

# Guiding Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) Through Organic Social Media for Effective Strategic Communications: a Literature Review

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## Abstract

The advantages of social media, including rapid information dissemination and easy access at little or no cost to the user, have placed them at the heart of communications. As a result, regardless of who they are (e.g., governmental organisation, NGO, terrorist group), all strategic communicators today have to utilise social media. More

specifically, it is necessary for strategic communicators to have a good understanding of how to guide word-of-mouth communications. While there is an emerging dialogue in the strategic communications journals about social media, it is still at a nascent stage. However, this area has received substantial attention from marketing scholars over the years. In this literature review paper, we aim to contribute to the development of this growing stream of research by summarising findings of the marketing literature on social media and word-of-mouth communications that are useful for strategic communications purposes. Overall, this paper has implications for the theory and practice of strategic communications.

## Introduction

Almost every large-scale political movement of the last two decades has involved the use of social media in a multifaceted manner. In many political events, social media were at the heart of mass message delivery and participant recruitment processes (Arab Spring, Gezi protests, Occupy movement).<sup>1</sup> However, beyond that, high-level strategic processes including the planning of message content and brand positioning of the message source (the faction trying to recruit participants, the political party trying to attain votes) were developed and continuously refined via data scraped automatically from social media platforms (the case of Cambridge Analytica). More importantly, the use of social media as a tool for strategic communications is so prevalent that almost every competing party in a political equation simultaneously employs social media.

In 2013, during Turkey's Gezi protests, groups opposing the Erdogan government leveraged social media to generate the word-of-mouth (WOM) necessary to recruit ordinary Turkish citizens.<sup>2</sup> In particular,

- 1 Pascal Lupien, 'Indigenous Movements, Collective Action, and Social Media: New Opportunities or New Threats?', *Social Media + Society*, 6 N° 2 (2020): 1–11.
- 2 Olu Jenzen, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Umut Korkut, and Aidan McGarry, 'The Symbol of Social Media in Contemporary Protest: Twitter and the Gezi Park Movement', *Convergence* 27 N° 2 (2021): 414–37.

WOM refers to 'informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service'<sup>3</sup> and social media are defined as 'online platforms that allow users to generate content, exchange information, and communicate with one another'.<sup>4</sup> Without the WOM communication facilitated by social media, turning what was initially a local sit-in protest in a district of Istanbul into a fully fledged opposition movement in ninety cities would have been difficult, if not impossible. Three years later, during the Turkish coup d'état attempt on 15 July 2016, social media were again leveraged to recruit ordinary Turkish citizens, but this time against an opposing military faction, by the Erdogan government.<sup>5</sup> These are examples of both government and opposition groups employing social media marketing for strategic communications. There are also numerous cases of NGOs, for-profit companies, and even terrorist organisations benefiting from the power of social media in order to attract groups of individuals,<sup>6</sup> or instil certain thoughts and emotions (ISIS beheading videos).<sup>7</sup> Social media platforms have even been used intra-organisationally (internal wiki sites) to strategically communicate with colleagues and change the discourse inside an organisation: to lessen resistance to strategic change, shape organisational identity, and establish strategic consensus/commitment to goals throughout the organisation.<sup>8</sup>

The prevalence of social media marketing is not without explanation; since its inception, social media use has grown unabated. It is now estimated

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- 3 L. Jean Harrison-Walker, 'The Measurement of Word-of-Mouth Communication and an Investigation of Service Quality and Customer Commitment as Potential Antecedents', *Journal of Service Research* 4 N° 1 (2001): 60–75.
  - 4 Jessica Y. Breland, Lisa M. Quintiliani, Kristin L. Schneider, Christine N. May, and Sherry Pagoto, 'Social Media as a Tool to Increase the Impact of Public Health Research', *American Journal of Public Health* 107 N° 12 (2017): 1890–91.
  - 5 Semra Demirdiř, 'The Role of Facebook and Twitter in Social Movements: A Study on the July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey', *Türkiye İletişim Araştırmaları Dergisi* 32 (2019): 32–49.
  - 6 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, 'Social Media Recruitment of Americans: A Case Study from the Islamic State', in *Routledge Handbook of US Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations* (Routledge, 2021), pp. 413–22.
  - 7 Ally McCrow-Young and Mette Mortensen, 'Countering Spectacles of Fear: Anonymous' Meme "War" against ISIS', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2021): 13675494211005060.
  - 8 L.R. Men, J. O'Neil, and M. Ewing, 'Examining the Effects of Internal Social Media Usage on Employee Engagement', *Public Relations Review* 46 N° 2 (2020): 101880.

that close to 4.5 billion people worldwide use social media, a figure that has more than doubled since 2015.<sup>9</sup> Facebook/Meta—which also owns Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger—reported that 2.8 billion users accessed at least one of its platforms each month.<sup>10</sup> TikTok, in a brief span of six years between 2016 and 2022, amassed well over a billion users.<sup>11</sup> On Snapchat, the number of ‘snaps’ created has surpassed 6 billion.<sup>12</sup> In the same way that all major institutions were argued to have incorporated ‘mass media logic’<sup>13</sup> into their strategic considerations by the 1970s, Van Dijck and Poell argue that ‘social media logic’ is now ‘gradually invading all areas of public life’. And politics is no exception.<sup>14</sup>

Many individuals regularly share not only their memories,<sup>15</sup> travel experiences,<sup>16</sup> and news<sup>17</sup>, but also political information,<sup>18</sup> and even misinformation<sup>19</sup> and ‘fake news’.<sup>20</sup> As well as opening avenues for public debate between online users, the proliferation of social media is credited

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- 9 Brian Dean, ‘Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?’, *Backlinko*, 1 September 2021.
  - 10 Facebook, ‘Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2020 Results’, *Facebook*, 27 January 2021.
  - 11 Marzieh Eghtesadi and Adrian Florea, ‘Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and TikTok: A Proposal for Health Authorities to Integrate Popular Social Media Platforms in Contingency Planning amid a Global Pandemic Outbreak’, *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 111 N° 3 (2020): 389–91.
  - 12 Ashna Habib, Tooba Ali, Zainab Nazir, and Arisha Mahfooz, ‘Snapchat Filters Changing Young Women’s Attitudes’, *Annals of Medicine and Surgery* 82 (2022).
  - 13 David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow, *Media Logic* (SAGE Publications, 1979).
  - 14 José Van Dijck and Thomas Poell, ‘Understanding Social Media Logic’, *Media and Communication* 1 N° 1 (2013): 2–14 (2).
  - 15 Charles B. Stone, Li Guan, Gabriella LaBarbera, Melissa Ceren, Brandon Garcia, Kelly Huie, Carissa Stump, and Qi Wang, ‘Why Do People Share Memories Online? An Examination of the Motives and Characteristics of Social Media Users’, *Memory* (2022): 1–15.
  - 16 Tiago Oliveira, Benedita Araujo, and Carlos Tam, ‘Why Do People Share Their Travel Experiences on Social Media?’, *Tourism Management* 78 (2020): 104041.
  - 17 Chei Sian Lee, Long Ma, and Dion Hoe-Lian Goh, ‘Why Do People Share News in Social Media?’, in *International Conference on Active Media Technology* (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011), pp. 129–40.
  - 18 Dam Hee Kim, S. Mo Jones-Jang, and Kate Kenski, ‘Why Do People Share Political Information on Social Media?’, *Digital Journalism* 9 N° 8 (2021): 1123–40.
  - 19 Xinran Chen, Sei-Ching Joanna Sin, Yin-Leng Theng, and Chei Sian Lee, ‘Why Do Social Media Users Share Misinformation?’, in *Proceedings of the 15th ACM/IEEE-CS Joint Conference on Digital Libraries* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2015), pp. 111–14.
  - 20 Shalini Talwar, Amandeep Dhir, Puneet Kaur, Nida Zafar, and Melfi Alrasheedy, ‘Why Do People Share Fake News? Associations between the Dark Side of Social Media Use and Fake News Sharing Behavior’, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 51 (2019): 72–82.

with a recent increase in political participation.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, they have become a vital platform for politicians seeking to mould public opinion and set agendas.<sup>22</sup> And now no election campaign is complete without substantial political chatter across social media. In today's political landscape—which has moved further into digital spaces since Covid—strategic communicators need a firm understanding of how to drive WOM communications using digital media.

