



## Does educating customers create positive word of mouth?

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### ABSTRACT

This research theorizes and empirically examines whether and how educating customers—a brand's efforts to enhance customers' product-related knowledge—affects customer word of mouth (WOM). In two lab experiments across service and retailing contexts, we find that educating customers enhances customers' positive WOM for a brand. Customer satisfaction and perceived expertise mediate this effect. Critically, the positive impact on WOM is stronger for customers who have less prior knowledge regarding the educational topic and are more amenable to knowledge sharing. The current findings add to the literature on customer education and WOM and offer managerial insights for improving brands' WOM campaigns.

### 1. Introduction

As many product and service offerings get more complex, diverse, and complicated, making the most out of a given product offering becomes increasingly challenging for customers (Merlo et al., 2018). To fully utilize the potential benefits of a product offering, customers need to have the necessary knowledge and skills (Hibbert et al., 2012; Hollebeek et al., 2019). To support customers, companies in various industries have attempted to enhance customers' product-related knowledge via customer education programs. Customer education refers to brands' efforts to systematically provide customers with the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities to maximize their experience with a given product/service offering and obtain the most value from it (Bell et al., 2017; Burton, 2002). The extant body of literature shows that educating customers may benefit a brand by, for example, changing how customers perceive the brand, improving customers' perceived service quality, building customer trust, and tying customers more closely to the brand (Bell et al., 2017; Burton, 2002; Eisingerich and Bell, 2008a, 2008b). Furthermore, customer learning supported by customer education efforts is central to customer engagement and value co-creation (Hollebeek et al., 2019). By equipping customers with critical knowledge, abilities, and motivation to communicate positive things about a product to others, educating customers might also shape their social interactions. However, limited research has considered this aspect to date. The current research aims to shed light on the influence of educating customers on an important form of interaction among customers—word of mouth (WOM).

It has been suggested that WOM can serve as one of the most credible ways for customers to gain product-related information and make product-adoption decisions (Ameri et al., 2019; Paley et al., 2019). Prior research suggests that WOM should be managed as a key part of the marketing communication mix (Chen and Xie, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding what factors affect WOM is critical for managers. Despite the significant value of knowledge sharing in current marketing practices, the extant body of research on WOM has focused mainly on psychological antecedents of customers' WOM. It remains unclear regarding the effect of brands' knowledge-sharing initiatives on customer WOM. Thus, to fill this gap in the existing literature, the current study aims to address the following research questions: 1) *To what extent does educating customers enhance customers' positive WOM?* 2) *What is the process mechanism that helps explain the effect of educating customers on positive WOM?* And, finally, 3) *what are the key boundary conditions?*

In two lab experiments, we find that educating customers enhances customers' positive WOM for a brand. This effect is driven by an increase in customers' satisfaction with the brand, as well as their perceived expertise vis-à-vis the educational topic. Moreover, we find that the impact of customer education on positive WOM is stronger for novice customers with less prior knowledge about the educational topic, and customers who are more social-friendly and enjoy knowledge sharing.

Our research contributes to the theory of customer education in several ways. First, our research introduces and examines a new and important potential benefit of educating customers for brands, namely boosting customers' positive WOM. Second, whereas previous work on WOM has extensively investigated the psychological antecedents of

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WOM, our study builds on this body of literature by demonstrating educating customers as a novel strategy to generate positive WOM for a brand.

Managerially, our findings shed light on a new marketing communication strategy for brands to generate positive WOM. Brands are encouraged to actively enhance customers' product-related knowledge. The current findings show that by doing so customers' satisfaction with their purchase and their willingness to offer positive WOM for a brand can be strengthened. Furthermore, our findings indicate that brands may benefit from targeting certain customer segments to amplify the effects of their customer education efforts on positive WOM. For example, brands may focus on novice customers who have less prior knowledge of a product. Customers who are socially active and prefer to share information with others in their daily lives could also be a potential target for brands to engage in customer education programs.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Customer education

Customer education refers to brands' efforts to share relevant knowledge and skills with customers (Honebein, 1997; Meer, 1984). This sharing provides customers with critical skills to evaluate, choose, and use their products rather than merely letting them be passively exposed to advertisements (Burton, 2002).

Educating customers can bring several benefits for companies and their customers. From the customer's perspective, with the knowledge and skills gained from customer education programs, customers can obtain several benefits during purchase and consumption. Customer education could improve customers' purchase decisions by helping them be more aware of their needs, more informed about different aspects (e.g., pros and cons) of a product/service, and able to make more rational comparisons (with competitive alternatives) before purchasing (Bloom, 1976; Fast et al., 1989). Weeks et al. (2016) for instance pointed out that customer education improves customers' saving behavior in grocery shopping over time. Furthermore, Sari et al. (2020) demonstrated that customer education increases customers' environmental concerns and

influences their attitude towards green products, while Steils (2021) showed that customer education helps customers avoid impulsive purchases of unhealthy food.

