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ABSTRACT: Marketers have long understood that consumers' self-concepts influence the products they purchase; conversely, products purchased influence people's self-concepts. Might the same self-enhancement framework apply in to shared online advertisements? Using the symbolic interactionist perspective of identity theory, this study empirically tests the proposition that online consumers use electronic word of mouth, and specifically the sharing of online advertising, to construct and express their self-concepts. The results suggest that self-brand congruity, entertainment value, and product category involvement increase the self-expressiveness of online ads, which then increase the likelihood of sharing those ads. These findings have both theoretical and managerial implications.

Keywords: Viral marketing, electronic word of mouth, identity theory, self-concept

MANAGERIAL OVERVIEW

Why do some online advertising campaigns go viral while others fizzle? What motivates consumers to share commercial messages through the Internet? Previous research indicates that consumers tend to forward advertising messages that they find entertaining, informative, titillating, or shocking-that is, messages that evoke strong emotional responses. This study suggests an additional motivation for sharing messages: to express a sense of identity. Marketers have long understood that consumers purchase products not just for their practical or utilitarian benefits but also for their symbolic value. Driving a Porsche, carrying a Coach bag, or using a Macintosh computer all express something about the consumer's self-concept, which in turn motivates the consumer to purchase them. This study proposes that a similar phenomenon exists for electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Consumers should be more likely to share advertising that is consistent with their self-concept or how they see themselves. An online experiment examines whether consumers' likelihood to share an online ad depends on the extent to which the ad expresses their self-concepts, and the results suggest that consumers are indeed more likely to share ads that express their self-concepts. In addition, the extent to which the ad expresses self-concepts depends on the similarity between the brand image and the self-image, the importance of the product category to the consumer, and how entertaining the consumer finds the ad. Consumers believe that what they find entertaining (e.g., Sex and the City versus South Park) says something about who they are, which affects the likelihood that they share that entertaining content. Advertisers should consider the symbolic and self-expressive properties of their online ads and match them to targeted consumers' self-concepts.

Internet-based social media and communication networks have supercharged the power of word of mouth (WOM). Consumer-to-consumer WOM has long been recognized as a promotional technique with strong influences on purchase decisions, primarily because WOM communications seem more trustworthy and reliable (e.g., Arndt 1967; Bayus 1985; Dichter 1966; Engle, Kegerreis, and Blackwell 1969; Richins 1984). However, the speed and global reach of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communications provide marketers with a means to transcend the effectiveness of traditional WOM.

When initiating eWOM, consumers can communicate with multiple receivers simultaneously through e-mail, microblogging media, instant messaging, or social networking sites; they also can transmit advertising messages, such as website links, videos, or games. An advertiser can distribute content to select recipients, who then will forward the message to multiple recipients in their network (friends, family, coworkers), who in turn forward the content to larger multiples of recipients. Thus advertising content can spread quickly and exponentially from a handful of recipients to millions of consumers, prompting the moniker "viral marketing" (Watts and Peretti 2007). Viral replication remains a hit-or-miss proposition though; for all of the hype and discussion surrounding it, the keys to successful execution remain unknown (Eccleston and Griseri 2008). For both practitioners and academics, identifying the factors that motivate consumers to share online advertisements is an

important step in understanding why some ads go viral while others do not.

Several studies have made some progress toward answering this question (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Ho and Dempsey 2010; Keller 2007; Phelps et al. 2004), including indications that messages are more likely to be forwarded when they evoke emotion (Dobele et al. 2007; Eckler and Bolls 2011; Phelps et al. 2004), titillate (Porter and Golan 2006), amuse (Brown, Bhadury, and Pope 2010), or have utilitarian/hedonic content (Chiu et al. 2007). Consumers appear motivated to forward viral ads to initiate personal growth (Ho and Dempsey 2010), display altruism (Ho and Dempsey 2010; Phelps et al. 2004), or demonstrate superior knowledge or opinion leadership (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Lyons and Henderson 2005). These motivations all reflect a desire to enhance some aspect of consumers' sense of self, that is, to improve how they perceive themselves or how others see them.

We instead approach self-enhancement motives for forwarding online advertising messages from a new perspective. Focusing on ads designed to entertain, we propose that consumers share ads to express their sense of identity, as well as to share the hedonic experience. The clothes consumers wear, the cars they drive, and brands they seek out reflect their self-image. We posit that self-image similarly influences the online ads consumers deem entertaining enough to forward. Using an analysis of motivations related to self-expression, we propose that consumers use viral ads to represent their identity to others. Specifically, we describe, model, and empirically test a process by which consumers extract self-enhancement from online ads, according to the degree to which the ads are congruent with their perceptions of themselves. Advertising that consumers perceive as able to communicate this self-perception is more likely to be forwarded, such that consumers' self-concepts exert a strong influence on their forwarding behaviors.

