

**This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).**

# Beyond personality: an emergence view of influential consumers

*Cinthia Beccacece Saturnino*

Department of Marketing, University of Connecticut System, Storrs, Connecticut, USA

*Demetra Andrews*

Kelley School of Business, Indiana Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, USA

*Rebeca Perren*

Department of Marketing, California State University, San Marcos, California, USA, and

*Michael K. Brady*

Department of Marketing, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA

## Abstract

**Purpose** – Previous research studies assume that influential consumers (“influentials”), who play a powerful role in the marketplace, are persuasive (or not) based on innate, static personality traits. By contrast, this paper proposes an emergence-based view of influentials. Grounded in dynamic self-concept theory, this research establishes that individuals possess an “influential” self-concept that can be activated by firm-originated communications. Specifically, the authors examine the impact of firm feedback on the three dimensions of influentials (and the corresponding traits and behaviors): who they are (propensity to connect with others), who they know (WOM) and what they know (expert power).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study tests whether an influential self can be evoked by marketers using a longitudinal experimental test with data collected in three periods. The data are analyzed using a multi-mediation model and partial least squares structural equation modeling.

**Findings** – The results reveal that even after controlling for the extroversion trait, firm-originated positive feedback increases perceived expert power of participants, which increases word-of-mouth behavior in a subsequent period, both directly and indirectly via an enhanced propensity to connect with others.

**Research limitations/implications** – Cultivating the influential self-concept requires time to ensure that the self-concept is sufficiently realized to become an enduring self-concept.

**Practical implications** – By cultivating influentials, practitioners are able to leverage diffusion mechanics and reduce costs and inefficiencies associated with traditional customer relationship management marketing strategies focused on finding them.

**Social implications** – These findings have implications across all domains that rely on the diffusion and adoption of ideas or products via influentials, including but not limited to public policy, politics, public health and sustainability, in that influentials can be evoked and leveraged to diffuse ideas in these important social domains.

**Originality/value** – This paper provides empirical evidence that firms can evoke influential consumer behavior challenging existing views of influence as a static personality trait. It casts a line to connect influential consumers to the nascent study of social emergence.

**Keywords** Emergence, Diffusion, Self-concept, Influentials

**Paper type** Research paper

Marketers are interested in the powerful roles that influential consumers play in the marketplace. Prior research has revealed the importance of these “influentials” in diffusing innovation (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2009), sharing information (Burt, 2000), and forming social networks (Totterdell *et al.*, 2008). Interestingly, much of the prior research asserts that influentials possess unique personality traits that predispose them to persuade other consumers (Brancaleone and Gountas, 2007; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2006; Marshall and Gitosudarmo, 1995; Mooradian, 1996). The assumption that influential individuals are predetermined by

personality traits presents certain challenges for marketers. That is because in order to benefit from the power of these influentials, marketers must first find them. However, identifying these individuals is challenging, expensive (Redman, 1998; Peralta, 2006), and perhaps, unnecessary.

Influential consumers are known by such names as “opinion leaders” (Katz, 1957), “market mavens” (Feick and Price, 1987), and “brand advocates” (Fuggetta, 2012). These influentials are valuable to marketers because they help generate word of mouth (WOM) which has been shown to shape consumption behavior across numerous domains and is estimated to generate billions of brand impressions per day (Berger, 2014). Naturally, marketing researchers and

---

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/0736-3761.htm>



Journal of Consumer Marketing  
37/2 (2020) 160–169  
© Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 0736-3761]  
[DOI 10.1108/JCM-11-2018-2964]

---

Received 30 November 2018  
Revised 23 May 2019  
16 September 2019  
Accepted 24 September 2019

practitioners are interested in identifying the tactics and contexts that provide the catalysts for influential consumer behavior. Yet, much prior research asserts that influential consumers are born rather than made. Many researchers have argued that dispositional factors such as extroversion predetermine the consumers who are destined to lead (Brancaleone and Gountas, 2007; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2006; Marshall and Gitosudarmo, 1995; Mooradian, 1996). But the idea that influentials are predetermined by personality traits implies that marketers must find and track them in order to benefit from their social impact. The challenges of identifying influentials are exacerbated by the fluidity of social influence that is afforded by social networking tools, which allow any user to build (or lose) social influence quickly. Accordingly, research focus has shifted away from identifying existing influentials to focus on marketer-controllable factors that may stimulate influential behavior. For example, research has uncovered the type of content and product characteristics that may elicit more WOM (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Berger and Schwartz, 2011). Yet, the frequency and importance of WOM and the cost of identifying influentials warrant additional exploration of better ways to motivate influential consumer behaviors. To this growing body of literature, our research adds an investigation of the efficacy of direct communication from the firm in evoking influential consumer behaviors.

Some scholars question the idea that influentials are, in fact, powerful. Rather, they suggest it is a critical mass of *influencees* that power diffusion mechanics (Watts and Dodds, 2007). Watts and Dodds (2007, p. 442) poses the following in questioning the importance and impact of influentials in formulating public opinion:

To what extent, therefore, does the observation that some people are more influential than others in *their immediate environment* [emphasis added] translate to the much stronger and more interesting claim that some special group of influentials plays a critical, or at least important, role in forming and directing public opinion?

The current research suggests resolution to this controversy can be found in viewing influentials through an emergence lens: influential individuals are not just born, benefiting from innate, static characteristics. Rather, as a result of contextual cues, influentials *emerge*. Through the lens of emergence, any consumer can exhibit the traits and behaviors of an influential.

