

BEYOND CREDIBILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIATORS BETWEEN ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine the mediating role of five variables in the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention. This goal is justified by new trends in e-commerce and social media, where consumer impressions and influences have specific means of transmission and reception. The raw data were collected via an online survey of 359 Romanian participants and analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling and specific mediation analysis techniques. The results show that perceived product quality, emotional response to eWOM and perceived buying risk fully mediate this relationship, while brand trust and brand engagement do not. These findings suggest that effective eWOM communication should enhance quality perceptions, evoke positive emotions, and boost customer confidence by reducing perceived purchasing risks. The primary contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the influence of credibility on buying intent is not direct, but rather mediated by other key factors: perceived product quality, perceived buying risk and emotional reaction of the eWOM recipient. Consequently, a well-crafted eWOM message should address issues of both product quality and buying risks. By directly tackling these critical factors, such a message can reduce customer doubt, build trust and improve the likelihood of influencing purchasing behavior. Since this research assessed purchase intention rather than actual behavior, future investigations could use field studies to explore whether the proposed mediating variables similarly mediate real-world purchasing decisions.

Keywords: eWOM credibility; purchase intention; perceived buying risk; emotional response to eWOM; perceived product quality

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a world in which the customer is always at the center of the business, understanding the mechanisms that determine the attitude towards buying intent is extremely important and has major implications for commerce (Gong & Liu, 2025), (Shi et al., 2025). Given that an important part of commercial activities are carried out through mechanisms that involve the use of online technologies, the opinions of online customers have a strong impact on purchasing decisions (Tang & Chung, 2025), (Ou et al., 2022).

Various models have been developed in the literature (Albayrak & Ceylan, 2021), (Li et al., 2023) that consider the direct influence between eWOM and purchase intention (Nofal et al., 2022), but mediation effects have not been fully covered by previous studies. Starting from previous results from the literature (Leong et al., 2022), (Maslim & Pasaribu, 2021), (Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2022) the current study has the objective to determine the factors with mediating potential between eWOM and intention to purchase, thus filling a research gap that will be identified and justified in the following paragraphs. Based on this research gap, the research goal of the article is to clearly determine whether the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention is directly or mediated by other variables.

In this approach introduced in this study, the novelty lies in the complex analysis of the links between eWOM credibility and intention to purchase through the lens of mediating relationships. In this way, the results obtained will clarify the nature of the relationships between these constructs, and sellers and influencers will be able to improve their marketing strategies in the new context.

Based on the research goal, the main research questions that are considered are the following: is the relationship between eWOM credibility and intention to purchase a direct one or is it mediated by other factors? If the relationship is mediated, what are the mediating factors and what is the nature of this relationship?

In the following, it is developed a research model that includes several research hypotheses based on scientific results from the literature. Then, it is analyzed the research model using the Structural Equation Modeling technique on a representative sample of respondents. Based on the results obtained from the model analysis, the study presents the relevant discussions about the hypotheses and the model, together with the practical implications, conclusions, limitations and future directions.

2. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

In the scientific literature, intention to purchase is a variable of overwhelming importance for e-commerce players, being a determining factor in sales volume. The relationship between eWOM and purchase intent can be better understood from the combined perspective of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the stimulus – organism – response framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). According to the stimulus – organism – response model, external stimuli (in our case, eWOM messages) influence behavioral responses through internal cognitive and

affective states like trust, positive attitude or good perceived value. Additionally, the theory of planned behavior suggests that behavioral intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Integrating these viewpoints, eWOM is expected to affect purchase intention indirectly, influencing the consumer's psychological mechanisms. This is ground for examination of possible mediating variables such as brand trust, perceived quality, emotional response, perceived buying risk, and engagement with the brand, rather than assuming a direct effect.

eWOM Credibility

eWOM refers to recommendations and reviews distributed in the digital space, which have the potential to influence consumer perceptions of products and services. Unlike traditional WOM, eWOM has a much wider audience and is accessible indefinitely (Iqbal et al., 2022). In this dynamic, credibility plays a key role, as consumers tend to pay more attention to information that is considered trustworthy and relevant.

