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**The valence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and
choice of online opinion platform: what role do
motivations to engage in positive and negative WOM
play in consumers' platform choice**

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Executive Summary

Nowadays, more and more consumers are employing the online opinion platforms to share and exchange product experiences with others. Both positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) concerning countless number of products and services has become easily accessible to the global community, thus turning this informal communication medium into a preferred source of marketplace information. With eWOM gaining increasing popularity among consumers, it is crucial for marketers to learn how to use and harness its power. Having certain predictability of where consumers are more likely to post their positive or negative product reviews and the most influential motives lying behind their choice of online opinion platform will undoubtedly help marketers to control and even benefit from eWOM.

Given the great number of online venues (e.g. product review websites, personal blogs, brand's forums, social networking sites, etc.) that offer space for consumer thoughts, it is interesting to investigate how the users choose the eWOM platform, depending on the positive or negative nature of the feedback they want to communicate, which motivations play a role in the decision making process and what platform characteristics are taken into account. By integrating the traditional motives to engage in positive and negative eWOM with some distinctive features of a marketer-controlled vs. non-marketer controlled online opinion platforms, the current study aims to shed light into the intricacy of consumer online communication behaviour.

Using an online sample of 134 consumers, the research findings confirmed that the nature of the product feedback has a significant impact on the type of website the consumer chooses as communication medium. The participants were more likely to share positive product reviews on the independent online opinion platform, while for expressing negative product feedback they preferred the brand's website. '*Helping the company*' emerged as the dominant motivation behind the decision to engage in positive eWOM on a third-party opinion platform, while '*anxiety reduction*' was found to influence negative eWOM behaviour on a company's website. The study findings contribute to our understanding of consumers' communication behaviour in the electronic medium and provide managers with an advantage in effectively and successfully dealing with consumers' eWOM.

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1. Introduction

Word-of-mouth (WOM) – a form of interpersonal informal communication about products and services among consumers – has long been recognized by the literature as highly influential in shaping brand attitudes and purchase decisions (Bone, 1995; Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). Consumers frequently rely on product recommendations and advice from friends and family when shopping and often value fellow consumers' opinion more than they trust advertisements (Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991). Being implicitly consumer driven and independent from marketers' influence, WOM is perceived as a reliable and trustworthy source of product information (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Bone, 1995) and thus has greater impact on consumer behaviour than many of the traditional marketing tools such as print ads and personal selling (Herr et al., 1991; Engel, Kegerreis and Blackwell, 1969). Moreover, through the sharing of consumption experiences, fellow consumers can not only gather first-hand information about the product performance, but also become aware of the psychological and social consequences of the buying decision (Cox, 1963).

The widespread adoption of the Internet has greatly facilitated the growth and popularity of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The Internet is said to open up a 'new era of WOM' (Yeh and Choi, 2011, p.145) – through the use of multiple communication channels that the cyberspace offers, consumers can share opinions and exchange information with peers quickly and with no cost, time or geographic constraints. Although eWOM shares some fundamental characteristics with traditional WOM, the magnitude and setting of eWOM are significantly different. Through the use of digital media, a consumer can only with a few clicks of the mouse share his/her opinion with hundreds of other consumers around the world.

1.1. Thesis Structure

This study begins with an introduction chapter, which identifies the field of investigation, outlines the research problem and discusses the research delimitations. Chapter two presents and justifies the chosen methodology, on which the present study is based. The research design and procedures are discussed, as well as the data collection technique employed. The third chapter includes an extensive review of the literature on WOM and

eWOM communication. Influential works, dealing with the motivations behind engaging in product conversations with fellow consumers, are identified and the specificities of online platforms are described. The theoretical framework chapter discusses the theoretical premises, on which the present study is structured, and develops the research questions and hypotheses. Chapter five describes the data analysis procedures used to ascertain the validity of the research hypotheses and presents the study findings. The final chapter discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the study findings, outlines potential limitations of this research and presents suggestions for future work.

1.2. Problem Identification

WOM is one of the leading sources of marketplace information for consumers (Arndt, 1967; Alreck and Settle, 1995) and marketers are highly interested in harnessing its power, especially when unfavourable information about products is being spread. Although, both positive and negative WOM have been shown to have an effect on consumer behaviour (Arndt, 1967), the valence of information does matter when it comes to evaluating the nature and magnitude of WOM influence. Researches have found that, in general, unfavourable information is more influential than favourable (Chiou and Cheng, 2003; Fiske, 1980), because negative messages are considered as being more informative than positive ones and thus tend to be weighted more heavily in the information evaluation process (Bone, 1995; Herr *et al.*, 1991). Negative product reviews (versus positive) are regarded as having stronger effect on product judgements (Mizerski, 1982) and on brand evaluation (Chiou and Cheng, 2003), thus likely leading to a loss in potential buyers and sales, and to an impairment of company's reputation and brand's image. On the other hand, positive WOM, on its own, although likely to increase purchase intentions (Dichter, 1966) and promote a favourable image of the company (Arndt, 1967), showed in recent researches no effect on brand evaluation, in comparison to negative product reviews (Chiou and Cheng, 2003). This finding can be explained with the increasing marketers' efforts to control and even fabricate positive product reviews, which made consumers more wary of positive WOM and less likely to attribute it towards the product's actual performance (Schindler and Bickart, 2005).

With the advent of the Internet, both positive and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) concerning countless number of products and services have become easily accessible to the global community, thus critically shifting the power to consumers and posing a serious threat to the marketer-dominated channels of communication. Consumerreview.com, rateitall.com and epinions.com, which are considered the three most dominant consumer opinion platforms, are said to host more than ten million product comments coming from consumers all over the world (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Consumers are increasingly turning to the online communication medium to share their opinions with such an unconceivable number of people that their traditional social ties and geographical location could never have offered. Moreover, online users have the possibility to control the location, context, and as such the audience of their message. An example of such user-controlled platforms are the social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, whose users are given the possibility to determine the audience of their posts and control the visibility of their profile. Given the plethora of virtual platforms (e.g. product review websites, personal blogs, brand's forums, social networking sites, etc.) that offer space for consumer thoughts, it is interesting to investigate how the users choose depending on the positive or negative nature of the feedback they want to communicate and which motivations play a role in the decision making process. Especially intriguing would be the case when the choice is between marketer controlled (brand's website) and non-marketer controlled online opinion platforms (third-party website) – two predominant, yet different, online contexts whose distinctive impact on the consumers' judgement of reviewed products has been proved by researchers (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan, Gould and Weisfeld-Spolter, 2006).

One of the most important decisions digital marketers face nowadays is whether to allow or not the users to leave public comments on the brand's websites. The kind of customer feedback that such open mechanisms will attract is the main concern and setback for launching this web feature. Although at first sight, the prospect of getting only positive product reviews looks good for the business and brand image, consumers might suspect certain manipulative intent (Schinlder and Bickart, 2005) given that the site moderator is in fact the company itself, and the marketing efforts might backfire badly. On the other hand, receiving mostly negative feedback, except for being unfavourable critique of the product,

might actually be beneficial for the company, because marketers can deal promptly with the customer's problem, thus limiting the spreading of negative eWOM on other websites and gaining some consumer insights directly from the source. The question is still open today and the current research aims to settle this issue by providing an indication of the likely nature of the customer feedback a company's message board might attract. Moreover, this study seeks to investigate the motivational determinants of online opinion platform choice, which will enable marketers to tailor their website and focus their digital strategies to better respond to their customer's communication needs.

1.3. Research Question Development and Considerations

With eWOM gaining ever-increasing popularity among consumers, it is crucial for marketers to learn how to use and harness its power. Having certain predictability of where consumers are more likely to post their positive or negative product reviews and the most influential motives lying behind their choice of online opinion platform will undoubtedly help marketers to control and even benefit from eWOM.

Depending on the positive or negative nature of the experience with the product, the consumer might be inclined to share his/her opinion on different types of platforms. This behaviour could be driven by one's communicational needs being better matched with the specific characteristics of either website, such as the type of audience visiting the website, the site popularity and owner. A company's website and a third-party's review website were the chosen cases for analysis, because their distinctive characteristics are known to influence the way consumers evaluate information and form product judgements (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan et al, 2006). The researched communicational needs were adopted from the work of Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster (1998), who were one of the first to argue that the motivations behind engaging in positive and negative WOM differ and are significantly related to the nature of the consumption experience. They developed a typology of four reasons behind positive WOM, namely *altruism*, *product involvement*, *self-enhancement* and *helping the company*, and four behind negative WOM – *altruism*, *anxiety reduction*, *vengeance* and *advice seeking*. By integrating the traditional motives to engage in positive and negative eWOM with some distinctive features of a marketer-controlled vs. non-marketer controlled online opinion platforms, this study will critically evaluate and

investigate on which platform the consumer communication needs were better matched and satisfied. The results in turn would allow us to ascertain the role that valence of eWOM plays in the choice of online opinion platform. Thus, the main theoretical focus of this research is to **investigate the influence of the positive and negative consumption episodes on the user's decision to post on a company's or a third-party's message board and to establish the role that the traditional WOM motives play in this choice.**

1.4. Research Delimitations

In order to define the scope and focus of this research and to accurately investigate the research question, certain delimitations need to be established beforehand.

Firstly, the valence of eWOM is operationalized in this research with two opposing, yet quite general descriptive adjectives – positive and negative. The spectrum of consumer experience with products is in reality much broader and complex, and includes highly variable and often elusive to accurately describe emotional feelings. Given the objectives of the present work and in order to be feasible for research, the two general descriptive adjectives - 'positive' and 'negative', were chosen to define the opposing experience states in this research. The same expressions were used and validated in previous studies (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan et al., 2006), which were researching the effect of valence of eWOM.

Secondly, this research applies a non-exploratory approach in relation to the motives for WOM communication. The validated motivational typology developed by Sundaram *et al.* (1998) has been employed as the theoretical framework for the present work. The purpose of this paper is not to unravel new motives behind eWOM communication, but to investigate the ability and the importance of already acknowledged motives behind traditional WOM to predict eWOM platform choice. Hence a fixed set of motivational factors was used, which would allow reaching the research objectives. The choice of theoretical framework is justified by the acknowledged significance of Sundaram *et al.* (1998) work and its suitability to the objectives of the present research. The authors' successfully validated argument corresponds to the main theoretical premise of this research, namely, that the motivational factors behind positive and negative WOM differ and are significantly related to the nature of the consumption experience.

Thirdly, a marketer controlled (company's website) and a non-marketer controlled online opinion platforms (third-party website) were the chosen cases of analysis. No existing, specific or branded websites were used; rather the distinctions between the two cases were theoretical and generalized. This delimitation was needed in order to eliminate the bias of any previous brand experience and knowledge and to avoid any subjective mistakes in choosing only two specifically defined websites from the otherwise highly distinctive and abundant pool of virtual platforms. Many websites exist nowadays with the same purpose of satisfying consumers' need to share and exchange product opinions. Those eWOM platforms can be roughly divided into 'marketer-generated and 'non-marketer generated', following the classification given by Lee and Youn (2009). The present research adopts this categorization and focuses on the two general, yet distinctive and dominant online contexts where consumers can choose to share their thoughts on. The two contrasting websites were taken as cases of analysis in several other researches, which successfully proved the significant impact of the different platforms on consumers' judgement of reviewed products (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan et al., 2006). Thus, it would be interesting to investigate whether the same effect is present in the pre-posting phase, i.e. whether consumers evaluate the differences between the two platforms and choose accordingly where to post their opinion. Thus, this study is conducted under the implicit assumption that consumers make a purposive and cognitive choice of where to articulate themselves online. Their decision is thus based on cognitive evaluation of the benefits of the platforms and are able to appreciate and discern the distinctive characteristics of each website.