LINK BETWEEN EWOM AND SELF-ENHANCEMENT

Defining eWOM

In many regards, eWOM is a special case of word of mouth. One widely used definition 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" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004, p. 39). A more recent definition describes eWOM as "forwarding actions through e-mail, instant messaging or other communication media that are of high 'addressability'" (Ho and Dempsey 2010, p. 1000), though this definition is too restrictive to encompass viral video advertising. Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), which are common channels for video sharing, do not necessarily offer high addressability. Therefore, we use Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) definition, with two caveats. First, the "positive or negative statement" need not originate with the consumer but may be forwarded or repeated as well. Second, though the message is available "via the Internet," we allow for it to spread by other electronic means, such as text messaging, and offline WOM too.

Self-Enhancement and Consumption

The concept of the self refers to a schema that organizes self-referent memories and guides the processing and categorization of self-referent information (Kihlstrom and Cantor 1983; Markus 1977, 1980; Nasby 1985, 1989). The self is "an abstract representation of past experience with personal data" (Rogers, Kuiper, and Kirker 1977, p. 677) that provides a framework for interpreting incoming data. It captures the totality of individual thoughts and feelings about themselves as objects (Rosenberg 1979). To reinforce a sense of self and express self-identities, consumer use possessions, products, and brands (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986; Richins 1994a, 1994b), to which they assign meanings. When consumers perceive these meanings as consistent with their self-concepts, they transfer the meaning to their own identity (Levy 1959), using rituals. McCracken (1986) identifies four consumption rituals for transferring meaning: possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment. We focus on possession rituals, through which meaning gets transferred by the display of or discussion about the object. A transfer of meaning through a consumption display (i.e., public consumption of product or brand) is the focus of most marketing research in this area, though McCracken also considers discussion an effective means to transfer meaning.

This conceptualization suggests that people need not consume a product or brand to transfer its meaning. Rather, by discussing a product-for our study, sharing an electronic brand- or product-related message-consumers may shift inherent meanings from the brand or product to their self-concepts. By publicly advocating an online advertisement, consumers can use the symbolic value of the product or brand to express their self-concepts, just as well as if they actually consumed the advertised products. This stance is consistent with McCracken's (1986) conceptualization of consumption

rituals; it also extends symbolic consumption literature. Few, if any, studies have applied this concept to WOM or eWOM. Therefore, we examine the role of this identity expression process as a potential motivator to engage in eWOM.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Identity Theory

According to identity theory (Stryker 1968), the self is a multifaceted entity composed of "the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (Stryker and Burke 2000, p. 284). Identity theory is based on a symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead 1934; Stryker 1980), which treats humans as actors who play roles, defined by the shared meanings of their interactions with others. Social interactions construct the self; the self influences individual behavior in social interactions. Society, self, and social behavior are thus highly interdependent and often reinforcing.

Engaging in eWOM is an inherently social process. Word of mouth by any means requires, at a minimum, one sender and one receiver. But in more overtly public eWOM contexts, the social aspect of this communication process expands dramatically. Not only can senders share a message with

multiple receivers simultaneously (e.g., by e-mailing the message to a group of recipients, tweeting the message, or posting it to a Facebook profile), but the message also becomes available for indirect distribution to others. A Facebook profile or Twitter stream, for example, is publicly visible to anyone with an Internet connection. Thus, the context lends an added element of public display that must be salient to any consumer engaging in eWOM. Using identity theory as a foundation, we propose that the social interaction inherent to eWOM (i.e., sharing and recommending advertising messages to others) shapes and expresses a consumer's identity. Conversely, a consumer's social interaction (i.e., propensity to share eWOM messages with others) is shaped by his or her sense of self and expression of identity.

We test this proposition according to the extent to which consumers perceive that sharing eWOM will express their identity to others, which then should be a determinant of their likelihood of sharing. The perceived value of the eWOM message as an expression of the consumer's identity then should be influenced by the entertainment value of the message, perceived congruence between the brand and the self, and level of product category involvement (see Figure 1). We discuss these constructs, as each of them relates to the proposed model, next.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Self-Expressiveness and Likelihood of Sharing
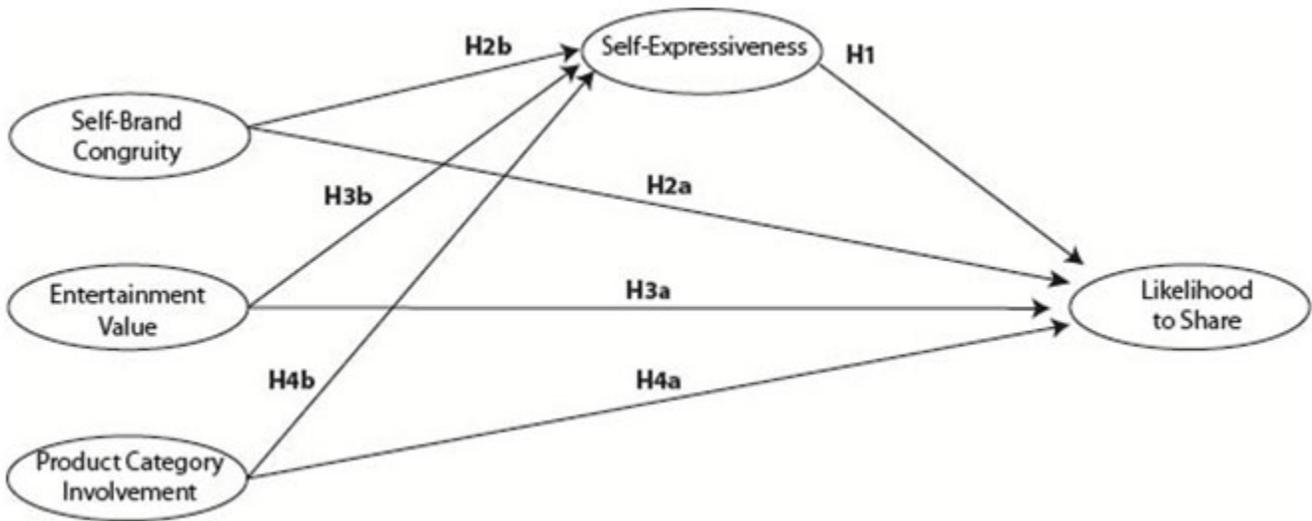
Self-Expressiveness

