

ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH VIA CONSUMER-OPINION PLATFORMS: WHAT MOTIVATES CONSUMERS TO ARTICULATE THEMSELVES ON THE INTERNET?

THORSTEN HENNIG-THURAU is chair for marketing and media research, Bauhaus-University of Weimar; e-mail: tht@medien.uni-weimar.de

KEVIN P. GWINNER is associate professor, Department of Marketing, Kansas State University; e-mail: kgwinner@ksu.edu

GIANFRANCO WALSH is assistant professor, Department of Marketing, University of Hanover; e-mail: walsh@m2.uni-hannover.de

DWAYNE D. GREMLER is associate professor, Department of Marketing, Bowling Green State University; e-mail: gremler@cba.bgsu.edu

The authors thank the Deutsche Bahn AG Consumer Affairs Department, Vanessa Eifler, Frank Datz, Lutz Helmcke of einsmedia.de, Bremen, and the management of ciao.com, dooyoo.com, [hitwin](http://hitwin.com), and Vocatus for their support of this research project.

The authors also are grateful for constructive comments from the editor, Venkatesh Shankar, and two anonymous *Journal of Interactive Marketing* reviewers.

Thorsten Hennig-Thurau
Kevin P. Gwinner
Gianfranco Walsh
Dwayne D. Gremler



ABSTRACT

Through Web-based consumer opinion platforms (e.g., epinions.com), the Internet enables customers to share their opinions on, and experiences with, goods and services with a multitude of other consumers; that is, to engage in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication. Drawing on findings from research on virtual communities and traditional word-of-mouth literature, a typology for motives of consumer online articulation is

© 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. and
Direct Marketing Educational Foundation, Inc.



JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE MARKETING
VOLUME 18 / NUMBER 1 / WINTER 2004
Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com).
DOI: 10.1002/dir.10073

developed. Using an online sample of some 2,000 consumers, information on the structure and relevance of the motives of consumers' online articulations is generated. The resulting analysis suggests that consumers' desire for social interaction, desire for economic incentives, their concern for other consumers, and the potential to enhance their own self-worth are the primary factors leading to eWOM behavior. Further, eWOM providers can be grouped based on what motivates their behavior, suggesting that firms may need to develop different strategies for encouraging eWOM behavior among their users.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional (offline) word-of-mouth has been shown to play a major role for customers' buying decisions (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). The advent of the Internet has extended consumers' options for gathering unbiased product information from other consumers and provides the opportunity for consumers to offer their own consumption-related advice by engaging in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Given the distinct characteristics of Internet communication (e.g., directed to multiple individuals, available to other consumers for an indefinite period of time, and anonymous), eWOM deserves the serious attention of marketing researchers and managers.

However, only limited research on consumers' eWOM communication has been published to date. Existing publications tend to be predominantly practice oriented and deal with what is often referred to as "viral marketing" (i.e., using consumer communication as a means of multiplying a brand's popularity through customers spreading the brand name of a product or name of a company). More theoretical contributions discuss customers' online articulations in the context of online communities where consumers come together in an online environment with the purpose of inter-

acting with others who share their interests and passions (Granitz & Ward, 1996). However, online community research typically focuses on either the managerial aspects of such communities (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996) or on the sociopsychological aspects of the formation and existence of online communities (e.g., Fischer, Bristor, & Gainer, 1996; Granitz & Ward, 1996). Online community research has not yet analyzed the product-related communication behavior between community members nor the resulting marketing implications. A valuable exception is Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001), who, based on an extensive review of different streams of the virtual-community literature, developed a conceptual framework for the economic leverage of virtual communities that integrates economic and social activity. They contend different kinds of utilities are derived by the consumer from his or her communicative behavior in a virtual community; these utilities are compared with costs, resulting in a "total social interaction utility" (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001, p. 126).

Tackling the topic of eWOM from a relationship marketing perspective, Stauss (1997, 2000) discussed various threats and opportunities for businesses brought about by the rise in customer online articulations. Conceptually, he speaks of "Internet customer communication" as occurring when "customers report/interact about consumption-relevant circumstances on the Internet" (Stauss, 2000, p. 243) and subsumes such online articulations under the general concept of word-of-mouth communication. Drawing predominantly on his definition and its theoretical categorization, in this article we refer to eWOM communication as *any positive or negative statement made 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*.

eWOM communication can take place in many ways (e.g., Web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, boycott Web sites, news groups). In this study, we focus on eWOM communicated via Web-based consumer-opinion platforms for the following reasons. First, Web-based opinion platforms are the most widely

used of the existing eWOM formats. World wide, approximately nine to ten million product- or company-related comments from consumers are available to Internet users on Web-based consumer-opinion platforms (e.g., epinions.com, consumerreview.com, and rateitall.com),¹ which provide consumers with the opportunity to read *other consumers'* consumption opinions and experiences as well as write (i.e., publish) contributions by themselves.

Second, eWOM communication articulated on Web-based consumer-opinion platforms can be expected to exert a stronger impact on consumers than eWOM published through other means because unlike news groups, such Web-based consumer-opinion platforms are relatively easy to operate and require less Internet-related knowledge on the part of the consumer to obtain information. Further, rather than aiming at small groups of consumers with expertise in specific fields of consumption (e.g., DVDs), Web-based consumer-opinion platforms provide information on *almost every area of consumption*.

