

WHY DO THEY WHINE?: AN EXAMINATION INTO THE DETERMINANTS OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE WORD-OF-MOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the impact of the evaluation of a range of benefits on WOM. Utilizing longitudinal data collected from an upscale health and fitness resort/spa, we examined, among satisfied consumers, how perceptions of benefit performance influenced how much negative versus positive WOM and the strength of negative and positive WOM the consumer engaged in after their resort stay. We also looked at whether men and women vary in their WOM activity. From our analysis we determined that consumers with low levels of symbolic benefit performance engaged in stronger negative WOM despite high reported levels of satisfaction. In contrast, hedonic benefit performance was the best predictor of strong positive WOM.

INTRODUCTION

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication has been shown across many contexts to influence choice and purchase decisions (e.g. Richins 1983; Brown and Reingen 1987). Because of its importance, numerous studies have examined the link between satisfaction and WOM (e.g. Westbrook 1987; Swan and Oliver 1989; Anderson 1998). Satisfaction appears to be the prevalent antecedent to WOM that is studied. Some authors, however, have examined the relationship between other factors and WOM. Factors that have been examined include involvement (Dichter 1966) and the benefits of social exchange (Brown and Reingen 1987). As with the two latter studies, we want to look beyond satisfaction to assess the impact of different types of benefits on WOM. Specifically, we focus on a set of consumers that were satisfied with a consumption experience to examine the impact of a range of benefits on negative and positive WOM. For example, a firm might determine there is a positive connection between satisfaction and positive WOM, but they might not know what about their product, or service, drove the positive or negative WOM. By examining a range of benefits we can gain insight into the drivers of WOM. We are also interested

in examining if men and women differ in their use positive and negative WOM.

The purpose of this research is to better our understanding of what drives negative and positive WOM. Utilizing longitudinal data collected from an upscale health and fitness resort/spa, we develop a typology of benefits and then test it's ability, along with disappointment and delight, to predict positive and negative WOM. From our data, we are able to obtain expectations of consumers anticipating a major consumption experience, and then re-contact them afterwards, at two points of time, to measure their perceptions of benefit performance and WOM activity.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The study utilized guests from a world renowned, full-service, destination health and fitness resort/spa in the Southwest. The resort/spa is all-inclusive. It is unusual for the guest to incur any expenses outside of the resort/spa; guests rarely leave the premises with the exception of an occasional tour provided by the resort/spa. The average daily cost of a stay was \$558 for guests participating in this study. Guests attend the resort/spa for a large variety of reasons, ranging from fun, rest, or relaxation, to more health related reasons such as stress reduction, improved fitness or diet, smoke cessation, or injury recovery. The resort/spa's promotions emphasize that even if a guest's motivation for a visit is to meet a life enhancement goal (lose weight, quit smoking, etc.) it can be accomplished in an environment that provides pampering, relaxation, and fun. The resort/spa offers a wide range of services including medical evaluations and preventive health services, behavioral and self-management counseling, nutrition education, spiritual growth, movement therapy, exercise physiology, massage and body therapies along with skin care and beauty services. To promote healthful living, meals at the resort/spa are low fat and no alcohol, or soda, is served. Healthful living is promoted in an environment that also can provide luxury. Accommodations at the resort/spa range from a standard room containing a bedroom

and bathroom to luxurious fully self-contained haciendas. The overall ambiance reflects the resort/spa's emphasis on fitness for the mind, body and spirit.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Types of Perceived Benefits

To examine the role of a range of benefits on WOM, we propose a typology of consumption benefits that encompasses the consumption experience. Currently, in the marketing literature, functional attributes of both products and services are frequently used to evaluate the consumption experience (cf. Parasuraman, Berry, Zeithaml, 1988; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). As a broad perspective, Woodruff, Cadotte, and Jenkins (1983) have proposed including effort and social approval along with functional attributes. Emotions have also been shown to be important (Mano and Oliver, 1993). Drawing from these multi-benefit perspectives, we propose a typology of benefits that can be utilized by consumers to assess the consumption experience.

To develop the typology of benefits, we consider what needs consumers seek to fulfill. Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986) proposed that consumers have three basic categories of needs: *functional, symbolic, and hedonic*. Functional needs are externally generated needs that solve a consumption-related problem. Functional needs are motivated by such concerns as health, comfort, safety, and specific problem solving. To meet such needs, a marketing organization provides corresponding benefits to the consumer. For a health and fitness resort/spa, for instance, comparable benefits might be availability of medical tests, comfortable accommodations, lighted walkways, and weight-loss programs, respectively.