The credibility of eWOM is influenced by several factors, including source expertise, perceived honesty, message relevance and information quality. A study conducted by (Mainolfi & Vergura, 2022) emphasizes that consumers' perception of source credibility directly influences the acceptability of the message conveyed. If a review or recommendation is perceived as authentic and based on real experiences, the likelihood of it positively influencing purchase intention increases significantly. According to (Nistor et al., 2021), building indicators for measuring the sentiment of people on a specific topic of discussion is a very difficult task.

In addition to message characteristics, the platform on which the eWOM is distributed plays an important role in building credibility. Established platforms, such as Amazon, TripAdvisor or major social networks, provide a more secure and transparent environment for consumers, which contributes to increasing trust in the information distributed. However, recent research, including (Reyes-Menendez et al., 2019), highlights that information overabundance may diminish the eWOM effect, as consumers become more skeptical when encountering conflicting reviews.

An interesting mechanism is related to the formation of positive attitudes towards brands and products. Positive reviews, backed by sources that are considered credible, contribute to creating a favorable image of a brand, which can lead to an increase in purchase intention. For example, a study by (Ngarmwongnoi et al, 2020) shows that reviews that contain clear details, concrete examples and an authentic tone are more effective in shaping consumer behavior than those that are vague or generic.

Brand Trust

In today's digital context, where social networks and rating platforms play a key role in purchasing decisions, the concept of eWOM (electronic Word-of-Mouth) has gained significant importance. The credibility of this information plays a key role in shaping purchase intention, but one factor that mediates this relationship is brand trust. Studies, such as the one conducted by (Erkan & Evans, 2016), highlight that a positive perception of eWOM credibility directly influences consumer trust in the product or service being analyzed. However, purchase intention is not only shaped by eWOM credibility, but also by deeper factors, such as the emotional and cognitive connection between the consumer and the brand.

This is based on a trust relationship built over time between the brand and consumers. According to a study by (Jain et al., 2022), brand trust mediates the relationship between the credibility of information received through eWOM and purchase intention by reducing uncertainty and creating a sense of security associated with the purchase decision.

In this case, eWOM credibility serves as a temporary proxy for brand trust, as concluded by (Seo & Park, 2018). The relationship between these variables is not without complications. Brand trust can be affected by discrepancies between eWOM messages and direct consumer experience. If messages deemed credible turn out to be misleading, brand trust suffers a sharp decline, which in the long run affects purchase intention. Therefore, in order to ensure a positive relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention, it is essential for brands to support a consistent experience that validates the positive information distributed online.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned aspects, the following research hypothesis is developed:

H1: The relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention is mediated by brand trust.

Perceived Product Quality

Consumer behaviour is influenced to a considerable extent by the opinions expressed online, and eWOM credibility is recognized as a key factor in determining buying intention. However, this influence is not direct and may be mediated by consumers' perception of perceived product quality. Analysis of this complex relationship provides insight into consumer decision-making processes.

Perception of product quality plays an important role in mediating this relationship, as consumers use information from reviews to form an evaluation of the product. Perceived quality, defined as the consumer's subjective evaluation of a product's benefits and performance, is often constructed based on information received through eWOM. For example, a study by (Daowd, et al., 2021) suggests that when reviews are perceived as credible, consumers associate this information with a more favorable perception of product quality, which in turn increases purchase intention.

The mechanism by which quality perception mediates the relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention involves several steps. First, consumers assess the credibility of eWOMs through the details, source and consistency of information. When these reviews are considered authentic, they positively influence the perception of the product, generating a higher level of confidence in its quality. This increased perception of quality translates into an increased likelihood that the product will be purchased. For example, the study by (Hussain et al., 2017) emphasizes that reviews that provide specific examples and are supported by real experiences are more effective in shaping quality perception and, hence, purchase intention. Some studies (Furtună et al., 2016) revealed that there are different typologies of consumers and patterns of their behavior, with influence on perception of quality. According to (García-Machado et al., 2020), there are many motivational forces that drive consumer choice.

On the other hand, an expensive or technical product requires a higher level of eWOM credibility to generate a positive perception of its quality, according to research by (Bushara, et al., 2023).

