social media on the site. All articles can be sent to a friend via email	The brand: On the top right corner (front page), users can like or follow the brand on social media - twitter and Facebook emphasized. On the bottom right corner, site visitors can see which articles have been recommended on FB. All the articles can be shared via Facebook, Twitter and other social media. The articles can be also recommended via FB, and rated as "a good article". Users can comment articles with pseudonyms. On the front page, no indication which articles have been commented. Editorial staffs' columns can be found from the comments section, no identification to blogs.	Online forum can be visited without registering, but the user cannot write to the forum. In this case the profiles of the users cannot be seen. It seems that the users cannot be rated.	Corporate and offering have different profiles.  Corporate: likes 106, 2 talking about, 107 were here. Functions: photo, map. Users can comment and post on the wall, and send messages. Not that updated profile, just one post from 2013. Post just informal, consists of links. Visual identity not taken care of - logo is not sharp, no cover photo. Only one feedback / post from the user (critique), which has been replied.  The brand: 1071 likes, 16 talking about. Functions: Photos. Users can comment, post comments, and send messages. Mostly short text and link in a post. Links can be directed to own websites, but also other sites, youtube videos, etc. that could interest readers. Also, in the given time, one post is quite long, and in the end of the post is a promotion. There were 5 posts during May 31st - June 13th, 2013 and the posts were not commented. No recent posts by others during the time period, but before, the brand has mostly commented back, and also liked some of the users' comments. Visual identity: Profile picture: the most recent magazine cover, cover photo: technical stuff.	Brands have own profiles, cannot find corporate account.  The brand: 1135 followers, 1358 tweets, 26 following. Tweets about service improvements, own articles, news. In the given time period, short posts, mainly linking to own website. Only three posts during the time. Users' tweets have been retweeted, and the complaints have been replied.	no blogs mentioned. Own youtube channel, which is not mentioned anywhere.