Next, although this research is not bounded to a specific product category, certain limitations are still applicable. According to Mizerski (1982), consumers are motivated to engage in product discussions when several criteria are fulfilled – the product is one that consumers would use, purchase and reasonably express an opinion about, and their evaluation of the product would be influenced by other individuals' opinions about it. Thus, this research encompasses those product categories that fit the above description.

The target population of this study are consumers who are familiar with and regularly use the Internet as part of their product information search. They are willing to engage in eWOM with both reading other consumers' product reviews and sharing their own product experiences. There is no gender, age or demographic limitation that applies to this study.

Instead, this research focuses on the global consumers, both men and women of all ages, who can be regarded as active users of the digital media and as social consumers willing to engage in product discussions.

Lastly, this study does not have as a focus to research the effect of brand knowledge and involvement on the motivation to engage in eWOM communication. This was deliberately chosen, since an extensive research already exists on the topic (Yeh and Choi, 2011; Hur, Ahn and Kim, 2011) and as such it will be excluded from the research scope.

2. Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology on which the present thesis is based. The goal of the empirical research is to analyse which are the most influential motivations behind the decision to engage in eWOM and how those motivational factors help explain the choice of online opinion platform. This study applies a quantitative approach to analyse the research questions. The first section justifies the choice of research method and briefly describes its characteristics. Next, the research design is presented, together with the chosen data collection method and its procedures. The final section discusses the validity, reliability and generalizability of the research instruments and results.

2.1. Choice of Research Method

In the field of social science, research methods are often divided into two main types: qualitative and quantitative (Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen, 2008), and more recently a third paradigm emerged, known as the mixed methods research (Creswell, 2003). The choice of research methodology depends on the objectives of the study, its research questions and the author's best judgment. Based on these factors, the present study has chosen the quantitative research approach and the following paragraphs present the rationale behind this choice and shortly discuss the advantages and weaknesses of each research method.

A quantitative approach is one in which the researcher primarily uses postpositive claims for knowledge creation (such as cause and effect thinking, theory reduction to specific variables

and hypotheses, etc.), employs investigation techniques such as surveys and experiments and collects data using predefined measurement instruments that provide statistical data (Creswell, 2003). According to Aliaga and Gunderson (2002), quantitative research is defined as the approach, which is: 'Explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analyzed using mathematically based methods' (in Muijs, 2004; p.1). The specificity of the quantitative methods thus lies in the assumption that social phenomena can be expressed numerically and subsequently be quantified and analyzed (Muijs, 2004). The quantitative approach aims at explaining phenomena by investigating what are the factors that drive a certain outcome. It is best suited to test specifically defined hypotheses and thus uncover and explain causal relationships and dependencies between social phenomena (Gilbert, 1992). However, the quantitative approach also has its weaknesses. Opponents of this research method often argue that social reality is too complex and comprehensive in order to be simplified and compressed in several hypotheses. Thus, the perspective of quantitative researchers is constrained, and it is of crucial importance to have extensive knowledge on the topic in order to develop accurate and correct research questions (Gilbert, 1992).

Alternatively, a qualitative approach is one in which the investigator mainly employs constructivist perspectives for developing knowledge, such as the focus on the multifaceted nature of the individual experience, shaped by social, cultural and historical factors (Creswell, 2003). The investigation techniques employed include narratives, ethnographies, participant observations, case studies or grounded theory studies. The data collected is mainly open-ended, expressed in a textual or graphic form, out of which general themes and patterns are developed. Qualitative approach aims at understanding phenomena by exploring the problem at hand. It is best used on new emerging trends and topics, where little research has been undertaken and existing theories are inapplicable (Morse, 1991). Opponents of this method argue, however, that due its exploratory and open nature, it lacks scientific rigidity, i.e. the researcher employs subjective judgment at interpreting the findings, which might lead to biased or incomplete results (Sechrest & Sidani, 1995).

Although different in their knowledge claims, strategies and data collected, the two approaches are not entirely incompatible and contradictory (Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen, 2008; Muijs, 2004; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). In fact, their distinctive

advantages could be complemented, which has led to the emergence of the third paradigm – the mixed methods approach. It is based on the pragmatist grounds, according to which the outcome is what matters and the best approach to follow depends on the research question at hand (Mujis, 2004). Employing mixed methods approach enables the investigator to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It is best used when the research problem needs to be addressed at both an individual experience level and at a more generalized population scope (Creswell, 2003). Among the criticism of this approach, the most cited is the incompatibility issue, i.e. successfully combining qualitative and quantitative research methods is still questionable by many authors, since the two approaches are based on fundamentally different and irreconcilable foundations (Smith and Heshusius, 1986). This in effect questions the validity of the findings stemming from a mixed methods approach.

The purpose of the present study is to determine the most influential factors behind consumers' willingness to engage in positive and negative eWOM and to investigate their role in the choice of eWOM platform. Based on the previous discussions and the objectives of the study, the quantitative approach has been chosen to explain and shed light into the research problem. Since the objective of the current study is not to explore, but to investigate the applicability and importance of an acknowledged motivational typology in an online context, a quantitative approach has been deemed as the best-suited research methodology. Moreover, this study aims to determine the linkage between the motivational factors and choice of eWOM platform through the development and testing of specific hypotheses, which is best accommodated by a quantitative research approach (Creswell, 2003). Great care has been taken in the development of accurate and relevant research questions and hypotheses, which were based on extensive literature review, in order to overcome the inherent weakness of the quantitative method.

2.2. Research Design

A between-subject experimental design was chosen to structure the research enquiry in the present study. Taking into account the research objectives, this specific type of design proved best in organizing and gathering evidence to help explain the research question in an unambiguous and convincing way.

Research designs can be divided into four main types: experimental, longitudinal, cross-sectional and case study (Gilbert, 1992). A between-subject experiment is a research design, in which the behaviours of two or more groups of participants are compared against a treatment condition that divides the groups (Keppel, 1991). In a longitudinal research design, participants are assessed at different time intervals during the course of the study. The main objective is thus to describe the pattern of change. On the other hand, a cross-sectional design is used to collect information on a population at a single point in time and is suited to the needs of descriptive research, which defines the characteristics of a phenomenon, but no cause-effect relationships are determined. Case studies are an exploratory research type, which investigate a phenomenon thoroughly and within its real-life context (Yen, 2003). Thus, it is most commonly used to structure a qualitative research.

The objectives of the present study are to determine the most influential factors leading to positive and negative eWOM behaviour and investigate their linkage to the choice of eWOM platform. Thus, a between-subject experimental design was selected, which would allow the comparison between the behaviour of people willing to engage in positive WOM and those, inclined to spread negative WOM. In such a way, not only the most influential motivations for each group would be investigated, but also the differences in the choice of eWOM platform could be examined. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups, which were exposed to the two different conditions – the positive or negative product experience. Then, in a series of questions, their motivations to engage in eWOM behaviour, their choice of eWOM platform and their considerations behind this decision were tested.

Data Collection Method

The data collection method chosen is a self-administered survey. It is a quantitative research methodology, which consists of a predefined set of questions and answer choices from which participants should choose (Kolb, 2008). A survey provides a numeric representation of the researched phenomenon and is most effective when the researcher already possesses some initial knowledge for the research problem at hand. This is necessary for the correct and accurate formation of the survey questions and answers (Kolb, 2008). Since the present study's aim is not to explore a new phenomenon, but to investigate an acknowledged theory in a new environment, a survey was deemed an appropriate

method to address the research problem.

Surveys can be either self-administered or researcher-administered (Kolb, 2008). A self-administered online survey was chosen for the purposes of the current study for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a fast, easily accessible and inexpensive way to distribute the questionnaire to a geographically dispersed sample of people. Secondly, it eliminates any involuntary influence by the researcher on the participant's answers to a question. Thirdly, a self-administered survey format allows the participants to complete the questionnaire at their own convenient pace. Lastly, any privacy or social concerns participants might have when responding to a researcher face-to-face are eliminated in a self-administered survey format, thus minimizing any inclination to provide socially accepted, but personally untrue information.

Participants

A total of 140 participants took part in the experiment. After eliminating the incomplete cases, a total of 134 valid responses were left for subsequent analyses. The CAWI (computer-aided web interviewing) method was used, which ensured that all participants were familiar with and used regularly the Internet. Due to restrictions on time and resources, convenience sampling was employed and the online questionnaire was made accessible through personal e-mail messages and postings on several online social networks and forums, in which the author is a user. Nevertheless, the sampling method was deemed appropriate for the purposes of this study.

The participants were mainly students (64% of the sample), with employees being the second largest group (28%). Ages ranged between 18 and 44 with a mean age of 25 years old. The final sample was well balanced – 57% of the respondents were female and 43% - male. Participants' knowledge of English (the language of the questionnaire) was tested using a self-evaluation question with none of the participants indicated a low level of language understanding. In terms of their experience level with consumer product reviews online, 70% of the respondents indicated they have posted a product opinion online. Furthermore, all of the participants stated that they have at least once read other consumers' product reviews, with 42% checking product feedbacks 'once or more per

month'. With regard to online shopping habits, 50% of the respondents usually buy products online 'several times per year', followed by 'once or twice per year' (32%) and 20% are quite experienced with online shopping and make purchases online 'once or more per month'.

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions (positive vs. negative experience with the product) in the between-subject experimental design. They were asked to imagine a recent product purchase with which they were either highly satisfied, hence willing to spread positive eWOM, or deeply unsatisfied and inclined to engage in negative eWOM. The text and wording used to create the two conditions were pretested and approved by the thesis supervisor. In order to reduce potential bias due to the descriptive adjectives used for depicting the varying nature of the experience with the mobile phone, this study manipulated the two experiment conditions as suggested by prior researches (Lee and Youn, 2009; Mizerski, 1982). Several positive and negative rating adjectives were chosen, which have opposite meanings that are almost equally distant from the neutral value (e.g. better versus worse). The transcripts of the two conditions can be found in the Appendix.

A mobile phone was selected as the product category for the experiment for several reasons. First, cell phones are highly used and relevant daily objects, such that participants would easily identify with the consumption experience when presented with the positive or negative condition. Second, this product category can be deemed as equally attractive and familiar to both genders, so that both men and women could effortlessly engage in product discussions (of course, of not too technical nature). Third, due to the relatively high average cost of mobile phones and their conspicuous consumption nature, consumers often need to perform extensive information search before purchasing (e.g. reading and writing product reviews online) so as to limit potential buying risks. The choice of mobile phones as stimulus product was also validated by the research of Chiou and Cheng (2003) and complies with the criteria suggested by Mizerski (1982), i.e. participants would use and purchase the product and would be willing to express an opinion about it.

