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## A FRAMEWORK FOR E-WOM FOR ONLINE CONSUMER BUYING

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### ABSTRACT

Consumer behaviour has changed significantly because of advances in information technology and the adoption of new communication methods. As such, consumer behaviour towards electronic word-of-mouth communication (e-WOM) is complex, and elicits different consumer perceptions, interactive responses, and behavioural intentions. This study investigated the influence of electronic word-of-mouth communication on the online consumer buying behaviour process. Data was collected from Generation Z and millennial students and staff members from a public university in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The structural equation model results demonstrated a significant positive correlation between electronic word-of-mouth communication and consumer buying behaviour. The study proposes a framework which could be used by digital marketers to possibly influence consumer buying behaviour.

**Keywords:** Consumer behaviour, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), online buying.

### INTRODUCTION

There are many distinct varieties of social media communications, each of which has the potential to evoke a unique set of consumer attitudes, interactive responses, or e-WOM behavioural intentions (Bilal, Jianqiu, Dukhaykh, Fan, and Trunk, 2021, Cervellon and Galipienzo, 2015, and Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). The relationship between e-WOM and consumer behaviour is complicated, not every user-generated content that is released online will have the same impact on consumers (Kwok and Xie, 2016).

A meta-analysis conducted by Ismagilova, Dwivedi, Slade and Williams (2019) and Al-Ja'afreh and Al-Adaile (2020) indicated that various factors influence e-WOM during buying decisions. These include trust in the message, age, emotional trust, attitude towards the website and product, e-WOM credibility, augment quality, e-WOM usefulness, existing e-WOM, volume and valence, among other variables. Several international studies have focused on various e-WOM predictors of purchase intention (Filieri et al., 2018; Filieri, 2015; Floyd et al., 2014; Nam et al., 2018; Wang

et al., 2015a; Yan et al., 2015); Duffett (2017) and Duffett (2015) conducted studies in the area of e-WOM and consumer behaviour in South Africa. Research shows inconsistent findings about the various e-WOM factors which impacts on purchasing behaviour (Dou et al., 2012; Flanagin et al., 2014; He and Bond, 2015; Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016; Zainal et al., 2017). For example, He and Bond (2015) discovered that the volume of e-WOM communications influences purchasing behaviour, whereas Flanagin et al. (2014) discovered that this association is non-significant. Some studies (Ladhari and Michaud, 2015; Mauri and Minazzi, 2013) found valence to have a substantial effect on purchase intention. Other (Sandes and Urdan, 2013; Teng et al., 2017) found it to be non-significant. These reservations indicate that there is still disagreement about the impact of e-WOM on consumer purchasing behavior. This disparity could be attributed to a number of factors, including the context in which the studies were conducted, the methodological approaches used, and the time and spatial dimensions. Another element contributing to the lack of agreement is that internet information is targeted to different contexts, social groupings, and even brands. Reviewing these factors will allow greater clarity with regards to the influence of e-WOM on online customer purchasing behaviour.

In the face of a quickly changing technical world, a lack of understanding in this area may have a negative influence on businesses when it comes to designing proper marketing strategies for online stores. Firms have a diversified target market in terms of demographic, regional, psychographic, and behavioural traits, necessitating the development of segment-specific marketing strategies. This may increase the company's competitive advantage and leads to a higher market share. A study of this nature, therefore, becomes pertinent as the findings may offer insights into e-WOM features that influence consumers' purchasing decisions. Based on this the paper attempts to present a framework for explaining the impact of e-WOM and to develop an e-WOM strategy for influencing online customer purchasing behaviour.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Online buying: contextualisation**

In the twenty-first century, trade and commerce have gotten so broad that multichannel has evolved, and online shopping has increased dramatically over the world. Online buying is the act of purchasing goods and services from a vendor directly over the internet. The traditional brick-and-mortar business model has given way to the internet-based or "click-and-order" business model. More people than ever before are turning to the internet to buy goods and services ranging from houses to shoes to plane tickets. When purchasing goods and services via the internet, consumers today have a number of options (Rahman, Islam, Esha, Sultana and Chakravorty, 2018). Such choices highlight the changing nature of the act of purchasing and selling into that of global activity.

