

## Determinants of eWOM Persuasiveness - A Literature Review

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**ABSTRACT:** *Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has surpassed conventional marketing tools in influencing consumers in the Internet era. Thus, eWOM is gaining increasing attention from scholars and practical marketers in various industries. In this regard, this review paper focuses on factors that determine eWOM persuasiveness. We applied the systematic review technique to analyze content of 45 related articles. Our findings show that argument quality and source credibility are two major determinants of eWOM persuasiveness that have been addressed in a huge number of existing studies. In addition, some other factors that influence eWOM are found in recent emerging studies include source, consumer expertise and tie strength.*

**Keywords** –eWOM, eWOMcredibility,eWOMpersuasive, eWOM usefulness

### I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, there have been significant changes in the way consumers communicate with each other and exchange information related to brands [1]. Thanks to the development of the Internet, customers now have chances to express their negative experiences through a wide range of methods such as emails, blogs, forums, and social networking sites, regardless of their geographical locations [2]. Nowadays, the complaints from consumers can reach not just a few people but by a multitude of Internet users globally, which can seriously affect businesses. However, positive word-of-mouth can also improve brand images and boost sales revenue. Therefore, in the Internet era, the advent of eWOM communication has become a powerful tool that can bring both opportunities and challenges for consumers and brand owners.

The influence of eWOM has received the attention of both managerial and academic experts in marketing and consumer behavior literature [3]. In addition, researchers have proved the influence of eWOM on the process of information adoption [4, 5, 6]. However, few published studies provide a detailed overview of the existing research about how consumers evaluate the persuasiveness of eWOM communication before adopting it.

### II. METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1. Scope of the review

We focus on factors that determine eWOM persuasiveness. We conducted this review by searching for relevant studies, filtering and evaluating the findings in those studies. As a result, the items in the literature were chosen for our review based on keywords. Those studies that did not match the selection criteria were removed.

#### 2.2. Analysis procedure and methods

The first stage was to define the research problem to be addressed. In this study, we focus on factors that determine eWOM persuasive. We then performed a search of various bibliographic databases using predefined keywords. We decided to limit the selection to journal articles and conference papers for the present review. Accordingly, we searched for the journal articles and conference papers in Google Scholar, ProQuest, and ScienceDirect.

Since there have been countless studies on the topic, we opted to confine the time horizon to the last five years, when the idea of eWOM had gained attraction. The keywords used in the title and summary fields of several search engines were *electronic word-of-mouth, eWOM, eWOM usefulness, eWOM credibility, eWOM adoption, eWOM persuasiveness*. These keywords enable us to find papers published on the topic.

During our search, we found a massive number of similar papers on Google Scholar (<https://www.scholar.google.com/>), ProQuest (<https://www.proquest.com/>), and ScienceDirect (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/>). We acquired 45 articles after skimming through all of the downloaded papers with a special emphasis on the title and abstract. Then we proceeded with several analysis steps.

First, a sweep was made to generate the keywords for coding the articles. The keywords were chosen and grouped into three levels of coding. Second, we carefully read the full text of all the selected papers for content analysis. The findings from our content analysis are shown in the following section.

### III. FINDINGS

#### 3.1 eWOM concept

The fast development of social networking sites has turned the Internet into an interactive environment, which facilitates consumers in sharing product-related experiences [7]. While traditional word-of-mouth is considered a direct interaction, the growth of the Internet has generated a new form of this communication, named electronic word-of-mouth [8]. eWOM is defined as “any negative and positive statement from potential, current or former consumers about a product, brand or company which is shared to others through online platforms” [9]. According to scholars and researchers, both online and offline versions of word-of-mouth happen at problem recognition and information search stages during the purchasing process [10]. EWOM is the expansion of offline word-of-mouth generated on different electronic platforms such as social networking sites, blogs, websites, and online communities [11]. It can include recommendations, ratings, or posts shared on the Internet [12].