The purpose of this article is to better understand the motivations behind a consumer's decision to engage in eWOM communication on Web-based consumer-opinion platforms. We begin with a review of the literature on customer motives for engaging in word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Using the utility typology suggested by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) in the context of virtual communities as a framework for our discussion, we identify 11 potential motives for customers' online articulations. The importance of these motives for eWOM communication is then tested via factor-score regression analysis using a sample of over 2,000 consumers. Finally, we discuss implications for marketing theory and management.

¹ The number is based on the authors' calculations, drawing on press articles, platforms' official statements, and personal correspondence with managers from several platforms. The platform providers ciao.com and dooyoo.com report having more than 2.5-million comments online each.

MOTIVES FOR ENGAGING IN eWOM COMMUNICATION

Motives for Traditional WOM Communication

Given the conceptual closeness of eWOM and traditional WOM communication, consumer motives that have been identified in the literature as being relevant for traditional WOM also can be expected to be of relevance for eWOM. Several authors have suggested that WOM communication mainly arises when consumers' consumption-related expectations are disconfirmed (e.g., Anderson, 1998) while others have stressed that the motives for engaging in positive WOM communication may differ from the motives that drive negative WOM communication (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998). However, only a few studies have explicitly addressed the specific motives underlying WOM communication behavior (Sundaram et al., 1998). Table 1 lists the motives for WOM communication suggested in the literature.

The most prominent study of WOM communication motives is by Dichter (1966), who identified four main motivational categories of *positive* WOM communication: product-involvement, self-involvement, other-involvement, and message-involvement. Despite its intuitive plausibility and prominence, a main weakness of Dichter's work is that no detailed information about the development of his typology is provided. Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard (1993) modified Dichter's typology, renaming the categories and introducing an additional motive—dissonance reduction—which they see as a reason for articulating *negative* WOM communication only. The most comprehensive study on motives for WOM communication to date is by Sundaram et al. (1998). Carrying out 390 critical-incident interviews, they identified eight motives for consumer WOM communication, several of which correspond with categories originally suggested by Dichter and Engel et al. Four of the identified motives explain positive WOM communication (i.e., altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement, and helping the company) while the other four motives give reasons for negative

T A B L E I

Motives for Word-of-Mouth Communication Behavior Identified in the Literature

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Motive</i>	<i>Description</i>
Dichter (1966)	Product-involvement	a customer feels so strongly about the product that a pressure builds up in wanting to do something about it; recommending the product to others reduces the tension caused by the consumption experience
	Self-involvement	the product serves as a means through which the speaker can gratify certain emotional needs
	Other-involvement	word-of-mouth activity addresses the need to give something to the receiver
	Message-involvement	refers to discussion which is stimulated by advertisements, commercials, or public relations
Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard (1993)	Involvement	level of interest or involvement in the topic under consideration serves to stimulate discussion
	Self-enhancement	recommendations allow person to gain attention, show connoisseurship, suggest status, give the impression of possessing inside information, and assert superiority
	Concern for others	a genuine desire to help a friend or relative make a better purchase decision
	Message intrigue	entertainment resulting from talking about certain ads or selling appeals
	Dissonance reduction	reduces cognitive dissonance (doubts) following a major purchase decision
Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster (1998)	Altruism (positive WOM)	the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return
	Product involvement	personal interest in the product, excitement resulting from product ownership and product use
	Self-enhancement	enhancing images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers
	Helping the company	desire to help the company
	Altruism (negative WOM)	to prevent others from experiencing the problems they had encountered
	Anxiety reduction	easing anger, anxiety, and frustration
	Vengeance	to retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience
	Advice seeking	obtaining advice on how to resolve problems

WOM communication (i.e., altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance, and advice seeking).

Theoretical Framework for eWOM Communication

As this study seeks to identify eWOM communication motives, an integration of general WOM motives and motives derived from the specific features of eWOM on consumer-opinion platforms is needed. Balasubramanian and Maha-

jan (2001) provided a useful framework for considering the integration of economic and social activity within the context of a virtual community, resulting in the distinction of three types of social interaction utility: focus-related utility, consumption utility, and approval utility. In the following paragraphs, we build on Balasubramanian and Mahajan's three utility types to identify motives for engaging in eWOM communication on Web-based consumer-opinion platforms and

extend their framework to include two additional consumer utilities that focus on the unique aspects of such platforms.

Focus-Related Utility

Focus-related utility is the utility the consumer receives when adding value to the community through his or her contributions (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). In a Web-based opinion-platform context, such contributions would include providing reviews and commentary on products and services of interest to other community members. This utility is based on the assumption that “adding value” to the community is an important goal of the individual. Based on the traditional WOM communication literature, we identify four motives that fall under the umbrella of focus-related utility: *concern for other consumers*, *helping the company*, *social benefits*, and *exerting power*. These four motivations, each related to a desire to advance the primary purpose of the platform and thus add value to the community, are discussed in more detail next.