In this literature review, we will contribute to the emerging dialogue in strategic communications literature on political events and social media<sup>23</sup> by providing an interdisciplinary perspective. More specifically, by reviewing marketing literature on social media and WOM communications, we aim to provide insights for strategic communications scholars and practitioners. In scope, this paper focuses on organic social media marketing as a key driver of WOM communication. But some of the information provided will be relevant for the purposes of paid advertising on social media as well. Consequently, this paper offers two key contributions to the theory and practice of strategic communications.

First, while the importance of persuasion is emphasised in this growing stream of literature,<sup>24</sup> the marketing perspective is missing. The lack of this perspective limits conceptual development in the literature, as the variance that can be explained by psychological theories is different from those of economic and organisational theories.<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that while the focus of most studies in the marketing literature is on selling commercial products and services, most of these ideas are based on the social psychology literature, and are applicable to inducing behavioural

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- 21 Shiksha Kushwah, Deep Shree, and Mahim Sagar, 'Evolution of a Framework of Co-Creation in Political Marketing: Select Cases', *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 14 N° 4 (2017): 427–45.
  - 22 Daniel Kreiss, *Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
  - 23 Nitin Agarwal and Kiran Kumar Bandeli, 'Examining Strategic Integration of Social Media Platforms in Disinformation Campaign Coordination', *Defence Strategic Communications* 4 N° 1 (2018): 173.
  - 24 M. Holmstrom, 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1 N° 1 (2015): 118–32.
  - 25 Aybars Tuncdogan, Frans Van Den Bosch, and Henk Volberda, 'Regulatory Focus as a Psychological Micro-Foundation of Leaders' Exploration and Exploitation Activities', *Leadership Quarterly* 26 N° 5 (2015): 838–50.

change in any other areas of life, such as health-related choices,<sup>26</sup> lifestyle preferences,<sup>27</sup> and voter perceptions.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it is also important to note that most strategic communications aim to convey a strategic idea to a group of individuals and a desirable future outcome as a result of adherence to this strategic idea (the argument for increased autonomy and prosperity as a result of Brexit). In this respect, strategic communications share similarities with selling a service. In sum, we argue that introducing insights from marketing literature will prove of use in increasing the explanatory capacity of strategic communications literature.

Second, the majority of current strategy literatures (strategic management, strategic renewal, institutional theory, public management, governance) are experiencing a micro-foundations movement.<sup>29</sup> In other words, instead of investigating phenomena only at the unit of analysis in which they are predominantly interested (country or organisation level), scholars are also examining underlying factors of smaller units of analysis (department, team, or individual level). While the goal remains to understand strategic outcomes at higher levels of analysis, by analysing smaller units, it is possible to gain a finer-grained understanding of how certain strategic outcomes can be reached. Parallel to this, we review the marketing literature on social media at lower levels of analysis to provide insights to strategic communicators regarding how they can more effectively reach their high-level strategic goals.

To recap, considering that a core goal of strategic communications literature is to convey information to and change attitudes of large groups of people, we believe that insights developed in marketing literature could be useful for scholars and practitioners in the strategic communications field. In particular—while exceptions exist—marketing is a discipline

26 Cornelia Pechmann, 'Does Antismoking Advertising Combat Underage Smoking? A Review of Past Practices and Research', *Social Marketing* (2018): 189–216.

27 Aylin Kumcu and Andrea E. Woolverton, 'Feeding Fido: Changing Consumer Food Preferences Bring Pets to the Table', *Journal of Food Products Marketing* 21 No 2 (2015): 213–30; Teoman Duman, Yusuf Erkaya, and Omer Topaloglu, 'Vacation Interests and Vacation Type Preferences in Austrian Domestic Tourism', *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* 37 No 2 (2020): 217–45.

28 M.R. Holman and J.C. Lay, 'They See Dead People (Voting): Correcting Misperceptions about Voter Fraud in the 2016 US Presidential Election', *Journal of Political Marketing* 18 No 1–2 (2019): 31–68.

29 Aybars Tuncdogan, Adam Lindgreen, Henk Volberda, and Frans van den Bosch (eds), *Strategic Renewal: Core Concepts, Antecedents, and Micro Foundations* (Routledge, 2019).

that typically examines micro-level effects regarding influence (level of the individual consumer or a group of consumers), whereas strategic communications literature is interested mainly in macro-level (country-level) outcomes. This makes marketing a relevant discipline for strategic communications scholars for the purpose of theory-building. That is, insights from marketing literature can be useful for building hypotheses in the strategic communications domain. Strategic communications practitioners can also benefit from these insights and consider how these findings apply to their area. Overall, this paper constitutes an early step towards increasing interdisciplinary research between the strategic communications and marketing specialties.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we briefly discuss communication norms on social media. After this, we discuss research on WOM with a focus on social media related effects. Then, we review research on opinion leaders. Finally, in the discussion, we review contributions and implications of this paper and point towards areas of future research.

## Communication Norms on Social Media

When using social media, strategic communicators must understand the social norms of the channel they are using. Social situations are moderated by norms that are, broadly speaking, a set of rules governing the behaviours and attitudes of the members of a social group;<sup>30</sup> they evolve through interactions between the group's members and are generally enforced through the application of sanctions to violators.<sup>31</sup> If a politician fails to adhere to the established social norms of a social media platform, they can expect to see a backlash from their followers.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Robert B. Cialdini and Melanie R. Trost, 'Social Influence: Social Norms, Conformity, and Compliance' in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Daniel Todd Gilbert, Susan T. Fiske and Gardner Lindzey (eds), (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 151–92.

31 Maria Knight Lapinski and Rajiv N. Rimal, 'An Explication of Social Norms', *Communication Theory* 15 N° 2 (2005): 127–47.

32 Daniel Kreiss, Regina G. Lawrence, and Shannon C. McGregor, 'In Their Own Words: Political Practitioner Accounts of Candidates, Audiences, Affordances, Genres, and Timing in Strategic Social Media Use', *Political Communication* 35 N° 1 (2018): 8–31.

A recent case of this was US Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who faced a substantial backlash after she was observed to 'like' several violent posts targeting candidates from a rival party ('a bullet to the head would be quicker').<sup>33</sup> Here, the key reason for the backlash is not the strategic communicator's personal characteristics or political affiliations, but a direct transgression of communication norms (non-violence). In other words, if the same uncalculated communications were made by politicians of other affiliations or if the remarks were made about other groups of people, a social media backlash would still be very likely.

Social media have created new social situations for which new norms have developed and continue to evolve. However, in addition to traditional social considerations, these norms are directly affected by the technological properties of the platforms on which they exist,<sup>34</sup> such as the communication tools available to users.<sup>35</sup> Many platforms encourage users to amplify the posts of others by making this as easy as possible. 'Sharing' on Facebook or 'retweeting' on Twitter each requires just a single click from users, making information dissemination quick and easy.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, platforms also allow users to find information on certain subjects quickly, often through hashtags or user-maintained groups dedicated to a particular topic.<sup>37</sup> These tools have useful applications for those looking to spread information strategically. Many people refrain from discussing politics due to its complexity and the potential of provoking disagreement,<sup>38</sup> but social media allow users to reshare political posts directly without necessitating that they understand them first, and also

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33 Allan Smith, 'GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene Faces a Backlash over Incendiary Social Media Posts', *NBC News*, 28 January 2021.

34 Anna J.M. Wagner, 'Do not Click "Like" When Somebody Has Died: The Role of Norms for Mourning Practices in Social Media', *Social Media + Society* 4 (2018).

35 Van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'.

36 Samah M. Alzanin and Aqil M. Azmi, 'Detecting Rumors in Social Media: A Survey', *Procedia Computer Science* 142 (2018): 294–300.

37 Gunn Enli and Chris-Adrian Simonsen, "'Social Media Logic' Meets Professional Norms: Twitter Hashtags Usage by Journalists and Politicians', *Information, Communication & Society* 21 N° 8 (2018): 1081–96.