From the company's perspective, extant research has focused mainly on how educating customers helps build stronger relationships with customers. Specifically, researchers found that customer education increases customers' trust in a brand (Eisingerich and Bell, 2008a, 2008b, 2008b) and enhances customer loyalty (Bell and Eisingerich, 2007a, 2007b; Eisingerich and Bell, 2006). Customer education has also been suggested to improve customer relationship depth and generates greater customer engagement (Bell et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2019). Furthermore, purchase growth has been noted to serve as an important outcome of customer education and to bring companies monetary benefits (Bell et al., 2017). Moreover, supporting customer learning helps customers integrate their resources and create value for a company (Hibbert et al., 2012). Exploring a service context, Burton (2002) theoretically demonstrated that customer education could enhance customers' perceived service quality of a company.

Depending on the context and content of customer education programs, their benefits could also spill over to related objects, such as other products under the same brand, related products from other brands, or even similar products from competitors. For example, Bell et al. (2017) noted such possibilities and found that educating customers about a market in general may sometimes benefit competitors. Keeping these possibilities in mind, in this study we focus on companies' efforts to educate their customers regarding their specific products so that benefits accrue primarily for their own brand(s).

Building on prior research that has mainly focused on the effects of customer education in enhancing customer–company relationships (see Table 1), we propose that customer education could be an effective strategy to increase customers' positive WOM for a brand. Specifically, we examine whether and how knowledge and skills sharing from a brand may influence customers' expertise and satisfaction level, and further increase customers' positive WOM for this brand.

**Table 1**  
Summary of research on customer education.

Study	Key insight	Key dependent variable	Mediator	Study context	Method
Eisingerich and Bell (2006)	Customer education increases customer participation.	Customer participation	–	Financial services	Survey
Bell and Eisingerich (2007a)	Customer education enhances customer loyalty.	Customer loyalty	–	Investment services	Survey
Eisingerich and Bell (2008b)	Customer education enhances customer trust.	Customer trust	–	Financial services	Survey
Suh et al. (2015)	Customer education enhances customer loyalty through service quality.	Customer loyalty	Service quality	General	Survey
Weeks et al. (2016)	Customer education increases shoppers' saving behavior across time.	Saving behavior	–	Grocery shopping	Longitudinal field experiment
Retana et al. (2016)	Proactive customer education from service providers improves customer retention and decreases customers' demand for technical support.	Customer churn, questions asked	–	Public cloud infrastructure services	Field experiment
Bell et al. (2017)	Firm-specific customer education increases loyalty to a firm, while market-related customer education decreases loyalty. These effects occur through changes in customers' perceived switching costs.	Relationship depth, Purchase growth	Firm-specific and market-specific expertise, perceived switching costs	Financial services, medical services	Survey, lab experiment
Vigolo et al. (2019)	Customer education enhances attitudinal loyalty towards cultural services.	Attitudinal loyalty	–	Cultural services	Survey
Sari et al. (2020)	Customer education helps promote customers' intention to buy green products.	Purchase intention	Perceived economic accessibility, benefit	Green products	Survey
Steils (2021)	Customer education moderates the influence of impulsiveness on purchase frequency of unhealthy food.	Purchase frequency	–	Grocery shopping	Survey, lab experiment
Current study	Customer education promotes customers' positive WOM for a brand through customer satisfaction and perceived expertise	Word of mouth	Customer satisfaction, Perceived expertise	Financial services, retailing	Lab experiment

## 2.2. Word of mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) refers to the interpersonal communication among individuals, which is informal, not commercially motivated, and may take diverse forms including offline and online (Berger, 2014; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Lin et al., 2021; Paley et al., 2019). Marketing managers believe that WOM is closely related to their product success, and thus they are highly interested in promoting and maintaining positive WOM for their brand. Indeed, extant research indicates that WOM increases customers' intention to buy and willingness to pay (Ismagilova et al., 2020), builds trust and loyalty (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008; Gauri et al., 2008), increases sales (Babić Rosario et al., 2016; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), enhances companies' reputation and performance (Nisar et al., 2020), and attracts new customers (Trusov et al., 2009; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007).

Prior research has already identified several factors that drive WOM. Specifically, from a customer perspective, the psychological antecedents of WOM include for example self-enhancement, self-efficacy, altruism, need for social interaction, social support, and identity signaling (Angelis et al., 2012; Berger, 2014; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; King et al., 2014). Customers' trust, satisfaction, self-connection, loyalty, commitment, perceived quality, and perceived value have also been suggested to drive WOM (Borah et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2005; Gill-Simmen et al., 2018; Matos and Rossi, 2008). From a company perspective, researchers have noted different strategies to promote positive WOM for a brand. For example, Berger and Schwartz (2011) explored how product characteristics shape WOM. Thomas et al. (2020) suggested that companies could use celebrities to stimulate WOM. Lu et al. (2020) investigated the impact of piracy on WOM. Other ways to create WOM include using short-term prompts or nudges, engaging with customers in communities, and creating opportunities for customers' self-presentation to others (Rosario et al., 2020).

However, to the best of our knowledge, limited research has tested the importance of product-related knowledge sharing and educating customers in boosting positive WOM. Building upon the extant literature, our work adds to the WOM literature by introducing customer education as a generator of positive WOM for a brand.

