Stimulating WOM and Raising Purchase Intent for Green Fashion Through Brand Experience

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Abstract

In global markets increasingly driven by customer reviews and recommendations, stimulating positive Word of Mouth (WOM) as part of corporate marketing activities has become a prerequisite for product success. Consequently, marketers must gain a better understanding of how beneficial WOM can be triggered and enhanced through targeted brand experiences, which allow companies to plan, implement and control the contact between user and product more effectively, as well as raise purchase intent. The article sheds light on this issue for the case of the green market, by analyzing a large-scale product testing campaign (N = 959) for a green fashion brand and investigating the effects of eco-opinion leaders' communication with potential users. In reference to its findings, a structural equation model will be developed to illustrate the effects of a pre-launch product testing as trigger for WOM. A supporting framework for the optimization of WOM results shall be introduced in conclusion, discussing how to utilize trusted brand ambassadors and green conversation triggers to achieve viral penetration, while at the same time controlling risks of negative WOM.

Keywords: *Word of Mouth (WOM), green brands, opinion leaders, viral promotion, launch strategy, purchase intent*

1.0 Introduction

In today's global and interconnected markets, organic customer recommendations and reviews have massively gained relevance in shaping product reputation and frequently display higher effectiveness than traditional forms of paid marketing promotions (Gruen *et al.* 2006; Trusov *et*

al. 2009; Ye *et al.* 2009). This is because they are perceived to be more credible and trustworthy than direct marketing information from a business organization (Cheung & Thadani 2012; Martin & Lueg 2013). Especially digital technologies are unquestionably facilitating the access to information about products and corporations for potential buyers (Keillor 2007; Sheth & Sisodia 2015).

WOM Marketing can be stimulated for instance by keeping customer satisfaction high, offering innovative and remarkable products, targeted outbound Public relations communication as well as cooperation with key influencers and networks (Williams & Buttle 2011).

At the same time, the values of global consumers in the context of their purchasing decisions have been shifting. Particularly in industrialized nations, individuals expect their products not only to be of impeccable quality and affordable price, but at the same time sustainably produced and non-harmful to the environment (Royne *et al.* 2011; Raska & Shaw 2012). This creates a new Green Market for environmentally conscious buyers, for whom the eco-performance is a key element for their brand choices (Peattie 2001). For Green Marketing to be successful, it will have to be simultaneously applied to a product of high environmental qualities and satisfy customer's expectations (Ottman *et al* 2006). Furthermore, it will be necessary to carefully select a target niche and market responsive to sustainability aspects, clearly communicating the green differentiation points and integrate environmental attributes within the dimensions of the Marketing Mix (Dangelico & Vocalelli 2017). At the current point of time though there is yet no specific model for marketing practitioners to specifically involve these green consumers based on corporate strategic goals via the above-mentioned WOM marketing mechanisms. Some studies have already investigated pre-launch WOM based on advertising and social media marketing (Burmester *et al* 2015; Kim & Hanssens 2017) and product samples as a promotion tool in various empirical experiments (Biswas *et al* 2014; Kim *et al* 2014). Consequently, it has become clear that opinion leaders' voice and reach play an essential role for the successful conduct and implementation of a WOM strategy. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge no specific research has been conducted yet on the identification, selection and analysis of opinion leaders for WOM campaigns focused on the green lifestyle market.

The paper at hand tries to make a contribution to marketing research by bridging these two major market developments and investigating how eco-opinion leaders communication is spreading and

how product trials might affect purchase intentions in the green fashion market. We conducted a three-wave field study. In total, 1,127 eligible testers were selected and received a cardigan for trial; of these, 959 participants completed the final survey (Q3), which forms the analytical sample. *Sample sizes vary across analyses due to casewise deletion of missing values.* Next, they received a free product they could test. To conclude, participants were asked to complete a survey to indicate their eWOM intentions.

Based on the results a structural equation model has been developed to illustrate a product sample promotion strategy and the thereof resulting WOM effects. Afterwards supporting operational marketing activities for green brands are presented, which allows the enhancement and effective utilization of pre-launch natural WOM among product testers and their network. It will become apparent that marketers in green brand companies should not leave the creation and direction of WOM up to chance and uncontrolled, but rather help to optimize the process for the achievement of the most substantial results through targeted tools and promotion elements.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Green Market: Characteristics and challenges

For the purpose of this paper, stimulation of WOM shall be investigated in context of the Green Market. The Green Market can be defined as the industry for products and services with the appeal of sustainability or environmental friendly features as key benefits towards the customers. Accordingly, Green Marketing may be characterized as "as the effort by a company to design, promote, price and distribute products in a manner which promotes environmental protection" (Cherian & Jacob 2012, p. 118). With growing awareness concerning environmental issues and sustainability as an 'emerging megatrend' (Lubin & Esty 2010, p. 42), sustainable products have gained popularity (Raska & Shaw 2012), with some consumers even willing to pay a premium for higher eco-performance (Royne *et al.* 2011). As a result, the Green Market has become a topic of interest for corporate management and marketing (Cronin *et al.* 2011). Sustainability may concern buyers due to a number of reasons: Health reasons and worries about the harmful effects of non-sustainable products, the desire to protect the natural environment, as well as moral considerations, such as avoiding harming animals as part of product testing (Magnusson *et al.* 2003; Vermeir & Verbeke 2006; Young *et al.* 2010). Awareness for sustainability issues has been driven recently by a better access to information, green advertising promoted by companies and more interest in

social and environmental issues within industrialized societies in general (Cherian & Jacob 2012).

Yet successfully marketing products to the green consumer segment is not a trivial task. One considerable issue for marketing in green markets is the so-called "green gap": When surveyed, a large number of consumers claim to be concerned about the environment and making sustainable purchasing decisions, yet when in an actual buying situation, often these consumers choose conventional products (Fraj & Martinez 2007; Young *et al.* 2010; Do Paco & Raposo 2010). Reasons for this effect might include a lack of financial means, the assumption that one's own purchasing decisions are not linked directly to environmental protection or the interview effect of proclaiming interest in the environment even though it contrasts with one's real individual values. Rettie *et al.* (2014) therefore suggest that instead of presenting green products as a niche choice, it could be more effective to rather stress social normalisation, i.e. present sustainable product options as the socially most accepted choice. Nevertheless, while consumers might consider sustainable attributes in their purchasing choices, these are frequently seen as less important than other features (Ginsberg & Bloom 2004).