The questionnaire was developed following the process suggested by Kolb (2008, p.194), where consideration is given to the structure, content, and wording of the questions. Since this was a self-administered online survey, a special attention was given to the layout on the questionnaire. It was designed to be visually unobstructed (one or two questions per page), easy to follow and to complete in short time. Only close-ended questions were used in the survey, which ensured smooth data entry and statistical calculations, and eliminated any bias of dealing with unstructured qualitative information. The wording of the questions was simple, easily understandable and presented only situations which participants know or have experienced, i.e. no imagined responses. The pre-determined answers, among which the participants chose, were created on the basis of literature review and revalidation of previous studies on the topic. In order to check whether the participant's understanding of the survey was the one that was intended with the wording and content of the questions and answers, the survey was pretested by several participants, who corresponded to the research subject sample. After any layout and wording mistakes were corrected, the final survey draft was approved by the thesis supervisor and distributed to the sample.

Variables

The dependent variables which were used to measure and operationalize eWOM platform choice were the willingness to post on company's website and on the third-party product review platform. Both were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'I would never post a review' and 7 being 'I would definitely post a review'. One additional forced choice question was created (i.e. If you had to choose only one online opinion platform to post your review on, which one would you select?) in order to check the consistency of the respondents' answers and screen out inconsistent ones.

The independent variables in the study were the eight motives for engaging in positive and negative eWOM, whose ability and importance to predict eWOM platform choice was investigated. Each motive was estimated with two items on a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 7 being 'strongly agree'. Reliability checks were performed to ascertain the internal consistency of each two items to explain the variability of the measure (Cronbach's alpha > .75; correlation coefficients > .80). The wording of each item was created on the basis of previous research (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Lee and Youn, 2009)

and modified to fit the objectives of the present study¹. For the subsequent analysis, the scores of each pair of items were aggregated to obtain an index score for each motivational category, with Cronbach alpha's ranging from .85 to .91.

A different set of independent variables was created in order to test the interaction effect between the platform features and the choice of eWOM platform. This study assessed three variables relating to platform features, namely: website popularity, website owner and audience². The importance of each variable was measured on the seven-point Likert scale, with 1 being 'not important at all' and 7 being 'very important'.

2.3. Validity, Reliability and Generalizability

In order to assure the significance of the study, the following chapter discusses and scrutinises the validity, reliability and generalizability of the present work.

The first element that determines the quality of the chosen measurement instruments is validity. It is concerned with the issue of whether the intended concepts are actually measured (Muijs, 2004). Quantitative methods are argued to have high levels of internal validity, on which strong conclusions can be drawn (McGrath and Johnson, 2003). In order to achieve this validity, this study ensured that reliable and precise measures were taken, controlled experimental conditions were followed and variability in the data was minimized. Specific attention was placed to ascertain content validity, i.e. the wording and structure of the questionnaire is right to measure the hypotheses. As discussed in the previous chapter, the content of each question and pre-determined answer was created on the basis of extensive literature review on the topic of WOM and eWOM communication and later pretested and revised to ensure content validity. Measurement scales adopted from previous research were thus revalidated to fit the objectives of the current study.

The second element that ascertains the quality of a quantitative research is reliability. Whenever there is measurement involved, a measurement error could exist. In order to get reliable results, this measurement error should be as limited as possible. In this research, consideration was taken to ensure that the internal consistency of the measurement

¹ The motivational categories and items can be found in the Appendix

² The choice of platform features is discussed in detail in chapter 3.3 of the Literature review

instruments is kept. The survey questions were pre-tested to ascertain their quality is high and unambiguous. Scales were constructed and several items were used to measure the same variable (i.e. items for the motivational categories). As suggested by Muijs (2004) using multiple items eliminates individual errors, which participants could make when answering a single item. The items were also pre-tested to ensure their internal consistency is kept and they are related to the variable they measure.

The final element that determines the quality of the chosen measurement instruments is generalizability, i.e. the extent to which the research results are valid and applicable to the population. The use of artificially controlled settings and measures on which quantitative research is based, affects the validity and significance of the research claims in real-life contexts (McGrath and Johnson, 2003). The high internal validity of quantitative research thus comes at expense of its external validity. Nevertheless, this study has taken the necessary measures to ensure the research results could be extended to the population. The sample chosen was representative of the population and its size was large enough to warrant significant findings. Statistical data was processed in a fair way and no statistical assumptions were violated, thus the inferences drawn from the data are accurate and the significance level confirmed their applicability and generalizability to the population.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication

Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) has received an enviable amount of scholarly interest throughout the years and now with the ubiquity of the Internet, the research focus has shifted with the same academic zest to the electronic word-of-mouth. Originally defined by Arndt in 1967 as "the oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service" (1967,p.291), WOM has long been known as an effective marketing tool whose impact on consumer decision making and behaviour is even greater than that of advertising (Arndt, 1967; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Previous researches unanimously acknowledge the important role of WOM in shaping consumer's attitudes and purchasing

behaviour (Bone, 1995; Brown and Reingen, 1987). WOM not only provides information concerning product quality and performance, but also reveals the intricate psychological and social consequences of the purchase decision (Cox, 1963). As such WOM represents one of the most influential sources of marketplace information for consumers (Arndt, 1967; Alreck and Settle, 1995) and has been shown to have a significant effect on product choice (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988; Kiel and Layton, 1981; Arndt, 1967; Katz and Lazarfeld, 1955) as well as on choice of services (Ennew, Banerjee and Li, 2000; Keaveney, 1995).

WOM has considerable influence on consumer behaviour due to its perceived source reliability and the effortless and flexibility, which the interpersonal communication suggests (Bolfing, 1989; Richins, 1983; Engel *et al.*, 1969; Day, 1971). Being a consumer-dominated channel, in which the communicator is presumably free from any market influence, WOM tends to be perceived as more trustworthy and credible source of product information than the firm-initiated communications (Lau and Ng, 2001; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Bone, 1995; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995). Close personal contacts such as friends and family represent the most reliable source of information and thus their opinions are highly influential in many purchase decisions (Brooks, 1957). Moreover, WOM recommendations are usually expressed by fellow consumers, who are seen as having no personal interest in promoting a certain brand or particular product (Cheung, Anitsal and Anitsal, 2007). Many authors acknowledge the greater impact of WOM communication on consumer behaviour in comparison with the effect that many marketing tools such as print ads and radio advertising have on product choice (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991; Engel *et al.* 1969; Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Stemming from the literature, WOM communication among consumers involves three different activities (Lampert and Rosenberg, 1975). Firstly, consumers search for product information related to immediate consumption in order to reduce potential risk associated with a dissatisfying purchase. Secondly, they gather and store information for future needs. Thirdly, consumers share the product information obtained through others or through personal experience with fellow consumers.

With the growth of the online usage, however, the traditional way in which WOM communication was performed shifted considerably. Nowadays, Internet users can obtain

information related to goods and service not only from their close circle of friends, colleagues and acquaintances, but also from a myriad of people, who possess relevant experience with products and services of interest to the user (Lee, Cheung, Lim and Sia, 2006; Ratchford, Talukdar and Lee, 2001). Thus, one single WOM message can, through multiple exchanges, reach and influence many consumers (Lau and Ng, 2001). An example of this amplified effect of eWOM is the rough estimate of more than ten million comments that users share and exchange on the three largest online opinion platforms, i.e. epinions.com, consumerreview.com, and rateitall.com (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Thanks to the online medium, consumers are increasingly strengthening their role in the commercial marketplace and this could result in profound implications for marketers (Riegner, 2007). Everyday consumers are exerting greater influence over brands and products through their product opinions posted on numerous channels on the Internet and shared with hundreds of users worldwide. Never before was the voice of the consumer so powerful and capable of making a difference in the media world that was so far dominated by the carefully controlled marketing messages.

Thus, with the advent of the Internet, the importance of eWOM in defining consumer behaviour is bound to increase (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler, 2004; Dellarocas, 2003; Bickart and Schindler, 2001). By abolishing the traditional limits of time, geographical location and social ties, the cyberspace facilitates immensely WOM sharing and diffusion. Easily retrievable and anytime accessible brand and product related information from multiple sources, message presence over time and geographically unlimited reach, user-friendly interaction with companies and other fellow consumers – these are just a few of the reasons why people are increasingly turning to computer-mediated environment for communication and information search (Dellarocas, 2003).

Scholars nowadays have adopted the term electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to define WOM that takes place in the Internet. For the purpose of this research, the definition given by Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) is used. According to the authors, eWOM refers to “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” (2004, p.39).

Electronic WOM communication can take place in many alternative ways – discussion forums, product review websites, retailers’ and brands’ websites, personal blogs, social networking sites, news groups (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Ahuja and Carley (1999, p.744) refer to this new computer-mediated communication structure as “an amorphous web of connections”, in which the online interpersonal influence has thrived like never before (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Though similar to the traditional face-to-face WOM, its electronic counterpart has several distinctive characteristics – as Dellarocas (2003) astutely commented: “word-of-mouth is being given new significance by the unique property of the Internet” (p. 1407).

The online medium has undoubtedly enriched and broadened interpersonal communication. Its uniqueness in comparison to other mass communication technologies lies in its bi-directionality (Dellarocas, 2003). The Internet enables individuals to share information and opinions with an unprecedented number of people around the world more easily than ever before. This is best exemplified by the recent popularity of social networks and Facebook especially. The traditional passive one-to-many communication process, typical of mass media, has been turned into a many-to-many interactive network, in which the user is simultaneously an active participant and creator of content (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). Easily accessible and user-friendly, eWOM platforms have become a favourite source both for giving and gathering consumer advice.

The density of consumers’ communication networks is another distinctive characteristic of eWOM. Due to the exploitation of Internet’s low-cost and bi-directional communication capabilities, the ability to reach quickly and efficiently other individuals, irrespective of their geographical location, increases substantially (Dellarocas, 2003). Thanks to the electronic medium, the effort in sending a message to multiple recipients is nowadays only marginally greater than the effort in sending it to just one contact (Vilpponen, Winter and Sundqvist, 2006). Thus, as more contributors and audiences are involved, the electronic communication network tends to be much larger, spreading way beyond the direct personal connections to the global community (Cheung, Luo, Sia, and Chen, 2009). The ever-increasing scale of eWOM is likely to render it a much more powerful and effective communication tool than traditional WOM could ever be (Dellarocas, 2003).

Since eWOM no longer involves oral speech (Pollach, 2008) certain restrictions that come together with the spoken word have been eliminated. The asynchronous nature of electronic communication allows users to read and write messages at their own pace (Hoffman and Novak, 1997). Unlike spoken discussions, the electronic ones are usually kept over time and are easily accessible if the consumer wishes to refer to the topic again. The permanence of the written word enables greater information absorption than it would be possible only from exposure to the spoken word (Bickart and Schindler, 2001). Undoubtedly, this easy access to information, irrespective of time and location, has made eWOM so popular and attractive to Internet users.

