Motivations of Electronic Word-of-mouth Communications by Reviewers: A Proposed Study

ABSTRACT
Shopping sites, such as Amazon, encourage consumers to create online reviews for products through product reviews. Such review systems enhance the value of Amazon and eBay as shopping destinations. However, Amazon takes it one step further by allowing other consumers to rate the reviews, creating reputation systems for reviewers. Those reviewers with the highest ratings are given greater prominence. They are featured first in the listings, they are given an honorary title, membership in an honorary group, and sometimes they are even provided with products in advance of the product’s release. These reviewers work long hours, without pay, to provide a valuable service to their fellow consumers. For instance, the top 1000 reviewers each write hundreds of reviews. What exactly motivates this extraordinary effort? How does the reputation system of helpfulness votes affect the case for Amazon’s reviewers?

Keywords
Electronic Word-of-mouth communications, Motivations, top reviewers, eWOM, online feedback systems, web 2.0

INTRODUCTION
Since the end of dot-com boom in 2001, the internet and web have undergone major changes. In addition to separating winning technologies and industries from the losers, technologies and techniques of their use have evolved (O’Reilly, 2007). According to O’Reilly, such “shakeouts” are a common consequence of all technological revolutions. One of these shakeouts is the concept of using the web as a platform for the hosting and distribution of user-generated content in order to harness its collective power. This harnessing of collective power, and intelligence from users complements Web 2.0 and provides the user unprecedented power in a virtual environment, to initiate and influence change on social, cultural, political, and economic issues in the non-virtual environment (Carlisle & Jackie, 2007). The importance of information from users or consumers has been well recognized in consumer behavior, information systems, economics, marketing, and general business literature (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993; Lu, Jerath, & Singh, 2010; Silverman, 2001; Unsai, 2009). Better known as word-of-mouth (WOM), it is characterized by direct, oral person-to-person communications (Chu, 2009). With the rise of Web 2.0 over the past decade, consumers are able to collect opinions on products or services or offer their own consumption related advice using the web. This digital (web-based) communication is termed electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and is a relatively new field. While it has its roots in traditional WOM theory, the nature and influences of its use introduces several factors that are not common to WOM. Electronic feedback mechanisms and online reviews of products or services are a modern manifestation of an old concept of WOM communications (Chrysanthos Dellarocas, 2003; van Doorn et al., 2010). Therefore, in this study, online reviews will be treated as eWOM communications.

This study begins with defining a few fundamental concepts of WOM theory, and identifies salient characteristics of both WOM and eWOM. It then highlights a few essential studies on eWOM, and proposes to validate and extend them with an empirical analysis using a sample from the top 10,000 reviewers (i.e. super reviewers) of Amazon primarily the U.S. market.

LITERATURE REVIEW
WOM communication refers to the dyadic informal interpersonal communication, directed at consumers, about ownership, usage or characteristics of products/services and/or their sellers (Arndt, 1967; Westbrook, 1987). It has been shown to be more effective than advertising or marketer-generated information in impacting consumers’ actual adoption of innovations and new products (Dichter, 1966; Silverman, 2001). This is consistent with Rogers study indicating that WOM is a major determinant of the adoption of new products or services and a key factor in influencing the speed of innovation diffusion (2003). With the growth and development of information and communication technologies, and the provision of web-based communication channels, consumers have been able to express themselves more quickly and conveniently. Therefore eWOM can be defined as “the act of exchanging marketing information, positive or negative, made by potential or actual customers, about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004). eWOM can take place via channels such as discussion forums, blogs, social networking sites (such as facebook.com, MySpace.com), sites that facilitate product/service reviews (e.g. Amazon.com, epinions.com, tripadvisor.com, angieslist.com, eBay.com) or just regular emails. In such cases, the voices of many
that are enabled by feedback mechanisms of websites like eBay.com are an important communication channel for building consumer trust and cooperation (Chrysanthos Dellarocas, 2003). It has been shown that eWOM has its foundations in WOM. Understanding differences between traditional WOM and the evolving eWOM would therefore help researchers analyze its characteristics and conceptualize their research frameworks.