Based on previous studies, the following research hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention is mediated by perceived product quality.

Emotional Response to eWOM

The credibility of reviews, perceived as the authenticity and reliability of the messages conveyed, plays a particularly important role in influencing purchasing decisions. However, the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention is mediated by several factors, including consumers' emotional response to these messages. Recent studies (Liu et al., 2021) highlight how emotions generated by eWOM content contribute to perceptions and thus to decision-making.

The credibility of eWOM is essential for the messages delivered to have a significant impact on consumers. Information considered authentic and relevant is more likely to trigger positive emotional responses, such as enthusiasm, trust or anticipated satisfaction. These emotional responses play an important media role, transforming consumers' cognitive appraisals into motivational impulses that lead to purchase intent. For example, a study by (Donthu et al., 2021) shows that positive emotional responses to authentic and well-argued reviews significantly increase the likelihood that a consumer will consider the advertised product.

The mediation of emotional response is also supported by the type of product or service discussed. Products with a strong emotional component, such as those in the luxury or entertainment categories, are more likely to generate intense emotional responses, which increases the influence of eWOM credibility on buying intention (Pangarkar et al., 2023).

Given the previous results, it can be argued that the emotional response to eWOM is a key mechanism through which the credibility of reviews influences purchase intention. Therefore, the following research hypothesis is proposed in the model of this article:

H3: The relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention is mediated by emotional response to eWOM.

Perceived Purchasing Risk

The credibility of eWOM is seen as a key determinant of purchase intention, being associated with the level of trust that consumers place in the information offered online. However, the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention is often influenced by intermediary factors, a key one of which is the perceived risk of purchase. Perceived risk plays a mediated role through its influence on how consumers evaluate available information and make purchasing decisions.

Perceived purchase risk is defined as the level of uncertainty and potential for loss that a consumer associates with a transaction. This concept can be divided into multiple dimensions such as financial risk, performance risk or social risk. For example, in the case of an expensive or highly technical product, consumers are more likely to perceive a higher financial risk. The credibility of the eWOM plays a key role in mitigating these risks by providing insights from previous users that validate or challenge product expectations. According to (Filiari et al., 2021), consumers perceive credible reviews as a substitute for missing information, which reduces the

perceived level of uncertainty. Studies by (Mircea et al., 2022), (Hurbean, 2020), (Gînguță et al., 2023), (Gruia, et al., 2024) reveal that some technologies like blockchain and artificial intelligence can be used to decrease the risk perception, for both individual and institutional consumers.

In addition to its role in reducing perceived risk, eWOM credibility also influences consumers' trust in the brand, which can help to reduce perceived risk even more effectively. For example, according to (Jiang, et al., 2021), reviews that contain positive and detailed descriptions of the user experience can generate a favorable perception of the brand's reputation while reducing concerns about potential losses. Reducing perceived risk through credible reviews enhances consumer confidence, creating a favorable framework for purchase decisions.

Based on the arguments presented above, it is hypothesized that:

H4: The relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention is mediated by perceived purchasing risk.

Engagement with the Brand

The literature (Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2021) shows that the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention is not direct, but may be mediated by consumer engagement with the brand. This phenomenon involves the active interaction, emotional attachment and level of dedication that consumers develop towards a brand, which significantly influences how they perceive the information they receive.

The credibility of eWOM directly influences the quality and authenticity of consumer interaction with the brand. Messages deemed authentic and relevant stimulate active consumer engagement, generating both emotional and behavioral responses. Recent research by (El-Baz et al., 2022) highlights that online reviews perceived as credible lead to users being more likely to interact with the brand through digital channels such as social networks, mobile apps or dedicated websites. This increased engagement helps to strengthen consumers' connection with the brand and facilitates the shift from intent to action.