We propose that the mechanism for emergence is found in the dynamic self-concept. Dynamic self-concept theory defines the self-concept as a multidimensional construct consisting of “a shifting array of accessible self-knowledge” (Markus and Wurf, 1987, p. 300). By combining the self-knowledge in different ways, individuals have many self-concepts available to them. Whichever self-concept is active regulates how the individual reacts to and behaves within his/her surroundings. The active self-concept also mediates motivation, information processing, interaction strategy, and reaction to feedback (Markus and Wurf, 1987). In sum, when a peripheral (or non-dominant) self-concept is *activated*, the behavior consistent with the self-concept *emerges*. The objective of the current research is to investigate the efficacy of marketer-controlled information in stimulating consumers to engage in influential behaviors. We propose that marketers can deploy contextual and social cues to evoke influential behavior. Findings from a longitudinal study suggest that firm-originated communications may be a potent

tool that marketers can use to cultivate intentions to influence social others.

## Background

### Emergence theory

A common illustration of emergence is the behavior of ants. The organization of ant colonies is impressive in its precision. While no single worker ant has attributes that are different than any other, and no ant is “born” into a specific role, the proportion of ants who are clearing the dens (25 per cent), defending the colony (25 per cent), or looking for food (50 per cent) rarely changes. When an ant dies, for example, no other ant is automatically re-assigned to cover the vacancy. Rather, a simple signaling systems ensures that the proportion of workers covering the different tasks remains constant. Ants fulfilling certain roles emit specific scents (signals). Ants moving through the colony encounter other ants and determine their scent. When a scent related to a specific duty is encountered in quick succession over a short period, an ant will reassign itself to a role that is less well-represented. (Note that although ant colonies have a “queen”, that designation is given to a worker ant whose duty is to procreate. She exerts no authority over the other worker ants.) In short, the scent signals used by ants modify their behavior. However, each individual ant is not using the signals strategically. Instead, each ant is responding to its immediate environment and its nestmates. The ants respond to simple and parsimonious rules at the micro-level which, at the macro-level, result in an organically emergent and efficient system (colony) without the benefit of a central planner or pacemaker (Johnson, 2002; Detrain and Deneubourg, 2006; Lenoir *et al.*, 1999).

Human beings are social developmental emergents, meaning that they develop their social norms via interactions with and within social systems (Bickhard, 2008). Social emergence is a bottom up phenomenon (Sallach, 2003) commonly explained using the phrase “the whole is more than the sum of the parts”. Mead (1938, p. 641) explained it as follows: “when things get together, there then arises something that was not there before”. Drawing from Mead (1938), Chang explains that, in human emergence, individuals or social groups interact with their social and nonsocial environments, which in turn results in emergence of reproduction and/or change of self or society. This view holds that emergence is a result of the process of interaction with the social environment rather than one or more preexisting human characteristics (Chang, 2004).

There have been three phases in the study of emergence. First, scholars inadvertently stumbled on emergent properties in systems in individual disciplines, but did not recognize these properties as transcendental properties that impacted systems across disciplines. The second phase, by contrast, was marked by a cross-disciplinary approach; emergence became a phenomenon explicitly observed across disciplines, with the objective of understanding the fundamental rules that governed it. In the third, nascent phase, scholars are focused on not the observation of but the creation of emergent systems. This phase originated centers, such as the Santa Fe Institute, that are devoted to the application of the rules of artificial, created emergence in fields as varied as physics, biology, and technological realms (Johnson, 2002). Our proposition that

influentials can emerge contributes to the exploration of this third phase of emergent phenomenon. We are guided by the premise that human systems are emergent social systems, and propose that influentials are, like ants, a result of individuals responding signals in their immediate environment that trigger the emergence of behaviors attributed to influentials.

### Dynamic self-concept theory

In the present work, we propose that when marketers deploy contextual and social cues, they evoke influential behaviors. We further suggest that the mechanism by which influential behaviors are evoked is the mutable, dynamic self-concept. The self-concept is a well-known construct in the marketing literature (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967; Sirgy, 1982; Malhotra, 1988). However, dynamic self-concept theory remains relatively unexplored. Markus and Wurf (1987) provides evidence that the self-concept is one of the most significant regulators of behavior and propose dynamic self-concept theory. The authors advance the idea that self-concept is not a static state. Instead, they propose that the self-concept is a dynamic state that is activated by contextual and environmental cues.

Similarly, Markus and Kunda (1986) asserts that the self-concept is malleable due to its inherently social nature. Alternate self-concepts can be activated in socially appropriate situations. For example, an introverted professor, who might normally be a reclusive researcher, gives dynamic presentations to a classroom of students. An alternate self-concept, activated by the classroom context, may be the mechanism behind the shift in behavior. Kunda and Sanitioso (1989) asserts that motivation may provoke the activation of an alternate self-concept with desirable attributes in a given context. For example, the introverted professor may be motivated to be an engaging presenter in a classroom context because dynamic professors often receive more favorable teacher evaluations.