Self-enhancement occurs when the consumer "believes the good he has purchased is recognized publicly and classified in a manner that supports and matches his self-concept" (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967, p. 25). The construct of self-expressiveness expands on this idea; we can conceptualize a continuum along which an eWOM message is perceived as able to express the self. For this study, self-expressiveness is defined as the extent to which consumers perceive that an eWOM message supports and enacts their self-concept and will be recognized publicly as such.

Extant literature suggests the symbolic value of a product can be transferred through consumption, in the form of private or public purchase, display, or use (e.g., Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967; Grubb and Hupp 1968; McCracken 1986). However, engaging in eWOM about the product may achieve the same transfer. The symbolic value of the product, message, or brand gets enacted through eWOM performance, rather than by purchasing or using the product. When consumers perceive that an eWOM message possesses some degree of self-expressiveness, they should be motivated to extract this value by sharing the message, to reinforce their identity or construct an identity closer to their ideal.

Prior research into blogger behavior suggests that self-expression motivates bloggers to post video blogs (Huang et al. 2007). Similarly, a study of offline WOM reveals that consumers are more likely to discuss products that are self-relevant and communicate something about them (Chung and Darke 2006). Chu (2011) shows that college-age consumers are more likely to engage in viral activities when they are more prone to self-disclosure. Although not directly linked to viral activities, another study indicates that social identity affects consumers' likelihood to accept advertising (Zeng, Huang, and Dou 2009). Building on these findings, we propose that the self-expressiveness of advertising messages motivates consumers to share ads; that is, when self-expressiveness is high, consumers are more likely to share eWOM messages.

H1: The self-expressiveness of an eWOM message has a direct positive effect on the likelihood that the message will be shared with others.

Self-Brand Congruity

For any brand, a consumer considers a complex set of associations that reflect the brand attributes, both product-related (e.g., size, shape, quality, taste, smell) and non-product-related (e.g., price, packaging, user/usage imagery), as well as functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits that consumers can derive from those attributes (Keller 1993). With entertainment-focused advertising, product-related attributes and benefits that the customer associates with the brand are less important than non-product-related elements, especially symbolic associations. Therefore, we consider self-brand congruity, or the match between the brand's value-expressive attributes (i.e., product/user images) and the consumer's self-concept (Sirgy 1985). Consumers compare the imagery of a brand to their self-concept; the greater the congruity, the more positive their attitudes toward the brand. Self-brand congruity also exerts a powerful effect on attitudes and behaviors. For example, when it is high, brand relationship quality and brand loyalty increase (Kressmann et al. 2006), and the overall connection between the consumer and brand grows stronger (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Self-brand congruity thus may have a dual influence on the likelihood to share eWOM messages.

First, the bond between the consumer and the brand likely is stronger when self-brand congruity is higher, and because brand loyalty is stronger, the consumer's attitude toward the brand will be more positive. Various studies demonstrate the link between attitude and behavior (e.g., Ajzen 1991; Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Logic and theory suggest self-brand congruity prompts more positive attitudes about the brand, and thus, people should be more likely to share the brand message. We thus predict a direct relationship between self-brand congruity and the likelihood of sharing eWOM messages:

H2a: The level of perceived congruity between the self and the brand has direct positive effects on the likelihood that the message will be shared.

Second, Sirgy's (1985) definition of self-brand congruity measures the match between brand image and self-image, so greater self-brand congruity increases the self-expressiveness of the eWOM message. Recent studies support the notion of a dual effect. For example, Ahn and Bailenson (2011) present evidence that self-referencing ads provide a secondary mediating path between brand associations and purchase intentions. Building on this finding, we predict a secondary mediating role for self-expressiveness in the relationship between self-brand congruity and sharing likelihood:

H2b: The level of perceived congruity between the self and the brand has direct positive effects on the self-expressiveness of the message.

In brief, the perceived congruity of a brand with a self-concept should have a direct positive effect on the likelihood of sharing an eWOM message, as well as help increase the self-expressiveness of the eWOM message, resulting in a secondary indirect effect on sharing likelihood.