38 Michael Chan, 'Reluctance to Talk about Politics in Face-to-Face and Facebook Settings: Examining the Impact of Fear of Isolation, Willingness to Self-Censor, and Peer Network Characteristics', *Mass Communication and Society* 21 N° 1 (2018): 1–23.

to find like-minded others that are likely to respond positively to these same posts.

Social media give strategic communicators the chance to bypass traditional media ‘gatekeepers’ and speak directly to voters.<sup>39</sup> Parties in different countries (right-wing party in the US, left-wing party in Turkey, opposition in Venezuela) tried to make a case for voting fraud; social media were commonly used to directly communicate with the voters.<sup>40</sup> However, while this would appear to democratise political communications by encouraging a dialogue between political elites and citizens, these platforms are deeply hierarchical ecosystems where the few users with many followers wield far more influence than the majority with fewer followers.<sup>41</sup> A significant reason for this is the algorithmic feed curation that dictates what most social media users see.<sup>42</sup> Despite originating as chronological platforms, Facebook and Twitter feeds are now populated algorithmically by default, with the stated intention to ‘show everyone the right content at the right time’.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, any strategic communicator seeking to proliferate a message effectively on social media must understand what the ‘right’ content is, and when is the ‘right’ time to post it.

Van Dijck and Poell observe how social media have developed the one-way communicative traffic of traditional media into a two-way conversation between users and programmers.<sup>44</sup> While algorithms shape the content that appears on a platform, they simultaneously learn from

39 Yilang Peng, ‘What Makes Politicians’ Instagram Posts Popular? Analyzing Social Media Strategies of Candidates and Office Holders with Computer Vision’, *International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 N° 1 (2021): 143–66.

40 Dino P. Christenson, Sarah E. Kreps, and Douglas L. Kriner, ‘Contemporary Presidency: Going Public in an Era of Social Media: Tweets, Corrections, and Public Opinion’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51 N° 1 (2021): 151–65.

41 Changhyun Lee, Haewoon Kwak, Hosung Park, and Sue Moon, ‘Finding Influentials Based on the Temporal Order of Information Adoption in Twitter’, paper presented at WWW 2010, 26–30 April 2010, Raleigh, NC, USA, pp. 1137–38.

42 Nicholas Diakopoulos, *Automating the News: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Media* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

43 Erich Owens and David Vickrey, ‘Showing More Timely Stories from Friends and Pages’, Facebook, 18 September 2014.

44 Van Dijck and Poell, ‘Understanding Social Media Logic’.

users' inputs and reactions, meaning that users also play a significant role in the evolution of online communicative norms. This pivot away from chronological feed curation is part of a wider aim of social media platforms to strive for relevance rather than freshness,<sup>45</sup> and means that widely followed users who are considered more 'relevant' by platform algorithms are more likely to see their posts appear on their followers' feeds.<sup>46</sup> Platform algorithms incentivise users to post certain types of content, in the knowledge that their post will be seen by more people if they adhere to certain norms. Even among politicians with significant online followings, campaign strategists report inconsistencies in how many people each post reaches, and a key process during a modern political election campaign is the 'test and learn' approach to social media posting.<sup>47</sup>

As well as giving thought to the mechanics behind social media, politicians also need to consider why people use different platforms, so that their posts are relevant to each platform's userbase and do not appear out of place or disingenuous.<sup>48</sup> Social media platform choice is driven by a variety of motivations.<sup>49</sup> More than half of US adults report using social media as a news source 'often' or 'sometimes', but this pattern is not uniform across all platforms; 59 per cent of Twitter users get news from the platform regularly, but this figure drops to 28 per cent for Instagram and 19 per cent for Snapchat.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, users who intend to use social media for news are more likely to choose Twitter than Snapchat, and it is therefore reasonable to expect that those seeking to strategically communicate newsworthy information may achieve a higher response rate if they do so on Twitter rather than Snapchat.

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45 Taina Bucher, 'The Right-Time Web: Theorizing the Kairologic of Algorithmic Media', *New Media & Society* 22 No 9 (2020): 1699–1714.

46 Van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'.

47 Kreiss et al., 'In Their Own Words'.

48 Michael Bossetta, 'The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 US Election', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95 No 2 (2018): 471–96.

49 See Shiu-Li Huang and Chih-Yu Chang, 'Understanding How People Select Social Networking Services: Media Trait, Social Influences and Situational Factors', *Information & Management* 57 No 6 (2020), for a summary.

50 Elisa Shearer and Amy Mitchell, 'News Use across Social Media Platforms in 2020', *Pew Research Center*, 12 January 2021.

User motivations and the expectations they have from each platform will also affect *how* they use social media. On Instagram—a primarily visual medium—users are more likely to post about visually appealing topics such as art, food, and travel, whereas Twitter, a microblogging platform, sees more posts about news, sport, and business.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the format of a post will influence the type of responses it will generate—text-based posts tend to generate comments, whereas videos are more likely to be shared<sup>52</sup>—and consequently strategic communicators should base the format of their post on the type of responses they seek. However, a trend that appears to hold firm for politicians across various platforms is the engaging nature of highly personalised posts.<sup>53</sup> studies across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all show that politicians elicit positive responses from users when posting personalised content.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, many studies also observe that the majority of political posts on social media continue to offer depictions of ‘politics-as-usual’.<sup>55</sup> Politicians and other strategic communicators that can buck this trend should expect to see favourable engagement with their organic social media activity, no matter what platform they are using.

## Word-of-Mouth Communications

For any strategic communicator seeking to influence, the most persuasive communications may not necessarily be those they elicit themselves, but rather those that their intended audience hear from their own

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51 Lydia Manikonda, Venkata Vamsikrishna Meduri, and Subbarao Kambhampati, ‘Tweeting the Mind and Instagramming the Heart: Exploring Differentiated Content Sharing on Social Media’, in paper presented at the Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, 2016.

52 Karolina Koc-Michalska, Darren G. Lilleker, Tomasz Michalski, Rachel Gibson, and Jan M Zajac, ‘Facebook Affordances and Citizen Engagement during Elections: European Political Parties and Their Benefit from Online Strategies?’, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 18 No 2 (2021): 180–93; Marton Bene, ‘Go Viral on the Facebook! Interactions between Candidates and Followers on Facebook during the Hungarian General Election Campaign of 2014’, *Information, Communication & Society* 20 No 4 (2017): 513–29.

53 In this context, by ‘personalised’ posts we mean those that show the politician as a private individual rather than as posts that have been specifically tailored to the audience. See e.g. Peng, ‘What Makes Politicians’ Instagram Posts Popular?’

54 Bene, ‘Go Viral on the Facebook!’, Peng, ‘What Makes Politicians’ Instagram Posts Popular?’; Shannon C. McGregor, ‘Personalization, Social Media, and Voting: Effects of Candidate Self-Personalization on Vote Intention’, *New Media & Society* 20 No 3 (2018): 1139–60.

55 Peng, ‘What Makes Politicians’ Instagram Posts Popular?’; Enli and Simonsen, ‘Social Media Logic’.

social networks. We are referring here to the effectiveness of WOM communications, which have been studied by marketing academics since the 1960s and have been described as the ‘dominant force in the marketplace’<sup>56</sup> and as one of the most persuasive tools available to marketers.<sup>57</sup> WOM communications are generally considered to be more influential than commercially sponsored messaging,<sup>58</sup> and researchers have demonstrated their positive effects on numerous outcomes beneficial for marketers, including brand perception,<sup>59</sup> customer loyalty and long-term value,<sup>60</sup> and product purchase intention.<sup>61</sup> These are benefits that translate to the political environment. Social networks are influential in the spread of political information,<sup>62</sup> so strategic communicators should attempt to capitalise on their credibility by disseminating information through these channels.