In the present work, we define the behavioral markers of an activated influential self-concept as a desire to exert influence while connecting to, and sharing information with, others. This definition reflects the distinctions outlined by Katz (1957), which suggested three criteria that distinguished opinion leaders from non-leaders: who one is, what one knows, and whom one knows, and echoed by Mason (1963), which suggests that “opinion leaders can be distinguished from non-leaders by their (1) personification of certain values, (2) competence, and (3) strategic social location” (p. 456). In prior work, “who one is”, or “personification of certain values” was captured by assessing traits such as personality and propensity. However, from an emergence perspective, “who one is” is dynamic, and the “values personified” are transmutable. Competence, or “what one knows”, and strategic social position, or “whom one knows”, are not only changeable, but importantly, can be modified by marketers.

### Activating the influential self-concept

Keys to activating self-concepts include contextual and social cues (Markus and Wurf, 1987). For example, participants in an experiment who answer questions about extroversion report themselves to be more extroverted than those participants who answer questions about introversion. The questionnaire, serving as a contextual cue, may have made salient a self-

concept that corresponded to the type of questions the participant answered (Markus and Wurf, 1987). Because contextual and social cues are external, we assert that a self-concept can be externally activated. Research shows that environmental stimuli can promote WOM. Online content that is arousing (Berger and Milkman, 2012) and products that are more interesting, more publicly visible, or for which there are cues in the environment can increase WOM (Berger and Schwartz, 2011). If the behavior of an influential individual emerges as the result of an externally activated self-concept, it follows that influentials can be inspired by marketers via contextual and social cues.

We posit that direct communications can be used by firms to activate the influential self-concept, specifically, this research examines firm-originated feedback. Feedback intervention is defined as “actions taken by (an) external agent (s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one’s task performance” (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Feedback intervention theory suggests that individuals compare their internal standards and goals with the feedback they received. If there is a discrepancy between the feedback they receive and their internal desired states, individuals are motivated to change their behavior (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Vancouver and Tischner, 2004). Because the internal standards are contained within the self-concept, failure or success feedback may generate changes in self-conception (Story and Dunning, 1998). Moreover, positive feedback may signal the opportunity for self-enhancement (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Social media interactions, relationship management system-generated communication, and brand community interaction offer opportunities for firms provide positive feedback and move beyond acknowledgement to more strategic engagement with their customers. In the next sections, we examine the impact of firm feedback on the three dimensions of influentials (and the corresponding traits and behaviors): who they are (propensity to connect with others), who they know (WOM) and what they know (expert power).

### Firm feedback, expert power and word of mouth behavior

We propose that firms can use positive feedback to build up customers’ perceptions of expertise. Social psychologists view feedback as an essential feature of interpersonal interaction and necessary for the influence of others (Ilgen et al., 1979). Feedback is one of the sources of efficacy information (Bandura, 1977). Positive feedback can increase perceptions of expertise, and “can amplify random differences within a population, creating strong distinctions of expertise which have no other basis than the feedback process itself” (Gaines, 1988, p. 1018). Individuals perceive themselves as possessing expert power relative to others in the marketplace due to the information or knowledge they possess (Raven, 2008). Firms can act as sources of feedback that impact the perception individuals have of their expertise on a given topic. Therefore:

*H1.* Positive firm feedback increases perceptions of expert power.

The perception of expertise, in turn, may activate an alternative self-concept in order to address self-affirmation and/or self-

enhancement goals; expert power increases action orientation by channeling behavior toward accomplishing a goal (Galinsky et al., 2003). Respondents in a motivational study of WOM behavior attributed their motivation to their desire to project themselves as experts (Dichter, 1966; Sundaram et al., 1998). Therefore:

H2. Perception of expert power increases WOM behavior.

### Propensity to connect with others as a mediating mechanism

The functioning of self-concepts depends on the immediate social situation (Markus and Wurf, 1987). Expert social power is associated with disinhibited social behavior (Keltner et al., 2003). High perceived self-efficacy increases the propensity to select or construct environments that allow for self-enhancement goals to be met (Markus and Wurf, 1987; Bandura, 1977). If self-perceptions of expertise motivates individuals to select environments where they can demonstrate their efficacy, then perceived expertise should impact selection or construction of social situations (Markus and Wurf, 1987; Bandura, 1994). Given that expertise is an interpersonal characteristic by definition (e.g. I am an expert because I know more about this topic *relative to others*), in order to construct social environments that are conducive to self-enhancement through demonstrations of expertise, individuals must connect with others. Thus, the present research asserts that:

H3. The propensity to connect with others partially mediates the positive relationship between perceived expert power and WOM behavior.

### A note on extroversion

Influentials in consumer contexts are often considered synonymous with extroverts. Previous studies have provided evidence for the correlation between extroversion and traits and behaviors typically associated with influential behavior. For example, Costa and McCrae (1998) showed extroversion to be strongly related to social leadership. Similarly, Brancalone and Gountas (2007) found a strong link between extroversion and market mavenism. Mooradian (1996) suggests that market mavenism might be environmentally determined. Ferguson et al. (2010) found that extroversion was a significant predictor intention to engage in WOM, but that the causal link was temporary. The present research does not refute the role that extroversion plays in the behavior of existing influentials; it seeks, instead, to extend the concepts of influentials beyond the

influence of extroversion. Therefore, extroversion is included as a control in the analysis. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized relationships.