The strength of the relationship between a communicator and a receiver is another important difference between WOM and eWOM (Chatterjee, 2001). Internet peer-to-peer communication often occurs between people who have little or no prior contact to one another, e.g. among strangers or fellow consumers (Brown and Reingen, 1987). The advantage of such weak-tie communication lies in its socially unconstrained nature i.e. by seeking advice from a much larger group of consumers than a social circle could extend to, there is a greater likelihood of finding people with the right product expertise (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox and Harrell, 1997). Moreover, both the sender and the receiver of the message can preserve their true identity and remain anonymous – a web-feature that has enabled consumers to share their opinions more comfortably (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006) and as such has greatly enhanced the volume of eWOM being spread (Chatterjee, 2001).

It is worth noting, however, that the specific weak-tie nature and anonymity of eWOM could entail some disadvantages as well. It is often difficult for people to assess the quality of information presented online, especially when the source is unknown and the motivations behind - uncertain, as it is often the case with product recommendations on the Internet (Chatterjee 2001; Schindler & Bickart 2005). Additionally, people posting online are less responsible for the consequences their recommendations will lead to, since often their readers are complete strangers (Granitz and Ward, 1996). Thus, the possibility to find inaccurate or misleading information on the web further increases (Bailey, 2004) and people are wary of who and what they choose to trust online – a circumstance that sets limits on the power of eWOM.

Now that eWOM is no longer verbal communication that takes place among people with strong relationship ties, the issue of credibility of the online consumer articulations has come to the research focus. Credibility can be defined as "the extent to which one perceives a recommendation as believable, true or factual" (Cheung *et al.*, 2009, p.12). According to McKnight and Kacmar (2006), perceived trust plays a major role in the decision to adopt a certain product recommendation and as such is an important predictor of subsequent online behaviour. Credibility in the online medium, however, is often difficult to be established, since many of the traditional cues used in face-to-face interactions to critically assess information are missing. As a result, people tend to deliberate on the truthfulness of an online post to a greater extent than they would do if the message came from their family or friends (Cheung *et al.*, 2009; Wathen and Burkell, 2002). Consumers thus make causal inferences about the communicator's intention to share his/her opinion based on additional cues such as both informational and normative factors. The so-called "dual-process theory" considers how those two types of influences affect the perception and judgement of online consumer reviews (Deutsch and Gerrard, 1955). Informational influence comes from the receiver's subjective evaluation of the different components of the information obtained, such as message content quality, argument strength, source reliability and similarity with receiver's prior beliefs (Cheung *et al.*, 2009). Normative influence, on the other hand, arises from the social opinion about the information and its impact on the receiver's judgement (Cheung *et al.*, 2009).

Thanks to the aggregation factor typical of the popular online discussion forums, people can nowadays compare numerous consumer reviews on the same topic and judge their reliability based on recommendation consistency. Coupled with users' ratings on each consumer's online comment, a web-feature that many online opinion platforms are now offering, one can assess the quality of information presented online more easily and confidently. Cheung *et al.* (2009) have successfully applied the dual-process theory in the virtual context and proved its validity and influence on eWOM readers' credibility evaluation. In addition to these findings, several researches have shown that the virtual location, i.e. the type of online opinion platform, where the consumer's review is posted, is commonly employed by consumers as a cue to determine the quality and truthfulness of eWOM (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan *et al.*, 2006; Schindler & Bickart 2005; Senecal and Nantel, 2004; Xue and

Phelps, 2004). The effect of the eWOM platform on consumer's credibility judgement and product evaluation will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapters.

Notwithstanding the credibility issue with online articulations raised by some scholars, researchers argue that eWOM is still perceived as more reliable and trustworthy source of information in comparison with firm-initiated communications (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Bone, 1995). Being a consumer-dominated medium, eWOM is implicitly given the statute of unbiased information provider. Consumers share their opinions based on their own personal needs, and not because of market incentives in recommending a certain brand or product (Cheung, Anitsal and Anitsal, 2007). As such, eWOM could represent an influential predictor of consumer behaviour and a far more powerful purchase stimulus than the traditional marketing tools such as print ads and personal selling (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Herr et. al., 1991).

A recently conducted panel study on the perceived credibility of online reviews shows a positive trend in consumers' trust and appreciation of online recommendations (Local Consumer Review Survey, 2012). This was the second wave of the online survey, which was originally conducted in 2010¹. The authors compared the results between the two studies in order to determine any changes in consumer attitudes and behaviour. The key finding of the recent study indicates that 72% (vs. 69% in 2010) of consumers surveyed trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations. Online credibility is thus slowly increasing, which in turn makes eWOM even more powerful source of product information. Once the contestable issue with the trustworthiness of online reviews is overcome, consumers would undoubtedly rely more and more on online recommendations for choosing products and services. Moreover, the study shows a decline in the number of reviews being read before a decision is reached, which indicates that consumers are getting more familiar with online reviews and thus trust them more. The addition of the star ratings feature, which allows other users to rate a certain review and which is a commonly offered feature on many online opinion websites, enables the user to feel more confident with fewer reviews read.

¹The first study was conducted in late 2010 with 2,012 participants from USA and UK. The follow-up study was conducted in early 2012 with 2,862 respondents from USA, Canada and UK.

Thus, the credibility issue with online reviews is soon to be resolved and the setback it places on the influence and further establishment of eWOM is to be diminished. As the importance and value of eWOM continues to grow, more and more consumers would perceive and trust online product reviews in the same way as face-to-face recommendations.

3.2. Motivations for engaging in WOM and eWOM communication

The motivations behind consumer knowledge sharing behaviour have intrigued researchers long before the popularization of the Internet. Dichter (1966) has been one of the first to extensively investigate the topic and his research findings are still valid and applicable in today's dynamic environment. Based on the assumption, that people would not share their knowledge "for nothing", he developed a four-factor motivational classification for engaging in positive WOM: *product-involvement*, *self-involvement*, *other-involvement* and *message involvement* (see Table 1). The four motivations correspond to the different psychological gratifications consumers obtain when recommending products to other people. Dichter (1966) was one of the first authors to extensively research the topic of WOM and motivations behind engaging in such product talks. He further acknowledged the active role of the consumer, who no longer passively accepts advertising messages, but vigorously contributes to the creation of brand image among fellow consumers and through his/her product talk plays an important role in brand attitudes formation and subsequent purchase decision.

Dichter's typology was later modified and extended by the work of Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993). They renamed the motivational factors and proposed an additional category, the *dissonance reduction*, which was added specifically as a reason behind engaging in negative WOM. In comparison with Dichter's typology, the authors introduced only one *involvement* motive and it was used to signify the motivation to engage in WOM due to a considerable interest in the product. Sharing this passion with other product enthusiasts is what drives the speaker to engage in product conversations with others. Thus, Engel *et al.* (1993) confirmed Dichter's typology of motives and extended it to cover motivation for

engaging in negative WOM, thus further enriching the literature and contributing to our understanding on the antecedents of consumer WOM communication.

One of the most comprehensive studies on motivations for WOM communication is the research of Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998). The authors were one of the first to argue that motivations behind engaging in positive and negative WOM differ and are significantly related to the nature of consumption experience. Conducting more than 700 critical-incident interviews, they uncovered eight motivational factors – four explaining positive WOM (*altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement, helping the company*) and four leading to negative articulations (*altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance, advice seeking*). Their research has been chosen as the theoretical framework for developing the research hypotheses of this study, because it represents a particularly influential work in the research field. The motivational typology developed by the authors matched the research focus of the current study on motivations for engaging not only in positive WOM, but also in negative articulations. The motivational typology developed by the authors will be discussed in depth in the theoretical framework of the present study.

The following table adopted from the research of Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004, p.41), briefly summarizes the main motivations behind engaging in WOM communications that have been identified in the literature review.

Authors	Motive	Description
Dichter (1966)	Product-involvement	The customer is so strongly involved with the product that he/she needs to react and do something about it; by recommending the product to other people this tension caused by the experience with the product is reduced
	Self-involvement	Through talking about the product the speaker can gratify certain emotional needs
	Other-involvement	Word-of-mouth activity addresses the need to bestow and share the pleasure with the receiver
	Message-involvement	Word-of-mouth is stimulated because of advertisements, or public relations featuring the product and not necessarily out of direct experience with the product
Engel, Blackwell and Miniard (1993)	Involvement	Discussion is stimulated because of interest in and involvement with the product
	Self-enhancement	By sharing product knowledge, the person shows connoisseurship, gains attention and asserts superiority status
	Concern for others	A genuine desire to help other make a better purchase decision
	Message intrigue	Discussion induced by appealing ads about the product
Sundaram, Mitra and Webster (1998)	Dissonance reduction	Talking about a important purchase decision helps reduce the accompanying cognitive dissonance, or doubts
	Altruism (positive WOM)	The act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return
	Product involvement	Word-of-mouth employed to vent positive feelings stemming from product ownership and use, and personal interest in the product
	Self-enhancement	To enhance images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers
	Helping the company	Patronizing a particular company and a desire to help it be successful
	Altruism (negative WOM)	Helping others avoid negative consumption experiences
	Anxiety reduction	Venting negative feelings; easing anger, anxiety, and frustration
	Vengeance	To retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience by warning off potential customers
Advice seeking	Obtaining advice on how to resolve problems	

Table 1

Main Motivations Behind Engaging in WOM Communication

With the entry of the Internet in everyday life, consumers have started to employ increasingly this new medium to interact with one another. The popularity of online opinion platforms, where consumers have approximately shared ten million product and company-related opinions (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004), have incited researchers to investigate the reasons behind this online sharing phenomenon and test whether the acknowledged motives for traditional WOM are valid for explaining its online counterpart.

One of the most prominent studies on the topic is the merit of Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004). By integrating traditional WOM motives with motives derived from the specific features of eWOM on consumer-opinion platforms, the authors developed a typology of four motivational factors behind online consumer articulations. The analysis indicates that consumers share their knowledge online because of their *need for social interaction*, their desire for *economic rewards*, *their concern* for other consumers, and the opportunity to enhance their *own self-worth*.

Humans are social beings and as such most individuals are naturally inclined to socialize and interact with other people. This behaviour has also transcended into the virtual world, where people with high social interaction motivation actively participate in online discussions and eagerly provide their opinions (Ko, Cho and Roberts, 2005). It can be deemed that through their articulations, consumers strive for identification and affiliation with a virtual community (McWilliam, 2000). The very act of commenting in opinion platforms signifies user's participation and presence to other platform users and entitles him/her to the social benefits stemming from this community membership (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). The importance of the community-related factor in explaining eWOM behaviour has also been evidenced by the work of Yeh and Choi (2011) and their research on the MINI Cooper virtual communities.

In order to stimulate consumer feedback, platform operators sometimes offer remuneration for the most contributing users. Economic rewards are known as one of the most important drivers of human behaviour and are considered by the receiver as a sign of gratitude to his/her efforts and contributions (Lawler, 1984). Thus, in some cases, sharing knowledge online has its price and is what motivates people to reveal their consumption tips.