Applying the work of Engel et al. (1993, p. 158), eWOM communication on Web-based opinion platforms may be initiated because of a desire to help other consumers with their buying decisions, to save others from negative experiences, or both. Thus, such communication can include both positive and negative consumer experiences with a product or company. This *concern for other consumers* motive is closely related to the concept of altruism (or prosocial behavior) intensively discussed in the philosophical literature (e.g., Nagel, 1970; Paul, Miller, & Paul, 1993) and sometimes referred to in the marketing literature (e.g., Carman, 1992; Price, Feick, & Guskey, 1995).

The *helping the company* motivation is the result of a consumer's satisfaction with a product and his or her subsequent desire to help the company (Sundaram et al., 1998). The customer is motivated to engage in eWOM communication to give the company “something in return” for a good experience. The intended effect of his or her communicative activities is that the company will become or remain successful. Supporting companies is related to the general altruism motive and draws on the same

psychological background as the first motive—concern for others. According to this interpretation, the consumer considers the company a social institution worthy of support (in the form of eWOM communication). In addition, this motive also can be supported by equity theory (e.g., Oliver & Swan, 1989). Equity theory suggests that individuals desire equitable and fair exchanges. If a consumer feels he or she has received a higher output/input ratio than the company, then helping the firm by recommending its offerings over the Internet is one way the output/input ratio can be equalized.

One characteristic of eWOM behavior on Web-based opinion platforms is that consumers become part of a virtual community through their articulations. Affiliation with a virtual community can represent a *social benefit* to a consumer for reasons of identification and social integration; thus, it can be presumed that consumers engage in eWOM communication to participate in and belong to online communities (McWilliam, 2000; Oliver, 1999). Specifically, consumers may write comments on opinion platforms as such behavior signifies their participation in and presence with the virtual community of platform users and enables them to receive social benefits from this community membership.

Given the great number of potential receivers of eWOM communication, the long-term availability of the comments, and their accessibility by companies, a consumer's individual articulation of a consumption problem can contribute to the *exertion of (collective) power over companies*. Since negative consumer comments can influence the way a company and its image are perceived, public articulations may be used by consumers as an instrument of power. Therefore, eWOM communication provides a mechanism to shift power from companies to consumers, particularly in cases where criticism is articulated by many consumers simultaneously—a regularly occurring phenomenon on Web-based opinion platforms.

Consumption Utility

Consumption utility refers to consumers obtaining value through “direct consumption of the contributions of other community constituents”

(Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001, p. 125). In a Web-based opinion-platform context, consumption takes place when individuals read the product reviews and comments written by others, which also can motivate consumers to *write* comments. Specifically, we expect that consumers may articulate a comment online describing their experiences with a product and request other consumers to submit problem-solving information. Writing and/or soliciting information on online consumer-opinion platforms may allow the contributor to gain more specific and useful feedback than simply anonymously reading comments (i.e., “lurking”). This *postpurchase advice-seeking* motive is concerned with acquiring the skills necessary to better understand, use, operate, modify, and/or repair a product.

Approval Utility

Approval utility is concerned with a consumer's satisfaction that comes “when other constituents consume and approve of the constituent's own contributions” (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001, p. 126). In an opinion-platform context, such feedback can be either formal or informal. Informal approval may come when another user either publicly praises one's contributions to the group or privately communicates to the individual regarding the usefulness of the information provided. More formal “contribution rankings” are being enacted by platform operators. For example, ciao.com provides a mechanism which allows product reviews to be evaluated by other users on the basis of helpfulness. This information is then used to create a ranking system which identifies the “top reviewers.”

Based on the WOM communication literature, we have identified two concrete motives that are associated with approval utility: self-enhancement and economic rewards. The *self-enhancement* motivation (Engel et al., 1993; Sundaram et al., 1998) is driven by one's desire for positive recognition from others. In the context of a Web-based opinion platform, this may take the form of being viewed as a consumption expert or intelligent shopper by other consumers. This motive refers to the existence of cer-

tain self-related consumer needs—underlying behavior which can be gratified only through social interaction. Electronic communication that is read by others allows consumers to signal a kind of connoisseurship or a level of social status that can become important to one's self-concept.

In some cases, the eWOM information provider may receive remuneration from the platform operator, a characteristic of eWOM communication on Web-based opinion platforms that makes it distinct from traditional WOM communication. Economic rewards have been demonstrated to be an important driver of human behavior in general and are considered by the recipient as a sign of appreciation of his or her own behavior by the reward giver (e.g., Lawler, 1984). As such, the receipt of *economic rewards* for eWOM communication from platform operators is another form of approval utility.

In addition to the three kinds of utility identified by Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001), we argue for an extension of this typology based on (a) the characteristics of opinion platforms and (b) our review of the motive-related WOM literature. Specifically, we introduce two additional utility sources for the consumer, which we refer to as moderator-related utility and homeostase utility. While moderator-related utility has its origins in opinion platforms' specific features, homeostase utility builds on findings from the traditional WOM literature.

Moderator-Related Utility

Moderator-related utility is derived when a third party makes the complaint act easier for the community member. In a Web-based opinion-platform context, this might entail the platform staff interacting with a company on behalf of the customer. This utility category stems from the existence of a moderator in the consumer-to-consumer interaction process, which makes it distinct from traditional WOM communication activity. Specific eWOM communication motives that refer to the moderating role of the platform are *convenience* and *problem-solving support* through the platform operator.