With more companies using eco-performance in their marketing, consumers might even display a growing mistrust towards green initiatives (Huang *et al.* 2014). Not only are potential buyers often highly skeptical about green marketing (Brennan & Binney 2008), some even show 'greenophobia' and consider sustainable products as more expensive, less effective and only aimed at a small niche of green consumers (Grant 2007).

Recent research further underlines the importance of trust and satisfaction in driving positive word-of-mouth in the green market. In an online survey of 297 participants, the authors (Román-Augusto et al., 2023) found that green perceived value significantly influences both green trust and green satisfaction, which, in turn, positively affect green WOM. These findings emphasize that companies should not only underscore the environmental benefits of their products but also systematically foster consumer trust and satisfaction to generate more authentic and credible recommendations.

Consequently, WOM marketing initiatives might be an ideal fit for the promotion of brands in the Green Market. Interestingly, green brands so far have not been discussed yet within academic marketing literature in great detail (Cronin *et al.* 2011; Huang *et al.* 2014). For a more effective planning, implementation and control of WOM based marketing for products with high eco-

performance, the development of innovative strategies, in particular for the digital communication context, is therefore required.

2.2. WOM-Marketing as an Essential Promotion Channel

Positive brand and product reputation is generally considered an essential foundation for market success in the current dynamic competitive environment (Abimbola & Kocak 2007; Davis 2010). To establish a beneficial corporate image, Word of Mouth (WOM), which can be defined as "the act of exchanging marketing information among consumers" (Chu & Kim 2011, p. 48), constitutes an effective method. Generally speaking, the image that consumers have towards a company or product may be influenced by owned, paid or earned information: Owned contents in this context refers to media controlled by the marketers, such as a corporate website; paid media to bought contents, like advertising and commercials, and finally earned media, which is not directly controlled nor bought by the company, like WOM and viral messages (Hanna *et al.* 2011; Burcher 2012). In recent years the shaping, modeling and maintaining of positively associated brand images has been experiencing a growing relevance of earned, customer driven content (May 2017). In fact, outbound, paid marketing messages are often no longer effective within a digital environment: Potential buyers are frequently inundated with a massive amount of information, making it difficult for brands to be noticed among countless other choices (Opreana & Vinerean 2015).

On the other hand, WOM not only targets the individual directly, but can be spread through a large variety of digital channels and platforms (Silverman 2011), therefore providing the potential to effectively shape company image and reach customer groups inaccessible through traditional marketing vehicles (Hanna *et al.* 2011). Additionally, in the digital environment potential and actual buyers are no longer just the recipients of information dispersed one-sided from the company's side; rather, every individual has the potential to publish online and thereby influence public opinion (Berthon *et al.* 2007; Hanna *et al.* 2011). This makes each consumer another possible source and hub for additional far-reaching WOM. Recommendations and suggestions of influential individuals and popular online publishers can easily reach millions of viewers or readers almost instantaneously, with WOM already today triggering between 20-50% of all purchasing decisions (Bughin *et al.* 2010). Lastly, eWOM is more measurable than traditional recommendations, which makes this channel interesting from the corporate strategic viewpoint (Cheung *et al.* 2012).

Confronted with the increased relevance of WOM, corporate marketers face the challenge of stimulating positive and avoiding negative WOM. This can be achieved by continuously working on improving customer satisfaction, offering innovative products and using opinion leaders strategically (Williams & Buttle 2011). Concretely speaking, for the targeted creation of positive WOM companies should first identify social influencers as the nodes of communication (Li *et al.* 2010; Li & Du 2011) and then use them for instance as brand ambassadors to recommend their products (Groeger & Buttle 2014). Besides, research indicates that positive WOM can be gained in particular if the product is perceived as interesting, innovative or surprising (Berger & Schwartz 2011).

To maintain a high level of WOM over time, it helps if the consumers receive cues from their environment or encounter promotional campaigns, reminding them of the brand (Berger & Schwartz 2011). On the other hand, negative WOM, especially when going viral online, might potentially have devastating effects, as the recent examples of a passenger forcefully being removed from a United Airlines flight and the following online brand backslash have illustrated (Temin 2017).

In this context, a pre-launch brand experience by opinion leaders has the potential to stimulate WOM as a reaction of successful product testing (Godes & Mayzlin 2009).

These findings show that the indirect pathways (i.e., via loyalty and trust) have an even stronger effect on WOM intentions than the direct relationship between green marketing and WOM itself. In other words, when green marketing efforts successfully foster higher levels of consumer trust and loyalty to a hotel brand, recommendations and positive WOM spread more effectively. This underscores the need for marketers to go beyond one-dimensional promotions and develop deeper, relationship-based strategies that cultivate trust and attitudinal loyalty particularly relevant in contexts where environmental credibility and authenticity are crucial.

Using product trials is generally believed to be more effective in building strong beliefs and attitudes towards brands than advertising alone (Kempf 1999). Furthermore, allowing a first test round of feedback from opinion leaders and their followers of the product and its marketing communication can be used as a market test (Kahn 2010), hence a pre-launch brand experience could constitute a tool to gather insightful information for perfecting the final launch based on actual market data.

Summing up, encouraging WOM by targeted measurement and improvement of customer satisfaction, innovativeness and opinion leader involvement in favor of the company has never been more essential for marketers, yet has to be planned, implemented and controlled based on a strategic plan and the unique requirements of digital communication networks. A recent bibliometric and systematic review of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by Donthu et al. (2021) highlights the field's strong growth, particularly in North America and Europe. Their analysis identifies several prominent themes: negative word of mouth, consumer trust, online reviews and ratings, brand loyalty, social media, and service failure/recovery. Four dominant research streams emerge: (1) the determinants of eWOM (e.g., satisfaction, perceived value); (2) eWOM in hospitality (with a focus on online travel reviews); (3) cognitive aspects (how consumers process and trust digital feedback); and (4) service failure and recovery strategies. For green brands, these findings stress the importance of authenticity and transparency. Since consumers often rely on online feedback when forming opinions about eco-friendly offerings, timely and credible eWOM efforts can bolster trust, reinforce brand loyalty, and mitigate negative perceptions. Future research directions include exploring eWOM's cultural nuances, new technologies (e.g., AI-based chatbots), and broader geographic settings beyond the traditional North American and European contexts.

