

**Customer Relations in Social Media: Social Media Usage Motives, Expected Responses
From Organizations, and Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)**

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Abstract

More and more organizations are attempting to use social media as a public relations tool to establish and maintain good customer relations. This study explores customers' motives for using social media, the responses they expect from organizations, and predictors of positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Using a web questionnaire, this study surveyed 17,254 consumers in the United States and uncovered several significant findings. First, the study results suggest that protecting oneself and others from bad companies or products are the top two reasons for consumers to share information in social media environments. Second, the results suggest that consumers expect companies to change policies if they have negative experiences with the company and make negative comments. Empty apologies are the least effective response from companies. Others expect organizations to offer discounts on future products or services or give a refund in these situations. Third, the results of correlation and multiple regression analyses suggest that confidence, integrity, pride, and passion are strong predictors for customers' positive eWOM. The more engaged a customer is with a brand, the more likely he or she will be to write positive comments on social media sites about the company, brand, product, or service. The results of this study extend the knowledge about customer relations in social media. (This study reflects completed research.)

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Introduction

The number of social media users increases every year. According to Madden and Zickuhr (2011), about two-thirds (65%) of adult Internet users said they use a social networking site (SNS) such as Myspace, Facebook, or LinkedIn. “The pace with which new users have flocked to social networking sites has been staggering; when we first asked about social networking sites in February of 2005, just 8% of Internet users — or 5% of all adults — said they used them” (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011, p. 2).

Because of the rising popularity of social media, more and more organizations are using it as a tool to establish and maintain good customer relations. Thus, organizations would like their customers to write positive, not negative, comments and create positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. To develop effective customer relationship management strategies in social media, organizations must understand customers’ motives for using social media. They must also know how to prevent negative eWOM by effectively handling social media criticism and diffusing customers’ anger. However, according to a survey conducted by Useful Social Media (2012), one out of five (20%) companies are completely unprepared for social media criticism or negative comments. Only 15% are fully engaged with the problem. To help corporate executives better prepare for social media criticism and develop effective social media initiatives, this study explores customers’ social media usage motives, expected crisis responses from organizations, and predictors of positive eWOM. Previous studies that addressed these issues are summarized in the following sections.

Consumers’ Social Media Usage Motives

To effectively communicate with customers in a social media environment, organizations must know *why* and *how* customers use social media. Kalmus, Realo, and Siibak (2011) conducted a study to investigate how personality traits and socio-demographic factors affect motives for Internet use. They surveyed 1,507 respondents aged 15 to 74 in Estonia in 2008. Factor analysis results for 31 online activity items revealed two underlying motives for Internet use: social media and entertainment (SME) and work and information (WI). SME factors include activities representing “personal need for entertainment, fun, self-expression, and maintaining social relations” (p. 393). Examples of SME activities are searching for and managing information regarding friends and acquaintances on an SNS, posting and updating information about themselves on an SNS, communicating with friends and acquaintances, searching for interesting and exciting information, and exploring online cultural activities. WI activities are related to institutional roles and related needs. Examples of WI activities are searching for information on public institutions, communicating with officials, managing public business online, using e-services, online databases, and online banking, shopping online, and gathering relevant information for making purchases. Kalmus et al. argued that these broad motives represent two aspects of an information environment: “a personal/relational aspect and an institutional aspect” (p. 393).

Kalmus et al. also explored how socio-demographic factors predict Internet use motives. The results suggested that SME was negatively correlated with education but positively correlated with perceived income. WI was positively correlated with education and perceived income. Thus, the results implied that young people are more likely to use the Internet for SME.

Kalmus et al.'s (2011) research identified people's motives for using the Internet and provided some basic understanding about why people do so. It is interesting to know that SME and WI describe the two major types of Internet usage motives in Estonia. However, the study did not specifically focus on people's motives for using social media. Additionally, the study only surveyed respondents in Estonia, not Internet users in the United States.

