An Examination Into The Determinants Of Positive And Negative Electronic Word-Of-Mouth Communication

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has empowered consumers. More and more marketers attempt to harness the power of word-of-mouth communication in the online environment. In this paper, we attempt to explore the underlying motives for consumers engaging in both positive and negative eWOM communication. The findings reported here indicate that consumers engage in positive eWOM mostly for altruistic, self-enhancement, reciprocity, and sense of belonging. In contrast, consumers engage in negative eWOM for altruistic and venting negative feeling. The results of this exploratory study showed that though eWOM behaviour is the same, the underlying motives are very different. Thus, we recommend future research should clearly specify whether they are investigating PeWOM or NeWOM, and researchers should continue to identify corresponding theories to explain the two different eWOM phenomena.

Keywords: Electronic word-of-mouth communication, Online consumer-opinion platforms, Positive eWOM, Negative eWOM, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development and public popularity of social media (e.g., social networking sites, micro-blogs, instant messaging, online consumer-opinion platforms, and etc) cultivate the endless stream of comments, opinions, and personal stories about any and every company, product, service or brand. Consumers now can easily post and share their purchase experiences with other consumers with a click of the mouse. This new form of communication is called *"Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) communication"*. Similar to traditional WOM communication, eWOM communication in general is seen as more credible than traditional marketing and advertising channels [16][22][26]. Recent studies showed that consumers find that the best advice mostly from strangers who have similar interests or who embody a lifestyle the consumer aspires to achieve [21]. eWOM via online consumer-opinion platforms becomes increasingly influential. ChannelAdvisor [7] also found that consumers have increased the number of reviews they read and the overall time they spend reading them.

The significance of eWOM communication has not gone unnoticed by the academic community. A lot of academic studies have already demonstrated the power of eWOM in influencing consumer purchase decision [12][25][28], as well as market sales [13][16][32]. In addition, researchers have shown that word of mouth is a good measure to capture both loyalty and advocacy among existing customers [18][29]. A few studies have already provided initial insights into the drivers of spreading electronic word of mouth [3][22][31]. However, the motives underlying negative electronic word of mouth is still an unexplored research area. Prior studies in marketing suggested that consumers pay more attention to negative information than positive information. We believe that identifying the motives underlying negative eWOM should also deserve attention. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the motives for spreading positive electronic word of mouth (PeWOM) and negative electronic word of mouth (NeWOM) in social media, particularly in online consumer-opinion platforms.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we will review prior literature on both traditional WOM communication and eWOM communication. Second, we will build on the social psychology literature and propose a framework for identifying motives of eWOM communications. We will then describe an exploratory study and report the key motives for both PeWOM and NeWOM communications. Finally, we will discuss the results and present future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we will first address prior studies on WOM communication and eWOM communication. We will then provide our review and analysis of prior studies pertaining to the motives of positive and negative eWOM communications.

Word-of-Mouth Communication

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication refers to

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"oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale" [2]. A great number of studies have illustrated that WOM is more effective than traditional marketing tools of personal selling and conventional advertising media [17], because people tend to perceive personal sources (e.g., consumer-generated WOM), as more credible than marketers or commercial sources (e.g., marketer-generated information). Past studies have also shown that WOM play a major role in consumer purchasing decisions by influencing consumer choice [2][17], as well as post-purchase product perceptions [5].

Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication
eWOM communication is usually considered as an extension of traditional interpersonal communication into the new generation of cyberspace. It refers to *"any positive or negative statement by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet"* [22]. eWOM can be exchanged through a variety of means such as emails, instant messaging, homepages, blogs, forums, product review sites, chat rooms, newsgroups, and social networking sites [19]. Because of the persuasiveness and the rapid adoption of social media, eWOM exhibits an influential power on consumer purchasing decision.

The topic of eWOM communication is generating increased interest in business disciplines. In recent years, we have witnessed that eWOM communication has become an emerging research area with an increasing number of publications per year [6][11]. Researchers from different disciplines adopted various research approaches to examine this important phenomenon, and a lot of attention has been paid to the effectiveness and the consequences of eWOM communication. Research on why consumers engage in eWOM communication, particularly spreading eWOM, remains very scarce.