### 2.3. Product-related knowledge, customer education, and word of mouth

To date, there exists limited research that sheds light on the possible influences of product-related knowledge on customers' WOM. Packard and Wooten (2013) for example found that perceived discrepancies of actual and ideal consumer knowledge shape consumers' WOM. Sohn and Leckenby (2005) found that product-class knowledge moderates the effects of information valence on consumers' WOM. Chen and Berger (2016) indicated that compared with found content, customers are more likely to generate WOM when the product-related information is presented to them. We build on these studies to argue that brands' efforts to share knowledge and skills with customers could promote their positive WOM. That is, we explore whether brands' active sharing of product-related knowledge influences customers' satisfaction level and perceived expertise, which in turn drives their positive WOM for the brands. We expect that educating customers boosts their willingness to offer positive WOM due to the process of receiving help from a brand as well as the outcome of a higher perceived expertise level of customers after having been equipped with additional knowledge and skills.

First, a well-planned customer education program by a brand enables customers' better purchase decisions and consumption experiences, and helps customers solve product-related problems more easily. The process of customer education is perceived as a benevolent signal of a brand's openness, transparency, and proactiveness in responding to customers' needs. Research has underscored that business transparency positively impacts customer behavior and customer-company relationships (Foscht et al., 2018; Heinberg et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2015). Customers have been suggested to form strong relationships with brands

that enable them and make their lives easier (Park et al., 2013, 2016) and, thus, are likely to appreciate brands' educating efforts as an aspect of good service on the part of the brand (Burton, 2002; Eisingerich and Bell, 2008b), leading to a higher satisfaction level for its brand. This prediction is in line with prior research, which has emphasized the role of educating customers in building customer satisfaction and improving customer relationships (Aubert, 2008; Bell et al., 2017; Chiang et al., 2017; Matos and Rossi, 2008). As a result, customers' positive WOM intention for a brand is enhanced because of higher satisfaction levels.

Second, sharing product-related knowledge and skills with customers is likely to lead to enhancement in customers' perceived expertise. Customer expertise is defined as knowledge and skills necessary to understand a brand, a product, and/or a market (Sharma and Patterson, 2000). Indeed, prior research has emphasized the effect of educating customers in increasing customer expertise (Bell et al., 2017; Bell and Eisingerich, 2007a, 2007b). When individuals perceive themselves as experts regarding a specific topic, they tend to share their knowledge and skills with others more willingly. A possible reason is that subjective product knowledge influences a customer's motivation and ability to communicate (Brucks, 1985). Sharing useful knowledge and skills with others helps customers gain respect and self-enhancement and build social identity (Berger, 2014). Therefore, we argue that when customers acquire new knowledge about a topic, their perceived subjective knowledge level regarding this topic increases, which would enhance their motivation and ability to communicate with others about it. When new knowledge acquired comes from a well-planned customer education program by a brand, there could be a positive spillover effect since customers also tend to mention this brand more in their communications with others.

In light of the above discussion, we expect that educating customers will enhance customers' positive WOM for a brand due to greater brand satisfaction and perceived expertise. Thus, formally:

- H1.** Customer education enhances customers' positive WOM for a brand.
- H2.** Customer satisfaction with the brand mediates the positive relationship between customer education and WOM.
- H3.** Customers' perceived expertise mediates the positive relationship between customer education and WOM.

Prior knowledge encompasses customers' understanding and their subjective experiences related to a specific topic before they are exposed to new information (Hong and Sternthal, 2010; Rao and Monroe, 1988). If customers already know a lot about the educational topic, their perceived benefits from brands' efforts to educate them may not be that strong. Specifically, for expert customers, customer education programs offered by a brand may provide them little if any new knowledge, which is likely to limit their interest in sharing the knowledge with others. Conversely, for novice customers, customer education efforts by a brand may enable them to have better consumption experiences, help solve their problems, and offer them new knowledge and skills to showcase to and share with other people. Thus, we posit that novice customers' motivation to share the brand will be stronger than expert customers. Thus, we theorize that customers who know less regarding the educational topic will tend to share more after they are educated. Formally:

- H4.** The positive effect of customer education on WOM is stronger for customers who have less prior knowledge regarding the educational topic. In this study, the enjoyment of sharing knowledge indicates the pleasure and reward derived from helping others have better shopping experiences and assisting them in being able to solve product-related problems through knowledge and experience sharing (Chen et al., 2018). Knowledge sharing benefits others as well as sharers themselves. It could therefore be seen as a reciprocal behavior. By sharing useful and novel information, individuals improve others' impressions of them and are able to communicate their specific identities (Berger, 2014).

Therefore, we believe that customers are motivated to share what they learn from a brand, from an altruistic standpoint and/or to gain more pleasure and relationship benefits. Considering individual differences in interpersonal communication and sharing behavior, we predict that individuals who tend to enjoy sharing knowledge will be more likely to engage in positive WOM behavior. Taken together, we hypothesize that:

**H5.** The positive effect of customer education on WOM is stronger for customers who derive greater enjoyment when sharing their knowledge and experiences. See Fig. 1 for an overview of our research framework.

### 3. Research method

#### 3.1. Overview of studies

We test our hypotheses in two experiments; one in a service context (financial services) and the other in a retailing context (furniture and home furnishings). Study 1 tested our proposed main effect that educating customers could generally increase customers' positive WOM for a brand. In study 2, we generalized the findings of our first study to another context. To understand the underlying mechanism, we also test the mediating roles of customer satisfaction and perceived expertise. Furthermore, in study 2 we test customers' prior knowledge level and enjoyment of sharing knowledge as potential moderators.