## Method

### Sample and data collection procedure

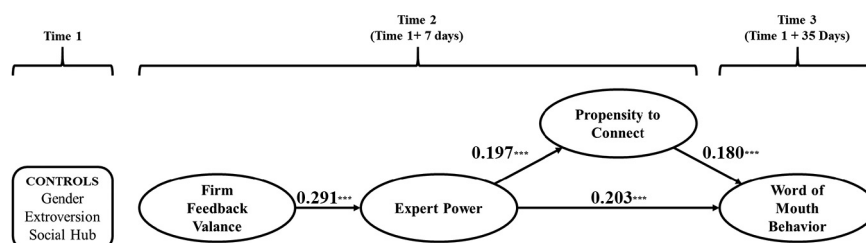
To test the proposed hypotheses, a longitudinal experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics. Data were collected from a convenience sample of 169 undergraduate students at a major southeast US research institution on three separate occasions. The participants were recruited from an introductory marketing course, and received partial course credit for participation in the survey. At time 1, participants completed a pretest, where their dispositions and personalities were assessed; we received usable data from 476 undergraduates in the pretest.

A week later (time 2), the participants were randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions: negative, neutral (no feedback), or positive feedback. Random assignment to condition addresses variability in individual accessibility of a preexisting influential self-concept. Note that for the sake of completion, a negative feedback condition was used, but it is acknowledged that it is unrealistic to assume that firms would intentionally reduce customers' perception of self-efficacy. In that second wave (time 2), we lost participants due to both attrition and failure of the quality control questions, resulting in 396 usable surveys.

An online medium was selected for delivery of the feedback because computer-based feedback has been found to be perceived by participants as more trustworthy than feedback provided by a supervisor (Earley, 1988; McCarty, 1986). The trustworthiness of the source of feedback is critical to the perceived credibility of the feedback (Mohammed and Billings, 2002). In the study, participants were presented a series of online pages with images related to a relatively new and unknown athletic shoe company – Athletic Propulsion Labs (APL). The relatively unknown athletic shoe company, APL, was used as the stimulus for the experiment to reduce confounding effects of previous exposure to, and experience with the stimuli.

Participants were next informed that the company was seeking to develop a promotional strategy for its fledgling company, and was looking for feedback from potential customers. Participants were asked a series of subjective questions about the strategy the company should pursue, such as “APL should promote their products at tradeshow”, and “What should be the leading edge promotional tactic that APL should use FIRST”. Participants were immediately provided feedback on their strategy suggestions according to their feedback condition, i.e. negative, neutral, or positive. The

Figure 1 Conceptual model of firm elicited, emergent influential behavior



feedback was purportedly reflective of the quality and feasibility of the participants' suggestions.

Finally, the third wave (time 3) of data was collected 35 days after the initial wave. As a result, significant attrition occurred. However, to ensure that responses of participants for whom we were unable to match data across all three timeframes did not differ significantly from those who were matched and included in the empirical model, we conducted Levene's test, and the results indicate that, for matched and unmatched respondents, the variance in outcome behavior were not significantly different ( $F(1,505) = 2.601, p_{median} = 0.108$ ). We received 169 usable, matched surveys at time 3. Responses were aggregated to protect participant anonymity. The final sample was comprised of 49 per cent male and 51 per cent female students whose ages ranged from 18 to 35.

Notably, all participants received the same prompts to "report in" during times 2 and 3 of the study. Thus, each participant experienced the same degree and form of interaction with the social environment via identical stimuli to participate/think about APL over time. Additionally, extroversion and social hub traits were assessed and included in the model as control variables. The control variables were expected to capture variance in the accessibility of an influential self-conception.

### Measures

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the study design and the effectiveness of the manipulation. Familiarity with the APL product offering was assessed at time 2. The majority of participants were unfamiliar with the company. Of the 169 participants whose survey responses were retained for analysis, 160 (95 per cent) had never heard of APL shoes, six had heard of APL shoes, one had friends who owned a pair of APL shoes, and two owned a pair of APL shoes themselves. Additionally, the difference between the feedback conditions was checked using a one-way ANOVA. Results show significant difference between positive, neutral, and negative feedback ( $F = 8.173, p < 0.000$ ). Table I reports the descriptive statistics, as well as correlations, reliability and validity of the measures.

Firm feedback valence was manipulated by random assignment to either a negative, neutral, or positive feedback group. Existing measures were adapted to capture the three proposed dimensions of the activated influential self-concept. Specifically, expert power was measured using items were adapted from Yukl and Falbe (1991) and Bachman et al. (1966). Intention to connect with others was measured with items adapted from Totterdell et al. (2008). The computed Cronbach's alpha coefficients ( $\alpha = 0.880$  and  $0.809$ , respectively) for the scales indicate internal consistency. Self-reported WOM behavior was assessed by asking participants to rate their agreement with the following statement: "I've told more people about APL Shoes than I've told about most other athletic shoes". A five-point scale was used anchored by "1-strongly disagree" and "5-strongly agree". For control variables, we included extroversion (adapted from the Neo Five-Factor Inventory; International Personality Item Pool, 2011), social hub traits (measures the predisposition for someone to connect with and share information with a large number of people; Wojnicki, 2004), and gender. For more information, please see the Appendix, which lists the items that comprise the constructs in the study, including the control variables.

