



# What drives consumers to spread electronic word of mouth in online consumer-opinion platforms

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## ABSTRACT

The advance of the Internet facilitates consumers to share and exchange consumption-related advice through online consumer reviews. This relatively new form of word-of-mouth communication, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication, has only recently received significant managerial and academic attention. Many academic studies have looked at the effectiveness of positive eWOM communication, examining the process by which eWOM influences consumer purchasing decisions. eWOM behavior is primarily explained from the individual rational perspective that emphasizes a cost and benefit analysis. However, we felt there was a need for an extensive study that examines consumers' motives for eWOM. In this paper, we focus on the factors that drive consumers to spread positive eWOM in online consumer-opinion platforms. Building on the social psychology literature, we identified a number of key motives of consumers' eWOM intention and developed an associated model. We empirically tested the research model with a sample of 203 members of a consumer review community, OpenRice.com. The model explains 69% of the variance, with reputation, sense of belonging and enjoyment of helping other consumers significantly related to consumers' eWOM intention. The results of this study provide important implications for research and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

With the advent of Internet technologies, traditional word-of-mouth communication has been extended to electronic media, such as online discussion forums, electronic bulletin board systems, news-groups, blogs, review sites, and social networking sites [34,44]. Everyone can share their opinion and experience related to products with complete strangers who are socially and geographically dispersed [19]. This new form of word of mouth, known as electronic word of mouth (eWOM), has become an important factor in shaping consumer purchase behavior. Hennig-Thurau et al. [27] argued that information provided on consumer opinion sites is more influential among consumers nowadays. Industrial statistics have also provided evidence in supporting the significant impact of eWOM communication. For instance, eMarketer revealed that 61% of consumers consulted online reviews, blogs and other kinds of online customer feedback before purchasing a new product or service [22]. In addition, 80% of those who plan to make a purchase online will seek out online consumer reviews before making their purchase decision [29]. Some consumers

even reported that they are willing to pay at least 20% more for services receiving an "Excellent", or 5-star, rating than for the same service receiving a "Good", or 4-star rating [15].

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication has only recently received significant managerial and academic attention. Most academic studies have looked at the effectiveness of eWOM communication, examining the process by which eWOM influences consumer purchasing decisions. To date, the issue of consumers' eWOM intention has received limited attention in the IS literature. We still do not fully understand why consumers spread positive eWOM in online consumer-opinion platforms. Among the few existing publications, eWOM behavior is primarily explained from individual rational perspective with the emphasis on cost and benefit. Consumer participation in online consumer-opinion platforms depends a lot on interactions with other consumers. We believe that it is necessary to further extend existing work by adopting a diverse theoretical perspective to explain this new social phenomenon focusing on antecedents to eWOM intentions. In the second section of this paper, we address the theoretical background. Then, we present our research model and hypotheses; and describe a survey study of users in an online consumer-opinion platform to empirically test the research model. Next, we discuss the findings of our empirical study. And finally, we conclude by describing the implications for both research and practice, the limitations of the study, and future research directions.

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## 2. Theoretical background

Prior literature provides a rich foundation of theory on which to build a research model that explains why consumers are willing to spread positive eWOM in online consumer-opinion platforms. In this section, we first define electronic word-of-mouth communication and compare the concept with traditional word-of-mouth communication. We then describe the theoretical foundation of our research model.

### 2.1. Definition of eWOM communication

With the advent of the Internet, there has been a paradigm shift in word-of-mouth communication. Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), which was originally defined as an oral form of interpersonal non-commercial communication among acquaintances [5], has evolved into a new form of communication, namely electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. eWOM communication can take place in various settings. Consumers can post their opinions, comments and reviews of products on weblogs (e.g. xanga.com), discussion forums (e.g. zapak.com), review websites (e.g. Epinions.com), retail websites (e.g., Amazon.com), e-bulletin board systems, newsgroup and social networking sites (e.g. facebook.com).