Prior Studies on Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication
Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication can be positive, negative, or neutral. In general, positive WOM may increase purchase intentions [15], whilst negative WOM may discourage brand choice and damage company's reputation [24]. The impacts of both positive and negative WOM communication have been extensively studied in both traditional media [1][23] and social media [26][27][30]. Our review of existing eWOM literature showed that the motives of engaging in positive and negative

eWOM are not very well-defined. Consumer engagement in eWOM communication is still an unexplored and relatively new phenomenon. The most prominent study of eWOM communication motives is by Hennig-Thurau *et al.* [22]. They built on Balasubramanian and Mahajan's framework [3] and identified main motivational categories eWOM communication in a German web-based opinion platform. Table 1 describes the key motives.

Table 1: Summary of the key motives of eWOM communications

Motives	Description	Results
Platform assistance	The moderating role of the platform are convenience and problem-solving support through the platform operator	√
Venting negative feeling	To lessen the frustration and reduce the anxiety associated	√
Concern for other consumers	To help other consumers with their buying decision, to save others from negative experiences, or both	√*
Self-enhancement	To enhance their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers	√*
Social benefits	To receive social benefits from this community relationship	√*
Economic reward	To receive economic benefits	√*
Helping the company	To give the company "something in return" for a good experience	√
Advice seeking	To describe their experiences with a product and request other consumers to submit problem-solving information	√

(Note: √ represents the motive is identified in the study. √* represents the motive is found significant in the study)

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK
Prior literature provides a rich foundation of theory on which to build a research framework that helps identify key motives of eWOM communications in online consumer-opinion platforms.

eWOM communication can be viewed as a public-good phenomenon. A public good is characterized as *"a shared resource from which every member of a group may benefit, regardless of whether or not they personally contribute to its provision, and whose availability does not diminish with use"* [8]. According to Batson [4],

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there are four main theoretical perspectives explaining public good phenomenon: egoism, altruism, collectivism, and principlism. Figure 1 presents our framework for eWOM communication.
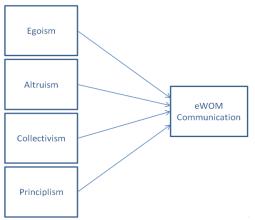

Figure 1: The Research Framework

Egoism refers to serving the public good to benefit oneself. Researchers in psychology, sociology, economics, and political sciences assume that all human actions are ultimately directed toward self-interest. Rewards and avoidance are the most obvious self-benefits that drive individuals to act for the public good. *Collectivism* refers to serving the public good to benefit a group. The act for the public good is for the group's benefit, as the self shifts from personal self to collective self. This is the most widely accepted social psychology theory of group behavior. *Altruism* refers to serving the public good to benefit one or more others. The motive for the public good can be linked to empathic emotion. Empathy (feelings of sympathy, compassion, tenderness, and the like) is a source of altruism. Some researchers have shown that feeling empathy for a person in need leads to increased helping of that person. *Principlism* refers to serving the public good to uphold a principle. The motivation is to uphold, typically, some moral principle, such as justice or the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number.

RESEARCH DESIGN
An exploratory research approach was used in the current investigation. We conducted 40

face-to-face interviews with consumers who have engaged in eWOM communications. The respondents were asked to provide details on a recent PeWOM or/and NeWOM communication in online consumer-opinion platforms. They were also asked why they used this channel to express their comments, and whether they used other channels (e.g., traditional WOM) to spread their purchase experience with other consumers. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded by two independent coders.