The mere existence of the platform can make

the complaining process easier to perform for the complainant. This is especially true when the consumer has been unable to reach the appropriate individual at the company involved in the dissatisfying exchange. As such, it can be a more *convenient* way for consumers to seek redress. Harrison-Walker (2001), in her study of complaints articulated by disgruntled United Airlines customers via the Untied.com forum, found convenience of complaining to be important in the consumer's decision of where to complain. "The complaint forum may simply be easier for consumers to identify and access than the company" (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 403).

Furthermore, it is possible consumers' articulations on Web-based opinion platforms are instigated with the hope that *platform operators will actively support* consumers in solving their problems. When eWOM communication transmitted via Web-based consumer-opinion platforms is forwarded to companies by platform operators, such communication gives consumers the ability to express dissatisfaction with low financial and psychological risk. In this sense, platform operators are viewed as an advocate for the consumer, perhaps replacing other third-party institutions (e.g., attorneys, consumer advocacy groups, and news media).

Homeostase Utility

This final utility is based on the notion that people have a basic desire for balance in their lives (e.g., Zajonc, 1971). Balance theory suggests individuals will strive to restore equilibrium after their originally balanced state has become unbalanced (Heider, 1946, 1958; Newcomb, 1953). In the context of dissatisfying consumption experiences, the source of unbalance comes from either a strong positive or negative consumption experience. Balance can be restored by writing a comment on an opinion platform. Based on the WOM communication literature, we have identified two motives that are associated with homeostase utility: *expressing positive emotions* and *venting negative feelings*.

Balance can be restored through *expressing positive emotions* that are experienced as part of a successful consumption experience (Sundaram et al., 1998). The reason behind the consumer's

need to express positive emotions is that the consumer's positive consumption experiences contribute to a psychological tension inside him or her because of a strong desire to want to share the joy of the experience with someone (Dichter, 1966). That tension may be reduced by writing comments on Web-based opinion platforms, a behavior that allows the consumer to share the experience with many others.

Relatedly, *venting negative feelings* associated with dissatisfying consumption experiences on a consumer-opinion platform can serve to lessen the frustration and reduce the anxiety associated with the event (Sundaram et al., 1998). A consumer's desire for catharsis is known to be a major driving force behind the articulation of negative personal experiences (Alicke et al., 1992; Berkowitz, 1970). Accordingly, sharing a negative consumption experience through the publication of online comments can help the consumer to reduce the discontent associated with his or her negative emotions.

AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE MOTIVES OF eWOM COMMUNICATION

Our review of the literature has led us to suggest 11 distinct motivations consumers may have in engaging in eWOM communication on Web-based opinion platforms: concern for other consumers, desire to help the company, social benefits received, exertion of power over companies, postpurchase advice seeking, self-enhancement, economic rewards, convenience in seeking redress, hope that the platform operator will serve as a moderator, expression of positive emotions, and venting of negative feelings. To empirically assess the structure and relevance of these 11 motives, a sample of some 2,000 consumers who actively participate in Web-based opinion platforms is examined. Methodology and findings of this study are described next.

Methodology

The 11 motives for giving eWOM communication are examined using an online sample of German Web-based opinion-platform users. An

online questionnaire was developed and made accessible through (a) a banner link on the home page of the Deutsche Bahn AG, one of the most heavily frequented Web sites in Germany, (b) pop-up windows on dooyoo.de and hitwin.de that pointed users to the survey, and (c) e-mail messages sent to a selection of users of two Web-based opinion platforms (ciao.com and Vocatus.de). As a participation incentive, 20 discount cards ("Bahncards") and 50 books were raffled off among the participants. The average time for completing a questionnaire was just under 12 min. Of the 4,445 respondents, only those 2,083 individuals who had previously written comments for distribution on the platform were included for data analysis. After excluding 20 cases containing missing or inconsistent information, the final sample consisted of 2,063 providers of eWOM communication. Information on the demographic profile of the sample is provided in Table 2.

Because we knew of no established scales for eWOM communication motives, items were constructed to measure each of the proposed motives. A pool of 49 items was initially generated and subjected to expert and user judgment. More specifically, two of the authors and three external experts assigned each item to one of the 11 motives suggested earlier. The same task was then given to ten users of Web-based platforms. Items were reworded or deleted from the pool, with the process being repeated until all items were assigned to the matching motive. At the end of this process, 27 items were retained. Five-point rating scales ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*) asking respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each item were used to measure each construct; therefore, a higher motive score indicates stronger motive agreement.

RESULTS

Analysis of Motive Structure

The 27 motive items were entered into a principal components analysis (PCA) to examine the dimensionality of the entire set of items.

T A B L E 2

Demographic Profile of the Sample

Variable	Categories	Percent of Sample
Age ($M = 30.25$; $\sigma = 10.59$)	14–19	13.6
	20–29	41.4
	30–39	27.6
	40–49	11.0
	50–59	4.9
	60+	1.5
Gender	Female	36.7
	Male	63.3
Education	College or University	38.1
	High School	32.3
	Have Not Completed High School	29.6
Occupation	Student	32.8
	Office worker	30.3
	Managerial employee	9.6
	Running own business	8.4
	Blue-collar worker	2.7
	Civil servant	5.4
	Others	10.8

Such a procedure is preferred to the application of a confirmatory factor analysis at this stage, as the PCA more adequately takes into consideration the exploratory state of the typology of eWOM communication motives. Based on Kaiser's eigenvalue criterion, eight factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted using the latent roots criterion and a Varimax rotation. All eight factors showed strong reliability ($\alpha s = \geq .79$). Table 3 contains the factor loadings for the rotated PCA solution and Cronbach's α values for each of the factors.