According to Huseynov and Yldrm (2018), the major obstacle to online retail sales is the lack of physical touch, followed by the protection of personal information and the security of online financial transactions. Hoque, Ali, and Mahfuz (2015) reveal that perceived ease of use of the internet has no influence on the behavioural pattern, which is instead driven by security and privacy

concerns. Even if a customer spends hours on the internet, when there is a perceived online danger, no partnership is built between the consumer and the online shop (Islam, 2017).

Online buying is a practical option for a hectic lifestyle in today's modern world. Consumers' purchasing patterns have shifted considerably in the recent decade. Even though people continue to buy in physical stores, users or buyers find online buying to be incredibly handy.

Consumers are busy and cannot or will not spend much time performing physical shopping; therefore, online buying saves them time (Jain, 2016). Furthermore, because internet purchasing includes perceived risk, consumers prefer to learn about the experiences of other customers before making a final selection. Online retailers, unlike conventional stores, describe all of their products using text, photos, and multimedia materials. Several internet shops offer links to a variety of additional product information. Some online shoppers, on the other hand, are daring explorers, thrill seekers, and shoppers who adore shopping, but others are technology tinkerers who loathe waiting for their items to arrive. As a result, online consumer behaviour (user activities during product search, purchase, and use) has emerged as a prominent research topic for an increasing number of researchers aiming to comprehend the unique nature of online buying (Jain, 2016).

In general, online buying is rapidly expanding. Owing to double-digit global growth in revenue (15%) and orders (13%), e-commerce accounted for around 2.29 trillion dollars globally and was anticipated to reach 4 trillion dollars by 2020 (eMarketer, 2018). (eMarketer, 2018; John, 2018). Furthermore, according to Ouellette (2020), by 2019, there were an estimated 1.92 billion digital purchasers, and e-Commerce sales accounted for 14.1% of retail purchases worldwide, with e-Commerce retail purchases predicted to grow from 14.1% to 22% by 2023. With the latest COVID-19 pandemic, a projected increase of more than 22% is anticipated. E-commerce will continue to grow in popularity as people feel more secure shopping online from the comfort of their own homes. Customers are even purchasing fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) online, which was uncommon prior to COVID-19, such as in the clothing and apparel industry in the South African internet market (Bizcommunity, 2021).

## **Consumer Behaviour in the digital environment**

Consumer behaviour is defined as the physical, mental, or emotional action that people engage in when choosing, purchasing, using, and disposing of goods and services to meet their requirements (Uzo, Shittu and Meru, 2018). Consumer behaviour research does not only aids in understanding the past, but also in forecasting the future. Consumer behaviour focuses on researching consumers' thoughts; hence, it is complex, and marketers must integrate many consumer behaviour theories and concepts into their marketing tactics to be effective. According to Dahiya and Gayatri (2018), a buyer goes through a decision-making process when acquiring any goods. The procedure varies based on the type of transaction the consumer is making. There are various types of consumer purchasing behaviour, such as habitual, variety-seeking, dissonance-reducing, and complicated purchasing behaviour. Because of the perceived risk, online buying might be seen as a difficult purchasing procedure. Before making a final purchase, potential online buyers always want to know the experiences of other consumers who have purchased from the same company by

checking electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). As a result, it is critical to comprehend how e-WOM influences online consumers during the purchasing decision-making process.

### **Role of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) during online buying**

Companies have harnessed the power of numerous technologies to communicate directly with consumers (Ferreira and Barbosa, 2017). Consumers can choose between two types of online marketing advertising: online broadcast media (OBM) and online interactive media (OIM) (Zhang and Tran 2015: 1). OIM refers to the different ways in which individuals process and share information, as well as how they communicate with one another. Microblogs, blogs, and social network services are all part of OIM (SNS). With OBM, the advertiser speaks, and the consumers listen, whereas in OIM, both the advertiser and the consumers speak, listen, and respond (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). This phenomenon has resulted in faster and broader information dissemination, which has a significant impact on marketers and influences consumer decision-making processes in a positive or negative way. Because OBM is simply one-way communication, this study will only focus on OIM because the researcher is interested in determining the impact of e-WOM.