Another study provided more specific information about consumers' motives for using social media and the relationship between customer engagement and social media use (James & Asplund, 2011). According to James and Asplund, people may use social media to influence, entertain, inform, learn, warn, create, or share their opinions. James and Asplund provided a typology to analyze consumers' motives for using social media. However, their study did not address the relative importance of each social media usage motive. To extend James and Asplund's research, the present study aims to provide more details about consumers' motives for using social media.

Electronic Word of Mouth

The emergence of Internet-based new media facilitated the development of eWOM (Chu & Kim, 2011). Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) defined eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p. 39). Indeed, because of the popularity of social media, many consumers can freely express their opinions about companies, brands, products, and services in social media. For example, consumers can choose to "Like" a product or company on Facebook. Consumers can also post positive or negative comments on various social media sites, such as *ratemyprofessors.com*, *apartmentratings.com*, or corporate-sponsored sites. Corporate executives would like their loyal customers to write positive comments and advocate for their brands, and they also want to reduce negative comments.

Corporate Responses to Consumers' Comments and Image Repair Strategies

Organizations must effectively handle customers' negative eWOM in social media environments. According to Evans and McKee (2010), listening, analyzing, and responding to customers' comments on social media is an ongoing process. "Actually addressing process issues that are driving negative conversations or implementing suggested innovations to further strengthen brand loyalty or enhance competitive advantage create the real payoff following the adoption of social technology in business" (p. 214). Otherwise, negative WOM may evolve from a problem to a crisis. According to Fearn-Banks (2007), "a *crisis* is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" (p. 8). Because of the nature of connectivity on SNS, consumers' network friends may respond to each other's comments. If a lot of consumers make negative comments about a company's products or services, this could affect the corporation's image and sales volume, leading to a corporate crisis. Therefore, it is important for corporations to address consumers' negative comments carefully, thus reducing negative comments.

Because customers' negative comments on an SNS can directly affect a company's image and may evolve into a corporate crisis, the Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew,

1997; Benoit & Pang, 2008) provides a theoretical foundation for this study. If an organization's image has been damaged in social media, the executives and public relations practitioners have to restore it by incorporating effective strategies. Benoit and Drew (1997) categorized 14 types of image restoration tactics into five major categories: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility for event, (3) reducing offensiveness of event, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification. First, denial means that the accused can simply deny the act occurred or shift the blame. Second, evasion of responsibility means that the accused can make excuses, for example claiming that the intentions of the wrong act were good, to reduce of responsibility and gain forgiveness from the other party. In addition to good intention, provocation, defeasibility, and accident are three other tactics that are used to evade responsibility.

Third, reducing offensiveness "is meant to deal with the offensiveness of the act in question rather than with responsibility of that act" (Benoit & Pang, 2008, p. 250). There are six strategies to reduce offensiveness: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation. Benoit and Pang provided explanations about each strategy. The bolstering strategy attempts to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward the accused to neutralize the negative feelings. The minimization strategy refers to lessening the perceived seriousness of the event. The basic idea of the differentiation strategy is to distinguish the offensive event from similar, but more offensive actions — so in comparison, the offensive event does not look so bad. The transcendence strategy means putting the offensive act in a more favorable context. The attack-accuser strategy refers to criticizing the accuser to undermine his or her credibility and minimize the effectiveness of the attack. The compensation strategy is often used in the consumer context. For example, the retailer can offer positive reinforcement, such as cash, goods, services, or discounts on other products or future purchases, to offset the negative feelings toward a wrongful act.

Fourth, the corrective action strategy, in which the company promises to correct the problem, is one of the most effective image repair strategies because "people want problems to be resolved and prevented" (Benoit & Pang, p. 251). Finally, the mortification strategy means that the company admits wrongdoing and asks for forgiveness.

Another frequently used crisis management theory is Coombs' (2008) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The SCCT seeks to provide guidelines and alternatives that crisis managers can adapt to their own unique situations. "SCCT works from a list of ten crisis response strategies that are grounded into three postures. A posture represents a set of strategies that share similar communicative goals and vary in terms of their focus on protecting the crisis victims (victim-orientation) and taking responsibility for the crisis" (Coombs, p. 266). The three postures are (1) deny posture (low concern for victim and responsibility acceptance), (2) diminish posture, and (3) deal posture (high concern for victim and responsibility acceptance).

