

# Investigating the impact of online word of mouth and traditional Face-to-face word of mouth on people's attitudes formation towards political issues

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## Keywords

Social Influence, Word of Mouth (WOM), Attitude formation, Political issues

## Abstract

*This article seeks to open dialogue about the utility of word of mouth (WOM) in explaining the development of people's political attitudes towards various political issues, both locally and internationally. This study argues that the best WOM impact is one that integrates both Internet tools (such as various social networks) with offline communication. Results show that in the Egyptian context, the Internet is at its most powerful when used to connect core reference groups who ultimately spread words through old fashioned, face-to-face conversations. Internet serves as a channel for boosting and encouraging people to gain politics information, in conjunction with face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, the Internet is a means that triggers people to spread face-to-face WOM.*

## 1. Introduction

*"A fundamental observation about human society is that people who communicate regularly with one another think similarly"* (Shiller, 2000, p.148). Word of mouth (WOM) has been acknowledged for many years as a major influence on what people know, feel and do (Sweeney *et al.*, 2008). Accordingly, social influence has the power to change people's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours (Kotler and Armstrong, 2013). *"People adjust their beliefs with respect to others to whom they feel similar in accordance with psychological principles such as balance"* (Latane, 1981). In general, social talk affects everything from the products consumer's buys to the medicines doctors prescribe (Solomon, 2013). This study focuses on WOM in the political context.

Social influences impact people's political attitudes and behaviours (Fein *et al.*, 2007; Lamprianou, 2013). Through WOM, individuals become aware of the notion of politics, acquire political facts, and form political values (Settle *et al.*, 2011). Political socialization and WOM creates: *"the patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning, constructing their particular relationships to the political contexts in which they live"* (Sapiro, 2004, p.3).

Currently, the Internet is driving WOM power (Breazeale, 2008) and diffusing political information (Fay, 2006). Web blogs, chat rooms, and social networking sites are expanding and becoming popular online (Harrison and Barthel, 2009). The Internet is helping make WOM reachable, speedy, and efficient (Fay, 2006). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the use of WOM communication through traditional methods (face-to-face communication) and social media and how it inspires people's political attitude formation.

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

Most investigations and academic research concerning WOM almost exclusively focus on products and services orientation issues (Sweeney *et al.*, 2008). Remarkably, there is a rare emphasis devoted to how WOM can sway people's judgments and behaviours in the political

arena (Lamprianou, 2013). Social interaction is important and influential within political perspective, given their intangibility and high associated risks (Fay, 2006). For these reasons, this research is academically significant. This study, which focuses on the impact of WOM on citizens' political attitudes and intentions, will be one of the very few to be carried out in the Middle East, especially in Egypt.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

WOM is a process of personal influence, in which interpersonal communications between a sender and a receiver can change the receiver's behaviours or attitudes (Sweeney *et al.*, 2008). WOM has existed for many years (Arndt, 1967). It refers to: "*person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service*" (Breazeale, 2008, pp. 297-298). According to Bansal and Voyer (2000), the interaction occurs in a spontaneous manner and then disappears as soon as it has been uttered, which is "*temporal synchronicity*". Furthermore, during social interactions, the people involved in the verbal communication know each other, must have some form of social ties, and must exchange information using verbal communication (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Sweeney *et al.*, 2008).

The age of the Internet has enhanced interactions and contacts among individuals. It provided people with a collaborative space for intermingling (Harrison and Barthel, 2009) like never before: "*now, regardless of where they are in the world, people with similar interests, or with similar backgrounds, or with similar attitudes, can join communities of like-minded people, and share views, exchange information, and build relationships*" (Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004, p. 16). Modern technology and social media provide: "*activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios*" (Safko and Brake, 2009, p. 6).

Whether online or offline, WOM is more influential on attitudes and behaviours than other marketer-controlled sources (Solomon, 2013). WOM affects a variety of conditions: awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, behavioural intentions and behaviours (Kotler and Armstrong, 2013). Sheth (1971) established that WOM is significant in raising awareness of countless subject matters. This is due to source reliability and the flexibility of interpersonal communication (Day, 1971). In marketing, WOM is nine times more effective than advertising (Kotler and Armstrong, 2013). It influences expectations and perceptions and influences attitude during the pre-choice evaluation of various issues (Buttle, 1998).