Entertainment Value

The entertainment value of a message reflects the extent to which an online advertisement provides pleasure, diversion, or amusement to consumers. Similar to self-brand congruity, an online message's entertainment value should exert a direct influence on likelihood to share, as well as an indirect influence mediated by self-enhancement value. The first effect is both intuitive and empirically supported. When consumers perceive online ads as entertaining, they are more likely to share the messages with others. Phelps and colleagues (2004) demonstrate that the most common motivation for passing along e-mail messages is entertainment or enjoyment. Dobele and colleagues (2007) also argue that emotional reactions (e.g., surprise, joy, anger, sadness, fear) are fundamental to forwarding behavior. Similarly, Porter and Golan (2006) find that titillating messages are likely to be forwarded, and Brown, Bhadury and Pope (2010) uncover similar results for comedic, violent ads. Such affective responses, ranging from joy and amusement to surprise and fear, all may be categorized as entertainment; for example, roller coasters, "freak shows," and "tearjerker" movies are all entertaining, though they provoke different emotional responses. Thus, we predict that online advertisements with higher entertainment value are more likely to be shared or forwarded:

> **H3a:** *The entertainment value of the message has direct positive effects on the likelihood to share the message.*

The connection between entertainment value and self-enhancement value is less obvious; it requires consideration of the consumer's process of viewing and interpreting communications. According to the meaning approach of information processing (Lannon and Cooper 1983; McCracken 1987; Mick 1988; Mick and Buhl 1992), consumers construct meanings for communications on the basis of their unique world views. All advertisements are subjectively experienced, "amid the consumer's history (past, current, and projected) and sociocultural milieu" (Mick and Buhl 1992, p. 317). Interpreting any message entails concepts of "the self, of the family, of status, of nation, of world" (McCracken 1987, p. 121) Thus, a message's derived meaning, and any entertainment value the consumer receives from that message, is inexorably intertwined with the consumer's own identity. Interpretations of and reactions to humor appeals, for example, are clearly affected by gender, ethnicity, national origin, personality, and social attitudes (Kelly and Paul 1975).

Therefore, the entertainment value of an advertising message depends on its meaning, which is determined by identity. What people find entertaining reflects who they are, how they see themselves, and how they are perceived by others. For example, a person who sees herself as trendy and stylish, may find the latest iPad advertisement entertaining, because it features current music, stylish models, and contemporary set design. This advertisement then seems expressive of the consumer's sense of self. Conversely, another person who sees himself as sophisticated and intellectual may find little humor or entertainment value in a commercial that contains comedic violence. The low entertainment value of such an advertisement results in low levels of message self-expressiveness for that person.

> **H3b:** *The entertainment value of the message has direct positive effects on the self-expressiveness of the message.*

Product Category Involvement

The consumer's level of involvement reflects the perceived personal importance attached to the acquisition, consumption, and disposition of a good, service, or idea (Celsi and Olson 1988). Involvement may be situational, such as when replacing a product, or enduring, as when a consumer is committed to and concerned about a product class (Richins and Bloch 1986). In the former case, the related behaviors decline if the situation changes, whereas in the latter case, behaviors remain stable over time. We thus predict two relationships for product category involvement: a direct positive effect on sharing likelihood and an indirect effect mediated by self-enhancement value.

Dichter (1966) links product category involvement to WOM by reasoning that consumers who feel strongly about a product type are more likely to talk to others about that product. Other researchers find that the level of interest or involvement in a product (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993) and excitement about a product consumption experience (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster 1998) stimulate WOM. According to Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988), situational and enduring involvement both influence a consumer's likelihood to engage in WOM. In general, the likelihood of sharing eWOM messages should increase when product category involvement is higher.

H4a: The level of involvement in the product category has direct positive effects on the likelihood that the message will be shared with others.

Product category involvement is also related to self-expression. What consumers regard as important is inexorably tied to their self-concept. This phenomenon can be illustrated with a mental exercise: Imagine three consumers, A, B, and C, about whom we know nothing other than their product preferences. Consumer A is highly involved in the purchase of shoes and handbags; B is highly involved in the purchase of power tools and fishing equipment; and C's involvement centers on comic books and Star Wars memorabilia. Even without any information about these consumers' ages, genders, or socioeconomic status, the indication of two high-involvement product categories likely prompts a strong visualization of each consumer's identity. Thus, product category involvement also should directly affect the self-enhancement value of a message.

H4b: The level of involvement in the product category has direct positive effects on the self-expressiveness of the message.

METHOD

Research Design and Data Collection

We conducted the study among undergraduate students at a large public university in the Southwestern United States. Student samples are often criticized, but college students are appropriate for this study for two reasons. First, they are highly representative of the at-large population of interest: Internet users likely to engage in eWOM. Second, student samples are comparatively homogeneous, which facilitates theory extraction and reduces Type II error compared with more heterogeneous samples (Calder, Phillips, and Tybout 1981).

Participants, recruited from several marketing courses, received extra credit for participation. An online survey that took 15-20 minutes to complete collected the data. To ensure a natural setting, participants received a URL that they could visit at their leisure over a two-week period. Therefore, participants could access the survey from their home computer, mobile device, or with whatever method they typically use to go online.