Coombs (2008) provided detailed explanations for each posture and each crisis response strategy. First, the deny posture represents three strategies that claim that there is no crisis or that the organization is not responsible for the crisis. The three strategies are attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat. In the attack-the-accuser strategy, the crisis manager confronts the accuser. The denial strategy means that the crisis manager simply claims no crisis exists. In the scapegoat strategy, the crisis manager blames someone outside the organization for the crisis. Second, the diminish posture uses two strategies — excuse and justification — to alter stakeholder attributions by reframing how stakeholders should interpret the crisis. The excuse

strategy means that the crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying the intention to harm and/or claiming inability to control the events. In the justification strategy, the crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage. Third, the deal posture represents five strategies that seek to improve the organization's reputation by addressing victim concerns. The ingratiation strategy means the crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works. The concern strategy means that the crisis manager expresses concern for the victims. In the compensation strategy, the crisis manager offers money or gifts to victims. The regret strategy means that the crisis manager expresses the organization's regret about the crisis. In the apology strategy, the crisis manager indicates organizational responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness from stakeholders.

Coombs and Holladay (2008) compared the effectiveness of different crisis response strategies — apology, compensation, sympathy, and information only — by surveying 167 undergraduate students with a case-study approach. The students read a news story about a crisis caused by an oil company and evaluated the oil company's post-crisis reputation based on different crisis responses they received. The results of Coombs and Holladay's study suggested that the students reacted similarly to sympathy, compensation, and apology response strategies. Thus, they argued that people react similarly to any accommodative strategy and, therefore, apology is not the best strategy.

Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory and Coombs' (2008) SCCT offer options companies can use when their corporate image is damaged. Because negative comments and customer criticism in the social media environment could inflict such damage if not handled properly, an increase in negative comments can evolve into a corporate crisis. Organizations must use appropriate image repair strategies to restore their corporate reputations. Thus, Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory and Coomb's (2008) SCCT provide a theoretical foundation for this study.

Customer Engagement and Positive Word of Mouth

In addition to reducing customers' negative comments, corporations also want to encourage their loyal customers to post positive comments on social media sites. Previous research (e.g., Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001) suggested that customers' positive word of mouth (WOM) communication is considered strongly beneficial for organizations because of its influence on their revenue and growth. According to Hong and Yang (2011), the emergence of new media, such as blogs and social media, has expanded the space of WOM communication. Thus, it is critical for public relations practitioners to build an environment that encourages positive WOM communication.

Since creating and maintaining positive eWOM is many companies' goal, it is important to know the predictors of positive eWOM. Hong and Yang's research results (2009) suggested that corporate reputation and customers' relational satisfaction predict customers' positive WOM intentions. Most importantly, "customer-company identification mediates the influence of organizational reputation on positive WOM intentions" (Hong & Yang, p. 381). Hong and Yang defined customer-company identification as "the customer's perception of oneness with or connection to an organization where the customer defines himself or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization" (p. 386). Hong and Yang suggested

companies obtain a favorable reputation, cultivate a satisfactory relationship with customers, and foster customer-company identification.

James and Asplund (2011) discussed the relationship between customer engagement and customer advocacy for the company/brand. According to James and Asplund, emotionally engaged customers are more likely to be socially engaged customers who will work for your company or brand within their social network. They suggested that the first step in a social media initiative is determining who your most emotionally engaged customers are. This implies that customer engagement may predict positive WOM. What are the components of customer engagement? According to McEwen (2005), there are four levels of customers' emotional engagement with brands: (1) confidence, (2) integrity, (3) pride, and (4) passion. First, confidence refers to customers' trust and faith in a brand. Second, integrity refers to customers' perceptions about being treated fairly and being able to count on the company to reach a fair and satisfactory resolution if problems arise. Third, pride means customers feel that they are valued, appreciated, and personally respected by the brand and its representatives. Finally, passion implies that customers feel the specific brand is perfect for them and can't imagine a world without this brand.