For each construct, the reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the measures were assessed. Results indicated that composite reliabilities were greater than 0.80 and all items load on their respective constructs. The square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds the correlation with other constructs in the model, indicating discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

### Analysis and results

To test the hypotheses, we used partial least squares structural modeling (PLS – SEM; Ringle et al., 2005). We chose PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2016) because our interest lies in maximizing the variance explained in the dependent variables by the independent variables while minimizing error – a predictive function, which is the focus of Partial Least Squares SEM (unlike covariance based SEM). Additionally, PLS-SEM offers high efficiency in parameter estimation, which is manifested in greater statistical power than that of covariance based SEM. Greater statistical power means that PLS-SEM is more likely to

Table I Construct correlations, descriptives, reliability and validity

Constructs and metrics	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Feedback Valence							
2. Expert Power	0.29						
3. Propensity to Connect	0.05	0.20					
4. WOM Behavior	0.04	0.26	0.23				
5. Gender	0.07	−0.16	0.01	−0.16			
6. Extroversion	0.01	0.04	0.50	0.12	0.04		
7. Social Hub	−0.02	−0.01	0.52	0.08	0.13	0.68	
Min	1	1	2.11	1	1	1.00	2.00
Max	3	5	5	5	2	5.00	5.00
Mean	1.89	2.84	3.98	3.01	1.50	3.61	3.82
Std Dev	0.79	0.83	0.67	0.86	0.50	0.78	0.60
Cronbach's alpha		0.88	0.81			0.88	0.80
Composite reliability		0.92	0.89			0.91	0.86
Average variance extracted		0.74	0.72			0.68	0.50
$R^2_{adjusted}$		0.10	0.33	0.09			

render a specific relationship significant when it is, in fact, significant in the population. Moreover, PLS-SEM is a method that uses a non-parametric bootstrapping procedure to test significance of coefficients (Efron and Tibshirani, 1986; Davison and Hinkley, 1997) and calculate *t*-values, which allows for testing of non-normal data. Finally, PLS-SEM allows the researcher to model the error term in the equations, an important consideration given that this study was conducted outside of a lab environment.

Overall, the results of the analysis support the model. After controlling for social hub traits, extroversion and gender, increasingly positive firm-originated feedback does indeed lead to increasing perceptions of expert power in the respondents ( $\beta = 0.291, p = 0.000$ ). Additionally, expert power increases WOM behavior directly ( $\beta = 0.203, p = 0.009$ ) and indirectly via propensity to connect with others ( $\beta = 0.197, p = 0.005; \beta = 0.180, p = 0.037$ ). Importantly, given that the focal question of this study is on whether firm initiated feedback impacts three dimensions of influential behavior, we find that not only does increasingly positive feedback valence directly enhance expert power, but that the indirect effects of the firm feedback is both positive and significant – enhancing both propensity to connect with others ( $\beta = 0.059, p = 0.032$ ) and WOM behavior ( $\beta = 0.072, p = 0.020$ ), above and beyond the effects of expert power. The total effects are listed in Table II, and direct effects are shown in Figure 1.

## Discussion

### Implications for theory

Given the advent of influencer-driven commerce, such as shoppable Instagram ads (Wagner, 2019), harnessing the power of influentials is more critical than ever. Extant research often examines internal motivations for engaging in WOM. In this work, we break outside of that tradition, and focus on ways that firms can inspire such activities. Our study highlights the possibilities that dynamic self-concept theory reveals regarding cultivating influential consumers through the use of a longitudinal study, a rare exception to the often cross-sectional or lab-based studies of WOM. This approach gives our study significant advantage, as we are able to assess influential behavior after time has elapsed since the application of the original stimuli.

Indeed, our study shows that it is possible that influentials are not just born; they can be inspired to emerge, an important gap in the current WOM literature. The study results demonstrated that provision of firm-originated feedback can promote perception of expert power and support the emergence of context-specific influential behaviors. Findings from this study

contribute to self-concept theory by providing empirical evidence of the dynamic nature of the self-concept. The study also casts a line to connect the study of influential consumers to the nascent study of social emergence. Exploring dynamic self-concept applications in consumer behavior research can lead to refinement of various behavioral theories and helps us better understand WOM. If we can trigger the emergence of influential behavior, we can better evaluate whether the nature of influence is driven more by the influencers or by the critical mass of those that are influenced.

### Managerial implications

A strategy focused on the emergence of influentials generates tangible benefits for relationship management practitioners. Influential consumers have been shown to broker information across a network (Burt, 2000), connect the firms to their consumer base (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), impact innovation diffusion (Valente, 1996; Valente and Davis, 1999), and speed product adoption (Goldenberg et al., 2009). The malleability of consumers offers the opportunity to inspire them to engage in influential behaviors and provides marketing managers an opening to leverage the power of influentials in the marketplace at will. Doing so can increase the speed at which the marketing message reaches the rest of the target market. Another advantage of managers being able to evoke influential behaviors from target individuals is the ability to tap into their social connections for prospective new clients. Implementing customer relationship management (CRM) strategies would play a critical role in realizing these benefits.

Given the significant impact that influentials have on the marketplace and other consumers, the implications of the findings are substantial for practitioners. For example, an important insight that can be gleaned from the present work is that evoking influentials may be the answer to the current challenges in CRM strategy. The present research addresses the concerns proposed by Hibbard et al. (2001) that relationships that “need building” must be differentiated from those that “need maintenance”. Traditional CRM approaches include general segmentation strategies on the basis of past purchase behavior and demographics (Cao and Gruca, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Ryals, 2005) Once segmented, the customers within each segment are often treated relatively identically.