WOM can influence people's acceptance of information. The acceptance of online WOM information affects individuals' intention to share the WOM (Huang, 2011). "*Humans like to know about the good, the bad, and the ugly side of people, places, and situations, as well as to share this information with others, often as quickly as possible*" (Safko and Brake, 2009, p. 3-4). In the political context, increased information has been found to lead individuals to make political judgments that are different from those they would make without the information (Delli and Keeter, 1996). Gidengil *et al.*, (2004), stated: "*research at the individual level ... bears out the truism that knowledge is power that the competent, active citizen is the knowledgeable citizen*" (p.11). Based on this brief literature review, this study hypothesized that both online WOM and traditional face-to-face WOM impact the people's political attitude formation, whether it was local or international matters.

## 3. Research Method

This study was conducted using *quantitative methods*. This study was considered a *conclusive research* that used a *cross sectional design* and had a *descriptive purpose* (to gain more

information and identify particular characteristics within a certain field of study). The *consumers intercept data collection method* was used to reach the respondents and to ensure the collection of large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time in order to test the hypotheses. The data collection was conducted during March and April 2015. Consumers were approached randomly in public locations and asked if they were willing to participate in a brief research study. Those who agreed were given a description of the survey process. The respondents were given an administrated questionnaire on the spot to fill in.

*Administrated questionnaires* were used to collect data. In this study, the questionnaire was divided into four main parts. The first part asked various statements that measured the influence of traditional face-to-face WOM. The second part of the questionnaire asked other statements that measured the influence of online WOM. The third part of the questionnaire assessed the overall formation of the political attitude when hearing political information from interpersonal ties. The final part of the questionnaire requested for the respondents personal socio-demographic information.

The questionnaire contained words that were simple and straightforward. The survey was originally created in the English language. However, an Arabic version was also created due to the fact that the native language in Egypt is Arabic. The researcher used the back-translation process in order to ensure that the language conversion was done accurately. A bilingual speaker whose native language was Arabic translated the questionnaire from the English language. Another bilingual whose native language was English then retranslated the translated version of the survey back into the original language. This procedure was vital because it helped to develop an equivalent questionnaire.

## 5. Results

Out of the 400 self administrated questionnaires, the researcher received 320 that were complete and accurate, for a response rate of 80%. The participants were of different demographic backgrounds order to ensure a large enough variety in the studied population (Table 1). The data were analysed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), to test the hypotheses.

Demographic Characteristic	%	Demographic Characteristic	%
<b>City of Residence:</b>		<b>Age:</b>	
Cairo	61	15 to 19	18.5
Alexandria	31	20 to 24	56.5
Port Said	4	25 to 29	16.1
Suez	4	30 to 34	8.9
<b>Gender:</b>		<b>Level of Education:</b>	
Female	55.2	Elementary School	7.8
Male	44.8	High School	29.2
		College	52.6
		Post Graduate	7.6
		Other	2.9
<b>Job Status:</b>		<b>Average Monthly Income:</b>	
Manager/ Executive	2.1	Less than 2,000 L.E.	18.0
Clerk	19.5	2,000 L.E. less than 5,000 L.E.	32.0
Academic	16.1	5,000 L.E. less than 10,000 L.E.	32.0
Self employed	19.0	Over 10,000 L.E.	18.0
Labourer	11.0		
Other	32.3		
<b>Marital Status:</b>		<b>Number of Children:</b>	
Single	66.4	None	69.0
Married	20.1	One	16.7
Divorced/ Separated	13.0	Two	9.9
Widowed	0.5	More than two	4.4

**Table 1: Participants' Socio-Demographic Characteristics**

The reliability analysis was carried out to help indicate the stability, consistency and the "goodness" of each instrument that measured the variables. This research showed that all the variables' Cronbach's Alpha were above 0.65, indicating that their scales were stable, consistent

and free from error across time and across various items. In addition, the overall questionnaire had a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.91, signifying that all questions were correlated to one another. Table 2 illustrates the reliability analysis' results.