Concern for others is a motive that has been proved influential both for traditional WOM

(Engel *et al.*, 1993) and its electronic counterpart, thanks to the research of Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004). Helping others make better purchasing decisions and saving them from experiencing negative consumption episodes is closely related to the concept of altruistic behaviour. A genuine desire to be of help to others without anticipating anything in return is in the core of altruistic motivation to share product experiences.

Some users however share their opinion online based on more self-centred and individualistic need. Engel *et al.* (1993) and Sundaram *et al.* (1998) speak of this need as *self-enhancement*, which is achieved through gaining attention, showing superiority status and projecting oneself as intelligent buyer. Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) successfully proved the validity of this motive in an online environment.

Thus, consumer's eWOM behaviour is driven by similar, if not the same, motives that incite face-to-face WOM communication. However, there are still some distinctive characteristics of electronic communication, especially in the role message context plays in information evaluation, which is the focus of the next chapter.

3.3. Online opinion platforms and eWOM

Nowadays, the Internet offers multiple channels where consumers can exchange information and opinions with peers. Product review websites, personal blogs, brand's forums, social networking sites, all offer space for consumer thoughts, and eliminate the geographical and time constraints inherent in face-to-face communication. Many of the online opinion platforms are user-friendly and do not require specific expertise, which is one of the reasons they have become so popular today. Moreover, they allow the speaker to remain anonymous and keep his identity private, which further contributes to the establishment and growth of such online venues (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Chatterjee, 2011).

Given the anonymous and prolific nature of online product information, consumers are particularly cautious of who and what they trust on the Internet. Moreover, marketers' attempts to compensate users to review their products and even to post their own reviews have exacerbated additionally the situation (Chatterjee, 2001). As a result, consumers often

resort to additional cues in order to determine the quality and credibility of the online information (Greer, 2003). The specific platform to which eWOM is posted is one of the cues consumers use to make causal inferences about the communicator's intention and judge the plausibility of the product review (Lee and Youn, 2009; Schindler & Bickart 2005; Senecal and Nantel, 2004; Xue and Phelps, 2004).

Following Lee and Youn's (2009) classification, eWOM platforms can be roughly divided into "marketer-generated" (e.g. brand's website) and "non-marketer-generated" websites (third-party websites). These two types of platforms differ according to three important characteristics – the website owner, the type of audience they attract, and the relative popularity of the website. The person or organization who owns the website has been argued to have very important consequences on user's evaluation of information and purchase intentions subsequently (Lee and Youn, 2009; Schindler and Bickart, 2005; Xue and Phelps, 2004) The *website owner* has control over the information that appears on the site premises, and can thus make corrections to better serve his own interests. When there is high possibility of marketer's involvement, the persuasiveness of a product review could be decreased, because the consumer might perceive the reviewer to be influenced to provide a biased representation of the product's actual performance (Lee and Youn, 2009; Xue and Phelps, 2004). Thus, product recommendations that appear on marketer-controlled websites could be considered as having selling intents (Schindler & Bickart 2005; Senecal and Nantel, 2004; Xue and Phelps, 2004) and in fact, they affect consumers' involvement and likelihood to adopt a new product to a lesser extent than if posted on a third-party website (Sussan *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, many of the independent consumer-opinion websites are generally known to be free of marketing tricks (Xue and Phelps, 2004) and as such, offer reviews that are likely to be perceived by consumers as reflecting the product's actual performance.

Another characteristic that defines the difference between a company's website and a third-party opinion platform is *the type of audience* they usually attract. The company's website is brand focused and thus presents information specifically related to the products and brands the company offers. The audience of a brand's website are consumers, who are interested in the particular products that the company offers. On the other hand, a third-party opinion website offers thousands of consumer reviews on a wide range of different products and

brands. Each of online platform providers, ciao.com and dooyoo.com report hosting more than 2.5 million consumer comments on a wide variety of products and brands. Additionally, the type of audience such platforms attract are often product-savvy users who share extensive product performance information.

The final important distinctive feature between the two platforms is the *popularity* factor. The three largest independent online review platforms are said to gather approximately nine to ten million comments from consumers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004) – a figure, which a brand's website could only hope to reach. Thus, third-party websites, due to their wide range of topics and product discussions can be argued to attract significantly more visitors than a company's website with its strictly specific brand-related content.

Since eWOM platforms have varying degree of marketers' influence, popularity and audiences, a few studies have explored whether the specific website, on which a product review is posted, influences consumers' attitudes towards the reviewed product (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan *et al.*, 2006; Xue and Phelps, 2004). Lee and Youn (2009) found that participants exposed to a review posted on a personal blog were more likely rule it out as biased and less likely to recommend the reviewed product than those who came across the review on the independent review website or on the brand's website. Although this result was in contrast to the authors' hypotheses, it indicates that consumers do take into account the website characteristics when evaluating the product information. The research of Sussan *et al.* (2006) has also supported the interaction effect between the eWOM messages and website location. In addition, the authors discovered that eWOM has an additive effect on advertising and increases the likelihood of product adoption when posted on third-party website in comparison with a company's website. This is in line with the previous stated theories that information posted on marketer-independent website is more likely to be perceived as credible and unbiased. Thus, the location of eWOM has important consequences on the way information is perceived by the consumer and as such influences significantly consumer's attitudes and purchasing considerations for the reviewed product.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study explores the effect of the nature of the product review (positive or negative) on the user's choice of online opinion platform. Stemming from the traditional literature on WOM, consumers are motivated to give voice to their thoughts when their product or service expectations have not been met (Anderson, 1998), i.e. the consumption experience was either higher or lower than originally foreseen. Such dissonance in turn leads to a positive or negative evaluation of the product or service in question, and to an impetus to restore the internal balance through the verbal or written expression of the consumption episode.

Given the great popularity of cyberspace and its continuing expansion, many online venues exist nowadays with the same purpose of satisfying users' needs for sharing personal product experience. The choice of online opinion platform often seems unpredictable and random, or dependent on too many variables to be feasible for research. This study aims to establish some predictability in the intricate way users decide the online medium they want to share their thoughts on by investigating the role that motivations to engage in positive and negative eWOM play in the choice of online platform. A company's website and a third-party's review website were the chosen cases for analysis, because their distinctive characteristics are known to influence the way consumers evaluate information and form product judgements (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan et al, 2006). The research questions were developed by integrating traditional motives to engage in positive and negative eWOM with some distinctive features of a marketer-controlled vs. non-marketer controlled online opinion platforms, and critically evaluating on which platform the consumer communication needs are better matched and satisfied. Thus, the main theoretical focus of this research is to investigate the influence of the positive and negative consumption episodes on user's decision to post on a company's or a third-party's message board and to establish the role that the traditional WOM motives play in this choice.

The work of Sundaram, Mitra, and Webster (1998) has been particularly influential in the research field and as such has been chosen as a framework for this discussion. The authors were one of the first to argue that motivations behind engaging in positive and negative WOM differ and are significantly related to the nature of consumption experience. They

developed a typology of four reasons behind positive WOM, namely altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement and helping the company, and four behind negative WOM – altruism, anxiety reduction, vengeance and advice seeking. In the following paragraphs, these motives and the implicit criteria to fulfil them will be briefly defined. Each motivation will be then matched with the specific platform feature that best conducts and enables the achievement of consumer’s goal behind the motivation. Eight hypotheses will be developed in order to test the validity of the linkage between the motivations and the platform features, and ultimately platform choice. The chosen platform characteristics which were used to differentiate the company’s website and the third-party website, are *website owner*, *type of website audience* and the *website popularity*, which were thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter. These specific platform factors were selected based on a critical evaluation of the literature on online platforms and represent important acknowledged characteristics that define an online opinion platform according to previous research (Lee and Youn, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Thus, in order to predict on which platform the user is more likely to post his/her positive and negative product opinion, this study approaches the traditional motivations behind positive and negative articulations, investigates their applicability to the online environment and their linkage to the choice of online discussion platform.

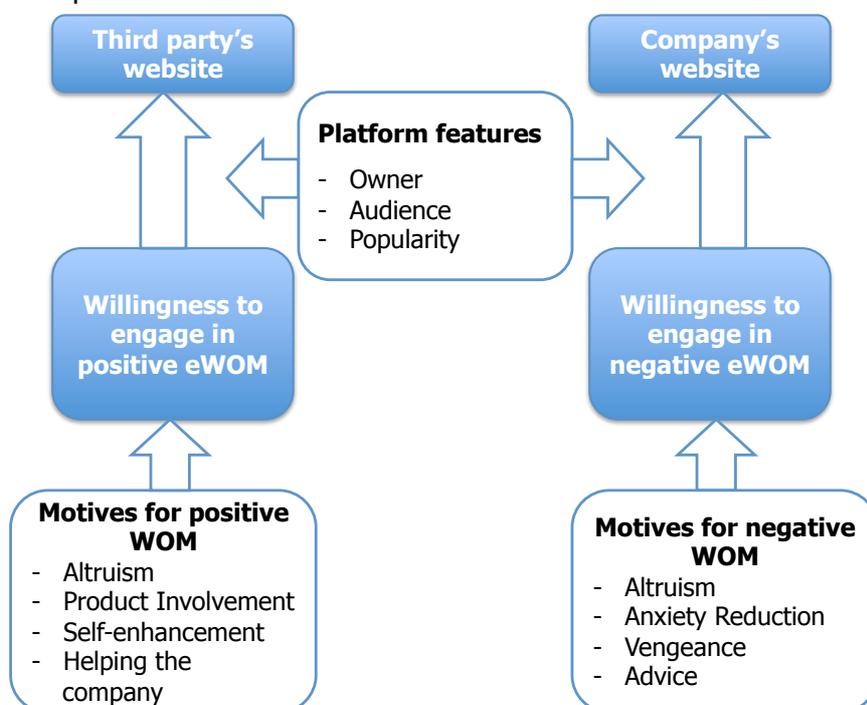


Figure 1: Relationship between consumer motivations & eWOM behavioural intention

Positive WOM is the kind of communication every business would like to stimulate. Although not as influential as negative WOM (Mizerski, 1982), positive information about a product is likely to increase purchase intentions by reducing risks (Dichter, 1966) and foster a favourable brand and company image (Arndt, 1967). Thus, establishing whether the motivations behind positive WOM are the very same that drive its online counterpart and predetermine the choice of opinion platform are of high importance to marketers in today's ever growing significance of the online world.

