Analysis of Factors Influencing Traditional WOM and eWOM

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Abstract. *This study aims to investigate the effect of consumer innovativeness, need to belong, and source credibility on the receipt of information within WOM and eWOM communication. Empirical research was conducted on 370 respondents in Croatia. Structural equation modelling analysis was used to test the structural relationship between variables from the proposed model and to test hypotheses. The study results confirm the positive association of proposed variables with WOM and eWOM, except the association of need to belong with WOM, which has not been established. In addition to new scientific knowledge, practitioners can use the results in implementing activities to increase customer engagement with the brand and company.*

Keywords. WOM, eWOM, consumer innovativeness, need to belong, source credibility

1 Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) is considered the oldest marketing activity, as old as the oral tradition (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014). The term itself suggests that it is about direct communication, in the context of marketing, about the oral sharing of information regarding products or services. One of the more precise definitions of oral tradition is given by Arndt, who defines it as "direct non-commercial face-to-face conversations between people who have experienced and those who are considering a product or a service" (Arndt, 1967). From the very nature of this type of communication, it follows that it is not under any control and spontaneously takes place. Kotler & Armstrong (2016, p. 171) emphasize that it occurs naturally when consumers begin to chat about the brand and share their positive or negative experiences. As such, it has very high credibility, which is confirmed by previous research, stating that 9 out of 10 consumers trust such information when they receive it from relatives, friends, and acquaintances (Nakhaee & Kheiri, 2012). While on the other hand, only 14% of consumers trust commercials (Halbusi & Tehseen, 2018). Given the great impact of such communication on brand perception and purchasing intent and the fact that it cannot be directly influenced and is not under the advertiser's control, appropriate attention is paid to it. Public relations, publicity, personal sales, direct marketing, provoking greater engagement of users in communication with the company are some of the activities that can, to some extent, affect such communication. In defining WOM, Kimme & Kitchen (2014) emphasize that it is "the oldest, newest marketing medium", which indicates the special role that WOM has in today's digital environment and speaks of eWOM.

Given the large impact of WOM on customer behavior, this paper aimed to determine the impact of three variables (individual consumer characteristics) on adopting information shared by WOM and eWOM communication. Individual consumer characteristics are considered essential in deciding to share information (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017).

In addition to new knowledge related to customer behaviour when making purchasing decisions, the results can be used by marketing experts to form promotional strategies and knowledge that will help create activities that WOM will use to create a positive perception of the brand and the company as a whole. The paper consists of 5 parts. First, the introduction is followed by a review of previous research and research methodology. The last part gives a conclusion and practical applications.

2 Literature review

The research is based on a model developed by Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko (2017), examining the influence of consumer innovativeness, the need to belong, and the source credibility on the acceptance of information in traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) and eWOM. The conceptual model of

the research and proposed hypotheses are presented in figure 1.
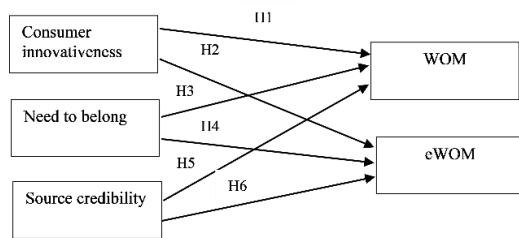
Figure 1. Conceptual research model

2.1 WOM and eWOM communications

Various studies emphasize the role of WOM as a way of personally transmitting (sharing) information about products and services in shaping attitudes and influencing brand and purchasing behaviour (Sohaib et al., 2020), (Torlak et al., 2014), (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017), (Halbusi & Tehseen, 2018), (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008). Several authors emphasize that this is the most effective promotional medium (Torlak et al., 2014), (Abubakar & Llkan, 2016), (Halbusi & Tehseen, 2018), which is not under the direct control of advertisers. By switching communication to digital media, consumers have the opportunity through various ways (via e-mail, blogs, virtual communities, instant messaging platforms, newsgroup, product review website, fun clubs, etc.) (Torlak et al., 2014), (Sohaib et al., 2020), (Siddiqui et al., 2021) to seek, give, and share various opinion (Sohaib etr al., 2020). Traditional WOM replaces eWOM, which refers to "any positive or negative statement made by present or previous customers about a product, service or company, which is made available to large audiences via the Internet" (Abubakar, Ilkan, & Sahin, 2016). Two facts particularly emphasize the importance of eWOM. People trust strangers who share their reviews of products and services online rather than official reviews on TV, radio, or print media (Nuseir, 2019) and the second lack of time for old-fashioned personal communications (Siddiqui et al., 2021). In this regard, various studies emphasize the credibility of eWOM and the impact and connection of the credibility of eWOM with brand awareness, which directly implies purchasing decisions (Ansari et al., 2019), (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Previous research also highlights two important factors influencing the usefulness and popularity of eWOM, which are a simpler and easier selection of products and services that do not require much effort and reduced risk of making a bad purchasing decision (choosing the right product) (Tapanainen, Thanh, & Trung, 2021). Given the significant influence of WOM and eWOM on the creation of attitudes and thus the purchasing behavior of consumers, research has focused on social factors of influence and motivation to participate in this type of