When it comes to purchasing decisions, buyers look for information related to their purchases from different sources. Therefore, Internet users are likely to trust online recommendations written by other consumers rather than conventional media when making purchase decisions [13]. eWOM is considered a reliable source of information and can be used by brand owners to improve product quality [14]. As a recommender, consumers provide information (feedback & personal opinions) that are different from the ones given by brands. This kind of word of mouth is consumer-oriented. Meanwhile, the information provided by companies is more related to functional and technical aspects [12].

#### 3.2 eWOM persuasiveness

Consumers consider electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as an essential source of information when making purchase decisions [15]. The persuasiveness of eWOM is determined by two main factors: eWOM credibility and the usefulness of the content. Studies have proven that eWOM is more credible and relevant to consumers than information generated by brands [16]. Up to now, there are a lot of studies proved the links between the credibility and usefulness of eWOM with eWOM adoption, which is believed to have an impact on consumers' attitudes, purchase intention and decisions [3, 17, 4, 18].

##### 3.2.1. eWOM perceived credibility

Wathen and Burkell (2002) wrote in their book that the most important step in persuading online information receivers is the credibility of the information transferred [19]. This will have a great impact on how an individual adopts and applies the information.

eWOM credibility is defined as the level in which consumers perceive information, comments, and suggestions related to products and services are based on facts, credible, and believable [17, 20]. eWOM adoption is based on social norms and opinions from online communities. Sussman and Siegel (2003) indicated that readers evaluate the level of eWOM credibility when receiving and analyzing the information [21]. If they believe that comment or recommendation is credible, consumers will be more confident when using this kind of information during their purchase process [22]. Petty et al. (2002) pointed out that if the source of information is trustworthy, the information receiver will no longer be suspicious about it, and adopt it immediately [23]. However, if a comment or suggestion is believed to be not trustworthy, the readers will ignore or skip this kind of information [24]. The studies of Fan and Miao (2012); Fan et al (2013); Fang (2014); Hajli (2018); Lis (2013) indicated that the perceived eWOM credibility has a major effect on information adoption in the online context [20, 25, 26, 27, 4]. After reading and filtering more than 100 journal articles, the author has summarized several determinants that affect eWOM credibility.

The first determinant is consumers' expertise which is defined as the ability of consumers to process information related to a product/ service. It is one of the strongest factors affecting how consumers evaluate the level of eWOM credibility. To be more particular, Ohanian (1990) defined expertise as the knowledge, skill, and experience which enables them to process the information precisely [28]. Expertise reflects the in-depth understanding, so the more expertise they are, the more knowledge they have about a particular topic. According to the study conducted by Doh and Hwang (2009), customers with more knowledge about products are more sensitive to unfavorable information than those without prior knowledge [29]. According to Bansal and Voyer (2000), the more expertise a consumer has about a product, the more confidence they have while making a purchase decision without collecting information from other people [30]. It means that consumers will not rely on the opinions of others while making purchase decisions. Petty and Cacioppo (1986) believed that the knowledge and experience of the consumers could be helpful during their purchase process [31].

The second factor is involvement, defined by Pham Thi Minh Ly (2016) as the motivation to process the information [32]. This factor reflects the needs, interests, and involvement of a person in a particular area.

The interest and attention to specific topic can generate more awareness and response [33]. Furthermore, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) indicated that with high involvement, readers have the motivation to process information and use peripheral routes to analyze it [31]. It means that they do not use their knowledge (due to the lack of information). Instead, they use other cues to decide their response to the received information. According to Zaichkowsky (1985) and Celsi & Olson (1988), high involvement means that the consumers have a strong intention to search for information, and as a result, more information will be collected, which leads to more confidence when making purchase decisions [33, 34].

The third factor is the tie strength between the information sender and receiver. This factor is defined as the level of closeness and similarities in terms of hobbies, lifestyle, and other social aspects among individuals [20]. The authors claimed that humans tend to believe in opinions and suggestions from their friends and close-knit relationships rather than strangers, which is explained by the fact that there is a solid natural bond between those people [30]. In the research of Pham Thi Minh Ly (2016), the author expands the definition of tie strength, not only between close-knit relationships such as friends and family but also people with similarities in their lifestyle and hobbies [32]. It is possible that they may not know each other, but the similarities in responding to eWOM can make them more reliable. Gilly (1998) indicated that tie strength has a significant impact on the way consumers evaluate the information credibility. The stronger and closer the relationships are, the more reliable information is perceived [35].