2.3. Identifying Green Key Influencers

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnectedness of an WOM stimulation strategy specifically for the Green Market in today's interactive communication environment. Each of these elements has its own specifications, which must be taken into account when crafting a marketing strategy. As the above argumentations have highlighted, the Green Market is an industry of growing consumer interest and therefore sales potential (Cronin *et al.* 2011; Raska & Shaw 2012; Royne *et al.* 2011). At the same time however, moral sensitivity of buyers towards environmental issues is high (Lee 2008); due to greenwashing, the exploitation of eco-marketing for profit making and general distrust towards environmentally friendly brands, there is a significant level of doubt towards products and services promoted based on sustainability features (Grant 2007; Brennan & Binney 2008; Chen & Chang 2013; Skarmeas & Leonidou 2013; Huang *et al.* 2014).

As a consequence, a more proactive communication strategy than for selling conventional products might be necessary to not only educate consumers about ecological aspects, but also in order to

build trust and credibility in the sustainability claims of the company (Hasan *et al.* 2012). Hence it will be crucial to identify *green opinion leaders*. As pointed out above, WOM marketing activities towards these partners have to be based on the establishment of relationships with key influencers (Li *et al.* 2010; Li & Du 2011; Groeger & Buttle 2014), which promise in particular long-term effectiveness through trust building with the ecological niche audience.

As hubs of information, opinion leaders furthermore promise a more effective approach to promotion dispersion than the involvement of individuals with more passive communication behavior. With the exception of intentional, paid WOM, for instance through celebrities (Bughin *et al.* 2010), genuine positive recommendations have to be earned over time, because trust develops only gradually and is a fragile resource, which can easily be destroyed (Keh & Xie 2009). In the frame of this paper, we will focus exclusively on non-paid, organic WOM messages. Therefore, in the case of using the WOM stimulation approach for a product launch, it will be essential to create and enhance the WOM in a timely manner to meet the limited time window of the (pre-) launch promotion.
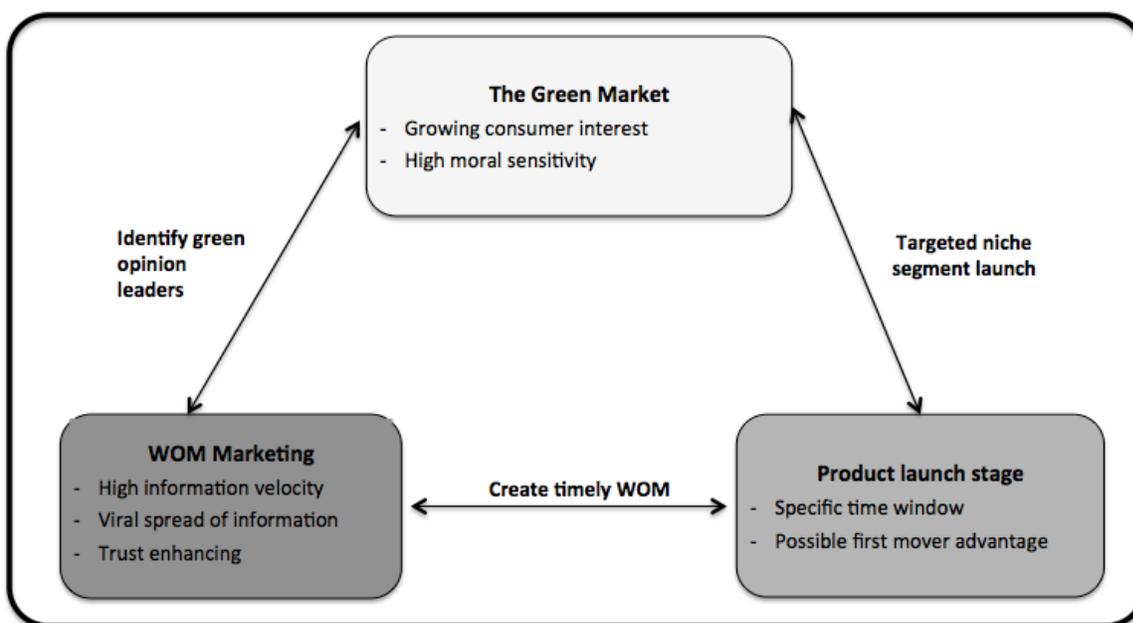

Figure 1: Interconnectedness of Green product launch WOM Marketing elements

In fact a launch announcement might be used as a suitable event for WOM triggering, as it can present remarkable news and improve launch performance, especially when the product is highly innovative (Lee & Colarelli O'Connor 2003). Additionally, a product launch focusing on

sustainability aspects could contribute to achieve a first mover advantage on the market, before competitors can imitate and introduce a similar approach (Tetrault Sirsly & Lamertz 2008). In its most distinctive form, a company might therefore be able to access a "blue ocean market" (i.e. one without major competition due to its newness and innovativeness) by offering an eco-product, thereby avoiding the "red ocean markets" of high competitive rivalry in conventional product areas (Kim & Mauborgne 2007).

Lastly, it has to be taken into account that the modern communication environment requires increased consideration of digital methods with high information velocity. This can work positively or negatively for a brand: When consumers are satisfied and intrigued about what the corporation has to offer, these individuals and opinion leaders are able to spread relevant information virally to a massive audience almost instantly (Ferguson 2008). On the other side though, there is the risk that negative impressions are distributed just as fast and might have an even greater impact on customers' impression of the brand than positive eWOM (Vázquez-Casielles *et al.* 2013).

Especially since the negativity bias suggests that negative information has a bigger impact than positive information. Therefore, it is of enormous importance to build and maintain a high level of trust between consumers and the corporation. It is additionally essential to make use of multipliers in the online environment in order to gain sufficient traction for the intended eWOM strategy (Li *et al.* 2010; Li & Du 2011). While companies in the Green Market should try to build a relationship with each potential customer, from a strategic viewpoint it will be most feasible to identify opinion leaders as preferred conversation partners and information hubs, and align the WOM promotion activities to these influential individuals. Ideally such an approach can lead to viral distribution of the transmitted brand message.