In contrast, dynamic customer segmentation strategies are focused on customized, precise marketing to influential individuals within traditional segments. At the core of dynamic segmentation strategy (Reutterer et al., 2006) is the assumption that traditional customer segments are social networks, and

Table II Total effects (combined direct and indirect effects) on word of mouth behavior

Constructs	Expert power		Propensity to connect		WOM behavior	
	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Feedback valence	0.31	0.00	0.06	0.03	0.07	0.02
Expert power			0.19	0.01	0.24	0.00
Propensity to connect					0.18	0.05
Gender	−0.18	0.02	<i>ns</i>	0.42	−0.18	0.02
Extroversion	<i>ns</i>	0.54	0.26	0.01	<i>ns</i>	0.39
Social hub	<i>ns</i>	0.83	0.36	0.00	<i>ns</i>	0.79

that a few, influential individuals exist within the segments (Hill *et al.*, 2006). Marketing to these influentials can dramatically reduce the number of customers that need to be tracked in a CRM system. However, the challenge with implementing this marketing strategy is that existing influentials are difficult to identify without in-depth analysis of a firm's data. Our findings provide a solution to this challenge: companies can focus on creating influentials in customer segments. Firms can then rely on diffusion dynamics to generate activity from the remaining individuals in the customer segment (see Meade and Islam, 2006 or Mahajan *et al.*, 1990 for a comprehensive review of diffusion).

### Limitations and future research

While the present work offers important insights, it also has some weaknesses that future research may address. For example, cultivating the influential self-concept requires time to ensure that the self-concept is sufficiently realized to become an enduring and vivid self-concept. Berger and Schwartz (2011) demonstrate that external stimuli have different effects on immediate vs. ongoing WOM. Additional and extended longitudinal field studies would help researchers and practitioners clearly understand the extent of time and information resources needed to cultivate a sustained and dominant influential self-concept.

Additionally, it is important to note that causal attribution plays a role in the interpretation of self-assessments. Evaluations of causality of outcomes can influence perceived self-efficacy about future behavior (Gist and Mitchell, 1992). Perceptions of control over the outcome may influence subsequent efficacious beliefs. Because the literature shows that attribution theory plays a critical role in efficacy judgments (Gist and Mitchell, 1992), the type of information provided unintentionally manipulated the *locus* of causality. The resulting attributions become cues for subsequent self-assessments, thereby reducing motivations to act. Outcomes may be attributed to effort, ability, luck, task difficulty (Gist and Mitchell, 1992, p. 192), while the objective of the present research was focused on ability alone.

Finally, additional research into the antecedents of an activated influential self-concept is also needed. Potential antecedents, moderators and mediators may include involvement, trust, commitment and self-regulatory focus, among others. Gathering sufficient data points to examine these factors and analyze them using more complex models would help complete understanding of the underlying mechanism responsible for activating the influential self. Finally, we note that we were unable to control for the level of a priori accessibility of an influential self-conception by participants. While our use of random assignment, control variables, and the inclusion of a neutral condition attempt to capture variance in accessibility, future research could more actively measure this accessibility.

### Conclusion

A common conceptualization of influentials is a small portion of a population that impact the knowledge and behavior of others by providing (or failing to provide) information that others use to make decisions (Watts and Dodds, 2007). While our findings do not undermine the importance of

influentials in the diffusion of knowledge, they do suggest that the population of influentials may potentially be larger than originally believed. Through a longitudinal experiment, we demonstrate that firms can evoke influential behavior – regardless of the level of extroversion – by providing positive feedback when engaging their customers. The ability to cultivate influentials presents significant advantages and efficiencies for firms, while offering several new lines of inquiry for scholars.

### References

- Bachman, J.G., Smith, C.G. and Slesinger, J.A. (1966), "Control, performance, and satisfaction: an analysis of structural and individual effects", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 4 No. 2, p. 127.
- Bandura, A. (1977), "Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 84 No. 2, p. 191.
- Bandura, A. (1994), "Self-efficacy", in Ramachaudran, V.S. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, Vol. 4, Academic Press, New York, NY, pp. 71-81.
- Berger, J. (2014), "Word of mouth and interpersonal communication: a review and directions for future research", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 586-607.
- Berger, J. and Milkman, K.L. (2012), "What makes online content viral?", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 49 No. 2, pp. 192-205.
- Berger, J. and Schwartz, E.M. (2011), "What drives immediate and ongoing word of mouth?", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 869-880.
- Bickhard, M.H. (2008), "Are you social? The ontological and developmental emergence of the person", in Müller, U., Carpendale, J.I.M., Budwig, N. and Sokol, B. (Eds), *Social Life and Social Knowledge*, Taylor & Francis, New York, pp. 17-42.
- Brancaleone, V. and Gountas, J. (2007), "Personality characteristics of market mavens", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 34, pp. 522-527.
- Burt, R.S. (2000), "The network structure of social capital", *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 22, pp. 345-423.
- Cao, Y. and Gruca, T.S. (2005), "Reducing adverse selection through customer relationship management", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 69 No. 4, pp. 219-229.
- Chang, J.H.-Y. (2004), "Mead's theory of emergence as a framework for multilevel sociological inquiry", *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 405-427.
- Costa, P.T. and McCrae, R.R. (1998), "Six approaches to the explication of facet-level traits: examples from conscientiousness", *European Journal of Personality*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 117-134.
- Davison, A.C. and Hinkley, D.V. (1997), *Bootstrap Methods and Their Application*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Vol. 1.
- Detrain, C. and Deneubourg, J.L. (2006), "Self-organized structures in a superorganism: do ants 'behave' like molecules?", *Physics of Life Reviews*, Vol. 3 No. 3, p. 162-187.
- Dichter, E. (1966), "How word-of-mouth advertising works", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 44, p. 147.