Six of the eight factors corresponded exactly to one of the theoretically derived motive categories discussed earlier: *venting negative feelings* (Factor 2), *concern for other consumers* (Factor 3), *social benefits* (Factor 5), *economic incentives* (Factor 6), *helping the company* (Factor 7), and *advice seeking* (Factor 8). The remaining two factors represent a combination of the previously posited motives. Factor 1 combines the two moderator-related utilities (i.e., "problem solving

T A B L E 3
Factor Structure and Item Stability¹

Factor (Cronbach's α /Average Variance Explained)	Indicator* I write comments on virtual platforms because	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	Coefficients of Determination
Factor 1 Platform assistance ($\alpha = .874$ /AVE = .600)	... I believe the platform operator knows the person in charge within the company and will convey my message. ... the platform operator will stand up for me when speaking to the company. ... I believe companies are more accommodating when I publicize the matter. ... it is more convenient than writing to or calling the company. ... it is not that costly. ... one has more power together with others than writing a single letter of complaint.	.876 .841 .772 .741 .682 .658								.645 .646 .656 .592 .493 .559
Factor 2 Venting negative feelings ($\alpha = .827$ /AVE = .657)	... the company harmed me, and now I will harm the company! ... I want to take vengeance upon the company. ... my contributions help me to shake off frustration about bad buys. ... I like to get anger off my chest.		.832 .806 .726 .714							.630 .572 .786 .638
Factor 3 Concern for other consumers ($\alpha = .802$ /AVE = .596)	... I want to warn others of bad products. ... I want to save others from having the same negative experiences as me. ... I want to help others with my own positive experiences. ... I want to give others the opportunity to buy the right product.			.843 .837 .644 .639						.577 .654 .621 .530
Factor 4 Extraversion/positive self-enhancement($\alpha = .788$ /AVE = .548)	... this way I can express my joy about a good buy. ... I feel good when I can tell others about my buying successes. ... I can tell others about a great experience. ... my contributions show others that I am a clever customer.				.803 .766 .675 .564					.629 .604 .493 .467
Factor 5 Social benefits ($\alpha = .887$ /AVE = .793)	... I believe a chat among like-minded people is a nice thing. ... it is fun to communicate this way with other people in the community. ... I meet nice people this way.					.885 .841 .829				.861 .803 .716
Factor 6 Economic incentives ($\alpha = .943$ /AVE = .917)	... of the incentives I receive (e.g., Web miles). ... I receive a reward for the writing.						.932 .925			.900 .934
Factor 7 Helping the company ($\alpha = .838$ /AVE = .793)	... I am so satisfied with a company and its product that I want to help the company to be successful. ... in my own opinion, good companies should be supported.							.889 .840		.716 .870
Factor 8 Advice seeking ($\alpha = .785$ /AVE = .706)	... I expect to receive tips or support from other users. ... I hope to receive advice from others that helps me solve my problems.								.836 .826	.729 .682

¹ The original German wording of each item is available upon request from the authors.

Note. Factor loadings are generated by a principle components analysis, those loading $\leq .30$ are not included. The coefficients of determination are generated from a confirmatory factor analysis.

T A B L E 4

Discriminant Validity Assessment

	AVE	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
Factor 1	.573	—						
Factor 2	.657	.452	—					
Factor 3	.793	.017	.206	—				
Factor 4	.596	.097	.103	.302	—			
Factor 5	.573	.268	.432	.554	.424	—		
Factor 6	.917	.144	.342	.377	.127	.294	—	
Factor 7	.793	.319	.226	.110	.464	.379	.098	—
Factor 8	.705	.336	.306	.415	.448	.446	.159	.261

Note. The statistics in the second column are the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor. The remaining statistics represent the squared correlation coefficient between two factors. Discriminant validity exists between two constructs if the average variance extracted of both constructs is greater than the variance shared by the two (i.e., the squared correlation coefficient).

through platform operator” and “convenience of articulation”) with the exertion of “collective power.” We have named this motive factor *platform assistance* to better reflect the meaning of the represented items. Factor 4 is labeled *extra-version/positive self-enhancement*, as it encompasses those motives that focus on the communicator’s psychological benefits of eWOM—integrating the original motive categories “to express positive feelings” and “self-enhancement.”

Stability and discriminant validity of the eight-factor structure was then assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The global goodness-of-fit measures of the CFA indicate an acceptable fit to exist between the measurement model and the data (normed fit index = .928, adjusted goodness-of-fit index = .936, non-normed fit index = .917; comparative fit index = .930). With regard to the local fit of the CFA model, the results show that all items had coefficients of determination above .40, and for all model constructs the average variance extracted was higher than .50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; see also Table 3). Discriminant validity was measured using the criterion suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), who contend that for discriminant validity to exist between two constructs, the average variance extracted of both constructs must be greater than the variance shared by the two (i.e., the squared correlation coefficient).

This condition was met by all pairs of factors (see Table 4).