In contrast to functional needs, symbolic needs are internally generated. Social meaning, rather than functional utility, motivates the need (Solomon 1983). A product or service that carries symbolic meaning conveys that meaning to both the individual and to others. For example, taking an extravagant vacation is conveying to the consumer and to others that the consumer has achieved a certain financial status and also rewards

the consumer for that goal. Analogous symbolic benefits are conveyed at the resort/spa through promotional and publicity efforts. A recent resort/spa newsletter gives "writing postcards to jealous friends" as one of a 101 ways to enjoy visiting the resort/spa. Realizing the consumption experience, and sharing it with envious friends, represent a potential symbolic benefit for guests.

The resort/spa also takes full advantage of publicity opportunities. It is often host to writers from major U.S. and European magazines, or newspapers, who wish to write about the resort/spa. The exclusivity of the resort/spa and a list of which celebrities have been known to visit the resort/spa are usually mentioned in published articles. In fact, the "who's who" at the resort/spa is often given precedence over discussion of other benefits one could receive at the resort/spa.

Experiential/hedonic needs comprise the third type of consumer needs. Like symbolic needs, they are internally generated. Experiential needs include the need for pleasure, variety and cognitive stimulation (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Park, Jaworski and MacInnis 1986). The health and fitness resort/spa may meet this type of need by providing personal services such as massages, entertainment activities such as movies, or a broad array of dining choices.

The services literature suggests another major category of needs: service delivery. Within the service quality literature, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) have developed SERV-QUAL to classify potential service delivery benefits. They identify reliability (dependability and accuracy), responsiveness (willingness and/or readiness of employees to perform the service), assurance (knowledge, courtesy, inspiration of trust and confidence), empathy (caring, individualized attention), and tangibles (physical elements such as facilities, equipment, employees' appearance) as determinants of quality. Continuing the example, corresponding benefits might be five-star hotel service, luxurious facilities, caring service providers, or efficient service delivery. Whether consumers receive all, or some, of these benefits will likely affect their evaluation of the consumption experience. An important consequence, to the marketer, of a consumption experience is WOM.

WOM

WOM refers to informal communications directed at other consumers about the usage of particular products or services concerning evaluations of goods and services (Westbrook 1987). WOM is very important to marketers because it can be a major potential source of future business. For example, Brown and Reingen (1987) find that the choice of a medical professional is greatly influenced by WOM. Anderson (1998) suggests WOM is either neutral, positive or negative. Positive WOM includes relating pleasant experiences, making recommendations or conspicuous display. Negative WOM includes product or service denigration and relating unpleasant experiences. In this study we examine three aspects of WOM: amount of negative versus positive, strength of positive, and strength of negative WOM.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To assess how the various benefits might impact WOM activity, we examine whether the proposed benefit types (functional, symbolic, hedonic and service delivery) significantly impact the amount of negative versus positive WOM and the strength of the positive and negative WOM. We also include disappointment and delight as potential predictors of the various WOM measures.

Benefit Performance as Predictors of Negative and Positive WOM

Based on prior WOM studies, we would expect to find low benefit performance leads to mostly negative WOM. In contrast, we would expect that high benefit performance should lead to mostly positive WOM. The fact that our sample is limited to satisfied respondents might minimize this effect.

Although we have little literature to guide us, we expect to find that the relationship between negative and positive WOM and benefit performance will vary across benefit type. For example, given that positive WOM has been associated with conspicuous display (Anderson 1998) we should expect to find that high symbolic performance results in a significant increase of

positive versus negative WOM and in the strength of positive WOM. Our participant observations also revealed the importance of symbolic benefits and the desire to talk about celebrities. During our two participant observations Tony Danza, Elle MacPherson and Mickey Rooney, were also at the resort. The importance of viewing celebrities was evidenced by the fact that celebrity viewing was a primary topic of conversation during hikes, exercise classes, and other activities we attended. Numerous conversations started with 'Did you know Tony (Elle or Mickey) was here?'

Disappointment and Delight as Predictors of Negative and Positive WOM

We anticipate that disappointment will lead to mostly negative WOM and that delight will lead to mostly positive WOM. Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) suggests that outcomes coded as losses (disappointment) have a greater impact on evaluation than outcomes coded as gains (delight). Consistent with Prospect Theory, we would expect to find that disappointment leads to stronger negative WOM whereas the relationship between delight and the strength of positive WOM might not be significant.

Gender Differences as Predictors of Negative and Positive WOM

Along with examining the role of the various benefits on WOM, we examine whether there are differences by gender. Specifically, we thought, because of the upscale exclusive context, women might be more likely to use positive WOM to negotiate social status.