- Earley, P.C. (1988), "Computer-generated performance feedback in the magazine-subscription industry", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 50-64.
- Efron, B. and Tibshirani, R. (1986), "Bootstrap methods for standard errors, confidence intervals, and other measures of statistical accuracy", *Statistical Science*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 54-75.
- Feick, L.F. and Price, L.L. (1987), "The market maven: a diffuser of marketplace information", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51 No. 1, pp. 83-97.
- Ferguson, R., Paulin, M. and Bergeron, J. (2010), "Customer sociability and the total service experience antecedents of positive word-of-mouth intentions", *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 25-44.
- Fornell, C. and Larcker, D.F. (1981), "Structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error: Algebra and statistics", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 382-388.
- Fuggetta, R. (2012), *Brand Advocates: Turning Enthusiastic Customers into a Powerful Marketing Force*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ.
- Gaines, B.R. (1988), "Positive feedback processes underlying the formation of expertise", *IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics*, Vol. 18, pp. 1016-1020.
- Galinsky, A.D., Gruenfeld, D.H. and Magee, J.C. (2003), "From power to action", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 85 No. 3, pp. 453-466.
- Gist, M.E. and Mitchell, T.R. (1992), "Self-efficacy: a theoretical analysis of its determinants and malleability", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 183-211.
- Goldenberg, J., Han, S., Lehmann, D.R. and Hong, J.W. (2009), "The role of hubs in the adoption process", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 73 No. 2, pp. 1-13.
- Goldsmith, R.E., Clark, R.A. and Goldsmith, E.B. (2006), "Extending the psychological profile of market mavenism", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 5 No. 5, pp. 411-419.
- Grubb, E.L. and Grathwohl, H.L. (1967), "Consumer self-concept, symbolism and market behavior: a theoretical approach", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 22-27.
- Hair, J.F., Hult, G.T.M., Ringle, C. and Sarstedt, M. (2016), *A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)*, Sage, Los Angeles.
- Hibbard, J.D., Brunel, F.F., Dant, R.P. and Iacobucci, D. (2001), "Does relationship marketing age well?", *Business Strategy Review*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 29-35.
- Hill, S., Provost, F. and Volinsky, C. (2006), "Network-based marketing: identifying likely adopters via consumer networks", *Statistical Science*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 256-276.
- Ilgel, D.R., Fisher, C.D. and Taylor, M.S. (1979), "Consequences of individual feedback on behavior in organizations", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 64 No. 4, pp. 349-371.
- International Personality Item Pool (2011), "A scientific collaborative for the development of advanced measures of personality traits and other individual differences", available at: <http://ipip.ori.org>
- Johnson, S. (2002), *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY.
- Katz, E. and Lazarsfeld, P. (1955), *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, Free Press, New York, NY.
- Katz, E. (1957), "The two-step flow of communications: an up-to-date report on an hypothesis", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 61-78.
- Keltner, D., Gruenfeld, D.H. and Anderson, C. (2003), "Power, approach, and inhibition", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 110 No. 2, pp. 265-284.
- Kluger, A.N. and DeNisi, A. (1996), "The effects of feedback interventions on performance: a historical review, a meta-analysis, and a preliminary feedback intervention theory", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 119 No. 2, pp. 254-284.
- Kunda, Z. and Sanitioso, R. (1989), "Motivated changes in the self-concept", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 272-285.
- Lewis, M. (2005), "A dynamic programming approach to customer relationship pricing", *Management Science*, Vol. 51 No. 6, pp. 986-994.
- Lenoir, A., Fresneau, D., Errard, C. and Hefetz, A. (1999), "Individuality and colonial identity in ants: the emergence of the social representation concept", in Detrain, C., Deneubourg, J.L. and Pasteels J.M. (Eds), *Information Processing in Social Insects*, Birkhauser Verlag, Basel, pp. 219-237.
- McCarty, P.A. (1986), "Effects of feedback on the self-confidence of men and women", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 840-847.
- Mahajan, V., Muller, E. and Bass, F.M. (1990), "New product diffusion models in marketing: a review and directions for research", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54 No. 1, pp. 1-26.
- Malhotra, N.K. (1988), "Self-concept and product choice: an integrated perspective", *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 1-28.
- Markus, H. and Kunda, Z. (1986), "Stability and malleability of the self-concept", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 51 No. 4, pp. 858-866.
- Markus, H. and Wurf, E. (1987), "The dynamic self-concept: a social psychological perspective", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 299-337.
- Marshall, R. and Gitosudarmo, I. (1995), "Variation in the characteristics of opinion leaders across cultural borders", *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 5-22.
- Mason, R. (1963), "The use of information sources by influentials in the adoption process", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 27 No. 3, pp. 455-466.
- Meade, N. and Islam, T. (2006), "Modelling and forecasting the diffusion of innovation – a 25-year review", *International Journal of Forecasting*, Vol. 22, pp. 519-545.
- Mohammed, S. and Billings, R.S. (2002), "The effect of self-efficacy and issue characteristics on threat and opportunity categorization", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 32 No. 6, pp. 1253-1275.
- Mooradian, T.A. (1996), "The five factor model of market Mavenism", in Corfman, K.P. and Lynch, J.G. Jr (Eds), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Provo, UT, Vol. 23, pp. 260-263.
- Mead, G.H. (1938), *The Philosophy of the Act*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