The next factor is the source credibility. Wathen and Burkell (2002) believed that source credibility is the key determinant when consumers judge online information [19]. If a website has a higher level of credibility, it is supposed to be designed carefully with eye-catching images and a well-designed layout. In the online environment, consumers are less likely to touch the products or get enough information about the information sender; as a result, the source credibility (i.e: the platforms, websites) are the critical criteria to form initial credibility. Dabholkar (2006) and Dou et al (2012) argued that the information credibility is directly affected by the source credibility or the credibility of the websites that provided the information [36, 37].

The fifth factor is the number of eWOM, which make eWOM distinguished from the traditional WOM in the offline contexts. According to Pavlov and Dimoka (2006), the number of eWOM is the popularity of this information on the Internet [38]. There are many scholars who believe that the length and number of arguments can show the strength of the information and this is believed to be essential for the consumer purchasing process. When looking for recommendations on the Internet, the popularity of the recommendation related to the products makes it more visible to consumers because the prevalence of the information can reflect the coverage of the products in the market [3]. Scanning through a huge amount of information about a product can reduce the anxiety of the consumers since they believe that there are many consumers who have made a purchase decision [39].

Next, the importance of information quality is highlighted in the previous research about information search [40, 41, 42]. eWOM can be generated by any user on social media. Hence, the quality of this information is believed to be increasingly important [43]. In other studies, scholars claimed that the quality of online recommendations has a significant impact on purchase intention [44]. Once eWOM attracts users' attention, they will be likely to judge the value it may bring to them. Consumers tend to pay attention to the accuracy and usefulness of eWOM, and a good quality argument may increase the credibility of the recommendation [45]. Park, Lee, and Ham (2007) believed that good quality and high quantity of eWOM could increase the persuasiveness of the information [46].

Lastly, the expertise of information senders can be essential in persuading the receivers, and this has been proved in previous research [47, 19]. It is evident that humans tend to trust the information shared by knowledgeable people since this looks credible to them [4].

Table 1. Determinant of eWOM credibility

Factors	Research (author, year)
Consumer expertise	Yi Wen Fan & Yi-Feng Miao (2012); Park & Kim (2008); Pham Thi Minh Ly (2016); Doh & Hwang (2009).
Consumer involvement	Pham Thi Minh Ly (2016); Yi-Wen Fan & Yi-Feng Miao (2012); Anum Saleem & Abida Ellahi (2017).
Tie strength/ rapport/ homophily	Albon et al. (2018); Lis (2013); Tan & Lee (2019); Ismagilova (2017); Yan et al. (2018).
Source credibility	Cheung et al. (2009); Ho & Chien (2010); Yin et al. (2018);

eWOM quantity	Park & Lee (2008); Petty & Cacioppo (1986); Tsao et al (2015); Thomas et al. (2019).
Source expertise	Chang et al. (2011); Cheung & Lee 2012; Ismagilova et al (2020); Pornpitakpan (2004); Albon et al. (2018); Ho và Chien (2010); Cheng & Zhou (2010); Fang (2014); Lis (2013).
Information quality	Chakraborty & Bhat (2018); Luo et al. (2014); Albon et al. (2018); Chakraborty (2019); Thomas et al (2019); Cheung et al. (2012).

### 3.2.2. eWOM usefulness

Perceived usefulness is a tool to predict the acceptance of the information [48]. This term is defined as the situation in which an individual believes that using online information will be helpful for their purchasing process [3]. When judging the usefulness of information as a mediator in the information adoption process, Sussman and Siegal (2003) indicated that this factor acts as a moderator between determinants of eWOM and eWOM adoption [49]. Erkan and Evans (2016) believed that if consumers find the information useful, they are likely to adopt this during their purchasing process [50]. Cheung et al (2008) indicated that information acceptance is the process in which humans are actively engaged with the information [42]. Furthermore, information adoption is a primary activity that users usually perform in online contexts. And scanning and skimming through comments and recommendations from other users on social networking sites before making a purchase decision is a typical example of information adoption [51]. Similarly, Internet users tend to post questions and queries related to products and services they are interested in and looking forward to receiving support from other users [49].