For the purpose of the empirical study discussed in this paper, the four categories of "Opinion Leader" (i.e. individuals with high WOM impact, who are frequently interviewed and foster active communication with a large amount of people) or "Opinion Seeker" (i.e. someone with limited own WOM impact and less active interview/communication activities, in accordance with Flynn et al. 1996, p. 137 ff.), as well as "Eco-Fan" (i.e. someone with a significant personal interest and knowledge concerning sustainable products and lifestyle) or "Conventionalist" (i.e. someone with low or only intermediate level of interest and knowledge concerning sustainable products and

lifestyle) were distinguished (see Figure 2). This clustering resulted into the four possible participant combinations of "opinion-leading eco-fan", "opinion-leading conventionalist", "opinion-seeking eco-fan", as well as "opinion-seeking conventionalist". Due to their high WOM impact as well as brand fit, for a green marketing campaign the opinion-leading eco-fans can be considered the most crucial sub-group for the purpose of this study.
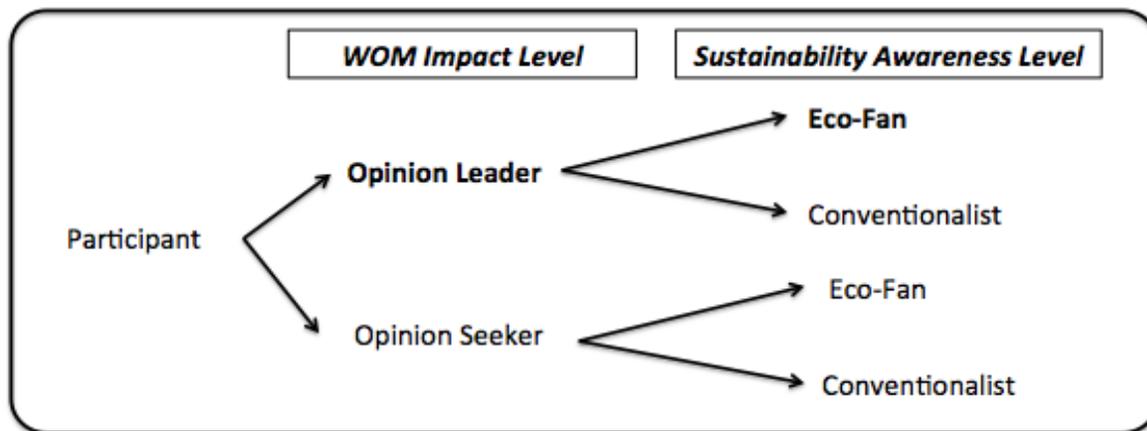

Figure 2: Participant Clusters Based on WOM Impact and Sustainability Awareness Levels

In addition to distinguishing between opinion leaders and opinion seekers as well as eco-fans and conventionalists recent research suggests that personality traits play a critical role in shaping how and why consumers share information about sustainability. According to Salem and Alanadoly (2020), three of the Big Five personality dimensions Extraversion, Openness to Experience, and Agreeableness are most strongly associated with high social media engagement. These individuals, the authors argue, tend to be more proactive in sharing content related to environmental concerns, thereby acting as powerful drivers of word-of-mouth (WOM) in the sustainable fashion domain. Moreover, Salem and Alanadoly's findings show that active social media usage among extraverted and open individuals enhances their eco-friendly behavior and environmental concern regarding fashion production.

This heightened awareness, in turn, amplifies the frequency and reach of WOM, particularly when these users encounter brands with compelling sustainability messages. For marketers, this indicates that targeted strategies addressing not only consumers' eco-orientation (i.e., eco-fan vs. conventionalist) and communication style (opinion leader vs. opinion seeker), but also the

underlying personality traits that predispose individuals to share content online, can help maximize viral potential. By identifying and collaborating with users who score high on extraversion, openness, and agreeableness, sustainable fashion brands may foster a more effective and authentic WOM network.

Therefore, it is crucial for green brands including hotels and other sectors to tailor marketing strategies that appeal to Millennials' sustainability values, thereby maximizing the potential for organic, positive WOM. Interestingly, Wang et al. (2018) also identified gender differences, finding that female tourists are more likely than male tourists to recommend green hotels. Taken together, these results suggest that an effective WOM strategy in the green market should not only focus on establishing and communicating a clear green image thus boosting green satisfaction and trust but also on identifying and engaging the right subgroups, such as Millennials and females, who demonstrate stronger WOM propensity. In doing so, companies can benefit from a more targeted and impactful approach to activating influencers for sustainable offerings.

2.4. Hypotheses development: Link between product experience, WOM and purchase intent
Before the analysis of the campaign, three hypotheses were developed, which later would be tested through the sample.

2.4.1 Main effect of a free product trial on WOM and purchase intent
Firstly, WOM does not only result from opinion leadership with enduring engagement, but can also come from situational involvement, especially associated with personal experience (Richins & Root-Shaffer 1988). Those individuals, who get involved on a situational basis – i.e., in a purchase decision situation, or here as product testers (as opposed to enduring involvement), tend to communicate product news and build attachment with the brand. After having experienced quality and design first hand, at least a certain number of the survey participants can be expected to develop a liking for the product. Product trials have been proven to have a high impact on the emotions felt towards the brand (Kempf 1999), which might help increase purchase intentions. Therefore we assume that attending a product test raises the probability of a positive buying decision for all participants. We consequently define H1a and H1b as follows:

> *H1a: In comparison to pre-test levels, after the product sampling all test participants*
> *overall will display a higher average WOM intent.*

H1b: In comparison to pre-test levels, after the product sampling all test participants overall will display a higher average intent of actual product purchase.

Secondly, even though product experience can be a driver for purchase intent, we argue that in the green fashion market with its critical and well-informed consumers the brand itself also plays an important role for the final purchase intentions. As discussed above, sustainability considerations can constitute a significant factor within the Green Market (Magnusson *et al.* 2003; Vermeir & Verbeke 2006; Young *et al.* 2010). Nevertheless, confining the research focus simply on the ecological dimension would not do the complex psychological process of opinion formation, brand selection and final purchase intention any justice. While the paper at hand can due to its limited frame not investigate all aspects of this process, it should be taken into account that purchase intent will require more than just a high sustainability performance. Consequently, we argue that in the green fashion market the brand and the perception that customers have of it also plays an essential role in the context of purchase decision-making. Accordingly, we assume H2 as follows:

H2: A reported positive brand perception will be positively correlated to product purchase intentions of the test participants in all control groups.