Variables	Statements	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Online WOM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online WOM enriches my basic understanding of subject matters</li> <li>- The way I thought about a subject would have been different if online WOM hadn't been present</li> <li>- Online WOM enlightens my understanding</li> <li>- Online WOM reduces my uncertainty about the subject</li> <li>- Online WOM helps me identify aspects of the subject that would otherwise have gone unnoticed</li> <li>- I use WOM to make specific decisions concerning the subject</li> <li>- Without WOM, my decision would have been very different</li> </ul>	0.834
<b>Traditional Face-to-face WOM</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online WOM enriches my basic understanding of subject matters</li> <li>- The way I thought about a subject would have been different if online WOM hadn't been present</li> <li>- Online WOM enlightens my understanding</li> <li>- Online WOM reduces my uncertainty about the subject</li> <li>- Online WOM helps me identify aspects of the subject that would otherwise have gone unnoticed</li> <li>- I use WOM to make specific decisions concerning the subject</li> <li>- Without WOM, my decision would have been very different</li> </ul>	0.768
<b>Attitude Formation towards Political Matters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intelligent/ Unintelligent</li> <li>- Good/ Bad</li> <li>- Believable/ Unbelievable</li> <li>- Informative/ Uninformative</li> <li>- Convincing/ Not Convincing</li> <li>- Persuasive/ Unpersuasive</li> </ul>	0.821

**Table 2: Reliability Analysis**

The next analysis steered was the correlation analysis, which indicated the direction, strength and significance of the relationships of the variables in the hypotheses. This analysis was used to test the hypotheses. The hypotheses were tested once regarding online WOM and another time regarding traditional face-to-face WOM. Both types of WOM were strong and positively significant in impacting people's attitude formation toward different political matters (whether locally or internationally). Table 3 illustrates the correlation analysis

Online WOM Impact Attitude Formation			Traditional WOM Impact Attitude Formation		
Correlation	Hypothesis Supported	Description	Correlation	Hypothesis Supported	Description
0.734**	✓	- Significant - Strong - Positive	0.689**	✓	- Significant - Strong - Positive

**Table 3: Correlation Analysis**

The multiple regressions analysis conducted a more sophisticated exploration of the interrelationship among the set of variables. Before exploring the interrelationship among the set of variables, the regression was conducted first for the conceptual framework as a whole. The effect showed that the model, when applied in this context was significant with a value of 0.000

in the ANOVA chart. Next, the analysis found that the effect of online WOM and traditional face-to-face WOM on the contribution and significance to the Attitude formation regarding various political issues. According to the results, traditional face-to-face WOM (Beta coefficient of 0.421) had a stronger effect on impacting individuals than online WOM (Beta coefficient of 0.321). Online WOM was a bit weaker in strength.

## 6. Conclusion and Discussion

Socialization is crucial for political mobilization and the spread of political information and awareness (Settle *et al.*, 2011). Currently, Egyptians interact to gain understanding about the contemporary political domain; apprehend the important issues facing society and the critical thinking skills required to evaluate different political views (Negm *et al.*, 2012). Social interaction implied comfort and assistance in learning about political matters and developing outlooks (Settle *et al.*, 2011). The aim of this study was to investigate the use of WOM communication through traditional methods (face-to-face communication) and social media and how it inspires people's political attitude formation.

The nature of this study was descriptive, using the quantitative approach. Data were collected through administrated questionnaires amongst 320 individuals. Results showed that both types of WOM, online and traditional face-to-face WOM were strong and positively significant in impacting people's attitude formation toward different political matters (whether locally or internationally). Discussions informed people of various civil, governmental, constitutional, and electoral matters that were unknown. It provided people with the opportunity to accumulate knowledge that lowered the political understanding barriers. Through social interaction, a collision of ideas, outlooks and beliefs arises, which alter people's attitudes and allows them to realize new things.

## 7. Research Limitations and Future Direction

A number of limitations prevent this study from being generalized. The first arises from the use of the consumer intercept data collection method in order to reach the respondents. This method ensured the collection of large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time and in an economical way. However, this technique has the disadvantage of convenience sampling. Therefore, the end results are not truly representative and cannot be generalized. Future research in this area would benefit from drawing a larger probability sample using, for instance, random sample selection techniques. The data for this study were collected over a period of two months. The comparatively brief period of time allowed only a restricted number of respondents (150) to participate. For future research, a larger sample is needed and the data should be gathered proportionately from all regions of the country.

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