- Peralta, V. (2006), "Data freshness and data accuracy: a state of the art", Technical Report, Universidad de la Republica, Uruguay.
- Raven, B.H. (2008), "The bases of power and the power/interaction model of interpersonal influence", *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 1-22.
- Redman, T.C. (1998), "The impact of poor data quality on the typical enterprise", *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 79-82.
- Reutterer, T., Mild, A., Natter, M. and Taudes, A. (2006), "A dynamic segmentation approach for targeting and customizing direct marketing campaigns", *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, Vol. 20 Nos 3/4, pp. 43-57.
- Ringle, C.M., Wende, S. and Will, A. (2005), *SmartPLS 2.0 (M3) Beta*, Hamburg, available at: [www.smartpls.de](http://www.smartpls.de)
- Ryals, L. (2005), "Making customer relationship management work: the measurement and profitable management of customer relationships", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 69 No. 4, pp. 252-261.
- Sallach, D.L. (2003), "The simulation of emergence: mysticism, reduction or social complexity", *Proceedings of the 2003 North American Association of Computational Social and Organization Science*, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.
- Sirgy, M.J. (1982), "Self-concept in consumer behavior: a critical review", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 287-300.
- Story, A.L. and Dunning, D. (1998), "The more rational side of self-serving prototypes: the effects of success and failure performance feedback", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 513-529.
- Sundaram, D.S., Mitra, K. and Webster, C. (1998), "Word-of-mouth communications: a motivational analysis", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 25, pp. 527-531.
- Totterdell, P., Holman, D. and Hukin, A. (2008), "Social networkers: measuring and examining individual differences in propensity to connect with others", *Social Networks*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp. 283-296.
- Valente, T.W. (1996), "Social network thresholds in the diffusion of innovations", *Social Networks*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 69-89.
- Valente, T.W. and Davis, R.L. (1999), "Accelerating the diffusion of innovations using opinion leaders", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 566 No. 1, pp. 55-67.
- Vancouver, J.B. and Tischner, E.C. (2004), "The effect of feedback sign on task performance depends on self-concept discrepancies", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 89 No. 6, pp. 1092-1098.
- Wagner, K. (2019), "Instagram will now let you buy products directly inside the app. No more clicking out to a retailer's website", *Voxô*, available at: [www.vox.com/2019/3/19/18271705/instagram-shopping-retail-direct-checkout-commerce](http://www.vox.com/2019/3/19/18271705/instagram-shopping-retail-direct-checkout-commerce) (accessed 18 May 2019).
- Watts, D.J. and Dodds, P.S. (2007), "Influentials, networks, and public opinion formation", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 441-458.
- Wojnicki, A.C. (2004), "Social hubs: a valuable segmentation construct in the word-of-mouth consumer network", *ACR North American Advances*.

- Yukl, G. and Falbe, C.M. (1991), "Importance of different power sources in downward and lateral relations", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 76 No. 3, pp. 416-442.

## Further reading

- Bickhard, M.H. (2012), "Are you social? The ontological and developmental emergence of the person", in Muller, U., Carpendale, J.I.M., Budwig, N. and Sokol, B. (Eds), *Social Life and Social Knowledge*, Taylor & Francis, New York, NY, pp. 27-52.
- Earley, P.C., Northcraft, G.B., Lee, C. and Lituchy, T.R. (1990), "Impact of process and outcome feedback on the relation of goal setting to task performance", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 33, pp. 87-105.
- French, J.R.P. (1956), "A formal theory of social power", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 63 No. 3, pp. 181-194.
- Hinkin, T.R. and Schriesheim, C.A. (1989), "Development and application of new scales to measure the French and Raven (1959) bases of social of social power", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 74 No. 4, pp. 561.

## Appendix

### Constructs and corresponding items

#### Controls – collected at time 1

*Social Hub* (adapted from Wojnicki, 2004):

- I very much enjoy learning new things about different
- I very much enjoy meeting new people.
- Compared to other people, I am very friendly.
- I go out of my way to introduce people to each other.
- I enjoy participating in small talk.

*Extroversion* (adapted from the Neo Five-Factor Inventory; International Personality Item Pool, 2011):

- I feel comfortable around people.
- I make friends easily
- I am skilled in handling social situations.
- I am the life of the party.
- I know how to captivate people.

*Gender*

#### Study constructs – collected at time 2 (time 1 + 7 days)

*Firm Feedback Valence* (Experimental Condition):

- Group 1 = Negative feedback
- Group 2 = Neutral feedback
- Group 3 = Positive feedback

For the following scales, answers ranged from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree:

*Expert Power* (adapted from Yukl and Falbe, 1991 and Bachman, Smith and Slesinger, 1966):

- I feel I can give good technical suggestions regarding APL athletic shoes.
- I feel I can share with considerable experience and/or training with others regarding APL athletic shoes.

- I feel I can provide others with sound athletic shoe-related advice.
- I feel I can provide others with needed technical knowledge about APL

*Propensity to Connect with Others* (adapted from [Totterdell et al., 2008](#)):

- I often put people in touch with the right person when they need something.
- I find it easy to bring individuals together.

- I like being able to connect people.
- WOM Behavior – Collected at Time 3 (Time 1 + 35 days)* (self-reported)
- I've told more people about APL Shoes than I've told about most other athletic shoes.

**Corresponding author**

**Cynthia Beccacece Saturnino** can be contacted at: [csatornino@gmail.com](mailto:csatornino@gmail.com)