2.4.2 Moderating Role Of Eco-Opinion Leadership

We assume that opinion-leaders and eco-fans will create the largest amount of WOM. The former are by definition more actively involved in communication with a bigger number of individuals and therefore can be expected to have a larger reach. Additionally, as the latter group of eco-fans has a pronounced interest in sustainability issues, it can be anticipated that they speak more frequently about the eco-brand they experience during product testing than the conventionalists. Previous studies have indicated that individual consumers create more WOM if the brand values reflect their personal beliefs (Tuškej *et al.* 2013), which is clearly the case for a sustainable fashion products and the group of eco-fans. Such kind of positive eWOM will likely be linked with raising the probability of considering purchase as well (Gupta & Harris 2010; Yang *et al.* 2012). Additionally, widespread positive WOM online can lead to an overall beneficial brand image. Accordingly, H3 will be defined as follows:

H3: Opinion-leaders and eco-fans involved in product testing will speak more often about the product and brand than the control group of conventionalists/opinion seekers.

Critically, attitude (towards eco-friendly products), subjective norms (social pressure or support), and perceived behavioral control (sense of self-efficacy in acting sustainably) each play a partial mediating role in explaining why individuals with strong pro-environmental beliefs and competencies ultimately recommend and then buy green products. In other words, heightened environmental awareness alone does not suffice: Consumers also need to feel positive about the product (attitude), receive reinforcement from their social network (subjective norms), and believe they can feasibly adopt green purchasing behaviors (perceived behavioral control). This framework underscores the importance of aligning promotional activities particularly in pre-launch WOM campaigns with psychological enablers that support individuals' sense of efficacy and social acceptance when it comes to recommending and purchasing green products. For marketers working with eco-opinion leaders, these TPB-driven insights highlight the need to address not just the informational or "buzz-building" elements of WOM but also the deeper motivational and normative factors that encourage sustainable product adoption.

3. Research Methodology

Now, to test these hypotheses and investigate pre-launch product testers' impact as well as comparing their opinion leading influence and ecological attitude through clustering, a large-scale survey was conducted with the help of one of the most established eco-textile companies in Europe, Hess Natur Textilien GmbH.

Procedure

Step 1: Pretest Survey

Hess Natur Textilien GmbH implemented a WOM-marketing campaign targeting opinion leaders already during the pre-launch stage. Hess Natur Textilien GmbH advertised this campaign through their own product catalogue, newsletter and social media channels, inviting customers and other interested individuals to apply through a questionnaire (Q1) for the free testing of one of 1127 cardigans made from premium eco-alpaca wool under fair working conditions. After 4 weeks close to 40,000 candidates applied to become a product tester.

From among these candidates, in the next step the most suitable 1127 trial participants, including a control group, were identified and separated in four categories (see Figure 2). To this end, the 40.000 participants were asked to complete a survey with a series of 12 close-ended questions,

evaluating the applicants' attitudes towards various lifestyle attitudes, including food, cosmetic, travel and textile usage (see appendix). Based on how engrained ecological product and purchase choices were in their daily lives, they were distinguished in either conventionalists or eco-fans. To assess the applicants' qualities as potential opinion leaders, the survey further evaluated the participants' communication habits, such as Internet usage, frequency of getting in touch with friends and family, as well as behavior in sharing information and recommending (ecological) products. Applicants with a highly distinct profile as communicative and advice-giving individuals were then assigned to the group of opinion leaders, those with more passive communication behavior as opinion seekers. To measure the degree of distinction for both the ecological and communication behavior profile of the participants, the survey used Likert scales (lowest degree of agreement to highest degree of agreement), numerical scales (e.g. to indicate frequency of initiated communication), as well as multiple choice and yes/no answers.

Results – Three-Wave Study

In this step, 959 participants completed the final questionnaire (Q3), forming the basis for the analysis. To assess participants' ecological orientation and communication behavior, the survey employed a mix of item formats: Likert scales (ranging from lowest to highest agreement), numerical scales (e.g., for communication frequency), as well as multiple choice and binary (yes/no) questions.

Participants were assigned to four clusters: 503 opinion-leading eco-fans, 154 conventionalist leaders, 154 eco-followers, and 147 conventionalist followers.

Step 2: Product Trial

After the analysis of all participant profiles around half of the test participants were selected with a clearly distinct profile as opinion-leading eco-fans, who going forward can be considered the key cooperation partners in context of WOM creation. The rest of the participants were selected from the three other groups of opinion-seeking conventionalists, opinion-seeking eco-fans and opinion-leading conventionalists based on their surveyed profile as control groups for the study.

One week after the identification of all participants, the cardigans were sent out to the qualifying candidates. After one more week the test subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Q2), evaluating their impression about the product and brand. At the end of the campaign (after 4 weeks)

yet another questionnaire (Q3) was distributed and analyzed to evaluate possible changes in brand and product reception, as well as in WOM behavior among the participants. During the campaign period between Q2 and Q3 all test subjects were supplied with additional information about the brand and its products and encouraged to speak to their peers (online- and offline). The final survey then measured their communication through the questionnaire. Figure 3 below illustrates the distribution of all participants' clusters during the course of the campaign (from Q1 to Q3). Due to rounding and the structure of the response scale, totals in Figure 3 may not add up to exactly 100%.
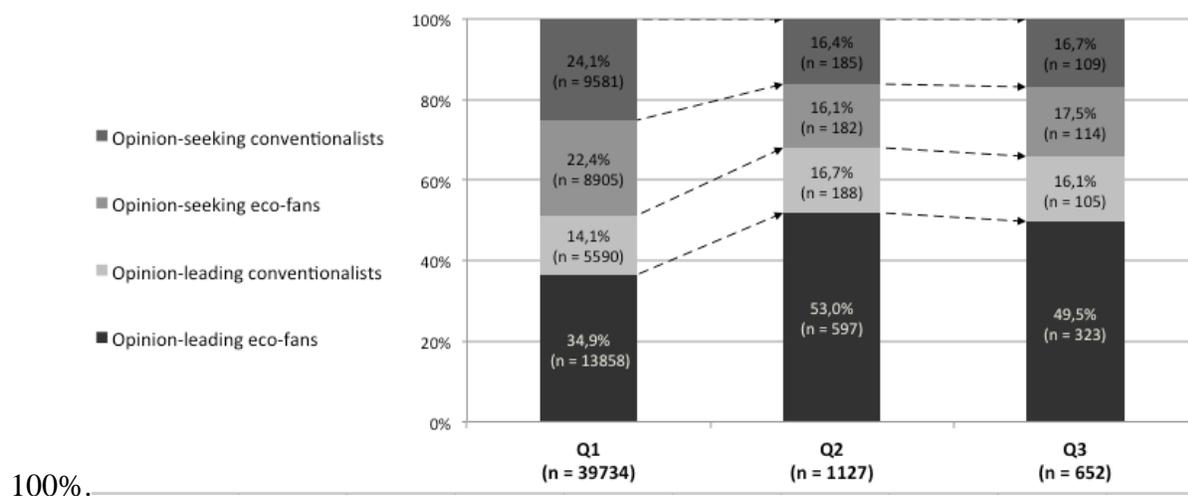
Figure 3: Distribution of participant clusters during campaign from Q1 to Q3