DATA ANALYSIS
In this study, 13 respondents were women and 27 were men. They were aged between 21 and 35. The proportion of positive and negative WOM experiences were 19 versus 17, and 4 interviewees provided both positive and negative eWOM in a single incidence. 14 online consumer-opinion platforms were cited in the interviews, and a variety of products and services (e.g., food, cosmetics, online games, mobile phone, and etc.) were mentioned. The average time they spent on posting comments on online consumer-opinion platforms was 5 minutes. 20% of respondents mentioned that they included photos and hyperlinks in their posts. 22.5% of respondents used more than one type of social media to spread their eWOM, and social networking site (e.g., Facebook) was the most popular type of social media they used for eWOM communication. It is interesting to find that 72.5% of respondents also used the traditional method, mainly face-to-face conversation, to spread word of mouth about their purchase experiences.

The responses to the key question in this study, *"Why did you post the comment/review on that forum?"*, were analyzed via a content analysis. Motives for positive and negative eWOM communications are classified separately. The research framework serves as guidance in classifying the motives. Hennig-Thurau *et al.*'s [22] study further provides us with a list of categorization of motivations (See Table 1) that facilitates our coding process. The classifications and quotes of motives are summarized in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2: Coding of Positive eWOM Communication

Motives of PeWOM	Description	Percent (%)	Quotes (Examples)
Concern for other consumers	To help other consumers with their buying decision	(3/61) 4.92%	R25: *"Because I think it's a valuable product in the current market, I would like to recommend other people who also want a new mp3."* R31: *"Hopefully my reply can help the person who asked about this product."* R34: *"I suggested a better product to other people in the forum, in order to provide more product choice for others."*

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Motives of PeWOM	Description	Percent (%)	Quotes (Examples)
Self-enhancement	To enhance their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers	(9/61) 14.75%	R1: *"I want be more popular in the forum, and hopefully people will find me trustworthy."* R30: *"I hope others (whom have similar interests) will know my comments."* R33: *"I think if the company's owner sees this post, he/she will recognize it's me and feels happy."*
Social benefits	To receive social benefits from this community relationship	(4/61) 6.56%	R7: *"I feel that those people in the forum are with the same situation with me, I feel more comfortable talking to them."* R17: *"I just wanted to find something to do, communicate with people on internet, and have conversation with them. Yes, I want to make friends through the forum, therefore I want to gain attention from others."* R30: *"It is also good to share with others as usually they will have similar feedback or response."*
Economic reward	To receive economic benefits	(3/61) 4.92%	R7: *"I want to get more point ... in the forum, for every thread you post, they will give u some point), those points are useful to get some exclusive info points."* R17: *"Gain points."* R25: *"Because points are required to view certain posts."*
Helping the company	To give the company "something in return" for a good experience	(13/61) 21.31%	R5: *"Because I really like the Burger in that shop, the shop is located in Hung Hom, and I would like to recommend this shop to other people who live in other districts."* R16: *"When I found a shop which is really good in service/product quality, I always feel that I wanted to help the shop and it deserves reward in return of their effort."* R36: *"I wanna share my movie review with others. Since I do think that movie is worth watching, I wish my review would arouse others' interest.*
Advice seeking	To describe their experiences with a product and request other consumers to submit problem-solving information	(1/61) 1.64%	R7: *"I want to get more idea from people with similar situation as me, as I think those people will all gather on the forum."*
**Expressing positive emotions	To express positive emotions (e.g., sharing positive consumption experiences contribute to a psychological tension inside him/her)	(4/61) 6.56%	R3: *"I want to share the happiness and recommend a good product to others and friends."* R16: *"It is because I want to share my positive feelings about the restaurant, and I want to recommend other people to go there. And I think the restaurant deserves to have better reputation."* R30: *"Basically to express my feeling."*
**Reciprocity	The person who offers help to others is expecting returns in the future	(11/61) 18.03%	R1: *"Yes, as I would help others when they're in need, therefore I think other people would do the same."* R16: *"Yes, like myself. I used these website a lot and I very appreciate other people's effort, therefore when I found something good, I would like to share it with others and I believe there will be some people would think the same."*
**Obligation	The person feels obliged to help others by engaging in positive eWOM	(3/61) 4.92%	R19: *"On ebay, there's a culture which you would normally leave a comment after purchase no matter its positive or negative, the main intention is to show other buyers if the seller is trustable. This is my responsibility to leave a comment."*
**Sense of belongings	The person defines himself/herself in terms of his/her membership in that group	(10/61) 16.39%	R17: *"Yes, as I have a group of friends there, I always visit the website and I found it easy to chat with people on the forum."* R34: *"Yes, I have many sisters on this forum."* R40: *"Yes, I know the people on there already."*