One definition of WOM is ‘communication between consumers about a product, service, or a company in which the sources are considered independent of commercial influence’,<sup>63</sup> and it is this perceived independence that explains its striking persuasiveness. Research shows that the credibility of a message is limited considerably when its commercial intentions are made clear,<sup>64</sup> individuals are naturally resistant to persuasion attempts made by someone with ulterior motives—such as creating a

- 56 W. Glynn Mangold, Fred Miller, and Gary R. Brockway, ‘Word-of-Mouth Communication in the Service Marketplace’, *Journal of Services Marketing* 13 N° 1 (1999): 73–89 (79).
- 57 Ed Keller and Brad Fay, ‘Word-of-Mouth Advocacy: A New Key to Advertising Effectiveness’, *Journal of Advertising Research* 52 N° 4 (2012): 459–64.
- 58 Pramod Iyer, Atefeh Yazdanparast, and David Strutton, ‘Examining the Effectiveness of WOM/ eWOM Communications across Age-Based Cohorts: Implications for Political Marketers’, *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 34 N° 7 (2017): 646–63.
- 59 Devkant Kala and D.S. Chaubey, ‘The Effect of eWOM Communication on Brand Image and Purchase Intention towards Lifestyle Products in India’, *International Journal of Services, Economics and Management* 9 N° 2 (2018): 143–57.
- 60 Moh Erfan Arif, ‘The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Brand Image, and Price on Repurchase Intention of Airline Customers’, *Jurnal Aplikasi Manajemen* 17 N° 2 (2019): 345–56.
- 61 Jungkun Park, Hyowon Hyun, and Toulany Thavisay, ‘A Study of Antecedents and Outcomes of Social Media WOM towards Luxury Brand Purchase Intention’, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 58 (2021): 102272.
- 62 R. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 63 Stephen W. Litvin, Ronald E. Goldsmith, and Bing Pan, ‘Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Hospitality and Tourism Management’, *Tourism Management* 29 N° 3 (2008): 458–68 (459).
- 64 Johannes Müller and Fabian Christandl, ‘Content Is King—But Who Is the King of Kings? The Effect of Content Marketing, Sponsored Content & User-Generated Content on Brand Responses’, *Computers in Human Behavior* 96 (2019): 46–55.

profit for themselves—as they view the persuader as less trustworthy.<sup>65</sup> For instance, politicians are among the least trusted professionals,<sup>66</sup> meaning this problem is particularly relevant in the context of political communications. Although few citizens adjust their perceptions of parties according to statements from the parties themselves,<sup>67</sup> recipients are far more likely to trust the information they receive via WOM as these communications come from a relatively independent source, making it an important part of a political communicative strategy.

Although the majority of WOM was historically transmitted through oral, one-to-one conversations between a single ‘sender’ and a single ‘receiver’,<sup>68</sup> the advent of the internet has caused the growth of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Rather than being communicated orally, most eWOM is written and posted on publicly available web pages, which allows for asynchronous information-spreading and the rapid diffusion of said information from one sender to many receivers.<sup>69</sup> eWOM is now a near-ubiquitous feature of online shopping: 89 per cent of online shoppers consult reviews before making a purchase,<sup>70</sup> and businesses are encouraged to demonstrate their willingness to engage with customers by responding to negative reviews.<sup>71</sup> Despite its many positives, a potential drawback of eWOM in comparison to traditional WOM is that because it regularly occurs between a sender and receiver who have no personal relationship, this can harm its credibility in the eyes of a receiver, who is unlikely to trust the word of a stranger to the same extent that they

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- 65 Kelley J. Main, Darren W. Dahl, and Peter R. Darke, ‘Deliberative and Automatic Bases of Suspicion: Empirical Evidence of the Sinister Attribution Error’, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 17 N° 1 (2007): 59–69.
- 66 Ben Gelblum, ‘[Trust in Politicians Has Fallen to an All Time Low in the UK](#)’, *London Economic*, 27 November 2019.
- 67 James Adams, Lawrence Ezrow, and Zeynep Somer-Topcu, ‘Is Anybody Listening? Evidence That Voters Do Not Respond to European Parties’ Policy Statements during Elections’, *American Journal of Political Science* 55 N° 2 (2011): 370–82.
- 68 Shu-Chuan Chu and Yoojung Kim, ‘Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in Social Networking Sites’, *International Journal of Advertising* 30 N° 1 (2011): 47–75.
- 69 Christy M.K. Cheung and Dimple R. Thadani, ‘The Impact of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication: A Literature Analysis and Integrative Model’, *Decision Support Systems* 54 N° 1 (2012): 461–70.
- 70 Ying Lin, ‘[10 Online Review Statistics You Need to Know In 2021](#)’, *Oberlo*, 4 July 2021.
- 71 M.S. Balaji, Kok Wei Khong, and Alain Yee Loong Chong, ‘Determinants of Negative Word-of-Mouth Communication Using Social Networking Sites’, *Information & Management* 53 N° 4 (2016): 528–40.

would trust the word of an acquaintance.<sup>72</sup> Feedback on review sites or company websites may also be anonymous, which may raise further questions as to the legitimacy of the feedback.<sup>73</sup>

As social media platforms have lowered communication barriers between individuals, they have encouraged the further proliferation of eWOM, and its prevalence on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter has led to claims that social media word-of-mouth (sWOM) should be considered separately to eWOM.<sup>74</sup> sWOM is often claimed to be more inherently trustworthy, partly because most conversations and interactions on social media take place between individuals who are part of a friendship network,<sup>75</sup> but also because most social media platforms are largely de-anonymised.<sup>76</sup> This has many potentially useful applications for strategic communicators. Evidence suggests that Facebook users who see that their friends have voted in an election are more likely to do so themselves,<sup>77</sup> and other research has shown how political groups that capitalise on sWOM can increase the reach of their online communications,<sup>78</sup> while also improving online community engagement and positively influencing the political preferences of—especially younger—voters.<sup>79</sup>

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- 72 Adrian Palmer and Qunying Huo, 'A Study of Trust over Time within a Social Network Mediated Environment', *Journal of Marketing Management* 29 N° 15 (2013): 1816–33.
  - 73 Anthony M. Evans, Olga Stavrova, and Hannes Rosenbusch, 'Expressions of Doubt and Trust in Online User Reviews', *Computers in Human Behavior* 114 (2021): 106556.
  - 74 Chu and Kim, 'Determinants of Consumer Engagement'.
  - 75 Jaakko Pihlaja, Hannu Saarijärvi, Mark T. Spence, and Mika Yrjölä, 'From Electronic WOM to Social eWOM: Bridging the Trust Deficit', *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 25 N° 4 (2017): 340–56.
  - 76 Shu-Chuan Chu and Sejung Marina Choi, 'Electronic Word-of-Mouth in Social Networking Sites: A Cross-Cultural Study of the United States and China', *Journal of Global Marketing* 24 N° 3 (2011): 263–81.
  - 77 Robert M. Bond, Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D. I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler, 'A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization', *Nature* 489 N° 7415 (2012): 295–98.
  - 78 Jeff Hemsley, 'Studying the Viral Growth of a Connective Action Network Using Information Event Signatures', *First Monday* 21 N° 8 (2016).
  - 79 Saikat Banerjee, 'On the Relationship between Online Brand Community and Brand Preference in Political Market', *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 18 N° 1 (2021): 27–55.

The written and recorded nature of eWOM and sWOM makes them far easier to measure than traditional WOM,<sup>80</sup> enabling companies to learn about their customers through the online reviews that are posted, and to adapt their product in accordance with this feedback.<sup>81</sup> As political parties have begun to place more importance on the views of the electorate—and increasingly allowed these views to dictate the formulation of policy—the political need for feedback has grown in importance,<sup>82</sup> and this feedback is readily available online. Strategic communicators can trial different messaging strategies and decide next steps based on the reaction from the internet users that were exposed to them.<sup>83</sup> Although collating and analysing feedback from some online platforms may be difficult and time-consuming, social media platforms offer a wide assortment of tools and metrics that allow users to assess the performance of their various posts. The data pulled from the platforms offers political operatives insight on what policies elicit positive responses, what type of content is most engaging, and what demographics are most supportive.<sup>84</sup>

There is a wide body of literature that addresses various moderators of WOM persuasiveness. These can be broadly divided into three subcategories: sender characteristics, receiver characteristics, and situational characteristics such as the content of the communication, or the environment in which it is communicated. We will discuss the impact of sender characteristics on WOM persuasiveness later in the section on opinion leadership. With this in mind, this section will focus primarily on the latter two features.