3.1. Presentation and discussion of results

We found that purchase intention for products of the brand increased from 39.4% in wave 2 to 50.0% at the end of the product test (wave 3). This confirms H1b, which assumed that purchase intention would increase following the product sampling compared to pre-test levels. In addition, 73.1% of respondents rated the brand with a 9 or 10 (M = 8.56, SD = 1.71) and 83.0% rated the product with a 9 or 10 (M = 9.21, SD = 1.65) on the recommendation scale. These results underline that the high mean values reflect a broad consensus rather than a few extreme cases. The more differentiated opinions can be explained by the personally gained experience with the product and the resulting insider perspective as actual users.

Total brand evaluation correlated positively with recommendations (r = .48, p < .01) and purchase intentions for the cardigan (r = .44, p < .01). This indicates that not only the sustainable aspects of

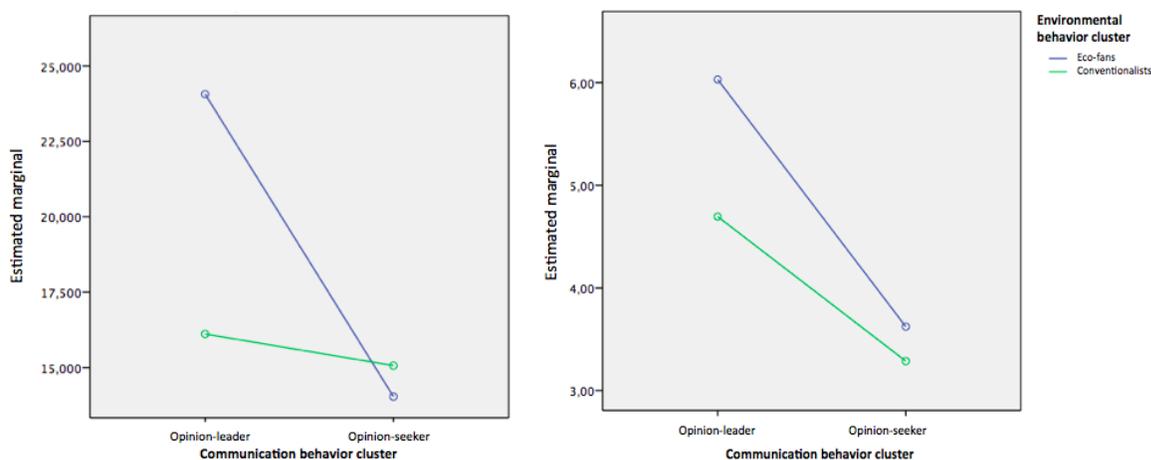the product but also the company brand itself play an important role in the context of word-of-mouth.

Figure 4: Number of people talked to about product/brand (left) and frequency of conversation with each person (right) as a result of product test

Respondents reported talking personally about the brand to an average of 36 persons (SD = 16.5) and to each person about 5 times on average (SD = 7.5). These results indicate that a pre-launch product test can serve as a powerful tool to generate active word-of-mouth among potential and actual buyers. The two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of communication cluster on both WOM reach and WOM frequency, $F(1,954) = 7.35$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 p = .008$. Opinion leaders thus talked to significantly more people and with higher frequency compared to opinion seekers. Ecological orientation had no significant effect, and the interaction between the two factors was also non-significant. Descriptive statistics for the four cluster groups are presented in Table 1, and the ANOVA results in Table 2. Opinion-leading eco-fans showed the highest WOM frequency and high reach; conventionalist leaders exhibited slightly higher reach but lower frequency. Conventionalist followers showed the lowest values.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics

Cluster	N	WOM Reach M (SD)	WOM Frequency M (SD)

Opinion-leading eco-fans	503	37.11 (16.76)	6.39 (9.65)
Conventionalist leaders	154	38.10 (15.81)	4.79 (7.77)
Eco-followers	154	33.83 (16.37)	4.14 (6.92)
Conventionalist followers	147	34.98 (16.50)	3.80 (6.00)

Table 2

Two-Way ANOVA Results

Effect	$F(1,954)$	p	$\eta^2 p$
Communication cluster	7.35	.007	.008
Ecological cluster	0.78	.376	.001
Interaction	0.00	.948	.000

3.2. General Discussion

To spread WOM we showed that involvement of the right people in a product test before a product launch can be highly valuable. While opinion seekers also promote WOM, the impact of opinion leaders is more far-reaching, as they speak to a larger number of people and with greater frequency. This confirms that engaging highly communicative consumers in a pre-launch product test constitutes a feasible strategy for generating WOM among actual and potential customers of a green lifestyle product. Consequently, the product test represents a first element of a more sophisticated pre-launch promotion strategy that stimulates and channels WOM through the targeted involvement of opinion leaders.

4. Stimulation of WOM through strategic marketing processes

4.1. Linking the empirical findings with a structural equation model

In order to better understand and further investigate the implications of the above study, a structural equation model (SEM) was developed. Such a model highlights the main findings of the study and

serves as a basis for designing targeted WOM activation. As Figure 5 illustrates, a product experience can raise product purchase intention (H1b) and improve brand evaluation, which in turn relates to future purchases (H2). The product experience also generates WOM, especially among opinion leaders and eco-fans (H3). Positive WOM is expected to benefit product (re)purchase intention, while unsatisfactory experiences may trigger negative WOM; firms should therefore support beneficial experiences and mitigate negative ones.

4.1.1 Structural equation model

Methods. We modeled how brand evaluation leads to recommendation with WOM reach as an additional route. Measures: BrandEvaluationScale (Q8a_1–Q8a_7; reverse-coded so higher = better), WOM reach (Q6a; number of people talked to), and recommendation for brand and product (Q4_1, Q4_2; 0–10). Missing code −99 was treated as NA. Parameters were estimated with FIML; standardized solutions are reported.