#### 3.2. Study 1

In study 1 we conducted a lab experiment to test whether customers are more willing to offer positive WOM after they get educated by a brand. We manipulated whether or not customers are educated by a brand and measured their positive WOM intention. By examining the association between them, we garner empirical evidence for our proposed main effect (H1). We conducted this first experiment in a financial-services context.

##### 3.2.1. Method

We created an online experiment and disseminated it to the general population by various channels and platforms (social media, survey platforms, university students and employees, friends/relatives) to ensure the generalizability of our results. We attracted 613 participants of diverse ages and occupations to participate in the experiment. To control for possible demand effects, they were told that the study aimed to record their opinion of a newly introduced financial service (a payment app) of a bank. The experiment employed a 2 (customer education vs. control) × 1 between-subjects design. Excluding participants who had previously taken part in the customer education program for this actual app, we got a valid sample size of 595 (295 in the customer-education condition and 300 in the control condition; 49.1% female;

$M_{age} = 32.25$ ;  $SD = 11.83$ ).

Before the stimulus was shown, participants reported whether or not they had prior user experience with the payment app ("I have used this payment app before"; 0 = no, 1 = yes). Then we assigned participants randomly to the treatment group and the control group. Participants in the treatment group were shown an educational video (of about 3 minutes) regarding a newly released mobile payment service from the bank (Raiffeisen, 2017). The video included an introduction to this new service, a description of the different functions of the service, as well as a step-by-step guide to make a person-to-person online payment in a quick and convenient manner. In contrast, participants in the control group were introduced to the app with only a simple promotional banner showing that the bank has a newly released mobile payment service with multiple functions that enables easy and quick payments. The brief description in the banner lacked any educational content.

Afterward, participants reported their intention of positive WOM (3 items; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree;  $\alpha = 0.92$ ; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Please see Table 2 for the specific items used in study 1.

Furthermore, we collected participants' demographic information such as gender, age, job, and education level.

##### 3.2.2. Results

An ANOVA of WOM showed that participants had a significantly higher intention of positive WOM for the brand in the customer-education condition ( $M_{education} = 5.30$  vs.  $M_{control} = 3.91$ ;  $F(1, 586) = 147.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ), lending support to our H1.

When we controlled for product experience, gender, age, job, and education level of the participants, the controls did not affect the results and thus are not discussed further.

##### 3.2.3. Discussion

Study 1 found evidence for the predicted positive relationship between customer education and positive WOM. Specifically, when a brand initiated the sharing of product-related knowledge and skills, customers had an intention to speak more often and more positively about this brand to others. Besides finding support for our proposed main effect, we also want to understand the mechanism of such an effect and examine possible boundary conditions, which we test in study 2. Further, study 2 aims to examine the possible effects of customer education format (video vs. text).

#### 3.3. Study 2

Study 2 aims to generalize the findings of study 1 to a consumer-goods context. We also tested the mediation role of satisfaction level and perceived expertise in the relationship between customer education efforts by a brand and WOM. Moreover, we tested customers' prior

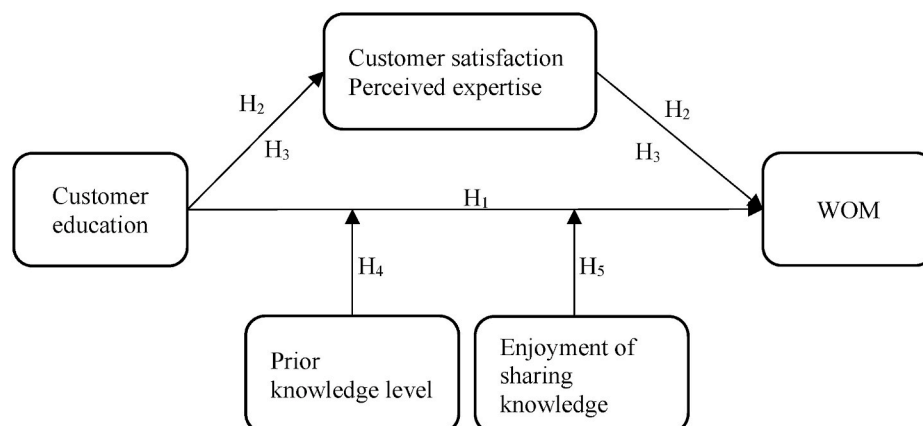


Fig. 1. Research framework.