The students were randomly assigned one of three groups, each of which considered a different branded product and its online advertisement. From Ad Age's list of top viral videos during the study period, we selected three ads for brands and products that were likely to elicit different levels of product category involvement, self-brand congruity, and other constructs. Specifically, we chose: (1) a T-Mobile cell phone service ad featuring a "flash mob" dance at Liverpool Street Station, (2) Evian bottled water, with an ad featuring babies roller skating to the classic 1970s Sugarhill Gang song "Rapper's Delight," and (3) DG Shoes with an ad featuring rally racer Ken Block, accompanied by music (see Figure 2). When participants initiated the online survey, they read an Institutional Review Board disclosure and asked if they wished to continue. Then they were presented with an audio test sample to verify they had audio capabilities. After correctly answering a verification question about the audio, they began the survey. It started with demographic questions, along with a measure of product category involvement for the product assigned to that respondent's group. After reviewing the corresponding brand (T-Mobile, Evian, or DC Shoes), the participants completed the self-brand congruity measure. Next, the survey asked them about message content (i.e., entertainment and self-enhancement values). Finally, participants indicated their likelihood of sharing the viewed message with others. To test for possible confounding effects of previous familiarity with the ads, respondents indicated whether they had seen the ad before and if they had previously shared the ad.

Among the 643 responses, we obtained 615 usable observations. The sample demographics were as follows: 56.9% women and 43.1% men, and 56.7% Caucasian, 13.7% African-American, 13.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4.6% other, with .8% declining to answer. A computer glitch caused the loss of age information, but the sample generally consisted of undergraduate students between the ages of 20 and 24 years.

Figure 2. Viral Advertisements Used in the Study

Brand and Description   **Screen Capture**

Evian Water

Set to the 1970s hit "Rapper's Delight," by the Sugar Hill Gang, computer-enhanced babies dance and perform acrobatic features on roller skates. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=_PHnRIn74Ag.

T-Mobile

Filmed live at Liverpool Street Station, a "flash mob" performs dance moves to various musical numbers while surprised but appreciative commuters watch, film, and even join in. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v= VQ3d3KigPQM.

DC Shoes

This music video features race driver Ken Block and his Gymkhana Three 2011 Ford Fiesta, set to an original music track written and produced by hip-hop duo The Cool Kids. See http://www.youtube .com/watch?v=EYUSlnXcYeU.

MEASURES

When possible, we measured the constructs using scales adapted from prior research, such as product category involvement (Beatty and Talpade 1994), self-expressiveness (Escalas and Bettman 2005), and self-brand congruity (Sirgy et al. 1997). The dependent variable was measured using an eight-item, semantic differential, behavioral intentions scale (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975), on which respondents rated their likelihood of sharing the message using word pairs such as "likely/unlikely" and "improbable/probable." The measure of the entertainment value of the message was developed for this study. We provide all the items in Table 1.

Table 1. Scales and Measures

Items	Factor Loadings
Likelihood to share (α = .96, AVE = 68.63, CR = .94)	
Unlikely-likely	.86
Improbable-probable	.86
Probably would not-probably would	.86
Definitely would not-definitely would	.85
Nonexistent-existent	.84
Impossible-possible	.81
Uncertain-certain	.71
Entertainment value (α = .96, AVE = 72.80, CR = .93)	
This message is entertaining.	.89
This message was fun.	.88
This message was amusing.	.84
I enjoyed this message.	.83
This message was pleasant.	.83
Self-expressiveness (α = .92, AVE = 76.48, CR = .93)	
This message reflects who I consider myself to be.	.83
This message reflects who I am.	.80
Passing along this message would communicate who I am to other people.	.79
This message is consistent with how I want to present myself to others.	.77
I can identify with this message.	.72
My reaction to this message would tell others something important about me.	.68
Product category involvement (α = .91, AVE = 71.20, CR = .92)	
In general, (product) is very important to me.	.93
In general, (product) matters a lot to me.	.92
In general, I have a strong interest in (product).	.90
In general, (product) is very relevant to me.	.87
I get bored when other people talk to me about (product). (R)	.62
Self-brand congruity (α = .92, AVE = 73.02, CR = .92)	
People who use this brand are like me.	.90
I am very much like the typical person who uses this brand.	.87
The image of this brand's users is consistent with how I see myself.	.86
I can identify with people who use this brand.	.86

Notes: a = Cronbach's alpha value; AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability, and (R) = reversed item.

RESULTS

Measurement Model

To establish the reliability and validity of the measurement scales, we adopted the two-step procedure described by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using SPSS Statistics 18.0; the constructs loaded cleanly on five factors, and the Cronbach's alpha values exceeded .90 for each scale. Next, with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using AMOS 19.0 software, we examined the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). For reliability, we noted the item and construct reliability (Peter 1981). All item loadings were significant (p <

.001), and exceeded the recommended .60 parameter value. Both CR and AVE values were well above the recommended thresholds of .60 and .50, respectively, indicating acceptable reliability (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Furthermore, the CFA indicated an acceptable fit between the model and the data (χ^2 = 474, df = 309, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .043, confirmatory fit index [CFI] = .979). To assess discriminant validity, we also compared the square root of the AVE for each construct against its correlations with other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). As we show in Table 2, the square root of AVE for each construct (on the diagonal) exceeded all correlations with other constructs.