In the online environment, ideas and opinions related to products and services will be analyzed thoroughly. Therefore, consumers tend to consider whether the information received will be helpful for them when it comes to buying decisions. As a result, if they believe that comment or recommendation in an online community is helpful, they are more likely to accept and use this kind of information [17]. Below are determinants of eWOM usefulness proved by previous research.

The first factor is argument quality. Word of mouth can be generated by any Internet user. Therefore, the quality of eWOM is of paramount importance [43]. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1998), argument quality reflects the strength and the suitability of persuasive messages [52]. This definition is similar to the opinion of Petty and Cacioppo (1981) that it includes strong arguments and persuasive information rather than weak and false information [31]. In line with previous authors, Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006) studied argument quality by focusing on the strength of argument [53], while Cheung et al (2008) use the strength of argument to highlight the fact that whether this message can persuade a person to believe in something or perform an action [42].

Wathen and Burkell (2002) show that source expertise has a significant impact on perceived usefulness [19]. Consumers tend to look for opinions from experts rather than unknowledgeable people when they want to expand their knowledge related to products. However, in the online context, it is hard to identify the level of expertise and credibility of information senders due to the lack of previous communication and actual link with their real personal identity [43]. There is other research that shows that social networking sites provide users with some clues related to the personal identity of the information senders, for example, personal profile. By looking at the personal profile of users on social networking sites, consumers can evaluate the verification of the comments or recommendations, which makes it easier for them to filter the information during their purchase decision [54].

The need for information is the third factor, which is considered one of the motivations for traditional and electronic word-of-mouth [55]. Previous research defined the need for information as looking for advice or opinion [9, 56]. Researchers believe that consumers seeking information on the Internet are more likely to find the appropriate and usable information, which can affect their purchase process [57, 9, 56].

Another determinant is information quantity. According to Elaboration Likelihood model, when receivers are not able to process the information, they will rely on other cues, apart from information quality, one of which is information quantity, a signal of peripheral route [17]. Exposure to loads of information related to products can reduce anxiety during the purchasing process because they believe that many consumers have bought this product [58]. Therefore, from the consumers' perspective, quantity is a tool to predict the quality of the product, and it can help evaluate the usefulness of eWOM messages [58, 59].

Lastly, tie strength is also a determinant of eWOM perceived usefulness. Due to the strong connection of social networking sites, it is possible for both strangers and acquaintances to communicate and exchange their opinions [60]. Researchers believe that information shared by people with close-knit relationships or similar lifestyles and hobbies will have a more significant impact on consumers in online communities. Wang et al

(2012) indicated that the tie strength between senders and receivers is the key point when consumers adopt eWOM from other people during the decision-making process [61].

Table 2: Determinant of eWOM perceived usefulness

Factors	Authors, Year
Argument quality	Cheung et al (2008); Cheung (2014); Erkan & Evans (2016); Gunawan & Huarng (2015); Hussain et al (2018); Zhu et al (2015); Phung Minh Tuan et al (2020); Le Minh Chi & Le Tan Nghiem (2018); Ronnie Cheung (2014); Duong Hanh Tien et al (2018); Adilla Anggraeni et al (2020).
Source credibility	Erkan & Evans (2016); Le Minh Chi & Le Tan Nghiem (2018); Cheung et al (2008); Gunawan & Huarng (2015); Zhu et al (2015); Duong Hanh Tien et al (2018); Adilla Anggraeni et al (2020)
Need for information	Erkan & Evans (2016); Le Minh Chi & Le Tan Nghiem (2018)
Information quantity	Qiang Yan et al (2016); Park & Lee (2008)
Tie strength	Zhu et al (2015)

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