**Table 2**  
Constructs and measurements.

Constructs	Items <sup>a</sup>	Scale	Study1 Cronbach's $\alpha$	Study 2 Cronbach's $\alpha$
WOM	I will say positive things about [brand name] to others. I will recommend [brand name] to someone who seeks my advice.	Zeithaml et al. (1996)	.92	.87
Brand attitude <sup>b</sup>	I will encourage friends and relatives to buy products from [brand name]. Dislike/Like Unfavorable/Favorable Negative/Positive	Homer (1995)	–	.92
Perceived expertise	Compared to average people, I know more home decoration skills. Compared to average people, I better understand how to decorate my home. I have greater exposure to home decoration-related knowledge and skills. I have more home decoration skills. I have more knowledge and skills regarding home decoration.	Chiou and Droge (2006)	– – – –	.89
Customer satisfaction <sup>b</sup>	Very dissatisfied/Very satisfied Terrible/Delightful Very dissatisfied/Not at all dissatisfied Not at all satisfied/Very satisfied	Spreng and Mackoy (1996)	– – – –	.92
Enjoyment of sharing knowledge	I enjoy sharing my knowledge and skills of home decoration with others. I enjoy helping others by sharing my knowledge and skills of home decoration. Sharing my knowledge and skills of home decoration with others gives me pleasure.	Chen et al. (2018); Kankanhalli et al. (2005)	– – –	.93
Prior knowledge	I possess a good knowledge of home decoration. I am quite experienced in home decoration.	Bell et al. (2017)	– –	.97
Topic involvement <sup>b</sup>	Not pleasurable/Pleasurable Unexciting/Exciting Not fun/Fun	Rosbergen et al. (1997)	– – –	.87

<sup>a</sup> All items were measured with a 7-point Likert scale.

<sup>b</sup> Semantic differential scale.

knowledge level and enjoyment of sharing knowledge as potential moderators. We conducted this study in the context of retailing (furniture and home furnishings).

### 3.3.1. Method

Students from a university participated in the experiment in exchange for a chance to win shopping coupons. We introduced a cover story to eliminate possible demand effects. We informed participants that the study's goal is to understand customers' interests in a specific product. The experiment employed a 3 (video education, text education, control)  $\times$  1 between-subjects design. We introduced both video and text educational materials to account for the possible influences of different education formats.

We used a well-known furniture and home furnishings brand as our research object in this experiment. We asked the participants to imagine as vividly as possible that they were planning to make a trendy gallery wall at home and bought frames from this furniture brand. Before the stimulus was shown to participants, they reported their attitude towards the brand (3 items; semantic differential scales;  $\alpha = 0.92$ ; Homer, 1995), their involvement level with the educational topic (3 items; semantic differential scales;  $\alpha = 0.87$ ; Rosbergen et al., 1997), and their prior knowledge level regarding the educational topic (2 items;  $\alpha = 0.97$ ; Bell et al., 2017).

Next, participants in the video education condition viewed an educational video (of about 40 seconds) that showed them how to easily visualize the gallery wall in advance and how to drill holes accurately on the wall without having to carefully measure everything (IKEA, 2016). In the text education condition, participants were shown a short text with bullet points relaying how to create a gallery wall effectively. Note that unlike the banner used in study 1, which only informed the participants of a new product without providing any educational information, the content of the text in study 2 was educational. It basically summarized the video and hence gave participants the same knowledge and skills as in the video education condition, but in a different format. In the control condition, participants were not given any information to

help them make the gallery wall.

Participants then reported their perceived expertise level regarding the topic (5 items;  $\alpha = 0.89$ ; Chiou and Droge, 2006), and their satisfaction level with the brand after exposure to the stimuli (4 items; semantic differential scales;  $\alpha = 0.92$ ; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996). Finally, participants reported their intention for positive WOM (3 items;  $\alpha = 0.87$ ; Zeithaml et al., 1996) and enjoyment when sharing acquired knowledge with others (3 items;  $\alpha = 0.93$ ; Chen et al., 2018; Kankanhalli et al., 2005). All the constructs in this experiment used a 7-point Likert scale; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree. Please see Table 2 for all the items used and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the constructs in study 2.

Furthermore, we collected participants' demographic information such as gender, age, job, and education level.

As in the survey study, the results in the experimental study may be influenced by common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Some of our procedural methods are helpful to control for it. For instance, we introduced cover stories for our experiments, kept the items as simple and clear as possible, and eliminated items that could be influenced by social desirability. We also ensured response anonymity and counter-balanced the question order to control for possible retrieval cues. To test if common method bias still has an impact on our findings, we also adopted statistical remedies. Podsakoff et al. (2003) suggested that single-method-factor approaches are appropriate to control for common method bias in experiments. Therefore, we first applied Harman's single-factor test as an initial step. It showed that 38.74% of the variance was explained when all items were loaded on a single factor. This is well below the threshold of 50%. Furthermore, following the method adopted by Archimi et al. (2018) and Katsikea et al. (2019), we found that a single-factor CFA model showed a poor model fit (GFI = 0.51; AGFI = 0.41; NFI = 0.49; IFI = 0.50; TLI = 0.45; RMR = 0.13 and RMSEA = 0.20), which confirmed the limited influence of common method variance. Finally, we adopted a common-latent-factor method and compared the standardized regression coefficients with and without a common latent factor. We found only minor changes in the items ( $<0.2$ ). Taking these results together, we believe that common method bias is

not a pervasive problem in our study.

### 3.3.2. Results

We used an open-ended question as the attention check (“Please use a few words to summarize the most important step you learned to create a gallery wall”). Participants who failed to provide any related information were removed from the data, leaving a valid sample of 390 for the analyses (118 in the video education condition, 112 in the text education condition, and 160 in the control condition; 73.3% female;  $M_{age} = 24.71$ ;  $SD = 5.97$ ).