Yarger (2009) affirms that when thinking about shopping online, the presence of users and reviews drive people to online retailers like Amazon which provides platforms for hosting product reviews on virtually any product, written by many, and accessible to everyone. This increased reach and accessibility changes the power paradigm from what is seen with traditional WOM (Unsal, 2009). Shoppers expect to see reviews by users like themselves that cut through the marketing veil and present the true story of how products perform in the real world. Therefore, eWOM becomes an expression of consumer actualized value (Ferguson, Paulin, & Bergeron, 2010), and has been rapidly gaining popularity with the growing online retail industry.

Research on eWOM

In addition to WOM characteristics, eWOM research has examined many issues, such as those inherent in review communities and reputation systems (Ghose & Ipeiritis, 2006; Lu, Jerath, & Singh, 2010), their impact (Chen, Dhanasobhon, & Smith, 2008), effectiveness and intelligence (Cheung & Thadani, 2010; Malone, Laubacher, & Dellarocas, 2009), as well as their misuse/abuse (David & Pinch, 2005; Hu, Liu, & Sambamurthy, 2008). While there has been ample and exhaustive literature on motivations of traditional WOM (Dichter, 1966; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1993; Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998), research on eWOM motivations is limited to a select few that address motivations of eWOM communication (Chrysanthos Dellarocas & Narayan, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Wang, Teo, & Wei, 2005). These are discussed in more detail below.

Hennig-Thurau et al.’s study (2004) was one of first ones to explore motivation of eWOM directly using prior studies of motivations of WOM and eWOM. His study created a framework founded primarily based on principles and support from four key studies: Dichter’s seminal research on WOM advertising (1966), Engel’s text on Principles of Consumer Behavior (1993), an influential study of WOM motivations (Sundaram, et al., 1998), and a formative manuscript on the management and economic leverage of virtual communities (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). Hennig Thurau et al. surveyed a sample of German web-based opinion-platform users, and found eight factors to significantly motivate eWOM communication: venting negative feelings, concern for other consumers, social benefits, economic incentives, helping the company, advice seeking, platform assistance, and self-enhancement. In their study, eWOM behavior was operationalized as the frequency of platform visits and the number of comments written by the consumer on opinion platforms. There were a few limitations to this study. First, there were no prior studies to validate the findings of the study. Second, the conclusions did not differentiate between motivations for eWOM articulation between goods and services. Third, one of the motivations for eWOM articulation was operationalized as frequency of visits (along with number of comments). It is possible that some people who visit opinion platforms (e.g. epinions.com, amazon.com), have no intention to write reviews. Fourth, the survey was completed by a German population. While Germany may share similar environmental characteristics (such as availability of broadband internet access, extent of online shopping, etc.) with developed countries, the cultural homogeneity of the sample may impart an unknown influence on findings, and therefore limit its generalizability at least towards the developed countries. Nevertheless, this study was influential, theoretically sound and used one of the most complete set of factors to explore eWOM motivations. Table 1 on the next page presents significant studies discussed in this section along with their corresponding factors.

A second study conducted by Dellarocas, et al, (2006) examined motivations of online movie reviews using secondary data from Yahoo using perspectives of behavioral economic theories, to explain drivers of public goods contributions. Using this approach, they selected four factors, three of which were already supported by Hennig Thurau et al. (see Table 1 on the next page) They introduced the fourth factor of crowding out effect using behavioral economics literature. This theory states that the propensity to review is positively related to the marketing effort for that product. Some of the limitations of this study were that it was specific to reviews of movies, and that it did not involve the complete spectrum of factors established so far (see Table 1).