Analysis of Motive Importance for Giving eWOM Communication

To determine the ability of the different motives to predict eWOM behavior, we conducted multiple regression analyses with two measures of consumers’ actual eWOM behavior as dependent variables and the eight eWOM motive factors as independent variables. We operationalized eWOM behavior in two ways: (a) the frequency of the consumer’s visits to opinion platforms and (b) the number of comments written by the consumer on opinion platforms.

Regarding the *frequency of platform visits*, this variable was measured as an ordinal variable, with categories being one or more visits per week (assigned a value of 4), one visit every two weeks (3), one visit every month (2), and less than one visit per month (1). Factor scores for each of the eight eWOM motive factors shown in Table 3 were calculated from the PCA results and used as independent variables in the regression equation. The regression function was highly significant ($p < .001$) and explained 24.2% of visit frequency. No multicollinearity was found among the independent variables, with tolerance values of .99 or higher for all variables. Standardized regression coefficients were significant ($p < .001$) for seven of eight

TABLE 5

Factor-Score Regression Results

	<i>Platform Visit Frequency Regression Coefficient (Standardized)</i>	<i>Comment Writing Regression Coefficient (Standardized)</i>
Factor 1: Platform assistance	-.18**	-.04
Factor 2: Venting negative feelings	-.10**	.01
Factor 3: Concern for other consumers	.13**	.16**
Factor 4: Extraversion/positive self-enhancement	.15**	.12**
Factor 5: Social benefits	.37**	.34**
Factor 6: Economic incentives	.10**	.18**
Factor 7: Helping the company	-.01	-.03
Factor 8: Advice seeking	.10**	.06*
R^2	.242	.197

** Significant at $p < .001$.* Significant at $p < .01$.

motive factors, with only the helping the company motive having no impact on visiting frequency. By far, the strongest positive impact on consumers' platform visiting frequency was by social benefits (Factor 5, $\beta = .37$), followed by extraversion/positive self-enhancement ($b = .15$) and concern for other consumers ($b = .13$). Interestingly, the impact of two motive factors (venting negative feelings, $b = -.10$, and platform assistance, $b = -.18$) was negative, suggesting consumers strongly driven by these motives tend to visit platforms less often. This result may be an artifact of those consumers who experience consumption-related problems coming to opinion platforms to try and resolve their dissatisfying experience, but not using the platform on other occasions.

With regard to the *number of comments* written on opinion platforms by consumers, another multiple regression analysis was conducted with the PCA factor scores as independent variables and the number of comments written by the respondent as the dependent variable. The standard deviation of the number of comments was relatively high ($SD = 107$), with values ranging from 1 to 1,800 and distributions being highly skewed. Consequently, we assigned respondents to one of four groups based on the number of comments they had written; the cat-

egories were 1 to 10 (assigned a value of 1), 11 to 35 (2), 36 to 99 (3), and 100 or more (4). The impact of four motive factors (concern for other consumers, extraversion/positive self-enhancement, social benefits, and economic incentives) was significant at $p < .001$, and the impact of advice seeking was significant at $p < .01$. Motive factors found to have no significant impact on the number of comments written were platform assistance, venting negative feelings, and helping the company. Paralleling the results of the visiting frequency regression, the motive factor with the strongest impact on the number of comments written was again social benefits ($\beta = .34$), this time followed by economic incentives ($\beta = .18$), concern for other consumers ($\beta = .16$), and extraversion/positive self-enhancement ($\beta = .12$). Table 5 lists the regression coefficients for all motive factors.

Thus, we find a moderately high level of consistency between the two sets of independent variables that predict our two eWOM behavior variables. Our results indicate that concern for other customers, extraversion/positive self-enhancement, social benefits, economic incentives, and to a lesser extent, advice seeking, all serve to motivate both one's frequency of platform visits and (perhaps most relevant for this

study) the number of comments written on opinion platforms. We will elaborate on what these results mean for managers in the implications section.

A Motive-Based Segmentation of eWOM Communication Providers

Given the variety of eWOM communication motives and the varying situational influences surrounding consumption experiences, we sought to understand how the relevance of our eWOM motives differs among consumers and the extent to which consumers may be motivated by multiple factors. To investigate potential differences among groups of consumers, we performed a hierarchical cluster analysis using the means of each of the eight PCA factors as input variables. Distances between the cases (i.e., consumers) were calculated according to the squared Euclidean distance measure. To eliminate artifacts, in the first step the single linkage cluster method was applied, leading to a deletion of 22 outlier cases whose motive assessments have no sufficient similarity to other cases. In a second step, the Ward method, known to be among the most effective algorithms for cluster agglomeration (cf. Malhotra, 1993), was used to identify distinct motive clusters. In deciding upon the appropriate number of clusters (or segments of eWOM givers), the increase of heterogeneity was plotted against the respective number of clusters (scree plot), suggesting a four-cluster solution. Next, when we simulated the cluster structure with multiple discriminant analysis, 79% of the consumers in the sample were assigned to the appropriate cluster, providing good support for the four-cluster solution.

For each of the four segments, Table 6 displays the mean values of the eight motive factors and selected demographic characteristics. Interestingly, concern for other customers was found to be the primary motivation for each of the four segments. Because it is a common feature for all of the consumer-motivation clusters, we examined the secondary motivations associated with each segment to better understand differences between the segments.