communication. Regarding social networks, Sohaib et al. (2020) talk about generating factors (trust, homophily, tie strength, helping others, self-disclosure, sense of belonging, and satisfaction) and eWOM impacts (purchase intentions, decision making, risk reduction, credibility, and loyalty). In contrast to previous research, Kursan-Milakovic et al. (2017) in their work, investigate the influence of individual consumer characteristics (consumer innovativeness, need to belong, and perceived source credibility) on both traditional WOM and eWOM.

2.2 Consumer innovativeness (CI)

According to Lee et al. (2013), innovative consumers are ready to be among the first to accept a novelty, change, new trend, idea, or a new challenge and thus emphasize their uniqueness. In this regard, Morton, Anable, & Nelson (2016) point out that the innovative consumer is characterized by "curiosity, ambition, and reasonableness". Midgley & Dowling view innovation as part of the human personality and believe that each individual has a certain dose of innovation or desire to seek new information, stimuli, or experience (Midgley & Dowling, 1978), (Hirschman, 1980). In addition, Peres et al. (2013) state two basic motives for such behavior altruism (help in sharing information) and reciprocity (desire to return the service in the same measure). In the context of WOM and eWOM, innovation refers to the consumer's desire to seek news and information about products and services (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017). Previous research has found that a higher level of innovation leads to more positive reactions in terms of adopting innovations (Ali, 2018). In line with previous knowledge, it is to be expected that innovative consumers will be more inclined to seek information through WOM and eWOM. Hypotheses H1 and H2 were proposed on this track.

H1: Consumer innovation has a positive effect on WOM.

H2: Consumer innovation has a positive effect on eWOM.

2.3 Need to belong (NB)

In their need to belong theory, Baumeister & Leary (1995) consider the need to belong to "one of the most important psychological needs of man". They define it as an "innate human motive or desire to form and maintain close, lasting relationships with other individuals". The extreme strength of this need motivates people to devote additional time and energy to establishing and maintaining social contacts (Cremer & Leonardelli, 2003). Cheung & Lee (2012) sense of belonging is observed as part of collective motivation where people with this need are motivated to share activities and help kinship partners. For this reason, this desire to belong and connect with other people is, in theory, used as a predictive antecedent of

using and participating in consumer communication with a special emphasis on social networks (Sicilia et al., 2016), (Chu, Lien, & Cao, 2018). Phelps et al. consider the need to belong as the basic motive of consumers in forwarding email, while Ho & Dempsey consider the connection between the need to belong and sharing online content (Phelps et al., 2005), (Ho & Dempsey, 2009). Therefore association has not been established. Sicilia et al. (2016), in the context of brand-oriented WOM communication they find that it is influenced by the need to belong. The positive impact of a sense of belonging on consumers' eWOM intention is also determined by Cheung & Lee (2012). In contrast, Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko (2017) do not find a link between the need to belong and participation in WOM and eWOM communication (information receiving). Based on the analysis of the literature, hypotheses H3 and H4 were proposed.

H3: The consumer's need to belong has a positive effect on WOM.

H4: The consumer's need to belong has a positive effect on eWOM.

2.4 Source credibility (SV)

Various sources confirm the great importance of WOM communication in the purchasing decision-making process. Cheung et al. point out that the source's credibility in that communication directly affects the intent to purchase (Cheung et al., 2009). This fact is confirmed by various studies (Lis, 2013), (Menendez, Saura, & Martinet-Navalon, 2019), (Rusdiana, Suroso, & Suwandari, 2019), (Sicilia, Palazon, & Delgrado-Ballester, 2016). Source credibility Ohanian defined as "communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message" (Ohanian, 1990). In this context, more research aims to determine the impact of credibility perception on the acceptance of WOM and eWOM communication (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017), (Menendez, Saura, & Martinet-Navalon, 2019), (Sallam, 2014). In research, the impact of source credibility is often considered through three basic elements: source expertise, trustworthiness, and homophily (Rusdiana, Suroso, & Suwandari, 2019), (Sallam, 2014). Rusdiana, Suroso, & Suwandari (2019) find that all three elements significantly positively impact purchase intentions. Zohura, Choudhury, & Sakib (2017) research include the impact of eWOM's quantity, polarity, logic and articulation, source and user's prior knowledge/expertise on eWOM's credibility. The positive impact of resource credibility on eWOM is also determined by Kursan-Milaković et al. (Kursan-

Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017), while a positive impact on traditional WOM has not been established. Based on the analysis of the literature, hypotheses H5 and H6 were proposed.