Tong et al. (2007) proposed the mobilizations of eWOM using social exchange and motivation crowding perspectives. They broke down social exchange motivators into costs and benefits, and used crowding-out effect (used earlier by Dellarocas, et al.) as a motivator, which again had partial commonality with the factors studied by Hennig Thurau et al. (2004). Tong et al.’s study used a different subset of the factors examined by Hennig Thurau et al.. However, their study made a contribution by the introducing of costs, in terms of time and effort to codify their cognitive expertise into an online system, as a de-motivating factor.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOM</th>
<th>eWOM</th>
<th>Proposed Research Model</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-involvement / Social benefit participation in online communities for recognition &amp; public relations</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others-involvement / Altruism (+/-). comprises of concern to help others and reduce negative experience</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exerting Power when public articulations are used by consumers as an instrument of power</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping the company Derived from a positive experience, this is a desire to help the company or product</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Involvement recommending the product reduces the emotion/tension caused by its use</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-enhancement self-gratification through self-promotion of one's status by demonstrating expertise</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Rewards receipt of reward or remuneration</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vengeance/venting negative feelings venting negative feelings associated with a dissatisfied negative experience</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoring balance/anxiety reduction expressing positive/negative emotions, to restore balance after disturbing experience</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice Seeking post-purchase advice seeking to operate, understand, use, modify, or repair product</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform Support use of a convenient forum to express complaints</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowding out effect Availability of information decreases propensity to post reviews</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity Cost (i) cognitive (e.g. effort) and (ii) executional (e.g. time) cost in providing feedback decision</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message-involvement amusement/interest stimulated by discussing commercials or other marketing.</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissonance reduction decrease of uncertainty of a purchase</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
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Table 1: Antecedents of WOM & eWOM
The case for Amazon

Amazon has played a central role in the change of consumer behavior over the 15 years since its inception. By being one of the first online retailers to embrace consumers’ views, make pre-purchase product information accessible, and attach reputation and trust building systems to support these views, Amazon.com has become one of the top online retailers in the U.S. (Walshe, 2010). At Amazon, buyers review and rate products. Those reviews are then rated in terms of helpfulness using votes, which are aggregated. In combination with total number of reviews, percentage of helpfulness votes, and their recency are used to rank reviewers. The ranking system at Amazon has accumulated a large number of reviewers, and is now one of their key competitive advantages (Ante, 2009). Online feedback mechanisms are a standard feature on most retailers websites, however, without a repository of reviews, supported by a reputation system like the one seen at Amazon, consumers invariably turn to Amazon. The success of their online retail business model therefore is dependent on the continued motivations of reviewers that continue to feed this system.

Amazon created the online feedback system in 1995, when consumer’s traditional work of mouth communication was still the way most product recommendation took place. Today most consumers expect to see reviews of a product before making any online purchase. One of their core strategies in development of their online feedback system began with building trust – one by which they simply aggregated helpfulness votes. This evolved into a ranking system, feeding off of social benefit and self-enhancement as significant motivating factors (Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Chrysanthos Dellarocas, 2006; Dichter, 1966; Engel, et al., 1993; Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2004; Tong, et al., 2007) In further support of these motivators, in 2007, Amazon added an elitist program called Vine Voices, which appointed selected reviewers privileged status, based on their reviewer activity (Springen, 2009). These reviews were given elevated exposure, and advanced review copies of products to review, therefore tapping into yet another well-known motivator – economic rewards. The impact of these motivators appears to have been positive; however no studies were found to examine the case of Amazon. Given that such reputation mechanisms are now a part of online feedback systems like the one on Amazon, this research proposes to examine the motivations of the most motivated – the top reviewers on Amazon.