Table 3: Coding of Negative eWOM Communication

Motives of NeWOM	Description	Percent (%)	Quotes (Example)
Platform assistance	To seek redress (e.g., when the consumer has been unable to reach the appropriate individual at the company involved in the dissatisfying exchange).	(1/31) 3.22%	R12: *"As I want to tell others that iphone's battery has problem, and I think that a lot of people will see my post, and it's a convenience way to express my opinion."*

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Motives of NeWOM	Description	Percent (%)	Quotes (Example)
Venting negative feeling	To vent their anger, anxiety, and frustration	(10/31) 32.25%	R2: *Yes, a little, as I could express myself freely to something that I do not agree with.* R26: *"I do get some comfort from the replies of others."* R32: *"Yes, I feel that I'm giving fair comment."*
Concern for other consumers	To help others by warning them about negative consequence of a particular action.	(16/31) 51.61%	R2: *"The comment I saw on the website praised the food quality in the restaurant. It was described as the best one in Yuen Long. However, I think there are better ones in Yuen Long and I don't want others to waste time travelling all the way from say Hong Kong Island just because of that restaurant."* R14: *"I found that the service and the food do not worth what I had to pay. I want to tell other people it's a rip off, and to warn them not to go there."* R20: *"I was deeply upset with the situation, so I was trying to warn others about this."* R26: *"I wanted to tell other people and try to stop people to go into this shop."*
**Vengeance	To retaliate against the company associated with the negative consumption experiences	(4/31) 12.9%	R11: *"Because I want everyone to know how bad this company is, and to make others lose their confident on this company, and to have negative image about this company, so this company will lose their businesses."* R14: *"Yes, I wanted to damage their reputation by posting truth comments onto the forum, to let others to know the dark side of this posh restaurant."* R20: *"Yes, because he's paying back what he has done i.e. ignoring potential customers."*

Categorization of PeWOM Motivations

We have identified ten motives of PeWOM and classified them into the four major perspectives (See Table 2).

- Egoism: Self-enhancement, economic reward, advice seeking, expressing positive emotions, reciprocity
- Altruism: Concerns for other consumers, helping the company,
- Collectivism: Social benefits, Sense of belonging
- Principlism: Obligation

The classification is very similar to the categories identified by Hennig-Thurau *et al.* [22], except that platform assistance and venting negative feeling are excluded, and four new categories, expressing positive emotions, reciprocity, obligation, and sense of belonging are included. Among all these motivations, helping the company is the most frequently cited motives of engaging in positive eWOM communication. Self-enhancement, reciprocity, and sense of belonging are also frequently addressed.

Categorization of NeWOM Motivations

We have also identified four motives for consumer engagement in negative eWOM communication in online consumer-opinion platforms (See Table 3).

- Egoism: Platform assistance, venting negative feeling, vengeance
- Altruism: Concerns for other consumers,

The first two categories are based on Hennig-Thurau *et al.*'s [22] classification. It is interesting to find that the motives for negative eWOM communication are quite different from those for positive eWOM communication (except for the motive of concern for other consumers). Among all these motives, concern for other consumers and venting negative feeling are the most frequently cited factors for engaging in NeWOM. However, some respondents agreed that leaving negative eWOM is a way to punish companies for providing bad services.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of why consumers engage in PeWOM and/or NeWOM communication in online consumer-opinion platforms. The four perspectives as proposed by Batson [4] guide us in developing a theoretical framework. An exploratory study is then conducted which gives us further insights into the factors determining eWOM communications in online consumer-opinion platforms. Table 4 provides a summary of the findings.