METHOD

Subjects

We conducted a longitudinal study over a ten-month period. It consisted of a total of seven stages: preliminary participant observation, pilot of pre-visit survey, pre-visit survey, pilot of post-visit survey, post-visit survey, a second participant observation, and a follow-up survey.

Subjects of the study were guests staying at the resort during the winter of 1995/1996. A total of

825 pre-visit surveys were sent out. Two hundred sixty-seven surveys were returned, representing a 32 percent response rate. The post-visit survey was sent to 267 resort guests that returned the pre-visit survey prior to their stay. A total of 218 responses, representing an 84% return rate were received.

The follow-up survey was sent, approximately six months later, to the 218 resort guests that returned the post-visit survey. One hundred seven surveys were returned within three weeks; 97 had complete enough information to utilize for this analysis. Of these guests, based on a 1 to 9 scale, 96% rated overall satisfaction as a 7, 8 or 9. As we were interested in examining the WOM behavior of satisfied guests we limited our analyses to the 93 guests that were relatively satisfied (7, 8 & 9). Of these satisfied guests, 13% gave overall satisfaction a rating of 7, 24% gave a rating of 8 and 63% gave a rating of 9. Females represented 84% of the respondents; the remaining 16% were males. Age of the respondents ranged from 28 to 77; the mean age was 51. Thirty five percent of the respondents had never been to the resort before; guests with prior experience at the resort had visited an average of 3 times before. These demographics were judged to be representative of resort decision-makers by the resort's Vice President of Marketing.

Data Collection Process

Pre-visit Survey. The pre-visit survey was four pages in length. Guests were asked to fill out the survey and return it prior to their visit to the resort/spa. The survey provided the opportunity of capturing guests' expectations prior to the consumption experience.

Post-Visit Survey. While the guests were visiting the resort/spa, a post-visit survey was mailed to their homes. The purpose of this survey was to capture the guests' evaluations of overall satisfaction and the benefits they received during their resort stay. To measure satisfaction guests were asked, on a 1 to 9 scale (1 = very dissatisfied to 9 = very satisfied) "Overall, how satisfied were you?"

Follow-up Survey. The follow-up survey was

sent, approximately six months later. Three WOM measures, from the survey, were utilized in this study. First, guests were asked if they had discussed their visit with others since leaving the spa. If they had discussed their visit, they were asked three additional questions: "How would you describe what you have told others about [xxx]?", "If you have shared any positive information about [xxx] with others, how positive would you rate the information?" and "If you have shared any negative information about [xxx] with others, how negative would you rate the information?" Responses for the first question were collected on a five-point scale with 1 representing all negative, 3 represented some negative and some positive and 5 represented all positive. The final two questions were also collected on five-point scale with 1 representing barely positive (negative) and 5 very positive (positive).

Developing Relevant Benefit Measures

A pilot of the pre-visit survey was sent to guests prior to their visit at the resort/spa in the fall of 1995. Benefit measures for use in the pre-visit survey were assessed in the pre-visit pilot survey. The benefits were guided by the proposed typology and developed from guest comments made to the researchers during a 3-day participant observation study, input from the Vice President of Marketing, interviews with resort/spa employees, and perusal of the resort/spa's promotional literature and video. Within the resort/spa context we identified thirty-one items that represented numerous service delivery, functional, hedonic, and symbolic benefits.

Service Delivery Benefits the resort/spa tries to provide include service delivery issues that map onto SERV-QUAL's dimensions. The benefit items utilized included: provide prompt service and aid in helping guests pick activities (responsiveness), services that are available when guests request them (reliability), caring and individualized attention (empathy), 'five-star' service (assurance) and extensive facilities and luxurious accommodations (tangibles). SERV-QUAL dimensions address these measures as potential benefits.

Functional Benefits that the resort/spa offers address both mental and physical well being.

These include low-fat cooking classes, stress management workshops, art therapy, yoga, fitness consultations, counseling and physical therapy, all of which address guests' functional needs. The pilot pre-visit survey contained the following items: make lifestyles changes, educate themselves about their mind or body, improve a mental or physical problem, get started on a fitness regimen, lose weight, and explore alternative healing methods.

Hedonic Benefits reflect the experience the guest had during their stay; they fulfill internally generated hedonic needs. Hedonic benefits identified for the pilot pre-visit survey included: have fun during the stay, feeling good and enjoying myself, becoming refreshed and renewed, being in surroundings that inspire or motivate, participating in a wide range of fitness activities, feeling rewarded, experiencing a variety of personal services (e.g., as massages, body wraps, or facials), being in beautiful natural surroundings, feeling like I am treated royally, and feeling pampered.