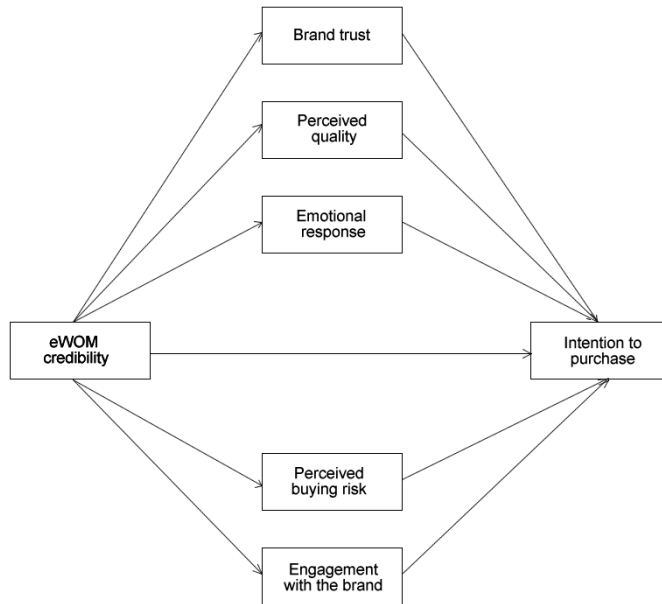
Besides the emotional dimension, consumers' behavioral engagement is also an important mediating factor. This includes activities such as sharing reviews on social networks, commenting on posts or attending events organized by the brand. Credibility of eWOM stimulates such behaviors by providing positive experiences that motivate consumers to actively engage with the brand. The study by (Chen & Zhao, 2021) demonstrated that users who actively participate in online discussions related to brands are more likely to exhibit increased purchase intention, as their interactions help build greater trust in the product and reduce perceived risks.

Thus, the following research hypothesis is developed:

H5: The relationship between eWOM credibility and buying intention is mediated by the intended engagement with the brand in the social networks.

Based on the described research hypotheses, it is proposed the research model presented in figure 1.

Figure 1: The research model



3. INSTRUMENT AND METHODOLOGY

To collect the data for this research it was used an online questionnaire administered to a convenience sample of 359 Romanian students and young professionals. About 58% of the respondents were female, while 42% were male. Informed written consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study at the beginning of the questionnaire. No data was collected to identify respondents. Respondents were not rewarded for their participation and responses were anonymous. Prior to commencing data collection, the participants were provided with detailed information about the study's procedures and fully informed about the purpose of the research and the study's aims, their rights as respondents (including the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time), and the measures taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. In this study, the convenience sampling technique was used, and the students' population was chosen because they actively participate in social networks.

The survey was administered online using GoogleForms platform. The questions were translated into Romanian, and the answers were obtained in January and February 2025. The respondents were asked to answer forty-four questions, split into seven scales. Each scale measured a specific latent construct: eWOM credibility, intention to purchase, brand trust, perceived product quality, emotional response to message, perceived buying risk and engagement with the brand.

To assess eWOM credibility, the scale of (Ohanian, 1990) was employed. To evaluate the intention to purchase it was used the scale created by (Dodds et al., 1991).

To measure brand trust it was used the scale devised by (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003), while perceived product quality was assessed with the scale developed by (Wu et al., 2011). The emotional response was measured using an adapted version of the scale created by (Hecker & Stewart, 1988).

The perceived buying risk was assessed using the scale built by (Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013) and the engagement with the brand was evaluated with the scale devised by (Schivinski et al., 2016).

All these constructs and indicators can be accessed in Appendix, at the end of the article. From a methodological point of view, a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) analysis was performed, consisting of several distinct stages. Each stage had a specific role in the analysis, verification and validation of the constructs, model and research hypotheses.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Our research procedure was structured in three phases. In the first phase, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was executed using the IBM SPSS software, version 26. The goal of the EFA was to establish whether the individual items are appropriately correlated with their constructs. After this analysis, eleven items out of forty-four were removed, because they presented either high cross-loadings or poor loadings. With the remaining items, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator for the EFA model was 0.922, showing excellent factor adequacy. The Bartlett's sphericity test was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).