After reviewing the literature, this study poses three research questions:

RQ1: What are customers' social media usage motives?

RQ2: What are customers' expected responses from organizations after making negative comments in social media?

RQ3: What are the predictors for positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in social media?

Methods

Survey Instrument and Respondents

A quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted in the United States in September and October 2010. The results are based on a Gallup panel study consisting of web surveys completed by 17,254 adults, aged 18 and older (Gallup, 2007). Respondents were not compensated for participation and were assumed to be competent Internet users based on their preference and ability to complete the survey via the web. The data were weighted to demographically represent the U.S. adult population.

The questionnaire instrument used in this study included questions measuring respondents' emotional attachment with a brand and communication behaviors regarding companies and brands in social media. The questionnaire also captured demographic data about respondents. Their ages ranged from 18 to 93, with an average age of 49.7. Of the respondents, 8,323 (48.2%) were male and 8,931 (51.8%) were female.

Respondents reported diverse educational levels and employment status: 5,477 (31.7%) were high school graduates, 4,219 (24.5%) had some college, 1,094 (6.3%) had trade/technical/vocational training, 2,617 (15.2%) were college graduates, 2,907 (16.8%) had done postgraduate work, and 880 (5.2%) had less than a high school diploma. About one-half 8,869 (51.4%) of respondents were employed full time, 1,579 (9.1%) were employed part-time

but were not full-time students, 804 (4.7%) were full-time students, 3,726 (21.6%) were retired, 1,322 (7.7%) were homemakers, and 951 (5.5%) were not employed.

Scale Development

To measure respondents' level of brand engagement, four scales — confidence, integrity, pride, and passion — were created. The confidence scale items are: always delivers on promise and name I can always trust. The integrity scale items are: fair resolution of any problems and always treats me fairly. The pride scale items are: treats me with respect and feel proud to be a customer. The passion scale items are: can't imagine a world without and perfect company for people like me. All items are measured by 5-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Copyright © 1994-2000 Gallup, Inc. All rights reserved.

Reliability analysis (based on Cronbach's coefficient alpha) was conducted. Reliability scores for confidence, integrity, pride, and passion were .94, .93, .87, .77, respectively.

Results and Discussions

RQ1: Social Media Usage Motives

To discern social media usage motives, the survey asked a multiple-choice question: "Looking back, what would you say was your primary purpose in trying to connect people together about a company/brand?" By looking closely at the items included in the present study, the researcher found that the most popular purposes for respondents to talk or write about their thoughts about a company/brand are to inform others (36.6%), share their views (27.6%), and learn something new (21.8%). A small number of respondents said they use social media to influence others (3.2%), warn others (2.8%), connect with others (1.4%), entertain others (.9%), or create something new (.2%).

Because sharing information is one of the most important reasons for consumers to talk or write about companies, brands, products, and services, a follow-up question was asked to discover the reasons why consumers share information or pay attention to other people's opinions. The survey instructed respondents to rank the importance of different reasons for sharing information about companies, brands, products, and services with others. These reasons were measured by 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = not at all important; 5 = extremely important). The means for these items based on 5-point Likert-type scales are summarized in Table 1.

<Inset Table 1 here>

The top two reasons for consumers to share information online are: (1) protecting themselves from bad products or companies and (2) protecting others from bad products or companies. The results of this analysis suggest that consumers attempt to protect themselves and others from bad companies or products through information sharing. This supports James and Asplund's (2011) argument that people use social media to inform, warn, and share their opinion. When customers send out strong messages in social media to warn and protect others, this may negatively affect a company's image and sales volume. Thus, companies with social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and blogs) should closely monitor their

customers' comments. If there are negative comments, companies should effectively handle these comments.

RQ2: Customers' Expected Corporate Responses

Previous research suggested that customers can create negative eWOM when their experiences with companies, products, brands, or services are below expectations (Samson, 2006). Samson also found that negative WOM has stronger effects on customer loyalty and customer acquisitions than positive WOM. For example, "a negative experience decreases loyalty to a greater degree than a positive experience increases loyalty" (Samson, p. 649). Because of the significant effect of negative WOM, organizations have to properly handle negative customer comments and keep negative WOM to minimum.