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80 Jumin Lee, Do-Hyung Park, and Ingoo Han, 'The Effect of Negative Online Consumer Reviews on Product Attitude: An Information Processing View', *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 7 N° 3 (2008): 341–52.

81 Antoni Serra Cantallops and Fabiana Salvi, 'New Consumer Behavior: A Review of Research on eWOM and Hotels', *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 36 (2014): 41–51.

82 André Turcotte and Jennifer Lees-Marshment, 'Political Market Research' in *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*, Jennifer Lees-Marshment, Brian Conley, Edward Elder, Robin Pettitt, Vincent Raynauld and André Turcotte (eds), (Routledge: 2019).

83 Kreiss et al., 'In Their Own Words'.

84 Turcotte and Lees-Marshment, 'Political Market Research'.

## Receiver Characteristics: Attitudes and Consensus

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pre-existing attitudes of a receiver towards a subject have been found to moderate their reaction to WOM communications on that topic. This is often due to genuine expertise in the matter at hand,<sup>85</sup> but uninformed preconceived opinions can be just as influential. Erkan and Evans find a consumer's initial purchase intention is positively correlated to their attitude towards and adoption of eWOM recommendations.<sup>86</sup> And Moravec et al. observe that social media users exhibit significant levels of confirmation bias when attempting to discern between truthful and untruthful information.<sup>87</sup> This effect is stronger still when WOM communications are in line with the consensus on a topic. People are less likely to scrutinise persuasion attempts when they know little about the subject matter, or if the topic does not strike them as being of high importance.<sup>88</sup> In these cases, individuals can employ mental heuristics—such as adhering to social proof—to accelerate the decision-making process.

The strength of social proof as a persuasive influence is well-documented.<sup>89</sup> Focusing on politics, Boukouras et al. draw attention to the fact that biased polls can sway the electorate in favour of the leading candidate,<sup>90</sup> and some countries do not allow any polling publication close to election day.<sup>91</sup> Some political groups attempt to take advantage of this phenomenon on social media by creating inauthentic grassroots accounts—a process

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85 Gillian Moran and Laurent Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility on Social Networking Sites: A Framework', *Journal of Marketing Communications* 23 No 2 (2017): 149–61.

86 Ismail Erkan and Chris Evans, 'The Influence of eWOM in Social Media on Consumers' Purchase Intentions: An Extended Approach to Information Adoption', *Computers in Human Behavior* 61 (2016): 47–55.

87 Patricia Moravec, Randall Minas, and Alan R. Dennis, *Fake News on Social Media: People Believe What They Want to Believe When It Makes No Sense at All*, Kelley School of Business Research Paper No 18–87 (2018).

88 Wendy Wood, 'Attitude Change: Persuasion and Social Influence', *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 No 1 (2000): 539–70.

89 See Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* (New York: Collins, 2007) for several examples.

90 Aristotelis Boukouras, Will Jennings, Lunzheng Li, and Zacharias Maniadis, *Can Biased Polls Distort Electoral Results? Evidence from the Lab*. Discussion Papers in Economics. School of Business, University of Leicester, 2020.

91 Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, 'Learning from the Behavior of Others: Conformity, Fads, and Informational Cascades', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12 No 3 (1998): 151–70.

known as ‘astroturfing’.<sup>92</sup> Widespread pressure following concerns over astroturfing during the 2016 US presidential election<sup>93</sup> caused Facebook to address the issue directly, and state its intentions to take action against what it calls ‘coordinated inauthentic behaviour’,<sup>94</sup> although concerns persist following reported instances in the period since then in countries such as India, Honduras, and Azerbaijan.<sup>95</sup>

The rise of social bots—particularly on Twitter—is also relevant here. Whereas astroturfing on Facebook is frequently achieved by a single or connected set of human users establishing groups or pages that appear to be distinct but are in fact not, Twitter’s communicative structure commonly involves interaction with strangers, meaning it lends itself much more readily to influence by automated systems that can push out thousands of messages in a very short space of time.<sup>96</sup> Large groups of bots can be employed to strategically push a political message—perhaps in the hope of affecting an election, as with the UK’s EU referendum in 2016,<sup>97</sup> or to influence public opinion following a negative event like the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.<sup>98</sup> This again can create the illusion of widespread support, which in turn makes that message more convincing and appealing to legitimate social media users.<sup>99</sup> Both social bots and the inauthentic groups that have become prevalent on Facebook attempt to create fictitious instances of social proof, and in so doing attempt to take advantage of the persuasive power of sWOM communications for political gain.

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92 Marko Kovic, Adrian Rauchfleisch, Marc Sele, and Christian Caspar, ‘Digital Astroturfing in Politics: Definition, Typology, and Countermeasures’, *Studies in Communication Sciences* 18 N° 1 (2018): 69–85.

93 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don’t, Can’t, and Do Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

94 Nathaniel Gleicher, ‘[Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Explained](#)’, Facebook, 6 December 2018.

95 Craig Silverman, Ryan Mac, and Pranav Dixit, ‘[“I Have Blood on My Hands”: A Whistleblower Says Facebook Ignored Global Political Manipulation](#)’, *Buzzfeed News*, 14 September 2020.

96 Emilio Ferrara, Onur Varol, Clayton Davis, Filippo Menczer, and Alessandro Flammini, ‘The Rise of Social Bots’, *Communications of the ACM* 59 N° 7 (2016): 96–104.

97 Chris Baraniuk, ‘[Beware the Brexit Bots: The Twitter Spam Out to Swing Your Vote](#)’, *New Scientist*, 21 June 2016.

98 Mariella Moon, ‘[Twitter Suspends Bots Spreading Pro-Saudi Tweets about Missing Journalist](#)’, *Engadget*, 19 October 2018.

99 Stefan Stieglitz, Florian Brachten, Björn Ross, and Anna-Katharina Jung, ‘[Do Social Bots Dream of Electric Sheep? A Categorisation of Social Media Bot Accounts](#)’, *arXiv:1710.04044v1* (October 2017).

## Receiver Attitudes: Tie Strength to Sender

Granovetter draws a distinction between the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ ties that socially connect individuals, and multiple studies investigate tie strength between a sender and receiver as a moderating factor of WOM effectiveness.<sup>100</sup> Although strong-tie WOM has been shown to most effectively drive product growth,<sup>101</sup> weak ties are also crucial for the spread of WOM communications, as they enable the passing of communication between largely unconnected groups of people,<sup>102</sup> making these links central to the effectiveness of eWOM communications. However, while eWOM may often pass between users with no social tie of any sort, a significant strength of sWOM communications is that they largely take place between individuals with some sort of tie, thus enhancing sWOM credibility in comparison to some eWOM, as discussed above. In particular, by making it much easier to interact with those outside one’s immediate social circle, social media significantly boost the prevalence of weak-tie eWOM.<sup>103</sup>

In weak-tie (or no-tie) situations, perceived homophily on the part of the receiver has also been shown to moderate WOM influence, with higher degrees of similarity between the receiver and sender increasing the persuasiveness of the communication.<sup>104</sup> This often applies regardless of sender expertise; studies suggest that people are more likely to seek information from those with whom they share political beliefs, even if the person from whom the advice is sought knows little about the

100 Mark S. Granovetter, ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’, *American Journal of Sociology* 78 N° 6 (1973): 1360–80.

101 Hai-hua Hu, Le Wang, Lining Jiang, and Wei Yang, ‘Strong Ties versus Weak Ties in Word-of-Mouth Marketing’, *BRQ Business Research Quarterly* 22 N° 4 (2019): 245–56.

102 Lars Groeger and Francis Buttle, ‘Word-of-Mouth Marketing: Towards an Improved Understanding of Multi-Generational Campaign Reach’, *European Journal of Marketing* 48 N° 7–8 (2014): 1186–1208.