H5: Source credibility has a positive effect on WOM.

H6: Source credibility has a positive effect on eWOM.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Scale development

The research aims to determine the influence of three antecedents (consumer innovativeness, need to belong, and source credibility) on the adoption of information shared by WOM and eWOM communication. Since eWOM is becoming the dominant form of this communication, WOM and eWOM have been considered parallelly. The measurement scale used in the study was taken from a previous study by Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko (2017). Respondents' attitudes were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree).

3.2 Data collection

Data for the purposes of empirical research were collected by conducting an online survey. Three hundred and seventy (370) correctly completed questionnaires were collected. Of the total number of respondents, 73% (271) were women, and 27% (99) were men. According to age, 9% (33) were younger than 20 years, 55% (204) were aged between 21 to 30 years, 19% (70) were between 41-50 (44), and those older than 50 years were 5% (19).

3.3 Data analysis

In order to conduct further analysis and test hypotheses, the measuring instrument was tested by determining its validity and reliability. Statistical software packages IBM SPSS 23 and SPSS AMOS 26 were used in statistical analyses. To verify the reliability of the measuring instrument, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and the Cronbach's alpha if item deleted was calculated. In addition, composite reliability (CR) was determined for additional validation of the measuring instrument (Peterson & Kim, 2012). Values above 0.7 for Cronbach's alpha and above 0.6 for composite reliability show good reliability of the measuring instrument (Fornely & Larcker, 1981) (Table 1).

Table 1. Validity and reliability of the measuring instrument

Construct	Item	Internal reliability			Convergent validity			
		Cronbach`s alpha	Item- total correlation	Factor loading	Composite reliability	AVE	Mean	SD
Consumer innovativeness	IN1 IN2 IN3	,788	,699 ,699 ,738	,668 ,642 ,804	,749	,501	3,721 3,878 3,781	0,985 0,936 1,024
Need to belong	NB1 NB2	,716	,559 ,559	,696 ,804	,721	,565	3,616 3,945	1,179 1,102
Source credibility	SC1 SC2 SC3	,762	,678 ,620 ,752	,765 ,804 ,620	,776	,538	3,648 3,645 3,481	0,747 0,804 0,865
WOM	WOM1 WOM2 WOM3	,856	,892 ,702 ,754	,689 ,912 ,878	,869	,692	4,286 3,964 3,691	0,785 1,077 1,115
eWOM	eWOM1 eWOM2 eWOM3	,809	,764 ,684 ,758	,716 ,826 ,758	,80	,584	3,821 3,700 3,964	1,007 1,118 1,023

In order to verify the validity of the measuring instrument, construct, content, convergent, and discriminant validity were determined. Construct and content validity are ensured by applying a verified measuring instrument in theory and through the implementation of exploratory factor analysis (EFC). In order to determine the suitability of the data for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure for all variables and the Bartlett-off test were performed (Table 2).

Table 2. KMO and Bartletts test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		,796
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2061,253
	df	91
	Sig	,000

Tests show good values (KMO = 0.796, p = 0.000 <0.05). Values less than 0.6 indicate that the data are not suitable for performing factor analysis. For factor analysis to be successful, the value for Bartlett's test of sphericity should be less than 0.05 (Rojs-Kramer et al., 2015). Both tests show the suitability of the data for conducting the factor analysis. The exploratory factor analysis was done based on 14 questions. The analysis identified five factors with eigenvalues above 1 and factor loads above 0.5. Selected factors explain 74.19% of the total variance.

Convergent validity, as the degree of connectivity within a construct, was measured by determining composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). Table 1 shows that the

values obtained for CR and AVE are above the recommended 0.6 and 0.5 for AVE (Fornely & Larcker, 1981). That the constructs in the measuring instrument are not overly correlated is determined by measuring discriminant validity. The results in Table 3 confirm good discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity analysis

	CI	NB	CV	WOM	eWOM
CI	**0,707**				
NB	0,307	**0,752**			
CV	0,252	0,143	**0,733**		
WOM	0,602	0,301	0,316	**0,832**	
eWOM	0,391	-0,041	0,319	0,421	**0,764**

3.4 Structural relationship analyses (SEM)

Structural equation modeling was applied to test the suitability of the model and to test the hypotheses. For this purpose, the statistical software package SPSS AMOS 26 was used. First, the suitability of the conceptual model is examined by determining the goodness of fit indices (GFI, AGFI, NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR). Table 4 shows the obtained values from which it can be concluded that the actual data support the proposed model.