Table 2. Correlations and Discriminant Validity

	Mean	SD	SBC	LS	EV	PCI	SE
Self-brand congruity (SBC)	2.71	1.15	**.85**				
Likelihood to share (LS)	2.94	1.15	.34	**.85**			
Entertainment value (EV)	4.44	1.26	.28	.57	**.85**		
Product category involvement (PCI)	3.99	1.22	.16	.21	.18	**.84**	
Self-expressiveness (SE)	2.77	1.78	.50	.65	.58	.26	**.88**

Notes: The square root of the average variance extracted is in bold on the diagonal.

Structural Model and Results of Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypotheses, we used structural equation modeling (SEM), which allows for the simultaneous examination of all paths, in the SPSS AMOS 19.0 software. As we show in Table 3, the structural model offered satisfactory fit with the data (χ^2 = 716, df = 312, p < .001, CFI = .98, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .92, adjusted goodness-of-fit index [AGFI] = .91, RMSEA = .05). The relatively large R-square values for self-expressiveness (.45) and likelihood to share (.50) indicated that their respective antecedents accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in each construct. As expected, self-expressiveness had a significant positive effect on likelihood to share (standardized coefficient = .43, p < .001), in support of

H1. We found significant direct and mediated, through self-enhancement value, effects on likelihood to share for involvement (direct coefficient = .08; indirect coefficient = .05; total effect = .12) and entertainment value (direct coefficient = .34; indirect coefficient = .20; total effect = .53), in support of H3 and H4. However, the direct relationship between self-brand congruity and likelihood to share was insignificant (direct coefficient = .03, p = .34), so we must reject H2a. Its effect appears totally mediated by self-enhancement value (indirect coefficient = .14), in support of H2b. We summarize these standardized direct, indirect, and total effects in Table 4.

Table 3. Summary of Hypotheses Tests

	Causal Path	Est.	S.E.	p	Result
H1	Self-expressiveness → Likelihood to share	.42	.06	<.001	Supported
H2a	Self-brand congruity → Likelihood to share	.03	.05	.339	Not supported
H2b	Self-brand congruity → Self-expressiveness	.34	.04	<.001	Supported
H3a	Entertainment value → Likelihood to share	.34	.06	<.001	Supported
H3b	Entertainment value → Self-expressiveness	.48	.04	<.001	Supported
H4a	Involvement → Likelihood to share	.08	.05	.014	Supported
H4b	Involvement → Self-expressiveness	.11	.04	<.001	Supported

Table 4. Summary of Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects

Construct	Standardized Estimate	p
Self-Brand Congruity		
Total	0.16	.01
Direct	0.03	.45ns
Indirect	0.14	.01
Involvement		
Total	0.12	<.01
Direct	0.08	.02
Indirect	0.05	.02
Entertainment Value		
Total	0.53	.02
Direct	0.34	.01
Indirect	0.20	.01
Self-expressiveness		
Total	0.42	.01
Direct	0.42	.01

To test whether familiarity with the ad affected any of these relationships, we conducted a multigroup analysis with AMOS. The sample split divided those who had previously seen the ad (n = 114) from those who had not (n = 501). We compared the models for each group using critical ratios, that is, the differences between the estimate of each path for the first group and the path estimate of the second group, divided by an estimate of the standard error of the difference. A critical ratio above 1.96 indicates a significant difference between the two path estimates. Only one path estimate was significant, namely, the relationship between product category involvement and likelihood to share (critical ratio = 2.15). The path was not significant (p = .404) for those who had seen the ad before, whereas the standardized path estimate for the group who had not seen the ad reached .167 (p < .001). Thus, previous viewership appears to moderate only the relationship between involvement and likelihood to share.

Because this experiment only measured behavioral intentions, rather than actual behaviors, we also conducted a final test to examine the relationship between behavioral intentions (likelihood to forward the message) and actual self-reported behaviors (whether the respondent had previously forwarded

the message). With the 114 respondents who answered that they had seen the message, we conducted an independent samples t-test. The mean value of likelihood to share was significantly higher (p < .001) for those who had previously shared the ad (M = 4.05, SD = 1.51) than for those who had seen but not shared it (M = 2.80, SD = 1.39). Therefore, though both measures were self-reported, behavioral intentions appear to reflect actual forwarding behavior.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The results support the proposition that Internet users' message-sharing behaviors are motivated by the need for self-enhancement. Specifically, when consumers perceive an online advertisement as consistent with their self-concept, they are more likely to share that message with others. This finding is an important contribution to knowledge surrounding eWOM and viral marketing. To the extent that previous research has studied self-enhancement as a motivator of eWOM, those studies have been confined to constructs such as initiating personal growth (Ho and Dempsey 2010), displaying altruism (Ho and Dempsey 2010; Phelps et al. 2004), or displaying superior knowledge/opinion leadership (Engel, Blackwell, and Miniard 1993; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Lyons and Henderson 2005). We demonstrate that consumers also use eWOM to construct and express their identity. The likelihood that they share online advertisements depends on the degree to which consumers perceive that the ad enables them to express their identity. Therefore, our study extends previous research on symbolic consumption (e.g., Belk 1988; McCracken 1988) by suggesting that symbolic value accrues not only from purchasing and using products but also from merely engaging in eWOM about those products.