Altruism has been defined by Sundaram *et al.* (1998, p.529) as "the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return". Helping others make better purchasing decisions is the motivation for which some people share online their consumption experiences. The main prerequisite for satisfying this altruistic need is the belief that other people will actually read and benefit from the comment and thus audience plays an important role in the decision of where to post a product review online. Users are naturally inclined to articulate their opinion on a platform where it will make the most impact, i.e. a comment posted on a popular review website will be viewed by a much larger and more diverse audience than if posted on a less well-known and smaller website. Given the popularity of independent review websites with the three largest hosting approximately nine to ten million comments from consumers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004), it is viable to assume that users, motivated by altruistic needs, will likely leave their review on such platforms and not on a brand's website, which attracts significantly less visitors due to the specificity of its contents (only brand related information) and seldom offers a publicly viewed message board:

H1: Users motivated by altruism will be more likely to engage in positive eWOM on a third-party review website rather than on a company's website

Involvement with the product is one of the oldest acknowledged motives behind engaging in traditional WOM communication. It has been described by Dichter (1966) as the feeling "...so strong about the product that a pressure builds up in wanting to do something about it" (as cited by Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004, p.41). The importance of this motive in explaining positive eWOM has been later emphasized by the research of Sundaram *et al.* (1998), who report that personal interest and excitement resulting from product ownership

and use were among the main reasons listed by their respondents. According to a recent global study of online user behaviour and future trends, Millennial Inc. (2010) young users nowadays “proactively seek to tell others about products they love...” As such, an online review platform that allows users to connect to and share their passion for the product with other fellow product-savvy enthusiasts will be the preferred context to post a feedback on. Given the notorious fame of a company website with its inherent commercial purpose, any review posted on such premises would likely be considered by other experienced users as biased and having selling intents (Senecal and Nantel, 2004; Xue and Phelps, 2004), and not reflecting a genuine expression of a user’s passion for the product. Thus, posting a review on a brand-independent source eliminates such prejudices and sets the right communication environment for users to share their consumption experience:

H2: Users motivated by product involvement will be more likely to engage in positive eWOM on a third-party review website rather than on a company’s website

The act of sharing positive consumption experience for the sake of emphasizing one’s superior shopping skills is known as *self-enhancement* (Sundaram *et al.*, 1998; Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993). Gaining attention, showing supremacy status and projecting an image of intelligent buyer are all desired ends that the user seeks when engaging in positive WOM. Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) successfully proved the validity of this motivational factor in explaining eWOM behaviour as well. Moreover, the authors have argued that enhancing “own self-worth” is one of the four primary factors leading to participation in non-marketer controlled consumer-opinion platforms. However, in contrast to the current discussion, their research did not encompass the elaborate distinction between positive and negative eWOM and its effect on platform choice, which is why the same motivation factor needs to be included and tested here to match the scope of this study:

H3: Users motivated by self-enhancement will be more likely to engage in positive eWOM on a third-party review website rather than on a company’s website

The final motive for engaging in positive WOM according to Sundaram *et al* (1998) is *helping the company*. Altruistic desire to do good for a patronized company is what drives some users to share their positive consumption experiences with others. Spreading the good word for a company is also made in the hope that it will thrive and have enough business to continue producing the beloved product. Stemming from this logic, the more people hear and read about the positive feedback, the more potential customers the company has, the better the user has fulfilled his/her proactive role. Given that the dimension of the audience is an important factor and third-party opinion websites are well known for gathering huge crowds of followers (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004), it is safe to assume that:

H4: Users motivated by a desire to help the company will be more likely to engage in positive eWOM on a third-party review website rather than on a company's website

Thus, as elaborated in the discussion above, the four different motivations that drive positive WOM could not only incite its electronic counterpart, but also predetermine consumer's choice of online opinion platform. Taking into account the considerations outlined in the previous paragraphs, this research aims to ascertain on a more generalized level that:

Consumers are more likely to post positive product reviews on a third-party opinion website rather than on a company's website

In contrast to the beneficial outcomes of positive WOM, negative product reviews can have very harmful effects on brand image and ultimately affect severely a company's business. Due to the existence of negativity bias, humans are innate to give greater weight to negative entities (Rozin and Royzman, 2001), which in turn affects the way they form overall product judgments. When presented with positive and negative information about a product, consumers perceive the unfavourable feedback as much more diagnostic and informative and thus tend to weight it more heavily in their product evaluations (Bone, 1995; Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991). Moreover, prior research has shown that dissatisfied consumers are much more prone to share unfavourable product experiences than satisfied

ones (Chatterjee, 2001), which makes predictability in their online actions and insight into their preferred e-places to complain even more desirable for managers.

Altruism has been argued in the research of Sundaram *et al.* (1998) as an important motivation not only for positive, but also for negative WOM. However, here the goal that the consumer, writing the negative product review, is seeking is to prevent others from making the same shopping mistakes. Sharing unfavourable consumption experiences for the sake of warning others and help them avoid disappointment and even hazard, without expecting any economic benefits in return, is in the core of this altruistic behaviour. Although it stands to logic that the altruistic motivated user strives to reach and help as many people as possible, the most impact made in the case of a negative feedback might not be directly proportional to the number of people having read the review as it is in the case of positive WOM. In other words, a negative review seen by the right consumers, i.e. the ones that are about to make a wrong buying decision and are thus the most vulnerable, would be perceived as having much greater impact than seen by thousands of users who are just gathering preliminary product information. Given the recent practice of many brand's websites of enabling the user to buy the chosen product/service online, it is likely that consumers would share their negative feedback exactly on the company's premises where it will influence and help fellow consumers in the 'moment of truth':

H5: Users motivated by altruism will be more likely to engage in negative eWOM on a company's website rather than on a third-party review website

When a consumption experience does not meet expectations, it creates an unbalanced state which people are naturally inclined to restore (Newcomb, 1953). Writing a review can help venting the negative feelings and anger associated with the dissatisfying product performance and can thus re-establish that balance (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Sundaram *et al.*, 1998). What a better way to *reduce the anxiety* than addressing your disappointment to the source of the dissatisfying experience – the company. Posting on a brand's website will enable the user to ease his/her frustration not only by sharing with others, but also by communicating directly to the producer that the brand trust has been broken. Such considerations has lead to the development on the next hypothesis:

H6: Users motivated by a desire to reduce anxiety will be more likely to engage in negative eWOM on a company's website rather than on a third-party review website

Sundaram *et al.* (1998) have uncovered even a stronger motive behind engaging in negative WOM – 36.5% of their respondents listed *vengeance* as the main reason for sharing their unfavourable consumption experience with others. Retaliation against the company whose products or services have inflicted upon the consumer unpleasant or even health and psychological damaging incidents is a natural human response and writing a review is a way to enable this vendetta. Following the battling logic, angry consumers seeking revenge would likely 'attack' where they will cause the greatest damage and hurt the company's business and image the most. By writing a negative review on a brand's website, the user not only discourages potential customers at the very product-praising context that marketers had traditionally owned, but also provokes the company to react and speak publicly for its actions, with its reputation at stake. Thus, the following hypothesis has been developed on the basis of the previous discussion:

H7: Users motivated by vengeance will be more likely to engage in negative eWOM on a company's website rather than on a third-party review website

The final acknowledged reason behind engaging in negative WOM according to Sundaram *et al.* (1998) is the *need for advice*. When faced with a dissatisfying consumption experience, some consumers share it with other people in the hope of finding post-purchase help. Nowadays, with the Internet and its increasing role of a preferred communications medium, users seeking solution to their consumption problems can find it quickly and easily from their fellow online users. Although it is true that posting on a popular online forum, the consumer has a higher chance of receiving a helpful and diverse advice from multitude of people, sharing on a brand's website also has its benefits. Addressing a consumption problem to the organization that have invented the product and is extensively familiar with every little detail of it, the user will likely receive an experienced and precise solution. Thus, it would be interesting to test the validity of the following hypothesis:

H8: Users seeking post-purchase advice will be more likely to engage in negative eWOM on a company's website rather than on a third-party review website

Therefore, on the basis of the previous discussion of the four most influential motivations behind negative WOM and the type of online platform that best corresponds to them, the study aims to ascertain the following general research claim:

Consumers are more likely to post negative product reviews on a company's website rather than on a third-party opinion website.

Thus, delving into the motivations that drive positive and negative WOM and juxtaposing them to the specific characteristics of a third-party product review website and a company's website, this study aims to ascertain the most influential motives that drive consumers' eWOM behaviour on the chosen platform and investigate the linkage between the valence of online articulations and the choice of online opinion platform.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1. Preliminary Data Analysis

The answers provided by the participants, who took part in the between-subject experiment and questionnaire, were entered into a data matrix using the SPSS statistical computer program. Any incomplete cases were excluded from the data matrix and a total of 134 valid cases were left for the subsequent analysis. Reliability checks were run on the scales measuring the motivational categories. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .80 to .89 for each pair measuring the same motivational construct, thus ensuring the internal consistency of the measure. A few data transformations were implemented on the motivational items in order to enable their subsequent analysis. The scores of each pair of items were aggregated to obtain an index score for each motivational category. Thus, 4 new indexed variables were created in order to fully capture the respondent's preferences for engaging in positive eWOM and another 4 new variables for negative eWOM. Each new variable represented the mean of the 2 items originally defined to operationalize the same motivational category. Each of the newly created 8 variables showed Cronbach's alphas ranging from .85 to .91 and they were deemed as appropriate measure for the substituted variables.

5.2. The role of consumer motivations and website characteristics in the choice of eWOM platform

In order to grasp thoroughly the interaction effect between the valence of eWOM and choice of online opinion platform, this study investigates the role that various motivational factors for engaging in WOM play in the willingness to post on the company and the third-party product review website.

Multivariate regression analyses were performed to assess the ability and the importance of the different motives to predict eWOM platform choice and to ascertain the validity of the 8 research hypotheses. The dependent variables which were used to measure and operationalize eWOM platform choice were the willingness to post on a company's website and on a third-party product review platform. The 8 motives for engaging in positive and negative WOM and the three platform features were employed as independent variables.

The regression function, investigating the impact of the positive WOM motives, was found significant in explaining the willingness to post on a third-party product review website, $R^2 = .17$, $F(4, 69) = 3.53$, $p < .01$. No multicollinearity was found among the independent variables with VIF values almost equal to 1 for all variables. Contrary to research expectations, however, the first three hypotheses were not supported. Namely, the motives of *altruism*, *product involvement* and *self-enhancement* were not found to influence either the willingness to post on a third-party product review website, or the willingness to post on a company's website. The regression coefficients indicating the impact of the motives on the willingness to post on a third-party product review website were significant only for the motive of '*helping the company*', $\beta = .38$, $p < .01$, thus successfully confirming H4 (see Table 2). Consumers driven by the motivation to help the company are willing to spread the good word for its products on an independent online opinion platform, and not on the company's website. The theoretical framework predicted that this choice of platform was influenced by the *popularity factor* of the website. In other words, the more people hear and read about the feedback, the better the consumer has fulfilled his/her proactive role. In order to validate this claim, another regression analysis was performed with the specific platform characteristics (i.e. popularity of the website, type of users visiting the platform and website owner) as independent variables explaining the willingness to post on a third-party review website (see Table 3). The regression function was significant, $R^2 = .23$, $F(3,$

130) = 3.40, $p < .05$, and in line with expectations, the *popularity of the website* factor has been found highly significant, $\beta = .26$, $p < .01$, in influencing the willingness to post feedback on the third-party online opinion platform.

