

# Thrilled or Upset: What Drives People to Share and Review Product Experiences?

Anja Dieckmann and Matthias Unfried

The Internet is full of reviews and recommendations but also rants about almost everything. Indeed, we may be increasingly reluctant to book a restaurant or order an item online that has not been thoroughly reviewed. But what drives people's decision to share product and service experiences in the first place?

**Why people share their experiences** ✕ Research across different disciplines has investigated why individuals share reputational information. Behavioral economists have investigated relevant motives using experiments on social interactions. They demonstrated that, for some people, altruism is the main motivator for sharing experiences, and reviewers simply want to help others in making better decisions. For others, reciprocity seems to be the driving force – for positive as well as negative experiences. For instance, hotel guests experiencing severe failures that ruined their holidays might be inclined to retaliate with bad word-of-mouth or reviews. On the positive side, a highly satisfied customer who enjoyed an exceptionally delicious dinner might be motivated to give something back and publicly praise the restaurant. Another highly discussed factor explaining why people do (or do not) share reputational information is the costs of sharing. Preparing and verbalizing the information to be shared requires cognitive effort. Further, it takes time to actually publish or share the information, leading to additional executional costs. Lower cognitive and executional costs make sharing more likely.

## KEYWORDS

**Consumer Experience,  
Emotion, Social Sharing,  
Persuasion**

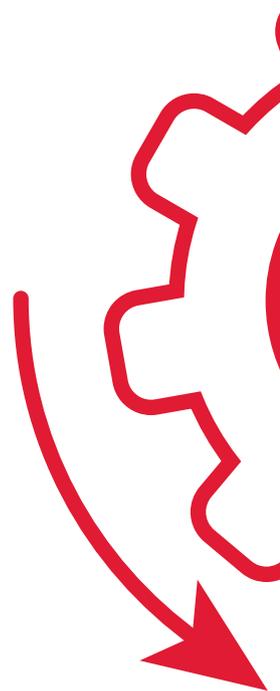
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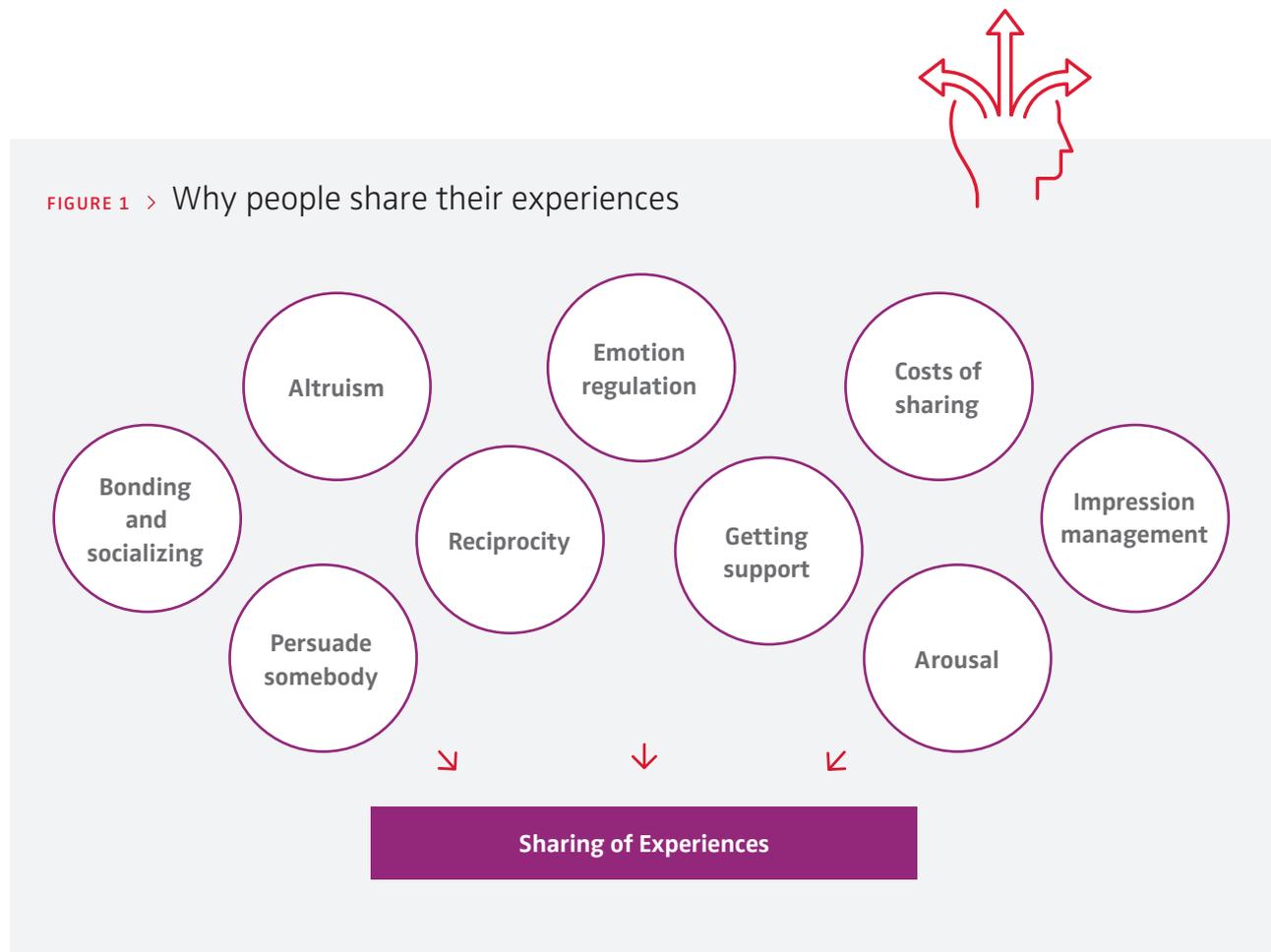
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Experimental studies by the NIM confirm that increased arousal is associated with higher levels of social sharing.