During the second phase a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run, to evaluate the relationships between the latent variables and their related items. The cutoff values that were used to estimate the goodness-of-fit of the measurement model were the following: for the χ^2/df ratio – between 1 and 5 (Marsh & Hocevar, 1985), for the comparative fit index (CFI) – 0.900 (Hair et al., 2010), for the Tuckey-Lewis index (TLI) – 0.900 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), for the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) – 0.08 (Hair et al., 2010), for the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) – 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), for the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) – 0.800 (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 1998), for the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) – 0.800 (Ellison et al., 2007).

The values for the measurement model are: $\chi^2/df = 2.192$, CFI = 0.927, TLI = 0.919, GFI = 0.843, AGFI = 0.815, RMSEA = 0.058, SRMR = 0.059. All indicators meet the cutoff values, so the model is good fit.

The main indicators of the measurement model are presented in Table 1. All path coefficients are statistically significant ($t > 1.96$) and their standardized values are higher than 0.5. The average variance extracted (AVE) values are greater than 0.5 for all the latent constructs, indicating good convergent validity. Furthermore, all constructs have good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values and composite reliabilities are higher than 0.7).

Table 1: Summary indicators of the measurement model

Constructs and items	Beta	t-value	SE	Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
eWOM credibility				0.874	0.853	0.608
This post is reliable	0.800					
This post is sincere	0.774	15.904	0.068			
This post is a safe source of information	0.718	14.482	0.070			
This post is objective	0.685	13.670	0.070			
This post is authoritative	0.546	10.469	0.078			
This post is trustworthy	0.769	15.789	0.065			
This post is useful	0.680	13.541	0.065			
Brand trust				0.830	0.800	0.634
This brand would make any effort to satisfy me	0.748					
I could rely on this brand to solve my problems	0.884	16.208	0.067			
This brand would be interested in my satisfaction	0.705	13.056	0.069			
This brand would compensate me in some way for the problems I might have	0.631	11.598	0.078			
Perceived product quality				0.864	0.879	0.754
This product is of good quality	0.761					
This product is of high workmanship	0.766	14.446	0.071			
This product is durable	0.790	14.937	0.078			
This product is reliable	0.821	15.541	0.077			
This product is dependable	0.649	12.074	0.092			
Emotional response				0.911	0.888	0.656
Joyful	0.792					
Surprised	0.852	18.318	0.060			
Delighted	0.895	19.588	0.060			
Enthused	0.812	17.172	0.059			
Impressed	0.776	16.185	0.062			
Captivated	0.696	14.123	0.062			
Grateful	0.593	11.661	0.068			
Perceived buying risk				0.840	0.793	0.576
I am afraid that this product might not work properly	0.858					
I am afraid that I could lose money if I buy this product	0.847	17.212	0.057			
I am afraid that this product might be harmful	0.686	13.742	0.059			
I am afraid that this product will not fit in my self-image or self-concept	0.624	12.216	0.065			
Engagement with the brand				0.937	0.937	0.808
I would comment on the posts of this brand	0.946					
I would comment on the videos of this brand	0.971	42.468	0.023			
I would comment on the photos of this brand	0.946	37.989	0.025			
I would share the posts of this brand	0.720	18.204	0.047			
Intention to purchase				0.878	0.859	0.723
The likelihood of buying this product is (very low – very high)	0.915					
The likelihood of using this product is (very low – very high)	0.784	18.691	0.047			

My desire to have this product is (very low – very high)	0.826	20.391	0.048			
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At the end of the second phase, it was necessary to assess the discriminant validity of the measurement model. To that effect, the construct squared correlations were compared with the average variance extracted. As it results from Table 2, all AVE values (on the main diagonal) are greater than the squared correlations, which suggests good discriminant validity.