This study also provides three insights into the determinants of the perceived self-enhancement value of eWOM messages. Consumers perceive an online advertisement as higher in self-enhancement value when the brand is congruent with their self-concept, when their involvement with the product category is greater, and when they find the message entertaining. We thus help clarify the finding in a previous study that consumers are more likely to engage in WOM about self-relevant than utilitarian products (Chung and Darke 2006). That is, the social process of sharing an online advertising message shapes and helps express consumers' sense of self, such that it influences which messages consumers are most likely to share with others through eWOM. These findings are consistent with the symbolic interactionist view of identity theory.

Finally, we observe that the entertainment value of an advertisement and the consumer's involvement with the product category-but not the perceived congruity between the self and the brand-influence the likelihood to share messages through both a direct path and an indirect path, mediated by self-expressiveness. This dual influence should not come as a surprise. Sometimes people forward messages simply because they entertain, or because the product category is important for one or another reason, regardless of whether the category holds symbolic value. Paraphrasing Freud, sometimes an ad is just an ad.

The finding that self-brand congruity does not exert any significant influence beyond that provided by the self-enhancement value was surprising to us though. Intuitively, we expected consumers to engage in eWOM about brands that are similar to their self-concept, regardless of their self-enhancement properties. A possible post hoc explanation is that the symbolic concept of self-brand congruity is inexorably intertwined with self-enhancement value. Both self-brand congruity and self-enhancement value involve a judgment by the consumer about whether the brand or ad is consistent with his or her self-image. A brand's advertising should be consistent with its brand image, suggesting a strong correlation between self-brand congruity and the ad's self-enhancement value. Thus, the influence of self-brand congruity may be captured completely by the perceived self-enhancement value of the eWOM message, because it is such an integral part of the message's self-enhancement value. This potential explanation merits additional consideration.

Managerial Implications

This study demonstrates great potential to contribute to marketing practice. The ability to create and replicate successful viral advertising campaigns still remains something of a Holy Grail for online marketers. For every advertisement that successfully generates viral buzz, dozens fizzle (Leskovec, Adamic, and Huberman 2007). For the most part, Internet marketing practitioners still struggle to exploit an opportunity that has tantalized them for more than a decade. Any new insight into why consumers share some messages but not others is thus significant. The constructs we explored herein-including consumers' ability to engage in self-expressiveness, advertisements' entertainment value, and product category involvement-explain a substantial portion of this variance.

Thus, our study contributes new insights and also delves into an area largely ignored in prior research.

Advertisers have long understood that consumers selectively expose themselves to ads that they find entertaining or informative (Katz and Foulkes 1962), and research into viral advertising suggests that consumers forward ads for similar reasons. We introduce symbolic self-expression as a motivation to forward entertaining ads; by leveraging consumers' desire for self-expression, advertisers might increase the likelihood of their messages being forwarded to other consumers.

A clear and overriding implication for online marketers who hope to stimulate viral advertising effects is to make sure their communications feed into the egos of recipients. Practitioners should mindfully develop advertising messaging, themes, and value propositions that enable the targeted consumers to express their identities through forwarding behaviors, in ways that reflect favorably on the recipients/potential senders by revealing and reinforcing their self-concepts. This undertaking undoubtedly will prove easier to explain on paper than execute in practice. But the challenge associated with this prescribed task does not negate the value of the recommendation.

Marketers developing messaging that they hope will spark viral effects also should ask themselves whether and how the advertisement resonates with targeted consumer segments' generalized self-images. For example, if managers of prestige brands develop advertising that taps into the consumer's self-image while also providing a message that conveys this image to others, the likelihood of pass-along behaviors greatly increases. Similarly, brands closely identified with a desirable in-group may strategically focus on creating online advertising that conveys to others the symbolic value imbued by stereotypical users. In either situation, if consumers consider themselves attractively expressed in advertising for entertaining or otherwise highly engaging products, e-viral advertising effects appear more likely.

Brand managers have long understood the symbolic value of consumption and leveraged such insights to position and differentiate their relatively homogenous products. Our study further suggests that marketing practitioners need to recognize the symbolic value of eWOM if they aim to exploit new insights and inspire viral message effects. The extremely precise online targeting techniques currently available make the potential to segment consumers and deliver highly relevant (i.e., consumer self-enhancing) messages very accessible.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

As with any research, caveats apply. First, our sample limits the generalizability of our findings. These participants were geographically concentrated and younger than the general population. However, students are part of the population of interest, and recent research suggests the online behaviors of this age group are consistent with those of older consumers (Strutton, Taylor, and Thompson 2010). Second, the external validity is limited; participants knew they were participating in a study and viewed the online advertisements in an artificial environment. The data also come from self-reports of traits and behavioral intentions, rather than actual behaviors.