**3.3.2.1. Manipulation check.** We conducted a manipulation check to see whether participants believed that they learned something from the educational materials in the experiment (“I feel that the brand gave me necessary knowledge and skills to use its products better”). The ANOVA test showed that participants in the video education condition ( $M_{video} = 5.10$ ,  $SD_{video} = 1.26$ ) felt significantly more educated than did those in the control (no education) condition ( $M_{control} = 4.57$ ,  $SD_{control} = 1.56$ ;  $F(2, 387) = 6.558$ ,  $LSD Post Hoc$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Similarly, participants in the text education condition ( $M_{text} = 5.07$ ,  $SD_{text} = 1.20$ ) felt significantly more educated than did those in the control (no education) condition ( $M_{control} = 4.57$ ,  $SD_{control} = 1.56$ ;  $F(2, 387) = 6.558$ ,  $LSD Post Hoc$ ,  $p = .004$ ). In addition, customers’ perceived education level between the video education and text education conditions was not significantly different ( $LSD Post Hoc$ ,  $p = .868$ ).

**3.3.2.2. WOM.** Consistent with the effect we found in study 1, an ANOVA with customer education as the independent variable and WOM as the dependent variable revealed that participants who watched the educational video ( $M_{video} = 5.56$ ,  $SD_{video} = 0.98$ ) had significantly higher intentions of positive WOM for the brand compared to those in the control condition ( $M_{control} = 4.46$ ,  $SD_{control} = 1.29$ ;  $F(2, 387) = 44.23$ ,  $LSD Post Hoc$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, participants who read the educational text ( $M_{text} = 5.50$ ,  $SD_{text} = 0.91$ ) also had significantly higher intentions of positive WOM for the brand than did those in the control condition ( $M_{control} = 4.46$ ,  $SD_{control} = 1.29$ ;  $F(2, 387) = 44.23$ ,  $LSD Post Hoc$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The difference between the video condition and text conditions was not significant ( $LSD Post Hoc$ ,  $p = .685$ ), excluding the alternative explanation that the WOM effect comes from the educational instruments. The possible explanation is that in both the text education and video education conditions in study 2, the same educational information was shown to customers. We expect that it is the knowledge shared with customers and the efforts invested by the brand to help its customers rather than the presentation format of information that influences customers’ WOM.

**3.3.2.3. Mediation effect of customer satisfaction.** We expected that after being educated by a brand, people would be more willing to generate positive WOM for this brand through an increase in their satisfaction with the brand. Thus, we tested the mediating role of customer satisfaction in driving the WOM effect. Because customer education in our experiment is a multi-categorical variable with three groups, we followed Hayes’ suggestion (2017, p. 204) to apply *Helmert coding* in PROCESS and constructed two variables ( $x1$  and  $x2$ ) to code our three experimental conditions. This coding system enables us to examine the effect of customer education (whether via text education or video education) relative to the no-education condition (represented by  $x1$ ), as well as the effect of video education relative to text education (represented by  $x2$ ).

Based on this coding system, we conducted a mediation analysis with 5000 bootstrap samples (model 4, Hayes, 2017). Results showed a significant positive effect of  $x1$  (customer education in general vs. no education) on customer satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ;  $t = 4.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The effect of  $x2$  (text education vs. video education) on customer satisfaction was not significant ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ;  $t = 1.45$ ,  $p = .15$ ).

When controlling for  $x1$  and  $x2$ , we found that customer satisfaction had a significant positive effect on WOM ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ;  $t = 11.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of  $x1$  on WOM was positive and significant when introducing customer satisfaction into the model ( $\beta = 0.80$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ;  $t = 9.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of  $x2$  on WOM was not significant when introducing customer satisfaction into the model ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ;  $t = 1.03$ ,  $p = .31$ ). Finally, the indirect effect of  $x1$  on WOM through satisfaction was significant ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ; 95% CI = [0.14; 0.36]). The indirect effect of  $x2$  on WOM through satisfaction was not significant ( $\beta = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ; 95% CI = [-0.14; 0.08]). These results support our H2 and suggest that customer satisfaction mediates the effect of customer education on WOM. Specifically, when customers get educated (regardless of the form of education), they tend to be more satisfied with a brand, and this leads to a higher level of positive WOM intention for the brand. Whether customers are educated by text or by video neither directly nor indirectly influences WOM.

**3.3.2.4. Mediation effect of perceived expertise.** We conjectured that customers tend to share more knowledge with others when they perceive that they are experts regarding a specific topic. Since they obtained the knowledge via customer education programs offered by a brand, there should exist a spillover effect of positive WOM for the brand. Thus, we tested the mediating role of perceived expertise in driving the WOM effect. Using the same *Helmert coding* system as above, we conducted a mediation analysis with 5000 bootstrap samples (model 4, Hayes, 2017).

Results showed a significant positive effect of  $x1$  (customer education in general vs. no education) on perceived expertise ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ;  $t = 3.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The effect of  $x2$  (text education vs. video education) on perceived expertise was not significant ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ;  $t = 0.60$ ,  $p = .55$ ). When controlling for  $x1$  and  $x2$ , we found that perceived expertise had a significant positive effect on WOM ( $\beta = 0.37$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ;  $t = 10.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of  $x1$  on WOM was positive and significant when introducing perceived expertise into the model ( $\beta = 0.89$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ;  $t = 10.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The direct effect of  $x2$  on WOM was not significant when introducing perceived expertise into the model ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ;  $t = 0.85$ ,  $p = .39$ ). Finally, the indirect effect of  $x1$  on WOM through perceived expertise was significant ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ; 95% CI = [0.05; 0.24]). The indirect effect of  $x2$  on WOM through perceived expertise was not significant ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ; 95% CI = [-0.07; 0.14]). These results support our H3 and suggest that perceived expertise mediates the effect of customer education on WOM. When customers get educated (regardless of the form of education), they have a higher level of perceived expertise, and this leads to a higher level of positive WOM intention for the brand. Whether customers get educated by text or by video neither directly nor indirectly influences customers’ willingness to offer positive WOM.