Table 2 Regression results for the motives behind engaging in positive and negative eWOM		
Motives	<u>Willingness to post on third-party website</u> Regression Coefficient (Standardized)	<u>Willingness to post on company's website</u> Regression Coefficient (Standardized)
Positive Motives		
H1: Altruism	.01 n.s.	Regression n.s.
H2: Product Involvement	.08 n.s.	
H3: Self-Enhancement	-.11 n.s.	
H4: Helping the Company	.38**	
R²	.170	-
Negative Motives		
H5: Altruism	.31*	-.08 n.s.
H6: Anxiety Reduction	.21 n.s.	.36**
H7: Vengeance	.06 n.s.	-0.2 n.s.
H8: Need for Advice	-.11 n.s.	.24 n.s.
R²	.164	.186
Note: Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$		

Concerning the negative motives, the regression function was significant for explaining the willingness to post both on a company's website, $R^2 = .19$, $F(4, 55) = 3.13$, $p < .05$, and on a third-party platform, $R^2 = .16$, $F(4, 55) = 2.71$, $p < .05$, (see Table 2). No multicollinearity was found among the negative motives as the independent variables with VIF values almost equal to 1 for all variables. The motive of *anxiety reduction*, $\beta = .36$, $p < .01$, i.e. the need

to vent the negative feelings and anger associated with a dissatisfactory purchase, was found as the only influential factor behind engaging in negative eWOM on a company's website. Thus, only H6 was supported, while no effect was found of other three motives of *altruism*, *vengeance* and *post-purchase advice* on the willingness to post on a company's website. The theoretical framework predicted that users driven by this motive of *anxiety reduction* would be willing to share their experience on the brand's website, because they can address their frustration directly to the company and they can ensure that their message will be seen by other brand users. In order to validate this argument, another regression analysis was performed with the specific platform characteristics (i.e. popularity of the website, type of users visiting the platform and website owner) as independent variables, $R^2 = .23$, $F(3, 130) = 2.95$, $p < .05$. Both the website owner, $\beta = .35$, $p < .01$, and the platform popularity, $\beta = .12$, $p < .05$, showed significant effect on the willingness to post a negative review on the company's website (see Table 3). The website owner factor had a stronger impact, which led to the conclusion that the possibility to share their negative product experience with the company directly is an influential factor that drives users in their decision to post an unfavourable product comment on the company's web platform, and not on a third-party website.

Interestingly enough, the '*altruism*' motivation has been found as having an impact on the respondents' intention to post an unfavourable product feedback on the independent opinion platform instead, $\beta = .31$, $p < .05$. This was in contrast to what H5 predicted – namely that consumers driven by altruism would be more willing to leave their negative comment of the product on a company's website. The result might be due to the greater influence of the website popularity factor on the willingness to post on a third-party website, which was found in the previous analysis. Altruistically motivated consumers want to share their negative feedback with as many people as possible, which makes the popular independent online opinion platform more preferable than a company's website.

Table 3 Regression results for the platform characteristics on eWOM choice		
Motives	Willingness to post on third-party product review website Regression Coefficient (Standardized)	Willingness to post on company's website Regression Coefficient (Standardized)
Platform Features		
Website Popularity	.26**	.12*
Website Owner	.02 n.s.	.35**
Type of Audience	-.03 n.s.	-.03 n.s.
R²	.230	.241
Note: Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$		

5.3. Valence of eWOM and Choice of Online Opinion Platform

The theoretical framework and discussion predicted that consumers would be more willing to post a positive product review on a third-party opinion platform than on a company's website, and vice versa for their positive product feedback. However, contrary to research expectations, only two of the eight stipulated hypotheses were supported, thus confirming the validity of only two of the eight traditional WOM motives in explaining eWOM platform choice. Moreover, H5 was rejected, but its alternative was supported, namely a negative motive was found as influential in predicting the choice of the third-party platform, and not the company's website, as expected. Thus, some contradictory results emerged from the initial analysis, which prevented the full comprehension of the research phenomenon of eWOM platform choice and the confirmation of the general research questions. In order to grasp thoroughly the linkage between the valence of eWOM and choice of eWOM platform, additional analysis was executed as outlined in the following paragraphs.

A repeated measures general linear model (GLM) procedure was performed to test the interaction effect between the valence of eWOM and the willingness to post on a specific platform. The GLM Repeated Measures procedure provides analysis of variance when all the

members of a random sample are measured under different conditions and the measurement of the dependant variable is repeated. The null hypothesis of 'no difference between the population means' is tested both about the effects of the between-subject factors and the within-subjects factors. The type of website (company vs. third-party) was included as within-subject factor in the analysis, and the product experience, i.e. valence of eWOM (positive vs. negative) as between-subject factor. The results of the GLM revealed a significant interaction effect between the choice of online opinion platform and the valence of eWOM, Wilk's $\lambda=0.85, F(1, 132) = 23.25, p < .001$.

The theoretical framework and discussion predicted that consumers would be more willing to post a positive product review on the third-party opinion platform than on the company's website. However, only one of the four hypotheses behind this research claim found support, which was not enough in order to ascertain the validity of the research argument. Thus, a paired samples T test was employed to test the trustfulness of the claim. It computes the difference between the means of the paired variables for each case and test whether the average is significantly different from zero. This statistical test is suitable for the data in hand, because each case in the data matrix contains two paired scores measuring the willingness to post on a company's website and the willingness to post on a third party website. Since the cases were made under different conditions, the data file was split based on the condition type and the output was organized in two groups. The paired comparison tests confirmed the research argument, by indicating a significantly higher willingness to post on the third-party product review website ($M=3.46$) than on the brand's website ($M=2.81$), $t(73)= 3.80, p < .001$ for respondents exposed to the positive product experience condition (see Table 4). In line with the research expectations, the second research argument was also supported. Under the negative product experience condition, the respondents were more willing to post their review on the company's website ($M=3.65$) rather than on the independent product review website ($M=3.05$), $t(59)=3.06, p < .01$.

Table 4 Means and standard deviations for the interaction between the valence of eWOM and different platforms on the willingness to post

Paired Measures	Mean (SD)* (positive condition cases only, n=74)	Mean (SD)** (negative condition cases only, n=60)
Willingness to post on third-party product review website	3.46 (1.21)	3.05 (1.11)
Willingness to post on company's website	2.81 (1.24)	3.65 (1.23)

Note: Means are significantly different at * $p < .001$ and ** $p < .01$

Furthermore, independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether the mean differences were significant also across conditions (positive and negative) and within the specific website type (company or third-party). This test was used because it enables the comparison of the means for the willingness to post on the two platforms between the two groups of cases, i.e. subjects assigned to positive vs. negative product experience condition. The test variables used were thus the willingness to post on a third-party website and on a company's website, while the grouping variable was the condition type (positive vs. negative). The willingness to post on the third-party product review website was significantly higher when participants were exposed to the positive ($M=3.46$) rather than the negative ($M=3.05$) product experience condition, $t(132)=2.02$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1). On the other hand, the willingness to post on company's website was significantly higher for communicating negative ($M=3.65$) rather than positive eWOM ($M=2.81$), $t(132)=3.91$, $p < .001$.

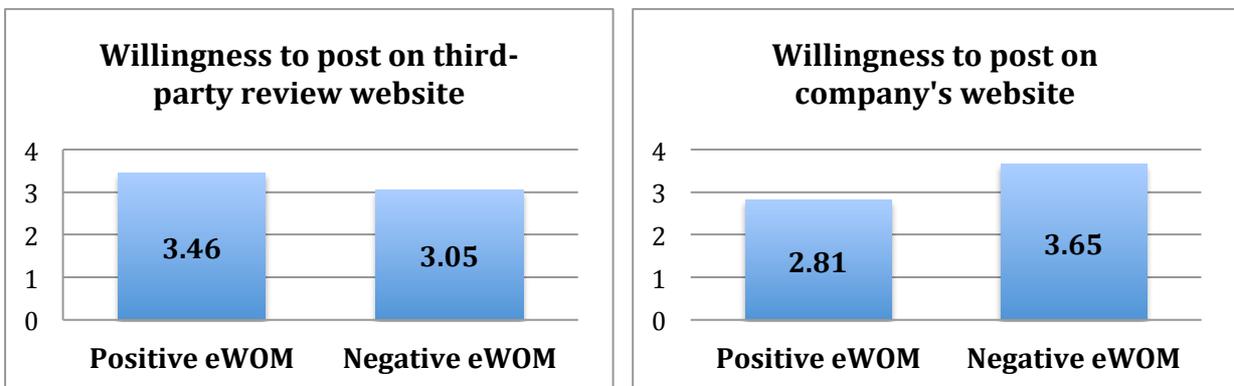


Figure 1: Willingness to post on a specific platform for different valence of eWOM

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The current study has a twofold purpose – to investigate the influence of the positive and negative consumption episodes on user's decision to post on a company's or a third-party's message board and to establish the role that the traditional WOM motives play in this choice.

The findings confirmed the general research arguments and demonstrated that the nature of the product feedback does have an influence on the type of website the consumer chooses as communication medium. Consumers are more willing to share positive product experience on the third-party discussion platform and to post their negative product reviews on the company's website. The research results indicated that these differences are not only significant across the two websites, but also within a specific platform, i.e. the willingness to post favourable product opinions is greater than to share unfavourable ones on the third-party discussion forum and vice versa for the company's website.

The goal of this research was to unravel the most influential motivations behind engaging in eWOM behaviour and with their help to interpret and apprehend in detail the interaction effect between the valence of eWOM and the preferred online opinion platform. The findings indicated that the decision to communicate positive eWOM on the third-party website was driven by the motive of *helping the company*. Being satisfied with the product, the consumer feels the need to support the brand by popularizing it and spreading the good word for the company with as many people as possible. The *popularity factor* has been shown to influence significantly the willingness to post on the independent product review website and as such justifies users' communication platform choice. On the other hand, the willingness to engage in positive eWOM on the company's website was not supported from any of the motivational factors, which confirmed research expectations.

The motive of *anxiety reduction* has been found highly influential in explaining consumers' preference for communicating negative eWOM on the company's website. Striving for regaining their inner balanced state, consumers express the negative feelings associated with the dissatisfactory purchase. The company's website is the chosen communication platform because it enables the user to not only share his/her unfavourable experience with

others, but also address the complaint directly to the source of the disappointing consumption episode – the company. As shown by the results, both the *website owner* and the *platform popularity* play a significant role in the decision to post on the brand’s website.

Additionally, an interesting finding was revealed - if consumers were to post negative feedback on the third-party opinion website instead, they would be driven by different motives than if posting occurred on the company’s website. *Altruism* has been found as the most influential motive behind consumers’ negative product feedback on the third-party review website, while *anxiety reduction* motivation has been shown to influence users’ sharing behaviour on the company’s website. Taking into account the importance of each platform’s specific characteristics, which emerged from subsequent analysis, these results come as no surprise. Driven by the altruistic motivation, consumers want to help others avoid their shopping mistakes by sharing their own negative experience with as many people as possible and the popularity of the independent opinion platform ensures that the consumer’s comment will be seen by its numerous users. The findings confirmed this claim by showing the significant influence that the *popularity of the website* factor had on the willingness to engage in eWOM on the third-party opinion website. On the other hand, posting on the company’s website helps reduce the stress associated with a dissatisfying purchase, because the platform enables the user to share not only with other fellow consumers, but also with the company that has produced the faulty product. Again, this argument has been supported by the study results which indicated a significant effect of the *website owner* on the decision to post a negative product review on the brand’s website.