Hypotheses

The current research aims to answer the question of what motivates super (top) reviewers in the presence of reputation systems. Hennig-Thurau et al.’s framework has been cited over 250 times, since its publication in 2004. While it is a significant study of eWOM motivations, it is not without limitations as described earlier. Subsequent research has found additional motives using social exchange and motivation crowding perspectives. However, these studies only partial factor sets of the study done by Hennig Thurau et al. No study was found to explore all factors using a single study. This study proposes to examine all these motivations using a single comprehensive approach, thereby allow conclusions to be made at an aggregate level. Since they have been used in the same context as their explorations in prior eWOM research, their discussion will not be repeated in this manuscript. The combined set of factors found in the key studies discussed earlier, have been presented in the last column of table 1 on the next page, along with brief explanations.

Thus, we argue for a positive relationship between the 13 factors (Social Benefit, Altruism, Exerting Power, Helping the Company, Self-enhancement, Product Involvement, Economic Rewards, Vengeance, Anxiety Reduction, Advice Seeking, Convenience, Crowding out effect, and Opportunity Cost) and motivation to review operationalized as two variables: total number of reviews and percentage of helpfulness votes (H1a-m).

Given the case for Amazon’s success for in the implementation of an online feedback system that supported by a sophisticated reputation building system, it is highly likely that social status is associated with being a top Amazon reviewer. Thus we hypothesize that Social Benefit is the strongest of all motives of super reviewers on Amazon (H1).

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

Survey Design

This survey builds on the instrument used by Hennig Thura et al.(2004), and appends constructs from subsequent eWOM research (Chrysanthos Dellarocas & Narayan, 2006; Tong, et al., 2007) that were excluded by former study (i.e. crowding out effect and opportunity cost).

There are a few variances in the final instrument from the comprehensive list in shown in table 1 of key contributing studies. (i) Dissonance reduction – it is excluded because it is dependent on synchronicity of communication that is
only found in WOM, but is not characteristic of eWOM. (ii) & (iii) Anxiety Reduction & Helping the Product – were used in an earlier study but it are excluded here because they are captured by Venting Negative Feelings and Helping the Product Supplier, respectively, in the study by Hennig Thurau et al. (iv) Although Hennig Thurau et al.’s study combined the two factors: Exerting Power and Convenience based on alignment along the same principal component, they will be treated independently because they are semantically different motivations. (v) Finally, Opportunity Cost has two sub-factors (cognitive and executional), which will be handled independently as well. The set of factors in the last column of table 1 are marked with a “?” to indicate the intention of their investigation.

**Proposed Analysis**

Since a list of reviewers is not available from Amazon, the authors have compiled a convenience sample of 2,000 reviewers who had exposed their contact information in their listing of 10,000 reviewers from on Amazon.com. The authors expect to see a response rate in excess of 10% based on the motivated nature of the sample. This data includes the reviewers rank, number of reviews and the reviewer’s helpfulness rating. Once the principal components have been extracted, their reliability and Cronbach Alpha will be assessed to ensure robustness of the constructs. Stability and discriminant validity will be confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis.

Predictability of the motives will be confirmed with multiple regression in which eWOM behavior will be operationalized using two variables: number of reviews written and the number of helpful votes received. Results of these analyses will be discussed in context of contemporary studies on eWOM. In addition to confirming the model with the 13 factors, the study also aims to explore cultural and occupational perspective, and extract descriptives and other situational correlations such as quality and quantity of reviews. These will then be discussed in context of prior research explored.

**IMPLICATIONS**

There are two hypotheses present in the research. We suspect that the primary motivation for super reviewers is status. If this hypothesis is confirmed then businesses will need to follow Amazon’s model of conferring status on super reviewers to encourage them to add value to their sites. On the other hand, retailers’ sites will have to put safeguards in place so that reviewers do not attempt to game the system in pursuit of status.

The second hypothesis is that all the 13 factors contribute to super reviewer motivation. In this case, businesses will have more of a challenge to incentivize behavior that plays to a variety of factors. For example, if helping others is a factor then businesses will have to follow Amazon’s model of ranking number of helpful votes that a review garners as a percentage of all votes.

**REFERENCES**