**3.3.2.5. Moderation effect of prior knowledge level.** We introduced customers’ prior knowledge level of the educational topic to our model as a potential moderator. We expected that if someone has less knowledge regarding a product, getting educated regarding this product will lead to higher perceived benefits, which will, in turn, strengthen this person’s positive WOM intention. Using the *Helmert coding* system (creating  $x1$  and  $x2$  as in our mediation analysis above), we ran a moderated-mediation analysis (model 7, Hayes, 2017) with customer education as the predictor, prior knowledge level as the moderator, both customer satisfaction and perceived expertise as the mediators, and WOM as the dependent variable. The results revealed a significant conditional indirect effect of  $x1$  (customer education in general vs. no education) and prior knowledge level via customer satisfaction on WOM (index =  $-0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , CI = [-0.16;  $-0.01$ ]). Similarly, we found a significant conditional indirect effect of  $x1$  and prior knowledge level via perceived expertise on WOM (index =  $-0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , CI = [-0.15;  $-0.03$ ]). Furthermore, the conditional indirect effect of  $x2$  (text education vs.

video education) and prior knowledge level via both customer satisfaction and perceived expertise on WOM was not significant. These results indicate that prior knowledge level moderated the effect of customer education on WOM through customer satisfaction and perceived expertise. Education format does not influence the moderated effect, in accord with our predictions in H4.

**3.3.2.6. Moderation effect of enjoyment of sharing knowledge.** We also introduced the enjoyment of sharing knowledge as a moderator in our research model. We expected that the more a customer enjoys sharing knowledge, the more this consumer will talk about what was learned and from where. Thus, using *Helmert coding* (creating  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  as in our mediation analysis), we ran a moderated mediation analysis (model 7, Hayes, 2017) with customer education as the predictor, enjoyment of sharing knowledge as the moderator, customer satisfaction and perceived expertise as the mediators, and WOM as the dependent variable. The results showed that the conditional indirect effect of  $x_1$  (customer education in general vs. no education) and prior knowledge level via customer satisfaction on WOM was not significant (index =  $-0.02$ , SE =  $0.03$ , CI =  $[-0.08; 0.05]$ ). We found similar insignificant results when using perceived expertise as the mediator (index =  $0.05$ , SE =  $0.03$ , CI =  $[-0.002; 0.10]$ ).

However, when using *Helmert coding*,  $x_1$  represents the average effect of text education and video education relative to no customer education. We separately examined the comparisons of text education versus no education, and video education versus no education in the moderated mediation analyses. We used the *Indicator coding* system to realize these comparisons and ran model 7 again in PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). We found that when comparing video education and no education, the conditional indirect effect via perceived expertise on WOM was significant (index =  $0.07$ , SE =  $0.03$ , CI =  $[0.01; 0.14]$ ). No other significant effects were found. Taken together, these results mean that our H5, which predicts that enjoyment of sharing knowledge moderates the effect of customer education on WOM, is only partially supported.

For all our analyses above, we controlled for involvement with the topic, attitude towards the brand, gender, age, job, and education level of the participants. The controls did not affect the results.

### 3.3.3. Discussion

Study 2 provides further evidence for our findings in study 1 and generalizes the WOM effects to another product context (H1). Furthermore, results of study 2 suggest that when getting educated by a brand, customers perceive an increase in their satisfaction level and expertise level, which in turn translates into an increased intention of positive WOM for the brand (H2, H3). Moreover, study 2 explores the moderating role of customers' prior knowledge level and perceived enjoyment of sharing learned knowledge regarding the educational topic (H4, H5). These could be seen as boundary conditions to the WOM effect, deepening the insights for managerial implications.

## 4. General discussion

Educating customers may help them get the most value from a product/service and use it to its full potential. The current research advances our understanding of how brands' educational effort shapes customers' WOM. With two experiments across service and retailing contexts, we demonstrate that customer education helps generate customers' favorable WOM for a brand. We also show that this effect exists because customer education makes customers more satisfied with a brand while increasing their perceived expertise for a product, which in turn enhances their positive WOM intention for the brand. Furthermore, we present two boundary conditions for the main effects. We find that this WOM effect is stronger for customers with less prior knowledge regarding the educational topic, and customers who are more socially active and/or have a high level of enjoyment when sharing knowledge

with others. In addition, we found no differences in effects on WOM between text education and video education when the same knowledge is shared with customers.

### 4.1. Theoretical contributions

Our research provides theoretical contributions mainly to two research streams: customer education and WOM.