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Table 4: Summary of the Results

Theoretical Perspectives	Motives	Hennig-Thurau et al. [22]	Current Study (PeWOM)	Current Study (NeWOM)
Egoism	Platform assistance	√	NIL	√
Egoism	Venting negative feeling	√	NIL	√#
Egoism	Self-enhancement	√*	√#	NIL
Egoism	Economic reward	√*	√	NIL
Egoism	Advice seeking	√	√	NIL
Egoism	Expressing positive emotions	NIL	√	NIL
Egoism	Reciprocity	NIL	√#	NIL
Egoism	Vengeance	NIL	NIL	√
Altruism	Concern for other consumers	√*	√	√#
Altruism	Helping the company	√	√#	NIL
Collectivism	Social benefits	√*	√	NIL
Collectivism	Sense of belonging	NIL	√#	NIL
Principlism	Obligation	NIL	√	NIL

(Note: √ represents the motive is identified in the study. √* represents the motive is found significant in the study. √# represents the motive is frequently addressed. NIL represents the motive is not considered)

Implications for Research

Our literature analysis indicates that research on consumer engagement in eWOM communication remains relatively new and has only received limited attention in the scholarly literature. To enhance the understanding of this phenomenon and contribute towards the developing of the existing literature in this area, we propose a theoretical framework that includes four key theoretical perspectives in explaining eWOM communications. The findings of this study indicate that the Batson's framework is useful in the understanding of eWOM communication in online consumer-opinion platforms.

Hennig-Thurau et al.'s [22] study is one of the very first studies on eWOM communications. The eight categories only cover the perspectives of egoism, altruism, and collectivism. In this study, we have included one more perspective, principlism. A number of new motives are also identified, including expressing positive emotions, reciprocity, and vengeance (egoism) and sense of belonging (collectivism). In addition, this study examines the motives of PeWOM and NeWOM communications separately. The results of this exploratory analysis suggest that the underlying reasons that motivate consumers to spread PeWOM and NeWOM are very different. In other words, people all have different reasons for their sharing in online consumer-opinion platforms. Some care about their own reputations, some look forward to reciprocity, some concern the company, some attempt to vent the negative feelings through sharing, and some warn other consumers from bad shopping experiences. We used to think that we should encourage customers to participate and share equally; however, this expectation seems unrealistic, as eWOM communications are drawn by many different reasons. In particular, research based on individual-based approach is likely to be very limited in its ability to help understand the complex phenomenon of social media. There is thus a need to integrate multiple theoretical perspectives if this phenomenon is to be better understood.

Implications for Practice

The proliferation of social media brings tremendous impact on the way companies conduct business with consumers. In particular, the explosion of so-called micro-media (online chat rooms, online discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and, etc.) provides retailers with expanded opportunities to gain deeper insights into their customers. In addition to the descriptive knowledge of customers, companies now can gain insights from eWOM communications in online consumer-opinion platforms. This knowledge is particularly important for retailers to gain competitive advantage over their competitors. It is therefore useful to understand what drives them to spread WOM online.

The result of this study offers practitioners some guidelines for managing eWOM. For instance, if companies want PeWOM, they simply need to do their job well and act with integrity. Our study shows that a majority of customers will say good words for the company that serve them well. In contrast, if they do the opposite, they will for sure get plenty of NeWOM.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is that the sample is relatively small (40) and conducted in an Asian country, with a fairly narrow focus on respondents' decision on eWOM communications in online consumer-opinion platforms. Researchers have to be cautious about the generalization of the results.

Given that rigorous research on motives of eWOM communication remains sketchy and lacking, more work should be done to enrich this

line of research. For instance, valid and reliable measurement instrument for the relevant constructs in the research framework should be developed and empirically tested. In addition, further empirical testing is needed to validate the research model and to examine the relative importance of factors affecting eWOM communications.

Existing eWOM studies only focused on the motives of spreading PeWOM. The underlying motives of NeWOM are still not very well understood in the current literature. In this exploratory study, we clearly showed that the motives for PeWOM and NeWOM are very different. Given the growing interest of negative asymmetry in the field of IS [9][10], researchers should continue to explore motives of NeWOM and identify appropriate theories to explain this important phenomenon.

Acknowledgement

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