Respondents were asked: "Earlier you told us that you felt fairly negative toward a company/brand. If a representative of the company were to contact you now, in which of the following ways could the company/brand make you feel more positive toward them?" The response options were: (1) give a discount on future products or services, (2) contact you directly and apologize, (3) change its policies, (4) give you a refund, or (5) other. Respondents were asked to choose yes or no for each corporate response. The results of this study suggest that customers' expected responses from a representative are having the organization change its policies (72.2% yes), offering discounts on a future product or services (38.5% yes), giving a refund (30% yes), and apologizing (26.3% yes). About half (54.6% yes) thought some other way would work, too. This finding is important because it implies that an empty apology is the least desired response, with only one-quarter of respondents saying an apology is their expected response from companies. Instead, many more respondents expect companies to initiate systematic changes by changing corporate policies or compensating them (e.g., offering discounts on future products or services).

This finding is somewhat different from Coombs and Holladay's (2008) research result. Coombs and Holladay found that college students responded similarly to sympathy, compensation, and apology strategies. However, the results of this study suggest that compensation is more effective than apology in social media environments. The differences may be caused by the differences in the research context. Coombs and Holladay's study was conducted in a college classroom setting. The present study is a web survey of consumers aged 18 to 93 with different educational levels and employment status. The demographics of our respondents are more diverse. In addition, this study also focuses on consumers' expected response from organizations after making negative comments in social media, and it was conducted in the social media/web environment.

RQ3: Predictors for Positive eWOM

Since creating and maintaining positive eWOM is many companies' goal, it is important to know the predictors of positive eWOM. Correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships between brand attachment and positive eWOM. Four levels of brand attachment, (1) confidence, (2) integrity, (3) pride, and (4) passion, served as the predictor variables for analysis. Respondents were asked, "How positive or negative was what you said or wrote about a company/brand when you most recently discussed it with others?" This question was measured by a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = extremely negative; 5 =

extremely positive). The higher score of this question indicates a more positive eWOM. This question serves as the dependent variable of the multiple regression analysis.

The results of Pearson correlation analysis suggest that confidence ($r = .72, p < .001$), integrity ($r = .70, p < .001$), pride ($r = .70, p < .001$), and passion ($r = .76, p < .001$) are positively correlated with positive eWOM. The results of multiple regression analysis show that the four types of brand engagement are significant predictors for customers' positive eWOM, $F(4,4214) = 1471.25, p < .0001$. The multiple correlation coefficient (R) is $.76, R^2 = .58, \text{Adjusted } R^2 = .58$, indicating that 58% of the variance in positive eWOM is accounted for by the linear combination of the four types of brand engagement. The more engaged a customer is with a brand, the more likely he or she would be to write positive online comments about the company, brand, product, or service. The results of multiple regression analysis are summarized in Table 2.

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The results of this study support James and Asplund's (2011) argument that emotionally engaged customers are most likely to be socially engaged customers who will advocate for a company within their social network, because the statistical results suggest that customer engagement components are significant predictors for positive eWOM in social media.

Conclusion

Practical Implications

By surveying 17,254 consumers and asking various questions to explore their social media usage behaviors, this study contributes to the body of knowledge about customer relations in social media. The scope of this study is broad because it investigates three important issues, including consumers' social media usage motives, expected responses from organizations, and predictors of positive eWOM. The findings can help organizations understand why and how customers use social media to share information and express opinions about companies, products, and services. The top two motives for consumers to share opinions online are: (1) protecting themselves from bad products or companies, and (2) protecting others from bad products or companies. Thus, companies must closely monitor customer comments in social media and effectively handle negative comments. The findings also answer two practical questions that corporate executives want to know: (1) how to reduce additional negative comments online by effectively responding to customers' negative comments and (2) how to encourage loyal customers advocate for the company/brand by posting positive comments online. The answer to the first question is that customers expect organizations to change policies and compensate them if they have negative experiences with the company/brand. An empty apology is the least effective response.