Table 2: Average Variance Extracted and Squared Correlations

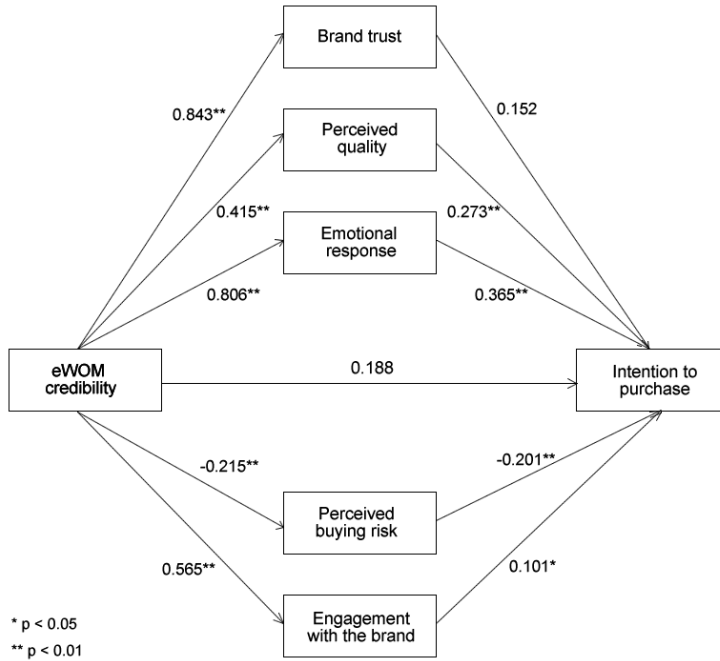
	eWOM credibility	Brand trust	Product quality	Emotional response	Perceived buying risk	Engagement	Intention to purchase
eWOM credibility	0.608						
Brand trust	0.616	0.634					
Product quality	0.236	0.243	0.754				
Emotional response	0.465	0.425	0.259	0.656			
Perceived buying risk	0.026	0.036	0.024	0.017	0.576		
Engagement	0.232	0.144	0.002	0.163	0.000	0.808	
Intention to purchase	0.441	0.411	0.279	0.479	0.108	0.145	0.723

During the third phase of the analysis, the causal model was investigated as presented in Figure 1. The goodness-of-fit indicators for this model were as follows: $\chi^2/df = 2.273$, CFI = 0.920, TLI = 0.914, GFI = 0.831, AGFI = 0.806, RMSEA = 0.060, SRMR = 0.069. These values indicate good model fit. The direct effects in the causal model can be examined in Table 3 and Figure 2.

Table 3: Summary of direct effects

Path	Coefficient	p
eWOM credibility -> Intention to purchase	0.188	0.159
eWOM credibility -> Brand trust	0.843	<0.01
Brand trust -> Intention to purchase	0.152	0.119
eWOM credibility -> Perceived quality	0.415	<0.01
Perceived quality -> Intention to purchase	0.273	<0.01
eWOM credibility -> Emotional response	0.806	<0.01
Emotional response -> Intention to purchase	0.365	<0.01
eWOM credibility -> Perceived buying risk	-0.215	<0.01
Perceived buying risk -> Intention to purchase	-0.201	<0.01
eWOM credibility -> Engagement with the brand	0.565	<0.01
Engagement with the brand -> Intention to purchase	0.101	<0.05

Figure 2: Direct effects – path coefficients



The mediation analysis summary can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Mediation analysis summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	Direct effect	Indirect effect	P	Conclusion
H1	EC→BT→IP	0.188 (p=0.159)	0.128	0.089	No mediation
H2	EC→PQ→IP		0.113	0.001	Full mediation
H3	EC→ER→IP		0.294	<0.001	Full mediation
H4	EC→PR→IP		0.043	0.010	Full mediation
H5	EC→EB→IP		0.057	0.050	No mediation

Notes: EC: eWOM credibility, IP: intention to purchase, BT: brand trust, PQ: product quality, ER: emotional response, PR: perceived buying risk, EB: engagement with the brand

The results revealed significant indirect effects for the following variables: perceived product quality, emotional response to eWOM and perceived buying risk. In conclusion, these variables have a significant mediating role between eWOM credibility and intention to purchase. Furthermore, the direct effect of credibility on intention to purchase was found non-significant (p = 0.159). Hence, the above-mentioned variables fully mediate the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intention.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Since the relationship between eWOM credibility and purchase intent is not statistically significant ($B = 0.188$, $p = 0.159$), it can be concluded that the effect of credibility is not direct but mediated by other variables. One of these variables is perceived product quality (indirect effect = 0.113, $p = 0.001$). This suggests that credible eWOM influences the likelihood of buying a product by shaping the perception of its quality, rather than having a direct effect. Previous studies carried out by (Yu et al., 2019) and (Roy et al., 2021) support the conclusion, showing that, on the one hand, positive eWOM improves perceived product quality, whereas, on the other hand, higher perceived quality is associated with stronger buying intent. All these findings align with the signaling theory in marketing, highlighting the role of eWOM messages as information cues that help customer to assess product quality even in the absence of direct experience.