Symbolic Benefits result from the exclusivity of the resort/spa. Symbolic items on the survey included: be around guests that are interesting, have an experience my friends will envy, see a celebrity during my stay, and have an experience that I want to tell my friends about. In the following section we discuss how these items were utilized to form benefit scales.

ANALYSIS

Prior to testing how the various benefit types impact WOM, several variables must be calculated based on survey items: delight and disappointment and benefit performance. Benefit deviations were computed by subtracting expectations from perceived benefit performance then weighting by reported importance. The computed deviations were identified as either positive or negative and then summed to form a measure of positive deviations and a measure of negative deviations. These two measures capture the constructs of disappointment and delight.

Four variables representing benefit performance, one for each benefit type (hedonic, service delivery, symbolic and functional), were developed. To develop these benefit types, a

factor analysis was performed on the benefit measures. From the factor analysis, hedonic, functional, service delivery and symbolic benefit inputs were determined. Scales for the various benefit types were developed by summing the benefit items multiplied by their factor loadings. The scales for hedonic ($\alpha = .7967$), functional ($\alpha = .7999$) and symbolic benefits ($\alpha = .7188$) demonstrate better reliability than expected, given the nature of these items. The scale for service delivery is also acceptable ($\alpha = .6683$). We reviewed the benefit scale items with the resort's vice president of marketing to ensure we were capturing the full range of benefits within in each benefit type. The developed benefit scales were utilized as independent measures in the analysis.

Model Testing

We have three dependent measures: the valence of the WOM (all negative = 1 to all positive = 5), the strength of positive WOM (barely positive = 1 to very positive = 5) and negative WOM (barely negative = 1 to very negative = 5). Hedonic performance, functional performance, symbolic performance, service delivery performance, disappointment and delight are the independent measures. Simultaneous regressions were performed to assess the significance of the various benefits, disappointment, and delight on WOM.

First, we looked at the predictors of the amount of negative versus positive WOM. Our results reveal that hedonic performance is the only significant predictor of negative versus positive WOM ($t = 2.30$; 0.023). To further illustrate, the ten guests with the highest hedonic performance scores shared mostly positive information (4.83; all negative = 1 to all positive = 5) compared to the guests with the lowest hedonic performance evaluations (3.5; all negative = 1 to all positive = 5). Likewise, hedonic performance is the only significant predictor of the strength of positive WOM ($t = 2.09$; 0.034).

Differences emerge when we examine what benefits predict strength of negative WOM. Symbolic performance ($t = -2.15$; 0.031) and disappointment ($t = -2.89$; 0.003) are both significant predictors of the strength of negative WOM. Further analysis shows that the ten guests

Results of Factor Analysis

Performance	Functional	Hedonic	Symbolic	Service delivery
Problem	.72419	-.03553	.08183	.23711
Lifestyle	.77248	.04099	.17872	-.00997
Healing	.65206	.04942	.03107	-.04308
Discover	.62114	.16209	.14159	.01768
Educate	.67017	.30743	-.04120	.09441
Fitness	.59174	.21927	.25367	.00377
Caring	.25424	.48950	.02208	.23070
Enjoy	-.10632	.65406	.11550	.16171
Wide	.11060	.46988	.22962	-.25282
Natural	.17503	.66551	-.09146	.15165
Pamper	.24412	.51559	.20181	.34248
Reward	.19938	.56242	.45782	.00652
Inspire	.19995	.54822	-.06878	.21130
Envy	.17458	.00755	.78892	.10891
Exclusive	.12966	.08280	.62746	.25241
Guest	.11133	.12756	.60021	.01223
Tell	.08292	.06643	.67669	.21844
Luxury	.04104	.10680	.07381	.72989
Fivestar	.19967	.18516	.00533	.54347
Appt.	-.10546	.23137	.26015	.47800
Delay	-.14515	.18782	.09637	.65024
Effort	.12697	-.12558	.19021	.50507

Negative Versus Positive WOM

	Coefficient	t-value	Significance of t
Hedonic	0.290	2.30	.023
Symbolic	0.150	1.44	.152
Service delivery	0.094	0.79	.431
Functional	0.054	-0.56	.578
Disappointment	0.200	1.63	.104
Delight	-0.046	-0.49	.627
R ² = 0.32			