However, this study lays a foundation for an interesting stream of research. Further investigations might examine the self-enhancement value of eWOM, delving further into brand- and message-related components. A real-world study using actual consumers and viral marketing campaigns could help confirm the external validity of our findings and provide additional empirical support for our proposed model. In addition, moderating factors such as demographic profiles, psychographic traits, and Internet usage might be influential. We examined the sender's perception of the symbolic interaction, but that view is only part of the equation. Additional studies should investigate the influence of receivers (i.e., whether consumers forward different messages to different types of acquaintances, based on the identity they wish to project). Therefore, studies should investigate receivers' perspectives to determine how they interpret and/or reinforce the sender's self-concept through their own behaviors. Finally, research might test whether (and how) eWOM spurred by self-expression motives affects purchasing behaviors. As with any advertising, the ultimate objective is to generate increased sales, so if viral ads do not have this desired effect, all is for naught.

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Appendix. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of the Observed Variables

	Mean	SD	SB1	SB2	SB3	SB4	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	LS5	LS6	LS7	EV1	EV2	EV3	EV4	EV5	IN1	IN2	IN3	IN4	IN5	SE1	SE2	SE3	SE4	SE5	SE6
SB1	2.8	1.30	1																										
SB2	2.6	1.26	.76	1																									
SB3	2.4	1.20	.77	.80	1																								
SB4	3.5	1.57	.77	.70	.69	1																							
LS1	2.8	1.73	.23	.27	.29	.23	1																						
LS2	2.9	1.56	.19	.23	.26	.20	.90	1																					
LS3	3.1	1.67	.11	.18	.18	.14	.58	.60	1																				
LS4	3.4	1.73	.21	.24	.24	.21	.79	.82	.60	1																			
LS5	2.9	1.67	.26	.27	.28	.24	.87	.87	.58	.85	1																		
LS6	2.8	1.71	.23	.27	.27	.23	.88	.84	.60	.78	.87	1																	
LS7	2.7	1.79	.22	.26	.27	.21	.89	.85	.58	.76	.87	.92	1																
EV1	4.6	1.32	.15	.19	.16	.11	.47	.48	.26	.50	.50	.46	.45	1															
EV2	4.6	1.35	.14	.18	.15	.10	.49	.52	.30	.52	.52	.47	.46	.87	1														
EV3	4.5	1.39	.16	.19	.16	.11	.50	.51	.29	.49	.52	.48	.48	.80	.80	1													
EV4	4.3	1.42	.17	.21	.19	.14	.52	.54	.30	.53	.55	.50	.49	.82	.82	.80	1												
EV5	4.3	1.34	.18	.18	.16	.12	.48	.51	.31	.48	.52	.48	.48	.81	.81	.78	.80	1											
IN1	4.3	1.46	.14	.13	.11	.15	.19	.16	.10	.17	.18	.16	.17	.14	.12	.12	.14	.10	1										
IN2	4.2	1.43	.16	.15	.12	.16	.26	.23	.14	.20	.24	.22	.23	.18	.18	.16	.18	.15	.83	1									
IN3	4.1	1.44	.16	.16	.13	.15	.26	.24	.15	.19	.24	.23	.23	.17	.17	.16	.19	.16	.81	.92	1								
IN4	3.7	1.43	-.03	.01	.00	-.02	-.10	-.06	-.05	-.09	-.09	-.05	-.07	-.01	-.01	.03	-.01	.03	-.47	-.44	-.44	1							
IN5	4.1	1.36	.15	.15	.12	.16	.22	.21	.12	.20	.23	.21	.20	.18	.19	.19	.19	.15	.74	.81	.81	-.45	1						
SE1	3.1	1.40	.22	.26	.28	.20	.35	.35	.24	.32	.36	.34	.36	.28	.30	.29	.32	.32	.16	.16	.15	-.04	.15	1					
SE2	3.0	1.39	.33	.33	.35	.30	.52	.53	.31	.50	.55	.52	.50	.50	.48	.56	.56	.56	.19	.24	.24	-.06	.21	.52	1				
SE3	2.8	1.39	.26	.30	.35	.25	.50	.50	.32	.45	.52	.48	.47	.38	.42	.38	.44	.45	.19	.22	.24	-.04	.24	.59	.67	1			
SE4	2.7	1.38	.35	.38	.44	.33	.56	.56	.32	.50	.55	.55	.55	.43	.45	.44	.52	.47	.19	.25	.24	-.02	.23	.50	.75	.70	1		
SE5	2.6	1.34	.34	.36	.40	.30	.54	.53	.35	.48	.55	.51	.52	.44	.44	.45	.52	.49	.18	.22	.21	-.02	.20	.51	.74	.73	.81	1	
SE6	2.6	1.35	.33	.37	.38	.28	.53	.53	.32	.48	.53	.52	.52	.40	.40	.41	.46	.47	.17	.21	.20	-.04	.21	.56	.74	.74	.82	.84	1