eWOM differs from traditional WOM in many ways. First, unlike traditional WOM, eWOM communications possess unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion. eWOM communications involve multi-way exchanges of information in asynchronous mode [27,28]. The use of various electronic technologies such as online discussion forums, electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups, blogs, review sites and social networking sites facilitate information exchange among communicators [33]. Second, eWOM communications are more persistent and accessible than traditional WOM. Most of the text-based information presented on the Internet is archived and thus, in many cases, at least in theory, is available for an indefinite period of time [28,37]. Third, eWOM communications are more measurable than traditional WOM. The presentation format, quantity and persistence of eWOM communications have made them more observable. Lastly, the electronic nature of eWOM in most applications may dampen the receiver's ability to judge the sender and his or her message on factors such as credibility. People can only judge the credibility of the communicator based on the associated cues through online reputation systems (online ratings, website credibility, etc.).

### 2.2. Prior research on eWOM communication

The topic of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication is generating increased interest in business disciplines such as marketing, consumer behavior, economics, and information systems. Researchers have adopted various research approaches to examine this important phenomenon. Most of these different research approaches explore the impact of eWOM communication. However, research on why consumers engage in eWOM in online consumer-opinion platforms remains relatively limited. A prominent study of eWOM communication motives is by Henning-Thurau et al. [27]. They built on Balasubramanian and Mahajan [6], identifying five main motivational categories of positive eWOM communication: focus-related utility (concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, and exerting power), consumption utility (post-purchase advice-seeking), approval utility (self-enhancement and economic rewards), moderator-related utility (convenience and problem-solving support), and homeostase utility (expressing positive emotions and venting negative feelings). Sun et al. [39] also proposed an integrated model to explore the antecedents and consequences of eWOM in the context of music-related communication. They found that innovativeness, internet usage, and internet social connection are significant factors in eWOM behavior. Tong et al. [41] explored costs (cognitive cost and executional cost) and benefits (enjoyment in helping other

consumers and enjoyment in influencing the company, self-enhancement, and economic reward) of consumer's information contribution to online feedback systems. These studies provide a reasonable start to exploring further the motives behind eWOM communication in a way that does not necessarily approach eWOM behavior as individual rational phenomenon.

### 2.3. The public good

In the literature, information sharing is 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" (p. 693) [11]. The fundamental problem of a public good is that any individual may consume a public good without contributing to a group. This results in a social dilemma situation, which occurs when an individual attempts to maximize self-interest over social-interest and makes a rational decision. In the online environment, anyone can access and consume knowledge without making a direct contribution back to it. It is very likely that individuals will free-ride [9,30]. Wasko and Tiegland [43] however urged that though public goods are subjected to social dilemmas, they are nonetheless created and maintained through collective action. In other words, public goods are still shared and contributed to voluntarily through cooperation of individuals. Based on the social psychology literature, we identified four perspectives that explain why consumers spread eWOM in online consumer-opinion platforms: egoism, collectivism, altruism, and principlism.

*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 [20]. *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. Gorsuch and Orberg [24] found that in moral situations, people reported their intentions to act out of their sense of moral responsibility.

### 2.4. Knowledge self-efficacy

Prior studies [33] have demonstrated that knowledge self-efficacy is an important antecedent of knowledge sharing in the online environment. Individuals tend to provide useful advice on computer networks if they possess a high level of expertise [17]. Conversely, when they lack information or knowledge which is useful to others, they tend to make less contribution in knowledge sharing since, for example they believe that they cannot make a positive impact for the organization [30]. Insufficient knowledge self-efficacy also hinders individuals to share in web-based discussion boards [33].

This line of study suggests that people form beliefs about what they can do, predict likely outcomes of prospective actions, and set goals for themselves in order to achieve desired outcomes. In other words, the motivations of performing a behavior do not stem from the goals themselves, but from the self-evaluation that is made conditional on their fulfillment. Bandura [7] defines perceived self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated

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