Another mediator between eWOM credibility and buying intent is the emotional response to the eWOM message (indirect effect = 0.294, $p < 0.001$). As a consequence, eWOM triggers the desire to purchase the product only by eliciting a positive emotional reaction like joy, enchantment, surprise, arousal or enthusiasm. Put differently, high eWOM credibility translates into stronger emotional engagement that creates the urge to buy. This result is consistent with the findings of (Hecker & Stewart, 1988), who demonstrated the role of emotions as mediators between advertising content and consumer response to advertising. More recently, (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2020) showed that online reviews that provoke positive emotions like pleasure or arousal are more likely to increase the readers' intentions to follow the reviewer's advice and purchase the product.

Our research shows that perceived buying risk fully mediates the liaison between eWOM credibility and intention to purchase (indirect effect = 0.043, $p = 0.01$). Credible eWOM reduces the perceived risks associated with the purchase (especially social and financial risks), thus increasing the probability of buying the product. These findings are in line with the results obtained by (Amarullah et al., 2022), who pointed out the role of perceived risk in the relationship between eWOM and buying intention.

As evidenced by this research, brand trust is not a mediator between eWOM credibility and buying intention (indirect effect = 0.128, $p = 0.089$), and neither is engagement with the brand on social media (indirect effect = 0.057, $p = 0.05$). While eWOM may enhance customers' trust in the brand, this trust alone does not convert into a higher propensity to purchase the product. This finding seems to contradict some prior research that shows that trust is a key driver of buying intent (Zhao et al., 2020).

Moreover, though high eWOM credibility can lead to increased social media interaction with the brand, this interaction does not necessarily influence the customers' purchasing decisions. In other words, this finding highlights that online engagement does not necessarily play a pivotal role in converting eWOM credibility into higher likelihood of buying. The influence of eWOM credibility is conveyed by the perceived product quality and perceived purchasing risks, rather than being amplified by consumer engagement with the brand.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The primary contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that the influence of credibility on buying intent is not direct, but rather mediated by other key factors: perceived product quality, perceived buying risk and emotional reaction of the eWOM recipient. Consequently, a well-crafted eWOM message should address issues of both product quality and buying risks. By directly tackling these critical factors, such a message can reduce customer doubt, build trust and improve the likelihood of influencing purchasing behavior.

From a practical standpoint, companies should prioritize strategies that encourage the production of credible eWOM messages that create strong quality perceptions about the product. This includes leveraging verified customer reviews, expert endorsements, and crafting emotionally compelling messages that resonate with receivers. In addition, businesses should actively focus on people concerns about purchasing risks by providing transparent information, guarantees and customer testimonials, ensuring a well-rounded approach that strengthens the impact of eWOM on customer decisions.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research reveals that the relationship between credible electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and purchase intent is not direct but is instead fully mediated by three key variables. Firstly, credible eWOM shapes the perception of product quality, which in turn increases the likelihood of a purchase. Secondly, it works by eliciting positive emotional responses—such as joy or excitement—that create an urge to buy. Finally, credible eWOM reduces the perceived risks (e.g., financial or social) associated with purchase, thereby increasing consumer confidence.

Conversely, the study finds that brand trust and social media engagement do not act as mediators. While eWOM can enhance trust and encourage online interaction, these factors do not directly translate into a higher purchase intention. Instead, consumers base their buying decisions more on immediate assessments of product quality and risk rather than on general brand confidence or engagement metrics.

This study presents several limitations. In the first place, the convenience sampling method was employed, which might reduce the generalizability of these results. Furthermore, the current sample is made up of Romanian students only, with the majority being aged under 30. In this study, the students were chosen because they actively participate in social networks and regularly interact with their peers.