The answer to the second question is that organizations must engage with customers first to foster positive eWOM online. The results of this study suggest that the four stages of customers' emotional engagement (confidence, integrity, pride, and passion) act as predictors for positive eWOM. What can organizations do to increase customers' emotional engagement with the brand? Based on the results of this study, the researcher would suggest that organizations keep their brand promises, find workable solutions (e.g., give refunds or discounts) when problems arise, and provide excellent customer service. By doing so, organizations can establish

and maintain a high degree of trust and confidence in their brands. Confidence is also built by a company's employees, services, and customer communications. In a social media environment, customers expect responses from companies if they ask questions online. Many customers also want to participate in online discussions and express their opinions. Therefore, responding to customers in a timely manner with honesty and consistency is important. Furthermore, the researcher suggests that companies make friends with their customers in social media environments. Companies should build an online brand community and encourage customer participation in social media, cultivate connections, and create enjoyable experiences in the social media environment. Positive interactions in the social media environment can foster overall customer pride and passion about the product as well.

Theoretical Implications

This study brings additional knowledge about eWOM in the social media environment. According to Hong and Yang (2009), WOM is an understudied area, despite its growing importance to companies. This study identifies effective ways of handling negative eWOM in social media and the predictors for positive eWOM. Thus, this study adds knowledge to an important but understudied area in public relations.

The results of this study also have theoretical contributions by providing empirical evidence to identify the most effective corporate crisis responses in social media based on Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory and Coombs' (2008) SCCT. The results of this study suggest that changing corporate policy is the most desired corporate response when consumers make negative comments in social media. This strategy is similar to Benoit's (1995) corrective action tactic. Offering discounts for future products or services and giving a refund are also effective response strategies. These two strategies are similar to Coombs' (2008) compensation strategy. Apologizing is the least desired response from organizations. Making an apology is the same as Coombs' (2008) apology strategy. It is interesting to know that an empty apology is not an effective corporate response strategy in the social media environment. Instead of expecting apologies from companies, consumers expect corrective actions and deals after making negative comments online. Thus, the results of this study extend the applicability of Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory and Coombs' (2008) SCCT in social media.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

This study offers insights into customer relations in social media by surveying more than 17,000 consumers in the United States. However, this study did not survey consumers in other countries. Future studies may survey consumers in different cultures and compare the results with the present study. By doing so, cultural similarities and differences in consumers' social media usage motives, eWOM, and expected corporate responses can be further explored.

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Table 1. Customers' Motives for Sharing Information Online

Items	Mean	S.D.	Rank
To protect myself from bad products or companies	3.77	1.17	1
To protect others from bad products or companies	3.53	1.23	2
To save money through special discounts or offers	3.34	1.27	3
To save myself or others time through reviews or comments	3.04	1.22	4
To constantly improve myself by gathering new knowledge	3.02	1.21	5
To help others spot opportunities	2.90	1.23	6
To fulfill my constant need to learn	2.69	1.21	7
To gain a sense of control by doing research and gathering opinions	2.58	1.27	8
To feel like my opinion counts	2.51	1.22	9
To feel on top of the latest news and trends	2.49	1.20	10
To express my unique point of view	2.42	1.20	11
To feel connected to people that have the same interests and opinions as me	2.30	1.15	12
To influence others' opinions	2.19	1.10	13
To create something new	2.00	1.06	14
To build my credibility	1.96	1.10	15
To feel like part of something bigger than myself	1.88	1.05	16
To be recognized by my peers	1.72	.94	17

N = 17,254

Table 2: Summaries of Multiple Regression Analysis for Customer Engagement Predicting Positive Electronic Word of Mouth (Enter Model)

	Positive eWOM (B)
Confidence	.40***
Integrity	.16***
Pride	.20***
Passion	.05**
R ²	.58
Adjusted R ²	.58
Model Significance	P < .0001

Note. Standardized Beta (B) is reported. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.