Word-of-mouth expert Jonah Berger has identified additional key factors that drive the sharing of information. Individuals want to shape the impression others have of them, or they might want to persuade others by sharing specific content. Some share experiences as a way to bond and socialize with others. Related to that, sharing information can be motivated by the desire to receive social support or additional information. Last but not least, another important function of word-of-mouth is to help consumers regulate their emotions. In the case of a rude service representative, for instance, telling others about it can help customers deal with these negative consumption experiences and reduce the emotional impact. So, it allows people to vent, but also to spread positive excitement over an experience.

**The role of emotional arousal for social sharing** ✕ Several studies highlight a sender's emotional arousal as a relevant factor for social sharing and virality of online content. According to psychological research, emotions are accompanied by a state of heightened physiological arousal or activation, which results from experiencing personally relevant events, independent of whether they are positive or negative. Arousal tends to boost social transmission. Ads that elicit

more emotional engagement receive more buzz than less activating commercials. Further, the fact that surprising, novel, or outrageous content is more likely to be shared also seems consistent with the notion that arousal boosts transmission.

**The measurement of arousal** ✕ Aside from self-report via rating scales, the measurement of arousal has been technically challenging. Activation was measured via changes in somebody's heart rate or skin conductance response with elaborate physiological tools and electrodes attached to respondents. More recently, technological progress in the field of Affective Computing has greatly facilitated emotion observation. Software for automatic and unobtrusive analysis of emotion expressions in both the face and the voice have been advanced. Research has revealed that emotional arousal can be validly detected in a person's voice by technology and/or attentive listeners who can hear when the arousal level of a speaker changes. This is the approach we used in our study on the effects of arousal on social sharing (see Box 1).

**Higher arousal – more sharing – more persuasion** ✕ The results (Figure 2) of our experiment are in line with other research confirming that increased arousal is associated with

## BOX 1

## Investigating arousal and sharing of experiences by analyzing the voice

### The experiment

Together with academic collaborators, the NIM conducted a lab experiment to identify to what extent emotional arousal drives the sharing of experiences. All participants were asked to select and watch trailers for upcoming movies varying in personal preference. In the next step, they argued for their choice in a spoken review that was recorded. Half of the respondents received a treatment for higher arousal: The participants of this experimental group were informed that, on top of voice analysis, their reviews would be evaluated by a group of peers in randomly matched pairs. A participant would earn a monetary reward when his or her review was perceived to be the more convincing one. At the end of the experiment, all participants in both groups had the opportunity to share their favorite trailer with their fellow participants, if they wanted.