6.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

The results of this study successfully validated the significant interaction effect between the valence of eWOM and the choice of online opinion platform and identified the most influential motivations for sharing product reviews on the chosen website. Thus, based on the results of this study, potential implications for both academic researchers and managers are developed and discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

The finding that the valence of eWOM is an important determinant of online platform choice

contributes to our understanding of consumers' communication behaviour in the electronic medium. Several studies have found that the type of eWOM platform does matter when it comes to evaluating the way consumers perceive other users' product reviews (Sussan *et al.*, 2006; Schindler & Bickart 2005; Senecal and Nantel, 2004). This research adds to the literature by showing that when consumers decide to post a feedback, they do take into account the nature of the product review they want to communicate and choose accordingly the discussion platform.

Following the research steps of Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004), this study has also successfully applied the traditional WOM motives in explaining the reasons behind engaging in electronic communication about products. The current research broadens the scope of Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) work to include and investigate motivational factors for posting both on a third-party opinion website and on a brand's website. Consistent with their results, this study has also found that *altruism* or "concern for other people", as the authors named it, is an important motive for writing a negative product review on the independent discussion forum, and it adds to their research by showing that the motive of *anxiety reduction* significantly influences the willingness to post on a company's website. Thus, the finding that consumers engage in negative eWOM driven by different motivations depending on the type of website they post their feedback on, is undoubtedly helpful in enhancing our knowledge of how consumers choose among the plethora of eWOM platforms.

Nowadays, with the ever-increasing importance that eWOM plays in consumer purchase decisions, many digital managers are contemplating whether or not to open their brand's websites for consumer feedback. Knowing that their discussion boards will likely attract more negative than positive reviews, marketers can better estimate the costs and benefits involved with creating and managing such platforms on their brand websites. Although it is true that unfavourable product reviews can damage sales and more specifically online purchases, especially if the website offers online shopping, on the other hand, marketers would be able to react promptly to complaints and resolve customers' problems on the spot before any 'dangerous' spreading of negative eWOM occurs. The company can also gain a lot of valuable consumer insights from the discussions happening right on its own monitored channel. Moreover, the study findings showed that the most important reason behind sharing negative product experience on the brand's website is to ease the anxiety and stress

associated with the dissatisfying purchase. By allowing their customers to interact with each other on the website and share their thoughts and complaints, marketers are already accommodating this need by ensuring that consumers' voice will be heard and acted on. In such a way, managers focus on the 'relational' element, and not only on the 'transactional' one, and sustain the trust relationship among and between consumers and the company (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996).

On the other hand, although positive product reviews are more likely to occur on a popular third-party website, this does not mean that the brand's website cannot benefit from them. In fact, previous research has shown that favourable product information appearing directly within a marketer-controlled platform could be perceived as biased and having selling purposes and as such could affect negatively product judgments and purchase considerations (Lee and Youn, 2009; Xue and Phelps, 2004). A smart move would be to add a link on the brand's website leading to an independent discussion platform where the positive product opinions appear. Because people are, according to the findings of this study, more willing to engage in positive eWOM on more popular websites, the linked platform will often be one that consumers know and trust. In such a way, consumers will not suspect any manipulative intents on part of the company and would evaluate the positive product feedback as credible and reflecting the product's actual performance.

Thus, with the help of this study, managers can anticipate the type of customer feedback they are likely to receive on the brand's website and can thus better plan and build accordingly effective mechanisms to not only deal with and control the negative product reviews, but also turn them into an advantage.

6.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although the findings of this study involve potential implications, several limitations need to be taken into account. This research operationalized the valence of eWOM with two opposing, yet quite general, descriptive adjectives – positive and negative. Although, the same expressions were used and validated in previous studies (Lee and Youn, 2009; Sussan et al., 2006), the author acknowledges that the spectrum of the consumer experience with

products is much broader and includes highly specific and often elusive emotional states. Future research could thus include a larger range of terms to describe the valence of eWOM and investigate whether they still significantly affect platform choice. Moreover, this study examined the motivations for engaging in eWOM based on a fixed set of factors adopted by the research of Sundaram *et al.* (1998). Although the choice of theoretical framework was justified and matched the research objectives of this study, future work could follow a more explorative approach towards consumer motivations.

This study was conducted under the implicit assumption that consumers make a purposive and cognitive choice of where to articulate themselves online based on the nature of their message. Their choice of platforms was forced and included only two of otherwise many different types of websites that offer space for consumer opinions. The limitations were deemed necessary in order to define the scope and the focus of this research. Future research could be more explorative and provide a more natural setting by letting respondents choose among all available platform types.

A mobile phone was used in the experiment as the product about which participants were asked to imagine they would write a review. Although the choice was justified and considered appropriate for the needs of this study, it is not representative of all product categories about which consumers share opinions. Future studies have to determine whether the findings could be replicated using different products or even services.

In addition, a convenience sample of people coming from different nations was used to test the research hypotheses. There was no gender, age or demographic limitations in the selection of participants. The sampling method and the target sample were deemed appropriate for the needs of this study and matched its objectives. The use of the convenience sampling method was also preferred due to time and resource constraints. Future research could use a more homogenous and focused group of respondents, which would allow the investigation of cross-cultural or demographic differences and their influence on the interaction between the eWOM valence and platform choice.

Lastly, the role of brand knowledge and experience falls outside the scope of this research and was excluded from consideration. Thus, no existing, specific or branded platforms were

taken as cases, as well as no branded products were used in the research experiment. This delimitation was needed in order to eliminate the bias of any previous brand experience and knowledge. Future research could investigate the effect of brand relationship and involvement on the consumer's online communication behaviour and choice of eWOM platform.

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8. Appendix

Conditions

Condition I (negative experience)

Imagine that a few weeks ago you bought a new mobile phone. Since then, the mobile phone has not met your expectations. The phone display is much less colourfully vivid than you had imagined, the phone camera makes even worse pictures than you thought was possible for this device, and the battery life lasts much shorter than you have expected. You are so disappointed by your phone that you feel the need to write a product review online (i.e. telling other people about your experience with the mobile phone and evaluating the product from your personal point of view).

Condition II (positive experience):

Imagine that a few weeks ago you bought a new mobile phone. Since then the mobile phone has surpassed your expectations. The phone display is much more colourfully vivid than you had imagined, the phone camera makes even better pictures than you thought was possible for this device, and the battery life lasts much longer than you have expected. You are so pleased by your phone that you feel the need to write a product review online (i.e. telling other people about your experience with the mobile phone and evaluating the product from your personal point of view).

Questionnaire – Positive Condition

Q1. Please indicate on a scale from 1 to 7, how willing you are to write your review of the mobile phone on the following online opinion platforms:

	I would never post my review here				I would definitely post my review here		
An independent product review website (has nothing to do with the specific phone brand or company; contains different topics & brand reviews e.g. consumerreview.com)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The company's website (a publicly visible message board/ product review section on the website of the mobile phone company)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2. If you had to choose only one online opinion platform to post your positive/negative review on, which one would you select?

- A) An independent product review website
- B) The company's website

Q3. Please indicate on scale from 1 to 7, how important each of the following factors is for your choice of online opinion platform:

	Not important at all Very important						
Popularity of the website	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Type of users that visit the website	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Owner of the website (i.e. the company or an independent third-party)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4. Please specify how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I want to share my product review on this type of website, because...

	I strongly DISAGREE					I strongly AGREE	
...I want to help other people make better buying decisions (motive: altruism)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I believe a lot of people will read my comment and benefit from it (motive: altruism)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I am so happy I own the product that I feel the need to share it with people who will understand me (motive: pdt involvement)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I want to connect with and talk to other people that are so enthusiastic about the product (motive: pdt involvement)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I want to show other people what a good choice of product I have made (motive: self-enhancement)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I am really proud of my shopping skills and other people should learn from my experience (motive: self-enhancement)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I am so happy with the company's product that I want to popularize it and help the company be successful (motive: helping the company)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I believe that the company that has created the product should be supported (motive: helping the company)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5. How often do you usually write reviews about a product online or given your feedback about a product/service you have used? (Participant can select only one option)

- A) I have never written a product review online
- B) Very rarely – once or twice per year, when the product has been exceptionally good/bad
- B) Several times per year
- C) Quite often – once or more per month

Q6. How often do you usually read reviews or feedback about products/services online (Participant can select only one option)

- A) I have never read/seen a product review online
- B) Very rarely – once or twice per year, when the product is really important for me
- B) Several times per year
- C) Quite often – once or more per month

Q7. How frequently do you shop online?

- A) I have never shopped online
- B) Very rarely – once or twice per year
- C) Several times per year
- D) Quite often – once or more per month

Q8. Please, specify your gender?

- A) Male
- B) Female

Q9. What is your age?

Q10. Please, specify your current occupation?

- A) Student
- B) Employee
- C) Independent worker
- D) Unemployed
- E) Other

Q11. Please, indicate your level of competence with the English language:

- A) English is my first language
- B) I speak and understand English as well as I speak and understand my first language
- C) I am fluent in English, and rarely I have trouble understanding others or expressing myself
- D) I speak good English but sometimes it is difficult for me to understand some phrases or express myself
- E) I speak and understand very little English

Questionnaire – Negative Condition

Q1. Please indicate on a scale from 1 to 7, how willing you are to write your review of the mobile phone on the following online opinion platforms:

	I would never post my review here				I would definitely post my review here		
An independent product review website (has nothing to do with the specific phone brand or company; contains different topics & brand reviews e.g. consumerreview.com)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The company's website (a publicly visible message board/ product review section on the website of the mobile phone company)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2. If you had to choose only one online opinion platform to post your positive/negative review on, which one would you select?

- A) An independent product review website
- B) The company's website

Q3. Please indicate on scale from 1 to 7, how important each of the following factors is for your choice of online opinion platform:

	Not important at all Very important						
Popularity of the website	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Type of users that visit the website	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Owner of the website (i.e. the company or an independent third-party)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4. Please specify how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

I want to share my product review on this type of website, because...

	I strongly DISAGREE					I strongly AGREE	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I want to prevent other people from making the same shopping mistake (motive: altruism)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I believe site's users deserve to know the product's real value before buying it (motive: altruism)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I am so shocked by the product's performance that I couldn't stay inactive (motive: anxiety reduction)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I want to get some of the stress off my chest (motive: anxiety reduction)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I believe the company deserves a lesson that it cannot go unpunished forever (motive: vengeance)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...the company has treated me badly and I want to strike back (motive: vengeance)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I believe someone can give me a good advice on how to fix the product (motive: advice seeking)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...I believe that the company owns me an explanation and should help me solve the problems I am having with the product (motive: advice seeking)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5. How often do you usually write reviews about a product online or given your feedback about a product/service you have used? (Participant can select only one option)

- A) I have never written a product review online
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- A) Male
- B) Female

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- E) Other

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- E) I speak and understand very little English