Specification. Two parallel blocks (brand, product) were estimated: BrandEvaluation → WOM Reach and WOM Reach → Recommend Brand/Product, plus direct paths BrandEvaluation → Recommend Brand/Product. Segment heterogeneity was handled via multigroup SEM across four segments (Opinion Leader × Eco-Fan; Opinion Leader × Conventionalist; Opinion Seeker × Eco-Fan; Opinion Seeker × Conventionalist).

4.1.2 Structural model results
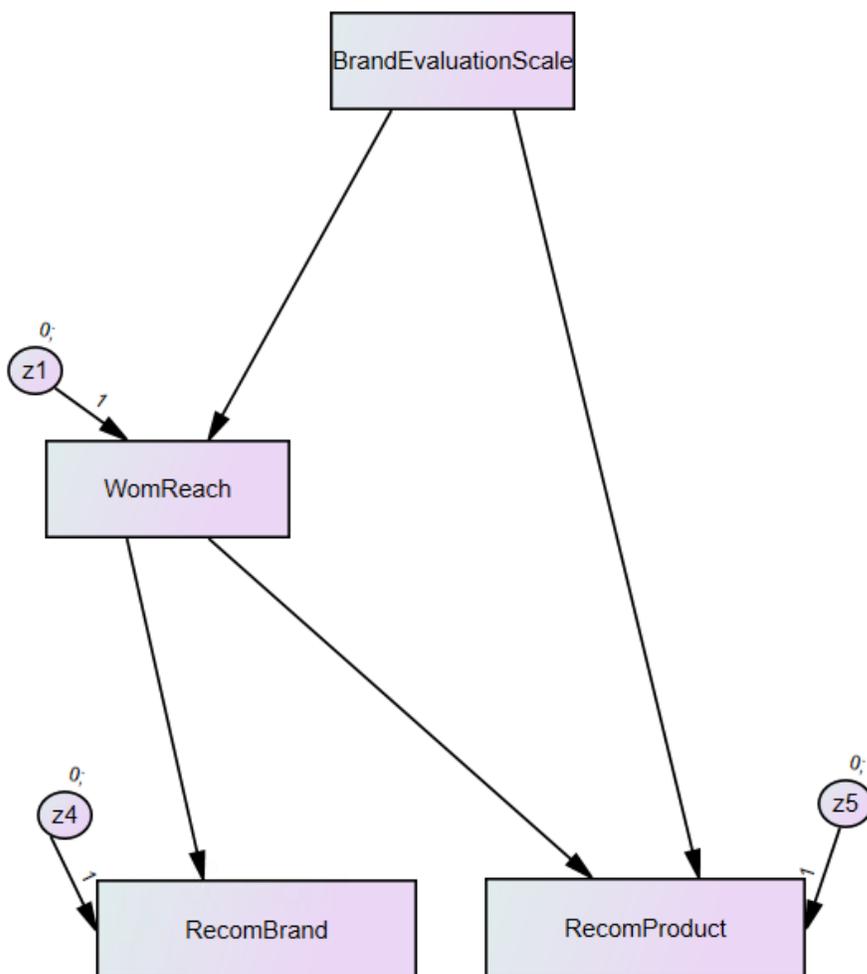
Figure 5. Combined structural model (standardized paths).

Caption: BrandEvaluationScale → WOM Reach → Recommend Brand / Recommend Product, with direct paths from BrandEvaluationScale to both outcomes. Fit indices are reported in the text.

Overall model: WOM reach strongly predicts brand recommendation ($\beta \approx 0.66$) and more modestly product recommendation ($\beta \approx 0.25$). Brand evaluation shows a sizeable direct effect on product recommendation ($\beta \approx 0.72$) and a moderate direct effect on brand recommendation ($\beta \approx 0.44$). The indirect effect via WOM is non-trivial for brand (≈ 0.22) and smaller for product (≈ 0.09), indicating

partial mediation. Explained variance is moderate for brand recommendation ($R^2 \approx 0.44$) and high for product recommendation ($R^2 \approx 0.70$), while WOM reach itself is modestly explained ($R^2 \approx 0.12$).

Segment-level results: Across segments, brand evaluation increases WOM reach more among opinion seekers (Eco-fans $\beta \approx 0.59$; conventionalists $\beta \approx 0.43$) than among opinion leaders (Eco-fans $\beta \approx 0.20$; conventionalists $\beta \approx 0.38$). WOM reach translates robustly into product recommendation in all segments ($\beta \approx 0.50$–0.71), strongest for leader conventionalists ($\beta \approx 0.71$). The direct path from brand evaluation to product recommendation is near zero or negative in three segments (-0.28 to -0.36), suggesting a stronger WOM-mediated route in these groups. For WOM reach $\rightarrow$ brand recommendation, the overall effect is strong ($\beta \approx 0.66$); the four by-segment coefficients will be inserted from the multigroup output.

Table 3. Standardized path coefficients (β) by segment.

Table 3

Standardized path coefficients (β) by segment

Path (X→Y)	Opinion Leader × Eco-Fan	Opinion Leader × Conventionalist	Opinion Seeker × Eco-Fan	Opinion Seeker × Conventionalist
BrandEvaluationScale → WOM Reach	0.20	0.38	0.59	0.43
WOM Reach → Recommend Brand	0,75	0,86	0,86	0,81
WOM Reach → Recommend Product	0.54	0.71	0.50	0.55
BrandEvaluationScale → Recommend Product	0.04	-0.28	-0.36	-0.31

Note. By-segment coefficients for WOM Reach → Recommend Brand are pending from the multigroup SEM output; control paths (z1, z4, z5) were estimated but are omitted from the table

4.1.3 Focus on creation of a base of trusted brand ambassadors

The first pillar for doing so presents the creation of a base of trusted brand ambassadors. The product experience then can be expected to have a direct impact on the level of trust the product tester feels, as product trials have a high impact on the emotions felt towards the brand (Kempf 1999). However, for an effective WOM effects chain not only the establishment of trust between the corporation and the opinion leader, but also between the opinion leader and his wider audience is essential. Most likely potential consumers of green products will not listen to a social influencer they just encountered (digitally) recently. Rather, it takes time to establish these trustworthy relationships (Lewicki & Wiethoff 2000) and only recommendations from trustworthy sources increase the likelihood of purchase (Reimer & Benkenstein 2016). Once developed though, within trusting relations the transaction costs are considerably lower, as both individuals no longer feel the need to check every piece of information presented for validity (Kramer 2006). Having said that, it becomes apparent that the opinion leader WOM strategy by definition cannot be a short-term project. Instead, the company in question will have to plan significant time in advance to establish trust with specific opinion leaders and then design a communication strategy towards their followers.