We processed all recordings of the reviews automatically using our voice analysis software and calculated the average arousal level for each recording. In addition, an independent group of psychology students rated the level of arousal in each speaker's voice, and another group evaluated the persuasiveness of each review.



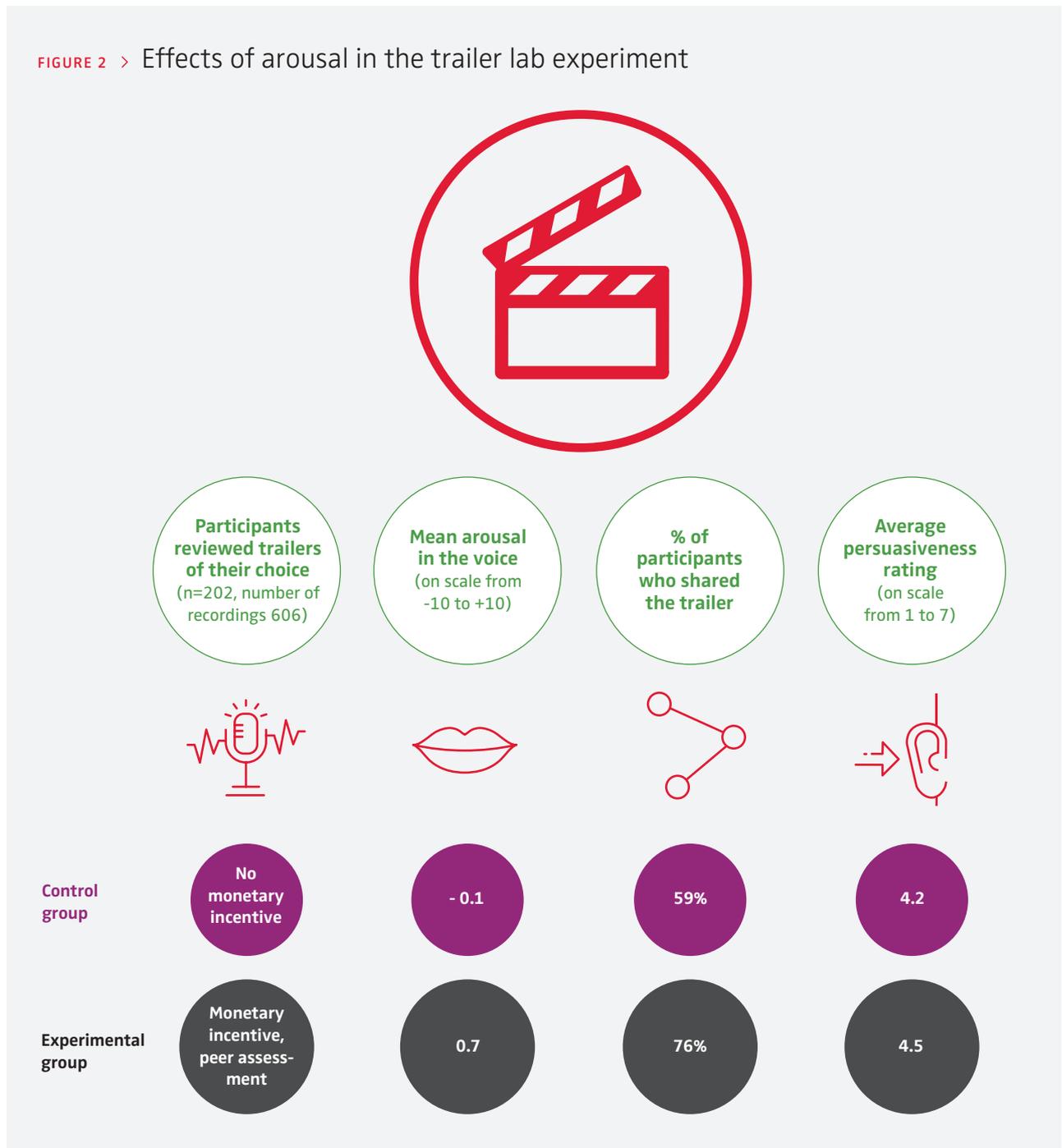
### How did arousal differences affect social sharing and persuasiveness?