Since this research assessed purchase intention rather than actual behavior, future investigations could use field studies to explore whether the proposed mediating variables similarly mediate real-world purchasing decisions. Additionally, further research might consider potential moderators in the relationships between mediators and purchase intention. These moderators could be customer's familiarity with the product, customer's personality traits, product category or product price. That could offer greater insight into the underlying mechanisms through which different variables affect purchase decisions.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed written consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study at the beginning of the questionnaire. No data was collected to identify respondents. Respondents were not rewarded for their participation and responses were anonymous. Prior to commencing data collection, the participants were provided with detailed information about the study’s procedures and fully informed about the purpose of the research and the study’s aims, their rights as respondents (including the right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time), and the measures taken to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Availability Statement: The data that supports the findings of this study are available on FigShare public repository at the following address:
<https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28861274>

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to the research, authorship or publication of this work.

Appendix

The survey body text:

Suppose you are browsing Facebook and come across the following post written by a virtual friend, regarding a laptop they recently purchased.

"I promised myself I wouldn't be the type of person who praises gadgets online, but this laptop is truly worth talking about. It's the kind of device that makes your life easier and more organized, and that's no small thing.

Let me start with what I liked the most: its performance. It's incredibly fast and handles multitasking perfectly. I can work, follow a webinar, and have several tabs open simultaneously without any issues. The battery is also a pleasant surprise – it lasts me through an entire workday. Plus, the design is simple and elegant.

Another aspect I really liked is the screen. The colors are vibrant, and the details are sharp, making any activity much more enjoyable. Additionally, the keyboard is so comfortable that it completely transformed my typing experience. The hours spent working are no longer a chore.

The only thing that slightly bothered me is that the speakers aren't exactly great. If you want to listen to music or watch a movie, the sound quality is decent but not spectacular.

In the end, I can say that it's more than just a laptop – it's a reliable partner. Whether you're working, studying, or simply looking for a moment of relaxation, it does its job very well. I would make the same choice anytime!"

Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible.

The questions of the survey:

The post above is...

(5-point agreement-disagreement scale for each statement)

- ... trustworthy
- ... a reliable source of information
- ... one you can rely on when making a purchase decision
- ... one that comes from an authorized source
- ... objective, impartial
- ... in good faith
- ... useful, helpful

Based on the post, indicate to what extent you agree with each of the following statements.

(5-point agreement-disagreement scale for each statement)

The manufacturer of this laptop...

- ... would be sincere and honest in addressing my concerns.
- ... would make every effort to ensure my satisfaction.
- ... is a company I could count on.
- ... would be interested in my satisfaction.
- ... would compensate me if I had a problem with the product.

Based on the post, the laptop being discussed seems to be...

(5-point agreement-disagreement scale for each attribute)

- ... of good quality
- ... very well-made
- ... durable
- ... reliable
- ... solid, robust

Please specify your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

(5-point agreement-disagreement scale for each statement)

When I read this post, I felt...

- ... happy, joyful
- ... pleasantly surprised
- ... delighted
- ... irritated
- ... excited
- ... impressed
- ... confused
- ... skeptical
- ... captivated
- ... amused
- ... calm, relaxed
- ... grateful
- ... indifferent
- ... informed, clarified

Please tell us what you would do if you encountered content created by the laptop brand mentioned in the post on a social media platform.

(5-point agreement-disagreement scale for each statement)

- I would "like" the brand's posts.
- I would "like" the brand's videos.
- I would write comments on the brand's posts.
- I would write comments on the brand's videos.
- I would write comments on the brand's images or photos.
- I would share the brand's posts.

Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements.

(5-point agreement-disagreement scale for each statement)

If I were to buy the laptop mentioned in the post...

- ... I am afraid it might not work well
- ... I am afraid I would regret the money spent
- ... I am afraid it might be dangerous or unsafe
- ... I am afraid it might not suit me or my personality
- ... I am afraid other people would disapprove or laugh at me

Please indicate whether you would buy and use the laptop discussed in the post.

(5-point bipolar scale, very low – very high, for each question)

The likelihood of purchasing this laptop is...

The likelihood of ever using this laptop is...

My desire to own this laptop is...

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