103 Moran and Muzellec, ‘eWOM Credibility’.

104 Mary C. Gilly, John L. Graham, Mary Finley Wolfinbarger, and Laura J. Yale, ‘A Dyadic Study of Interpersonal Information Search’, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 26 N° 2 (1998): 83–100.

subject.<sup>105</sup> Homophily has long been known to play a role in shaping social networks and in influencing a voter's preferred candidate during an election,<sup>106</sup> but social media platforms give their users more choice than ever over the content they see and the other people they interact with online. Individuals can participate in self-chosen communities filled with like-minded others and spread information that is likely to be believed by fellow participants.

The ability of social media users to carefully manage those with whom they exchange information has led to claims that online communications are increasingly taking place within various self-contained echo chambers.<sup>107</sup> Evidence of echo chamber development on Facebook,<sup>108</sup> Twitter,<sup>109</sup> and TikTok,<sup>110</sup> as well as others such as Instagram and Weibo,<sup>111</sup> has raised concerns that social media are contributing to the political polarisation of society<sup>112</sup> and to the spread of misinformation, as individuals who see content posted by those they consider themselves similar to are more likely to spread it without confirming its veracity.<sup>113</sup> The prevalence of these concerns in the last few years speaks to the persuasive power of sWOM within social media communities and suggests that, rather than

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105 Joseph Marks, Eloise Copland, Eleanor Loh, Cass R. Sunstein, and Tali Sharot, 'Epistemic Spillovers: Learning Others' Political Views Reduces the Ability to Assess and Use Their Expertise in Nonpolitical Domains', *Cognition* 188 (2019): 74–84.

106 Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M. Cook, 'Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks', *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 N° 1 (2001): 415–44; Benjamin R. Warner and Mary C. Banwart, 'A Multifactor Approach to Candidate Image', *Communication Studies* 67 N° 3 (2016): 259–79.

107 David Robert Grimes, 'Echo Chambers Are Dangerous—We Must Try to Break Free of Our Online Bubbles', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2017.

108 Ana Lucia Schmidt, Fabiana Zollo, Antonio Scala, Cornelia Betsch, and Walter Quattrociochi, 'Polarization of the Vaccination Debate on Facebook', *Vaccine* 36 N° 25 (2018): 3606–12.

109 Kiran Garimella, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Aristides Gionis, and Michael Mathioudakis, 'Political Discourse on Social Media', in *Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference on World Wide Web—WWW '18* (ACM Press, 2018).

110 Medina Serrano, Juan Carlos, Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, and Simon Hegelich, 'Dancing to the Partisan Beat: A First Analysis of Political Communication on TikTok', *WebSci '20: 12th ACM Conference on Web Science* (New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery, 2020), pp. 257–66.

111 ZiPeng Chen, 'Research on the Rapid Growth of the Chamber Effect on Social Media', in *2021 International Conference on Social Development and Media Communication (SDMC 2021)* (Atlantis Press, 2022), pp. 153–56.

112 Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, 'Social Media and Political Polarisation', *LSE Public Policy Review* 1 N° 1 (2020): 1–7.

113 Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, 'Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs', *American Journal of Political Science* 50 N° 3 (2006): 755–69.

trying to convert new followers, strategic communicators should instead use social media to motivate and energise those that already agree with them, while encouraging this audience to share and repost that content themselves.

## Situational Characteristics: Message

Regardless of the sender or receiver, features of the communication itself can moderate WOM effectiveness. Research suggests that WOM is more persuasive when the argument used to express it is of a higher quality,<sup>114</sup> with specific attention given in some cases to the vividness and the clarity of the expression.<sup>115</sup> Plenty of attention has also been given to the valence of a WOM communication—i.e., whether the recommendation is positive or negative—with mixed conclusions as to what reviews are more persuasive.<sup>116</sup>

This ambiguity extends to the political arena,<sup>117</sup> but there is ample evidence that negativity spreads more widely and quickly than positivity on social media. Chung and Zeng provide general evidence for this phenomenon on Twitter,<sup>118</sup> whereas Hemsley and Stromer-Galley et al.

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114 Erkan and Evans, 'Influence of eWOM'.

115 Moran and Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility'; Jillian C. Sweeney, Geoffrey N. Soutar, and Tim Mazzarol, 'Factors Influencing Word of Mouth Effectiveness: Receiver Perspectives', *European Journal of Marketing* 42 N° 3/4 (2008): 344–64.

116 Geng Cui, Hon-kwong Lui, and Xiaoning Guo, 'Online Reviews as a Driver of New Product Sales', *ICMECG '10: Proceedings of the 2010 International Conference on Management of e-Commerce and e-Government* (IEEE Computer Society, 2010), pp. 20–25, find negative reviews are more persuasive, whereas the reverse is found by Iryna Pentina, Ainsworth Anthony Bailey, and Lixuan Zhang, 'Exploring Effects of Source Similarity, Message Valence, and Receiver Regulatory Focus on Yelp Review Persuasiveness and Purchase Intentions', *Journal of Marketing Communications* 24 N° 2 (2018): 125–45.

117 For an example that contests the effectiveness of negative political advertising, see Victor A. Hernández-Huerta, 'Negative Advertisements and Voter Turnout: The Evidence from Mexico', *Colombia Internacional* N° 92 (2017): 135–56, and for an argument that it is effective, see Tao Ma, David Atkin, Leslie B. Snyder, and Arthur Van Lear, 'Negative Advertising Effects on Presidential Support Ratings during the 2012 Election: A Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Serial Dependency Study', *Mass Communication and Society* 22 N° 2 (2019): 196–221.

118 Wingyan Chung and Daniel Zeng, 'Dissecting Emotion and User Influence in Social Media Communities: An Interaction Modeling Approach', *Information & Management* 57 N° 1 (2020): 103108.

find the same applies to political communications on the platform.<sup>119</sup> This then would suggest that the most effective political WOM messages on social media are negative posts that attack opposing groups (see also Lewsey's discussion on this topic<sup>120</sup>). For example, a video posted by a YouTuber called Rezo entitled 'The Destruction of the CDU', attacking Angela Merkel's policies, went viral. As of the election day (which went badly for the CDU), it was watched more than 11 million times.<sup>121</sup>

However, although the literature suggests that negatively valenced content posted is likely to spread further and more quickly on social media, this is a tactic that should be approached with caution; social media users may dislike or be uninterested in negative content on platforms like Instagram where the majority of content is positively valenced.<sup>122</sup> Research based on the 2019 Canadian elections examining posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter suggests that a post attacking a rival politician (among Trudeau, Singh, and Scheer) is likely to positively influence user engagement in Twitter, but not on Facebook or Instagram. Furthermore, there is evidence that incivility begets further incivility on these channels<sup>123</sup> and that political negativity can cause citizens to become disengaged.<sup>124</sup> The Pew Research Center reports that in a survey of US citizens following the 2020 presidential election, the majority (55 per cent) of social media users said that they were 'worn out' by political posts and discussions.<sup>125</sup>

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119 Jeff Hemsley, 'Followers Retweet! The Influence of Middle-Level Gatekeepers on the Spread of Political Information on Twitter', *Policy & Internet* 11 No 3 (2019): 280–304; Jennifer Stromer-Galley, Feifei Zhang, Jeff Hemsley, and Sikana Tanupabrungrun, 'Tweeting the Attack: Predicting Gubernatorial Candidate Attack Messaging and Its Spread', *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 3511–32.

120 Fred Lewsey, 'Slamming Political Rivals May Be the Most Effective Way to Go Viral: Revealing Social Media's "Perverse Incentives"', *University of Cambridge*, 22 June 2021.

121 Joachim Allgaier, 'Rezo and German Climate Change Policy: The Influence of Networked Expertise on YouTube and Beyond', *Media and Communication* 8 No 2 (2020): 376–86.

122 Sophie F. Waterloo, Susanne E. Baumgartner, Jochen Peter, and Patti M. Valkenburg, 'Norms of Online Expressions of Emotion: Comparing Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp', *New Media & Society* 20 No 5 (2018): 1813–31.

123 Patricia Rossini, Heloisa Sturm-Wikerson, and Thomas J. Johnson, 'A Wall of Incivility? Public Discourse and Immigration in the 2016 US Primaries', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 18 No 3 (2021): 243–57.