The dynamic and ongoing flow of information between actual, former, or potential consumers about a product, service, company, or brand that is accessible to many consumers over the internet is described as electronic word of mouth (e-WOM). e-WOM is recognised as a valuable source of information that influences consumer decision-making (Ismagilova, Dwivedi, Slade and Williams, 2017). Prior research has found a relationship between e-WOM and purchasing behaviour (Filieri, Raguseo and Vitari, 2018; Filieri, 2015; Floyd, Freling, Alhoqail, Cho and Freling, 2014; Nam, Baker, Ahmad and Goo, 2018; Wang, Cunningham and Eastin, 2015; Yan, Wang and Chau, 2015; Erkan and Evans, 2016; Kim et al., 2018). Hence, marketers must not underestimate the power of e-WOM, especially when angry customers upload negative content because it has a longer shelf life and is more persuasive than positive content. Consumers typically use online interactive media during the purchasing process (gathering information, analysing options, and picking the best alternative) and even post-purchase when they share their own experiences on social media (Oblak, Barcic, Klaric, Kuzman and Groselj, 2017).

According to Ismagilova et al. (2019), numerous aspects influence e-WOM during purchasing decisions, including trust in the message, age, emotional trust, attitude towards the website and product, e-WOM credibility, enhance quality, e-WOM utility, existing e-WOM, volume, and valence. However, because it is impossible to directly observe all variables, a few variables have been chosen based on gaps left by prior studies. The research will concentrate on e-WOM trust, the volume of e-WOM on social media platforms, and e-WOM valence. Other research, nonetheless, have found contradictory results regarding various e-WOM factors influencing purchasing behaviour (e.g., Dou, Walden, Lee and Lee, 2012; Flanagan, Metzger, Pure, Markov and Hartsell, 2014; He and Bond, 2015; Reimer and Benkenstein, 2016; Zainal et al., 2017). Sen (2008) and Sen and Lerman (2007) also reported that the influence of e-WOM was not as effective as the traditional face-to-face mouth (WOM) effect. Variations in results could be attributed to differences in context, sample size, population characteristics, methodological techniques and study settings, study time, validity and reliability in the studies included, and so on. It is thus

critical to undertake another study to try to fill the vacuum left by prior studies utilising the context of South African online users. The study focused on generation z and millennials, hence, these cohorts will be discussed below.

## **Generational Cohorts**

For marketing purposes, consumers are frequently segmented into generational cohorts. Previous experiences can influence consumers' ethical perspective and purchasing behaviour. It is thought that events shared by all people born around the same time have a similar impact on their beliefs and consumer incentives, meaning that generational cohorts might be used to better understand consumer behaviour (Arli and Pekerti 2016). Retailers and consumer researchers have spent years attempting to comprehend millennials, but now they are attempting to comprehend how Generation Z differs from millennials (Schlossberg 2016). According to Baizley (2018), different generational cohorts react differently to various commodities and marketing. Consequently, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the two main generational cohorts, millennials and Generation Z, are influenced by e-WOM when making purchasing decisions on OIM.

## **Millennials**

Several sources define millennials differently, but they are often individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (Bridgeworks, 2017), putting them between the ages of 27 and 42 in 2023. Although Generation Y is occasionally referred to as a distinct generation, its age range is included in the millennial cohort. In South Africa, millennials made up 14 million people, or 27% of the population (IOL, 2019).

## **Generation Z**

Those born between 1997 and 2012 are referred to as Generation Z, and they will be between the ages of 11 and 26 in 2023. Seemiller and Grace (2015) provide one example. According to TransUnion (2020), Generation Z comprises 46% of South African customers, or 27.5 million individuals, making it the most populous generation. In terms of education and marketing, Generation Z differs from millennials because they are more tech-savvy, tech-connected, price conscious, and undertake more product research (Bridgeworks, 2017; WGSN, 2016). While Generation Z is still young, there is little academic research on them, but they are a key consumer demographic for internet products, and corporations want to know how they vary from millennials.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The research was quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional in nature. This approach was chosen because it works best with a bigger sample size. Four hundred (400) self-administered questionnaires were emailed to personnel and students at a higher education institution. Two hundred and eighty-eight (288) questionnaires were returned. A 72% response rate. According to Botani (2021: 1), if a questionnaire is distributed via email, the acceptable response rate is 60%. The data was analysed using the most recent version of SPSS. In this study, structural equation modelling was employed to evaluate the causal relationships. Construct validity was used to evaluate model fit. The rights, values, and interests of the respondents were respected. The study findings will be provided in the section that follows.