#### 4.1.1. Customer education

Extant research offers valuable insights into how educating customers assists customers' better purchase decisions and improves customer relationships, but it yields limited insights into its effects on customers' interactions with each other. Given that WOM campaigns have become critical for most brands, it is important to understand whether and how educating customers motivates them to speak more and speak positively about a brand. We extend research on customer education by documenting that brands' educational efforts shape not only how customers interact with brands but also with each other. This facilitates exposure to brands' products and services to more potential customers, ideally leading to a larger market share.

Furthermore, we demonstrate that the positive effect of customer education on WOM occurs through an increase in customers' satisfaction with a brand and perceived levels of expertise. We thereby offer useful insights into the mechanism behind the benefits that educating customers could bring for brands. We extend the current understanding in the marketing literature of how customer education influences customer behavior. We also note that the beneficial outcomes of customer education are more likely to emerge under certain conditions. In contrast to the extant research that has thus far paid limited attention to boundary conditions of customer education, we identify two critical ones: prior knowledge regarding the educational topic and customers' enjoyment of sharing knowledge.

#### 4.1.2. WOM

Prior research on WOM has shown that customers' WOM is a result of individuals' psychological states. This past work on the topic proposed a limited number of strategies to influence WOM; they include, for example, improving product design, using celebrity campaigns, applying short-term prompts and nudges, and building customer communities. The current research adds to the WOM literature by introducing educating customers as a novel strategy to generate positive WOM for a brand. Furthermore, conventional strategies to generate customer WOM have mostly focused on short-term incentives. In contrast, educating customers can be seen as an ongoing and sustainable tactic that brings long-term benefits. We also investigated the mechanism and boundary conditions of such WOM effects, delivering a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities for businesses to gain positive WOM.

### 4.2. Managerial implications

By investigating whether and how educating customers shapes customers' WOM intention for a brand, we provide insights into how brands can design better marketing communication strategies and effective WOM campaigns. First, brands are encouraged to invest in educating their customers and be more open to sharing product-related knowledge. The possible benefits for brands to do this are not only better relationships with existing customers but also favorable WOM as a powerful pathway to gaining new customers. Brands could offer their customers, for example, online and offline workshops, education via social networks, experience-based company tours, education via opinion leaders to share knowledge with customers. Our findings also suggest that brands should focus on letting customers feel their educational efforts and delivering useful knowledge to solve customers' real problems. It is the useful knowledge embedded in the educational process that

influences customers' behavior towards a brand. The presentation format of educational information may not be as important as many expected.

Second, brands could improve their customer education programs based on our findings. For example, our study suggests that educating customers could effectively enhance customers' expertise level. Therefore, brands could help customers who have high learning needs become experts in relation to the brand's products/services. Such customers have the potential to become "knowledge opinion leaders" and are able to communicate about a brand more efficiently and widely. Offering them suitable educational opportunities would therefore be a good investment for the brand. It is also advisable for brands to become more customer-centric in their marketing communications. They should be more active in recognizing and understanding real problems that customers encounter in their purchasing and consumption. Brands can take the initiative to use educational programs to help customers solve product-related problems. This will lead to a higher level of customer satisfaction and in turn enhance positive WOM for a brand.

Third, brands should target the right customer groups with these opportunities for education to make the best use of limited resources. For instance, given that customers' prior knowledge level serves as an important indicator for market segmentation (Hong and Sterntal, 2010), it is more effective to educate new customers (or novice customers) who have relatively less product knowledge. For such customers, the influence of customer education on WOM is more pronounced. Brands could offer customer education programs that especially fit new customers' needs. Moreover, we suggest that brands could also educate customers who are more socially active and tend to enjoy knowledge sharing. Such customers tend to generate more favorable WOM after benefiting from brands' customer education programs. Such customers could be observed by observing their activity on social networks or in customer communities.

#### 4.3. Limitations and future research

In this study, we examined the two most prevalent forms of educating customers in the current marketing praxis, namely education via videos and texts. However, customer education efforts may also take different forms. Future research might explore whether new technologies in marketing communication, including for example augmented reality (Rauschnabel et al., 2019; Scholz and Duffy, 2018) and virtual fitting rooms (Beck and Crié, 2018), could empower customer education and have similar or even stronger effects in boosting positive WOM for a brand. Another limitation of our research pertains to the measure of customers' WOM. We could only capture WOM intention instead of real WOM behavior. Considering the increasing availability of consumer data from social media and online communities and novel analytical methods such as text analysis, big data analysis, and unstructured data analysis in marketing research, future research could examine our findings with real WOM behavior data. Furthermore, given the importance of customer loyalty (Khamitov et al., 2019; Swoboda et al., 2013; Troebs et al., 2018), we invite future research to examine the role of educating customers in enhancing WOM along with customer loyalty to a brand in the face of strong competition or when a new competitor enters the market. In addition, future research could investigate the spillover effect of customer education on related objects that go beyond a company's own brand—for example, products or brands of a company's business partners, or even competitors. Moreover, given the specific research context, future studies could also take additional aspects into account when investigating the WOM effect, such as the perceived entertainment value of customer education programs and customer orientation.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

In sum, customer education has a strong potential to help brands

achieve competitive advantages in their WOM campaigns. Given the increasing importance of knowledge sharing and learning in today's society as well as the need for business to be seen as transparent, our research provides several implications and insights, both theoretically and managerially. These findings help us better understand whether, why, and how educating customers could enhance positive WOM and therefore create possibilities to address a rich set of relevant questions.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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