The eWOM behavior of consumers in Seg-

ment 1, *self-interested helpers*, appears to be strongly driven by economic incentives. Economic incentives are the second strongest motive for this cluster (behind concern for other consumers), and respondents rated economic incentives the highest among the four clusters. In terms of size, the self-interested helpers segment is the largest of the four segments, representing 34% of all respondents.

The consumers in Segment 2, *multiple-motive consumers*, are motivated by a large number of factors. Across the four segments, they have relatively high motivation ratings for all motives. In fact, this segment has the highest motivation rating for *each* of the motives across the four clusters (with the exception of economic incentives). The multiple-motive consumers represent 21% of all respondents.

In contrast, Segment 3 seems to be motivated to provide eWOM comments primarily by a single motive—the concern for other consumers motive. Consequently, we labeled this segment *consumer advocates*. This segment is the smallest of all four, representing 17% of all respondents, and the one with the highest level of formal education, with 44% of its members having a college or university degree (compared to 30% of all respondents considered for the cluster analysis).

Finally, Segment 4 can be referred to as *true altruists*, as they appear to be both strongly motivated by helping other consumers as well as helping companies. All other motives are of less importance for this segment's members, and consistent with an intense altruistic orientation, the segment's interest in receiving economic rewards from giving eWOM communication is limited. The true altruists segment is the second largest of the four, representing 27% of the respondents.

When comparing the four segments with regard to the average number of contributions and the frequency of visiting an opinion platform, the multiple-motive consumers segment clearly engages in the most eWOM communication ($M = 69.5$ comments overall) and visits platforms most often ($M = 2.63$ on the 4-point scale reported earlier in this article). The true altruists and the consumer advocates made the

T A B L E 6

Motive Relevance and Demographics for eWOM Consumer Segments

	<i>Segment 1: “Self-Interested Helpers” (n = 700)</i>	<i>Segment 2: “Multiple-Motive Consumers” (n = 429)</i>	<i>Segment 3: “Consumer Advocates” (n = 356)</i>	<i>Segment 4: “True Altruists” (n = 556)</i>	<i>Entire Sample (n = 2,041)</i>
Factor 1: Platform assistance	2.89	3.71	2.35	3.17	3.04
Factor 2: Venting negative feelings	2.17	3.30	1.63	2.18	2.32
Factor 3: Concern for other consumers	4.32	4.65	4.00	4.50	4.38
Factor 4: Extraversion/positive self-enhancement	2.94	3.85	2.19	2.88	2.98
Factor 5: Social benefits	3.31	4.02	2.31	2.86	3.16
Factor 6: Economic incentives	4.02	3.98	2.03	2.26	3.19
Factor 7: Helping the company	3.66	4.31	2.70	4.20	3.78
Factor 8: Advice seeking	3.16	4.11	2.71	3.41	3.35
Age (mean)	27.0	27.4	29.1	30.4	28.3
Gender (% female respondents)	28	30	32	33	31
Education (% with college degree)	28	22	44	31	30
Occupation (% students)	21	18	23	17	20
Number of contributions written (mean)	63.1	69.5	32.3	32.2	50.7
Platform visiting frequency	2.48	2.63	2.19	2.31	2.41

Note. Factor means for each segment are calculated as a weighted average using the factor scores from the items assigned to each factor.

fewest contributions (32.2 and 32.3, respectively), with the latter having the lowest platform visiting frequency ($M = 2.19$). Managerial implications of these results are discussed next.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivations consumers have for articulating their views on Web-based consumer-opinion platforms (i.e., eWOM communication). Using a sample of 2,063 Internet users who had written online comments, this study provides insight into a variety of different motives for eWOM communication and their impact on eWOM behavior, and also develops a motive-based segmentation of individuals who compose eWOM messages.

For platform operators, the results of our study provide the first comprehensive account of users' eWOM articulation motives. Identifying such motives enables platform operators to design their service in a more customer-oriented way by addressing the specific reasons platform users post messages. As indicated in Table 5, our results suggest social benefits, economic incentives, concern for others, and extraversion/self-enhancement to be the primary reasons consumers publish their experiences on opinion platforms.

Based on our results, platform operators can develop programs that appeal to the basic motives that drive eWOM behavior. For example, because of the especially large impact that social benefits have on eWOM behavior, a platform provider might decide to offer special services

to increase community coherence and activity. Illustrative methods for achieving such social benefits could include the development of a discussion forum for frequent users of the platform that is separate from the product-rating sections. In this part of the platform, users could start threaded discussions on topics of interest and build a sense of community by increasing their familiarity with other users. Another way to increase the attractiveness of the platform as a social space might be to provide room for contributors to post personal profile information. This information would be available for other users to view and, again, may serve to increase familiarity among the users and increase the sense of community. These are but two examples of how the motive results from this study could be used to craft strategies to encourage eWOM behavior.