## RESULTS

### Model fit summary

*Table 1 Model fit summary of Structural Equation Model*

Parameter	Value	Suggested value
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.785	>0.90 (Daire et al. 2008)
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.114	<0.08 (Hair et al. 2006)

Table 1 summarises the most important summary model fit measures, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of 0.114 in this sample indicates a good fit. The CFI value is barely below 0.9, indicating a rather excellent fit. The model fit summary demonstrates that the values were extremely close to acceptable levels, providing sufficient confidence to describe the relationship between the variables in the dataset.

Nevertheless, Peugh and Feldon (2020) stated that interpreting model fit estimates is a difficult procedure. Because of the small sample size, the usual inferential measure of model fit, the chi-square test, is subjective. Fit indices can only provide non-inferential values of model fit (e.g., root-mean-square error of approximation and comparative fit index) but cannot provide a final "acceptable" or "unacceptable" fit judgement.

## CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

An analysis on how an item performs in relation to other variables was done and findings are presented in Table 2 below.

*Table 2 Construct Validity*

	Comp.	Ben.	Integrity	Emotion. Trust	Volume	Valence	e-wom adop. & usage	Cons.buy. Behaviour
Competence								
Benevolence	0,84							
Integrity	0,721	0,866						
Emotional trust	0,642	0,71	0,827					
Volume	0,264	0,269	0,281	0,269				
Valence	0,034	0,002	0,023	0,08	0,087			
e-wom adoption & usage	0,357	0,29	0,28	0,296	0,25	0,051		
Cons.Buying Behaviour	0,486	0,472	0,487	0,509	0,328	0,019	0,442	
CR	0,9432	0,9143	0,9302	0,934	0,9382	0,8097	0,9039	0,8354
Ave Convergence	0,8472	0,7806	0,8162	0,7799	0,8353	0,5811	0,6151	0,4668
Discriminatory	0,9204	0,8835	0,9034	0,8831	0,9139	0,7622	0,7842	0,6832

The researcher wanted to find out if the groups of the indicators are not overlapping. The idea is for the indicators not to overlap because they must explain all that is happening in the construct that they are assigned to. From Table 2 it can be concluded that there is discriminant validity i.e. there is no overlap that is distinct, each value in the discriminatory row is higher than any of the green values in that particular column.

Given that there was no overlapping with the other groups latent variables, the performance of the indicators in their respective groups construct were assessed. Ideally, items in one group must show that they are close to each other (convergent). If  $AVE > 0.5$  it means convergent validity exists. All average convergent values from Table 2 are above 0.5 which means that convergent validity exists. This means that the indicators for a particular latent are close to each other as expected. Measures that should be related (grouped together) are in reality related. Basically, demonstrates overall correlation between the items in a particular construct with values  $>0.5$  being acceptable. Only one latent i.e. consumer buying behaviour had a value of 0.46 which is slightly below 0.5.

The consistency of these indicators in each construct was also measured. That is, if the indicators are close to each other, how reliable are they in consistently doing so? Composite reliability (CR)  $> 0.7$  is a generally acceptable value that shows good reliability demonstrated by the items allocated to a particular construct. Values closer to 1.0 are excellent. From Table 2 it can be concluded that all indicators are reliable as all are above the acceptable value 0.7.

### **Structural Modelling Equation (SEM)**

Figure 1 presents the structural modelling equation (SEM).