4.1.4 Green conversation triggers

Furthermore, in order to encourage the proactive recreation of content and WOM, the company should include green conversation triggers in its promotion strategy. Like during the implemented pre-launch product trial, the company will not only provide a product sample, but also exclusive information about the brand, which can be shared by the opinion leaders and brand ambassadors with their respective audiences. In particular in the case of sustainable fashion, which can be considered at least partially a hedonic product, carefully crafting the emotional appeal of the product trial and promotion is essential to shape the customers' beliefs in the corporation's favor (Kempf 1999). According to previous research, WOM is strongly triggered by rich information including some kind of "story", which can be shared as interesting content (Mazzarol *et al.* 2007). Green conversation triggers should be distributed shortly before and during product launch to make best use of the gained momentum for actual sales.

4.1.5 Aiming for viral penetration effects

The established trust base in combination with insightful green conversation triggers in the next

step can then lead to viral penetration of the pre-launch product experience. Ideally, the company targets viral penetration, i.e. a massive distribution by many inspired individuals. Messages have a higher probability of getting shared virally if they are either provoking high arousal emotions (awe, surprise, anger, anxiety etc.) or are highly interesting and/or useful (Berger & Milkman 2013). Also aspects like quality, authority, authenticity and interestingness can have positive impact on resenders' WOM acceptance, thereby improving the resending intention (Huang *et al.* 2011). Opinion leaders tend to share most frequently when having strong individualistic or altruistic intentions (Ho & Dempsey 2010). According to previous studies, information is generally passed on out of a sense of community duty, the wish to help others or the pleasure felt by sharing useful insights (Walsh *et al.* 2004). For the case of sustainable fashion, the company could for instance craft inspirational content about the benefits for the environment when choosing eco-textiles (appealing to awe, interest and surprise), share insightful fashion tips (offering usefulness), or create awareness for the dangers of conventional fashion production and consumption (evoking anger and anxiety).

4.1.6 Placement of Hook-Action Points

If implemented correctly, the base of brand ambassadors and opinion leaders will help spread the word about the company's products, supported by the green conversation triggers and viral design of the communication campaign. This leads to two possible outcomes: If the information from the opinion leader has been highly convincing, individuals in the audience might be directly encouraged to purchase the product. However, in a more likely case, the audience might not purchase right away. Indeed marketing literature suggests that several, continuous exposures are required until a customer remembers a brand and feels encouraged to finally purchase the product (Baker 2003; Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* 2015). Therefore, the company in question should utilize the momentum gained through positive WOM in order to involve the (potential future) customer more with the brand through Hook-Action points. In other words, the positive impression that users have gained about the product and brand through a specific experience or WOM message (the hook) must not evaporate, but should be directly connected to the next level of involvement (the action point). Depending on the campaign characteristics, this could mean involving the individual in a brand community (Hammedi *et al.* 2015), signing up for a newsletter or blog feed (Ryan & Jones 2011), visiting a product page, joining a trial campaign, watching a video about the brand etc. Ideally, this kind of follow-up communication involvement will further encourage

product purchases and positive reviews, again resulting into a positive cycle of brand-consumer exchanges.

As displayed in Figure 6, the four layers of a basis of trusted brand ambassadors supported by green conversation triggers, can through viral promotions enhance the effectiveness of natural WOM. Through carefully placed hook-action points, customers are finally encouraged to (re)purchase the product and engage with the brand.
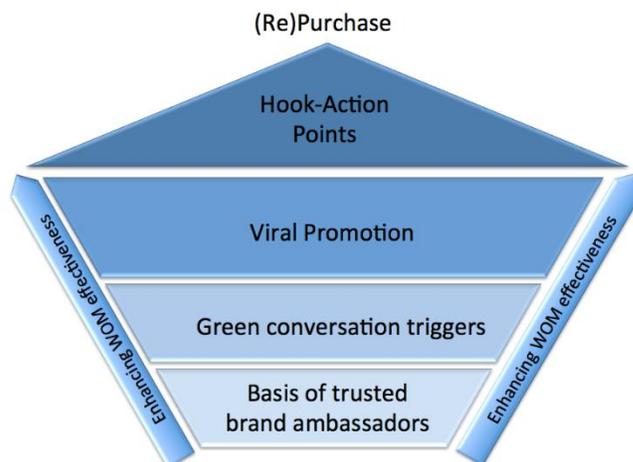

Figure 6: Enhancing of WOM effectiveness through targeted marketing tools

 Managing the effects of a negative product experience

Nevertheless, no matter how well the WOM strategy is planned, there remains the possibility that the campaigns creates not only positive, but also negative WOM (Vázquez-Casielles *et al.* 2013). Viral campaigns therefore have to be monitored for negative WOM, as bad informal publicity brings about the risk of a massive number of message recipients believing the harmful claims about the brand, no matter whether they are indeed truthful or not (Fox *et al.* 2015). When negative or false information is spread about the brand or products, the company marketers must act immediately to contain these messages and respond in an appropriate manner. In this context it is crucial to address the negative WOM in a nuanced, transparent way in order to be perceived as credible (Ranaweera & Jayawardhena 2014). The eco-brand should therefore have a special task force to manage eco-reputation risks. This team should be in charge of any PR activities related to maintaining a positive brand image, involving customers in proactive conversations online (Fox *et al.* 2015) and addressing doubts concerning the sustainability claims of the brand if necessary (Skarmeas & Leonidou 2013). Ideally, such risk control can further contribute to reinforcing trust in the brand and corporate credibility among the larger public, by putting negative WOM in

perspective and adding factual information from the corporate side.

5. Limitations and need for further research

The proposed model, though grounded in literature and empirical research, has not yet been tested in real-world corporate settings. Future research could explore the characteristics of WOM recipients, their sharing behaviors, and the potential for co-creation to enhance both product development and WOM marketing before a product launch.

6. Conclusion

Pre-launch product trials can be an effective WOM strategy to capture and maintain customer attention. However, WOM must be strategically planned, with opinion leaders playing a critical role in influencing broader social circles. The paper highlighted the positive impact of pre-launch product sampling on brand image, WOM, and purchase intention, suggesting that elements like trusted ambassadors and eco-reputation risk control can further enhance its effectiveness. Ultimately, a targeted WOM plan can significantly optimize marketing efforts for eco-brands.

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