Positive WOM

	Coefficient	t-value	Significance of t
Hedonic	0.270	2.09	.028
Symbolic	0.031	0.29	.973
Service delivery	0.160	1.35	.187
Functional	0.065	-0.66	.562
Disappointment	0.140	1.19	.237
Delight	0.093	0.98	.325
R ² = 0.29			

with the lowest symbolic performance scores were very negative about any negative comments (2.73; barely negative = 1 to very negative = 5) compared to the ten guests with high symbolic performance (1.33; barely negative = 1 to very negative = 5). Likewise, the ten guests with the

Negative WOM

	Coefficient	t-value	Significance of t
Hedonic	0.110	0.79	.314
Symbolic	0.240	-2.15	.031
Service delivery	0.200	-1.60	.106
Functional	0.079	0.79	.533
Disappointment	-0.360	-2.89	.003
Delight	0.140	1.48	.188
R ² = 0.27			

highest level of disappointment were more negative (2.77; barely negative = 1 to very negative = 5) compared to the ten guests with lowest level of disappointment (1.57; barely negative = 1 to very negative = 5).

Gender Differences as Predictors of Negative and Positive WOM

Prior to testing for gender differences with WOM, we examined whether there were differences in benefit performance, disappointment, or delight. We wanted to ensure any WOM results were a function of gender and not differences in actual benefit performance, disappointment or delight. We conducted a

MANOVA analysis. We found that there were no significant differences in the level of benefit performance, disappointment or delight by gender (Pillais F-Statistic = 1.189; Significance of F = .321)

We could now test whether differences in WOM could be attributed to gender. Again, we utilized MANOVA. Valence of WOM, strength of positive WOM and strength of negative WOM were the dependent measures. Gender was the independent measure. We expected to find that women were more likely to engage in positive WOM. This idea was supported. Women engaged in a significantly greater amounts of positive versus negative WOM (4.42 compared to 3.50; 1 = all negative 5 = all positive). The strength of the positive and negative WOM, however, did not significantly vary by gender.

Gender:	Men	Women	F-Statistic	(p-value)
Positive Vs.				
Negative WOM	3.50	4.42	9.315	.003
Positive WOM	4.75	4.66	0.141	.709
Negative WOM	1.75	1.81	0.018	.892
Full Model (Pillais):	Degrees of Freedom: 3		F: 5.75	
	Significance of F: .002			

DISCUSSION

Our analysis showed that hedonic performance was the only benefit that significantly predicted the amount of negative versus positive WOM and the strength of the positive WOM. We had anticipated that symbolic benefit performance might significantly impact strength of positive WOM given the interest in celebrity viewing and numerous comments about the exclusivity of the resort. We did not, however, find this result. The importance of symbolic benefits to WOM becomes apparent when we examine the link from symbolic benefits to the strength of negative WOM. An interesting finding of the study was that symbolic performance significantly influenced the strength of negative WOM. In other words, guests that did not report high levels of symbolic benefits engaged in very negative WOM despite the fact that they reported they were satisfied with the resort experience. Our results show that guests can be satisfied with a consumption experience and still

engage in negative WOM if they did not feel they received high levels of symbolic benefits. These results provide evidence that delivering symbolic benefits are very important and should not be overlooked by the marketer.

The finding that disappointment leads to stronger negative WOM while delight has no significant impact on the strength of positive WOM was expected. It is interesting, however, given that we limited our analysis to satisfied guests. A finding that came out contrary to our expectation was that disappointment did not lead to significantly more negative, versus positive, WOM. It appears that if guests' expectations were not met, they did not decrease the balance of positive versus negative comments but the negative comments were significantly more negative than if expectations were met.

Implications

Practical implications that can be drawn from the study are that marketers should not assume that if guests are satisfied that no negative WOM will occur. Within our upscale context, there was stronger negative WOM if symbolic benefit performance was low. These results show that satisfaction is not enough. Marketers must make every effort to provide the benefits that will limit negative WOM. Marketers must examine benefit performance along with satisfaction to gain a better understanding of what drives negative and positive WOM.

Future research should examine the role of hedonic, symbolic, service delivery and functional performance on WOM over a range of contexts. In other contexts, or with other consumers, the significance of the four benefit types in predicting negative and positive WOM might vary. The fact that we found women engaged in more positive, versus negative, WOM should be tested for its generalizability beyond a high status vacation context. We would expect results to vary by the status associated with the product or service.

CONCLUSION

This study clarifies our understanding of the impact of range of benefits and disappointment and delight on WOM among satisfied consumers. Our

results provide insight into what drives WOM and WOM differences across gender. Our results show that women engage in more positive WOM. Most importantly, our results suggest managers can not overlook the importance of providing symbolic benefits, even if satisfaction is high, because not providing these benefits results in negative WOM.

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