We first evaluated whether vocal arousal varied with personal involvement. Unsurprisingly, arousal was higher for personal favorite trailers. Also, arousal was higher in the incentivized experimental group. In consequence, a significantly higher proportion of participants in this group decided to share the trailer with others. And how did arousal affect listeners? We found preliminary evidence that – even when controlling for trailer preference and incentives – arousal had a significant impact on the persuasiveness ratings. Thus, arousal did not only increase the likelihood of sharing experiences, it also made the shared content more convincing, possibly by increasing perceived authenticity or by social contagion. Figure 2 shows an overview of the results.

We need to point out, however, that only ratings by psychology students showed significant arousal differences. In the data from the automatic voice classifier, we did not find significant differences between experimental groups, despite a high correlation with the psychology students' ratings. This can be explained by a narrower value range and a tendency toward the mean of the automatic classifier – a phenomenon often observed in machine learning, attributed to common error-minimizing training procedures. In defense of the classifier, it should be noted that it was trained and successfully validated in a different domain and simply may not generalize well to the present scenario with inherently moderate personal relevance and arousal levels.

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authenticity and credibility.*  
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FIGURE 2 > Effects of arousal in the trailer lab experiment



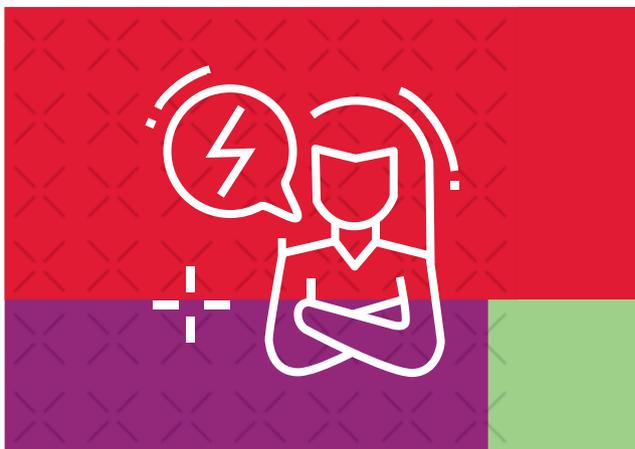
higher levels of social sharing. For practitioners in marketing, the results highlight the importance of arousal for goals like determining whether a product, service, or advertising is perceived as relevant, and whether or not consumers will share their experience in social media. Also, at least for spoken reviews, there is an indication that higher arousal can even increase persuasiveness. Revealing emotions in reviews may thus add authenticity and credibility.

#### How to make use of the insights on emotional arousal

✗ To increase the chances for sharing positive reviews of a product or service, a piece of advice for marketers is to link their brands and products to positively arousing emotions, such as amusement and surprise, beyond pure contentment. On the other hand, alarm bells should sound – quite literally – once customer dissatisfaction evolves into hot anger. Being furious at a company rather than merely disappointed may increase the likelihood of telling others about it. A brand can

be seriously damaged when bad reviews escalate. To prevent this, customer service hotlines, for instance, could use voice analysis to flag the increase of arousal during calls to initiate effective countermeasures, like consulting a manager or offering compensation.

To end on a positive note, annoyance caused by negative experiences may not necessarily translate into negative reviews. Research by Nobel-prize-winner Daniel Kahneman and colleagues demonstrates that experiences extended over time, such as restaurant visits or hotel stays, can effectively benefit from positive endings: The peak and the end of emotional experiences is what most sticks to people's memories. This buys retailers and service providers some time: if something went wrong, negative effects can be partially counteracted by friendly and effective complaint management. According to research findings, a simple apology can make a substantial proportion of customers withdraw negative reviews. ✗



#### FURTHER READING

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