124 Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

125 Monika Anderson and Brooke Auxier, '55% of U.S. Social Media Users Say They Are "Worn Out" by Political Posts and Discussions', *Pew Research Center*, 19 August 2020.

## Situational Characteristics: Subject

As well as the way in which a message is communicated, the nature of the subject can also affect the value and persuasiveness of WOM; consumers consider WOM more important for products that cannot be trialled or researched beforehand. It is particularly important for service organisations—especially when consumers consider the services in question to be complex or high risk.<sup>126</sup> This relates to the earlier discussion of the prior knowledge of WOM receivers, as it provides more evidence that WOM is more effective and important when the receiver knows less about the subject in question.<sup>127</sup>

In political marketing literature, the marketing of politics is frequently likened to service marketing<sup>128</sup> due to its inherent complexity and heterogeneity.<sup>129</sup> Although the comparison is not perfect,<sup>130</sup> the literature suggests that, as consumers use WOM to inform themselves about complex decisions, politicians should attempt to capitalise on this to disseminate information. However, research on the impact of WOM for service organisations is not quite so clear. Valos et al. suggest that WOM is less likely to spread on social media as complex products are less interesting,<sup>131</sup> while Sano finds no significant evidence for social media marketing generating positive WOM for a complex service.<sup>132</sup> This may be due to the limited attention span of social media users. Facebook recommends using easily digestible content to appeal to

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126 Valarie A. Zeithaml, Ananthanarayanan Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry, 'Problems and Strategies in Services Marketing', *Journal of Marketing* 49 N° 2 (1985): 33–46.

127 Moran and Muzellec, 'eWOM Credibility'.

128 Robert P. Ormrod and Heather Savigny, 'Political Market Orientation: A Framework for Understanding Relationship Structures in Political Parties', *Party Politics* 18 N° 4 (2012): 487–502.

129 Christian Grönroos, 'Marketing Services: The Case of a Missing Product', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* 13 N° 4/5 (1998): 322–38.

130 Jenny Lloyd, 'Square Peg, Round Hole? Can Marketing-Based Concepts Such as the "Product" and the "Marketing Mix" Have a Useful Role in the Political Arena?', *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 14 N° 1–2 (2005): 27–46.

131 Michael John Valos, Fatemeh Haji Habibi, Riza Casidy, Carl Barrie Driesener, and Vanya Louise Maplestone, 'Exploring the Integration of Social Media within Integrated Marketing Communication Frameworks: Perspectives of Services Marketers', *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 34 N° 1 (2016): 19–40.

132 Kaede Sano, 'An Empirical Study of the Effect of Social Media Marketing Activities upon Customer Satisfaction, Positive Word-of-Mouth and Commitment in Indemnity Insurance Service', paper presented at the *International Marketing Trends Conference*, 2015.

users, given the average online user's short attention span,<sup>133</sup> and the amount of time that topics spend 'trending' on Twitter has decreased during the last decade.<sup>134</sup> With this in mind, in order to maximise the effectiveness of their social media posts it would seem prudent for strategic communicators to keep to simpler topics that can be easily consumed and spread by their followers.

## Opinion Leadership and Word-of-Mouth in Social Media Settings

One construct that has been receiving particular attention from WOM researchers is opinion leadership. Opinion leadership is defined as 'the process by which individuals share information and influence others' attitudes and behaviors'<sup>135</sup> or 'the process by which one person (the opinion leader) informally influences the actions or attitudes of others, who may be opinion seekers or merely opinion recipients',<sup>136</sup> whereas opinion leaders are individuals 'that exert a disproportionate influence on those around them'.<sup>137</sup> In other words, by definition, the concepts of opinion leadership and opinion leader are intertwined with the idea of WOM communication. Basically, opinion leaders are individuals (either actively or passively, when their opinion is requested) who distribute a substantial amount of WOM and whose WOM has more influence on other individuals. Research on opinion leadership can be divided into two areas. One part of the literature focuses on the outcomes of opinion leadership, such as the different effects it has on others, while an even larger part focuses on the antecedents of opinion leadership.

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133 Facebook, 'Capturing Attention in Feed: The Science behind Effective Video Creative', *Facebook IQ*, 20 April 2016.

134 Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, Bjarke Mørch Mønsted, Philipp Hövel, and Sune Lehmann, 'Accelerating Dynamics of Collective Attention', *Nature Communications* 10 N° 1 (2019): 1–9.

135 Eunice Kim, Yongjun Sung, and Hamsu Kang, 'Brand Followers' Retweeting Behavior on Twitter: How Brand Relationships Influence Brand Electronic Word-of-Mouth', *Computers in Human Behavior* 37 (2014): 18–25.

136 Leon G. Schiffman, Håvard Hansen, and Leslie Lazar Kanuk, *Consumer Behaviour: A European Outlook* (Prentice Hall/Financial Times, 2008).

137 Hans Risselada, Peter C. Verhoef, and Tammo H.A. Bijmolt, 'Indicators of Opinion Leadership in Customer Networks: Self-Reports and Degree Centrality', *Marketing Letters* 27 N° 3 (2016): 449–60.

The variables examined by the stream of literature focusing on the outcomes of opinion leadership include WOM tendency (referral), shifts in attitudes, and behavioural change. According to a large two-wave survey conducted with a sample reflecting the US population, on social media opinion leadership is a clear determinant of political persuasion.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, according to a study conducted on Instagram, opinion leadership is positively associated with a consumer's intention to follow the influencer's advice, and with the likelihood of their interacting with and recommending the opinion leader.<sup>139</sup> Likewise, opinion leadership is positively associated with satisfaction. In fact, engaging not only in opinion leadership behaviours (i.e., opinion giving and opinion passing) but also opinion seeking behaviours on social media increases individuals' satisfaction with the brand.<sup>140</sup>

The stream of literature focusing on antecedents of opinion leadership is very diverse, as numerous classes of factors can influence one's emergence as an opinion leader. Some of these studies take the perspective of traits and individual differences and examine chronic tendencies. Studies suggest that the popular Big Five model of personality (extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and agreeableness) can successfully predict the emergence of opinion leadership on social media.<sup>141</sup> One important aspect of examining chronic tendencies is that stable psychological characteristics can be used to predict behaviours in the long term and can also be used to locate opinion leaders. For instance, using text and/or pictures from an individual's social media posts or the pictures that an individual 'liked' on social media, machine-learning

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138 Brian E. Weeks, Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, 'Online Influence? Social Media Use, Opinion Leadership, and Political Persuasion', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 29 Nº 2 (2017): 214–39.

139 Luis V. Casaló, Carlos Flavián, and Sergio Ibáñez-Sánchez, 'Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and Consequences of Opinion Leadership', *Journal of Business Research* 117 (2020): 510–19.

140 Akos Nagy, Ildikó Kemény, Krisztián Szűcs, Judit Simon, and Viktor Kiss, 'Are Opinion Leaders More Satisfied? Results of a SEM Model about the Relationship between Opinion Leadership and Online Customer Satisfaction', *Society and Economy* 39 Nº 1 (2017): 141–60.

141 So Young Song, Erin Cho, and Youn-Kyung Kim, 'Personality Factors and Flow Affecting Opinion Leadership in Social Media', *Personality and Individual Differences* 114 (2017): 16–23.

algorithms can predict that user's Big Five personality traits<sup>142</sup> and determine a user's likelihood of emerging as an opinion leader.

Some other studies examine 'proximal' variables. Unlike traits, the levels of these psychological variables change more regularly—so they generally cannot be used to make long-term predictions such as who will emerge as opinion leaders—but due to their conceptual closeness to the outcome variables, they typically have better explanatory power (coefficient of determination).<sup>143</sup> An Instagram user's originality is an important predictor of whether that person emerges as an opinion leader.<sup>144</sup> However, originality is not a stable trait (i.e., an individual will not always be original or unoriginal in all areas of life—it fluctuates) but is rather an outcome of other stable traits such as openness to experience.<sup>145</sup> In other words, while such proximal variables are better able to predict opinion leadership in the short term, they are not suitable for purposes of long-term forecasting.