Table 4. Model fit indices

(Fit indices)	Test model	Suggested value	Source
Chi-square	138,289; df=67, p<0,001		
χ^2/df	2,064	< 5	(Park & Kim, 2014)
GFI	0,951	>0,8	(Halmi, 2016)
AGFI	0,923	>0,8	(Halmi, 2016)
NFI	0,934	>0,9	(Park & Kim, 2014)
RFI	0,910	>0,9	(Park & Kim, 2014)
IFI	0,965	>0,9	(Park & Kim, 2014)
TLI	0,952	>0,9	(Kim & Han, 2014)
CFI	0,964	>0,9	(Hu & Bentler, 1999)
RMSEA	0,054	0,03 to 0,08	(Hair et al., 2014)
SRMR	0,055	<0,08	(Hair et al., 2014)

3.5 Hypothesis testing

The proposed hypotheses were tested by performing SEM analysis. As a result, all hypotheses except hypothesis H3 were confirmed. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 5

For the purpose of testing the model, the determination coefficient (R2) was also calculated. The result shows that 44.2% of the variance of the dependent variable WOM was explained by independent variables (informativeness, need to belong, and source credibility). At the same time, the same variables explain only 27.7% of the variance of the eWOM

Table 5. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Standard estimate	Critical value (CR)	p-value	Supported
H1 (+)	IN	WOM	0,557	7,244	***	Supported
H2 (+)	IN	eWOM	0,434	5,596	***	Supported
H3 (+)	NB	WOM	0,091	1,550	0,121	N/S
H4 (+)	NB	eWOM	-0,215	-3,059	0,002	Supported
H5 (+)	SC	WOM	0,173	3,072	0,002	Supported
H6 (+)	SC	eWOM	0,248	3,802	***	Supported

4 Conclusion and practical implications

This study examines the impact of three antecedents (consumer innovativeness, need to belong, and source credibility) on the acceptance of traditional WOM and eWOM communication. Hypotheses H1 and H2 were supported, thus establishing a significant positive association of consumer's innovativeness with the acceptance of WOM and eWOM communication. The result is confirmed by previous studies (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017), (Kursan & Ivasečko, 2018), (Sun et al., 2006). On the other hand, a positive connection of the need to belong with WOM (H3) was not confirmed. This result is based on the research of Kursan-Milaković et al., who also did not establish that connection (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017). Referring to earlier research related to interpersonal influences and age, authors tried to explain these results by the characteristics of

students (who formed the sample) who perceive themselves as self-esteemed or self-actualized, and a priori reject belonging to anybody or anything.

In contrast, a positive relationship between the need to belong with eWOM was established, and hypothesis H4 was confirmed. The greater the need to belong, the greater is the desire to accept eWOM communication. That relationship was not found in the Kursam-Milaković study (Kursan & Ivasečko, 2018). The literature analysis determined that there is a lack of research on the connection between the need to belong and WOM / eWOM communication, which is why this result is also useful. Given the research that deals with the sociological aspects of accepting communication through social networks, it can be concluded that the need to belong also has a significant effect on eWOM communication. Hypotheses H5 and H6 were also confirmed. Source credibility has a positive effect on the acceptance of WOM/eWOM communication. Previous research by Kursan-Milaković et al. did not find the connection between source credibility and WOM while confirming with eWOM (Kursan-Milaković, Mihić, & Ivasečko, 2017). The result is explained by

demographics, which points to the fact that the younger population trusts the information they receive through eWOM more. The impact of source credibility on WOM communication is determined by several studies (Rusdiana, Suroso, & Suwandari, 2019), (Menendez, Saura, & Martinet-Navalon, 2019), (Sallam, 2014), (Cheung et al., 2009).

In addition to new scientific knowledge, the result can be useful to marketing professionals in developing customer relationships and making efforts to increase their engagement with a brand and company. For the purposes of the research, three selected predictors were used, which can be considered as a limiting factor of the research. The relatively weak impact of these variables on WOM, especially on eWOM, requires the inclusion of other variables that would better explain the reasons for accepting information through eWOM communication. It is important to mention that the development and application of new technologies radically change the current patterns of customer behaviour, which certainly requires consideration from the aspect of developing and maintaining communication with customers. The possibility of high personalization in communication also generates various factors influencing that communication, which directs future research.

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