Another finding from our study is that consumers are not a homogeneous group in terms of their eWOM motivations (see Table 6); instead, they can be divided into distinct motive segments. Given the presence of different motivation segments, strategies for encouraging and increasing eWOM participation should be developed with particular segments in mind. For example, in encouraging Segment 4 (the true altruists segment) to engage in more eWOM behavior, a firm may want to emphasize how doing so aids both other consumers and the focal company. In contrast, motive Segments 1 and 2 (the self-interested helpers and multiple-motive consumers) will likely respond better to messages that explain how they may personally benefit from engaging in eWOM. This implies that platform operators should undertake research to understand the motives of their particular user base.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Some limitations are associated with this study that provide directions for future research. First, as with every new research field, the validity of the empirical results is in question insofar as no previously existing scales for eWOM com-

munication motives were available to help validate the measures used in this study. Therefore, a major challenge for future research would be to continue to refine the measures used in this study; doing so also would allow for replication of the findings of this study. Second, the empirical results allow conclusions at an aggregate level, but make it difficult to detect differences between different kinds of goods and services. Third, since this study focuses on motives for writing online articulations, examining motives for reading eWOM represents another promising extension of our study. Finally, a German sample was used in this study, which might make it difficult to generalize the results to other countries, especially to countries that are less developed in terms of Internet access. This suggests that future research should replicate our study by exploring consumers' online articulations in different cultural contexts.

REFERENCES

- Alicke, M.D., Braun, J.C., Glor, J.E., Klotz, K.L., Magee, J., Sederholm, H., & Siegel, R. (1992). Complaining Behavior in Social Interactions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18(3), 286-295.
- Anderson, E.W. (1998). Customer Satisfaction and Word-of-Mouth. *Journal of Service Research*, 1(1), 1-14.
- Armstrong, A., & Hagel, J., III. (1996). The Real Value of On-line Communities. *Harvard Business Review*, 74(May-June), 134-141.
- Bagozzi, R.P., & Yi, Y. (1988). On the Evaluation of Structural Equation Models. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 16(Spring), 74-94.
- Balasubramanian, S., & Mahajan, V. (2001). The Economic Leverage of the Virtual Community. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 5(Spring), 103-138.
- Berkowitz, L. (1970). Experimental Investigations of Hostility Catharsis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 35, 1-7.
- Carman, J.M. (1992). Theories of Altruism and Behavior Modification Campaigns. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 12(Spring), 5-18.
- Dichter, E. (1966). How Word-of-Mouth Advertising Works. *Harvard Business Review*, 44(November-December), 147-166.
- Engel, J.F., Blackwell, R.D., & Miniard, P.W. (1993).

- Consumer Behavior (8th ed.). Fort Worth: Dryden Press.
- Fischer, E., Bristor, J., & Gainer, B. (1996). Creating or Escaping Community?: An Exploratory Study of Internet Consumers' Behaviors. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 23, 178–182.
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D.F. (1981). Evaluating Structural Equation Models with Unobservable Variables and Measurement Error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 18(February), 39–50.
- Granitz, N.A., & Ward, J.C. (1996). Virtual Community: A Sociocognitive Analysis. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 23, 161–166.
- Harrison-Walker, L.J. (2001). E-complaining: A Content Analysis of an Internet Complaint Forum. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 15(5), 397–412.
- Heider, F. (1946). Attitudes and Cognitive Organization. *Journal of Psychology*, 21, 107–112.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Lawler, E.E., III. (1984). The Strategic Design of Reward Systems. In C. Fombrun, N. Tichy, & M. Devanna (Eds.), *Strategic Human Resource Management* (pp. 127–147). New York: Wiley.
- Malhotra, N.K. (1993). *Marketing Research: An Applied Orientation*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- McWilliam, G. (2000). Building Stronger Brands Through Online Communities. *Sloan Management Review*, 41 (Spring), 43–54.
- Nagel, T. (1970). *The Possibility of Altruism*. Oxford, England: Clarendon.
- Newcomb, T.M. (1953). An Approach to the Study of Communicative Acts. *Psychological Review*, 60, 393–404.
- Oliver, R.L. (1999). Whence Customer Loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 63, 33–44.
- Oliver, R.L., & Swan, J.E. (1989). Consumer Perceptions of Interpersonal Equity and Satisfaction in Transactions: A Field Survey Approach. *Journal of Marketing*, 53(2), 21–35.
- Paul, E.F., Miller, F.D., Jr., & Paul, J. (1993). *Altruism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Price, L.L., Feick, L.F., & Guskey, A. (1995). Everyday Market Helping Behavior. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 14(2), 255–266.
- Richins, M.L., & Root-Shaffer, T. (1988). The Role of Involvement and Opinion Leadership in Consumer Word-of-Mouth: An Implicit Model Made Explicit. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15, 32–36.
- Stauss, B. (1997). Global Word of Mouth. Service Bashing on the Internet is a Thorny Issue. *Marketing Management*, 6(3), 28–30.
- Stauss, B. (2000). Using New Media for Customer Interaction: A Challenge for Relationship Marketing. In T. Hennig-Thurau & U. Hansen (Eds.), *Relationship Marketing* (pp. 233–253). Berlin: Springer.
- Sundaram, D.S., Mitra, K., & Webster, C. (1998). Word-of-Mouth Communications: A Motivational Analysis. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 25, 527–531.
- Zajonc, R.B. (1971). The Concepts of Balance, Congruity, and Dissonance. In P. Suedfeld (Ed.), *Attitude Change* (pp. 63–85). Chicago: Aldine-Atherton.