## Discussion

In this paper we reviewed the literature on social media and WOM communications. In particular, we discussed the role of communication norms in social media and then reviewed the factors affecting the amount and impact of WOM communications. The review also explored the role of opinion leadership as a driver of WOM communications. As a result, the paper contributes to and provides implications of the theory and practice of strategic communications.

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142 Alixe Lay and Bruce Ferwerda, 'Predicting Users' Personality Based on Their "Liked" Images on Instagram', in *The 23rd International on Intelligent User Interfaces, March 7–11, 2018* (CEUR-WS, 2018).

143 Aybars Tuncdogan and Aybeniz Akdeniz Ar, 'Distal and Proximal Predictors of Food Personality: An Exploratory Study on Food Neophilia', *Personality and Individual Differences* 129 (2018): 171–74.

144 Casalo et al., 'Influencers on Instagram'.

145 Wiebke Kückenmester, Antonia Bott, and Jan Wacker, 'Openness to Experience Predicts Dopamine Effects on Divergent Thinking', *Personality Neuroscience* 2 (2019).

As previously described, a variety of strategy literatures are experiencing micro-foundations and behavioural strategy movements.<sup>146</sup> Put differently, the psychological micro-foundations of behaviour at lower levels of analysis (individuals, groups) have been examined to gain a deeper understanding of the outcomes at higher levels of analysis (e.g., countries, organisations). By drawing upon the streams of literature on social media<sup>147</sup> and WOM,<sup>148</sup> this paper introduces the behavioural micro-foundations perspective to strategic communications literature. In particular, the current review draws upon relevant digital research to provide explanations of why certain manners of communicating on social media generate WOM and produce large-scale impact while others fail. In doing so, this study contributes to the ongoing debate within strategic communications literature about how the strategic use of social media campaigns<sup>149</sup> can be further improved.

This paper also adds to the discussion in the streams of literature on strategic communications, political science, and strategic management on the extent to which strategy is a deliberate or emergent phenomenon.<sup>150</sup> That is, there are various types of strategies depending on where they lie on the deliberate–emergent continuum. Strategy may be fully planned (deliberate extreme of the continuum) or it can be fully imposed by the environment (emergent extreme of the continuum). However, it can also lie somewhere between the two extremes, such as when there are specific constraints influencing the process of formulating a deliberate strategy, when the strategic choice is the result of a consensus by the key stakeholders, or when the strategy is based upon a certain ideology.<sup>151</sup>

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146 Tuncdogan et al., *Strategic Renewal*.

147 Wondwesen Tafesse and Anders Wien, 'Implementing Social Media Marketing Strategically: An Empirical Assessment', *Journal of Marketing Management* 34 No 9–10 (2018): 732–49.

148 Ana Babić Rosario, Kristine de Valck, and Francesca Sotgiu, 'Conceptualizing the Electronic Word-of-Mouth Process: What We Know and Need to Know about eWOM Creation, Exposure, and Evaluation', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 48 No 3 (2020): 422–48.

149 Agarwal and Bandeli, 'Examining Strategic Integration', and Holmstrom, 'Narrative and Social Media'.

150 J.M. Bryson, 'The Future of Strategizing by Public and Nonprofit Organizations', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54 No 1 (2021): 9–18; Mustafa Cosar Unal, 'Strategist or Pragmatist: A Challenging Look at Ocalan's Retrospective Classification and Definition of PKK's Strategic Periods between 1973 and 2012', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 No 3 (2014): 419–48.

151 Henry Mintzberg and James A. Waters, 'Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent', *Strategic Management Journal* 6 No 3 (1985): 257–72.

On the one hand, social media are a tool for collecting external data (e.g., using automated tools to scrape data on WOM communication, such as tweets). For numerous types of organisations (political parties), this data represents a key aspect of marketing research,<sup>152</sup> which, in turn, is one of the most important steps in strategy formulation.<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, as we have described, one of the key factors mediating the impact of social media is WOM,<sup>154</sup> which can only be controlled to a certain level due to its organic nature. In other words, once social media communication goes online, it takes on a life of its own.

There are also several cases of communicators facing unintended consequences, ranging from unpopular posts to large-scale negative reactions.<sup>155</sup> That is, while social media contain elements that enhance political organisations' capabilities to shape the landscapes they operate in, they also have aspects that induce ambiguity and force political organisations to adapt continuously to emerging strategic options. In essence, social media represent a feedback loop where strategy is simultaneously a deliberate and emergent phenomenon.

Finally, regarding practical implications, the insights this paper provides can serve individuals working in positions involving strategic communications. More specifically, in this paper, we discussed a number of specific findings from the literature on social media, WOM, and opinion leadership. Gaining a better understanding of these findings will help strategic communicators build more efficient social media campaigns.

Furthermore, this paper implies a number of questions that strategic communicators should ask when working on a social media campaign.

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152 Pablo Barberá, Andreu Casas, Jonathan Nagler, Patrick J. Egan, Richard Bonneau, John T. Jost, and Joshua A. Tucker, 'Who Leads? Who Follows? Measuring Issue Attention and Agenda Setting by Legislators and the Mass Public Using Social Media Data', *American Political Science Review* 113 N° 4 (2019): 883–901.

153 Mark Van Rijmenam, Tatiana Erekhinskaya, Jochen Schweitzer, and Mary-Anne Williams, 'Avoid Being the Turkey: How Big Data Analytics Changes the Game of Strategy in Times of Ambiguity and Uncertainty', *Long Range Planning* 52 N° 5 (2019): 101841.

154 Ana Margarida Barreto, 'The Word-of-Mouth Phenomenon in the Social Media Era', *International Journal of Market Research* 56 N° 5 (2014): 631–54.

155 Belinda Kintu and Karim Ben-Slimane, 'Companies' Responses to Scandal Backlash Caused by Social Media Influencers', *International Journal of Market Research* 62 N° 6 (2020): 666–72.

In a given case should we be focusing on an organic social media campaign, paid social media ads, or both? Which social media channels have a good fit with our goals? How much control do we have over the message characteristics (which aspects of the message are we allowed to change)? How much control do we have over our own characteristics as the message source (are we allowed to reposition our brand as a part of this campaign; if so, to what extent)? How much control do we have over the receivers of the message? Do we have discretion over whom to target and do we have time and resources preliminarily to affect receiver attitudes before projecting our main message? Are we going to focus mainly on digital channels and social media, or will we support the marketing efforts on digital channels by using traditional channels as well? What effect do we expect our campaign to have on sWOM and eWOM, but also traditional WOM (how will we measure success)?

## Future Research

While this review helped to consolidate insights from the streams of research on social media platforms and WOM communications, it also uncovered several limitations which present areas of future research.

First, in line with the general focus of marketing literature, the majority of the studies we reviewed examined commercial institutions and products. While notable exceptions exist, marketing research with a specific emphasis on political settings is relatively scarce. Similarly, there is little or no marketing research that distinguishes between strategic political communications versus tactical political communications, although this is an important difference worth future research effort. One possible reason for this shortcoming is the lack of sufficient interdisciplinary research connecting marketing and strategic communications. We hope that this paper may serve to increase research in this relatively underexplored area.

Second, except for personality traits, the literature has largely overlooked perspectives on traits and individual differences. However, there are several

other classes of traits (physiological, endocrinological, neurological) that are known to affect behaviours.<sup>156</sup> Some of these traits, such as the facial width-to-height ratio, can be collected automatically (scraped) from social media and used to make predictions, such as which individuals are most likely to emerge as opinion leaders.

Third, this paper focused predominantly on organic aspects of social media marketing as a primary driver of WOM communication, but paid advertising in digital environments represents another interesting area of subsequent research.

Finally, it is also worth noting that this literature contains certain methodological limitations, including a relative lack of longitudinal studies and field experiments, which represent another challenge for future researchers to overcome.

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<sup>156</sup> For a review, see Aybars Tuncdogan, Oguz Ali Acar, and Daan Stam, 'Individual Differences as Antecedents of Leader Behavior: Towards an Understanding of Multi-Level Outcomes', *Leadership Quarterly* 28 N° 1 (2017): 40–64.

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