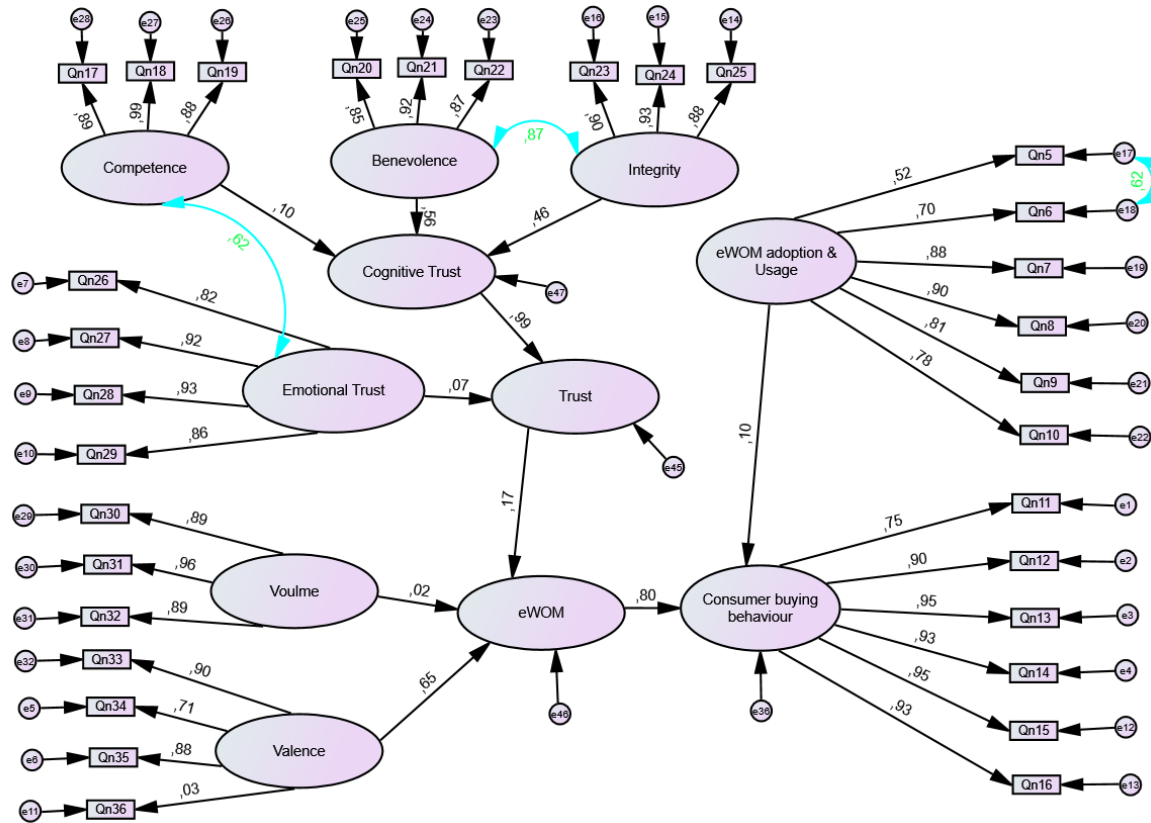


Figure 1: Structural Modelling Equation (SEM)

## DISCUSSION

The findings, as depicted in Figure 1, indicate that, cognitive trust is primarily described by the extent to which a trustee is perceived to perform good for the trustor (benevolence). In this situation, the online store is the trustee, and the consumer is the trustor. Also, cognitive trust had a greater influence on trust than emotional trust. Yet, as seen by relatively low regression weights, trust and volume as e-WOM characteristics had little influence on customers' buying behaviour. The findings are consistent with earlier research. Ismagilova et al. (2019), found out that the predictor 'volume' is one of the most often investigated factors on purchase intent but appears to be the worst predictor. SEM findings indicate that valence was the most powerful e-WOM factor. Ultimately, e-WOM exhibits a significant positive correlation with purchasing behaviour. The model was additionally validated with RSMEA and CFI and found to be a satisfactory fit. The model fit summary demonstrates that the values were extremely close to acceptable levels, providing sufficient confidence to describe the relationship between the variables in the dataset. The research data were utilised to develop a framework for an e-WOM approach targeted at influencing the purchasing habits of online consumers. Based on the findings, valence emerged as the most relevant e-WOM aspect; consequently, the proposed framework was focused on e-WOM valence.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FRAMEWORK

From the findings, a framework was developed for an e-WOM approach focused on influencing online consumer buying behaviour. The framework can help digital marketers choose and implement an appropriate strategy.

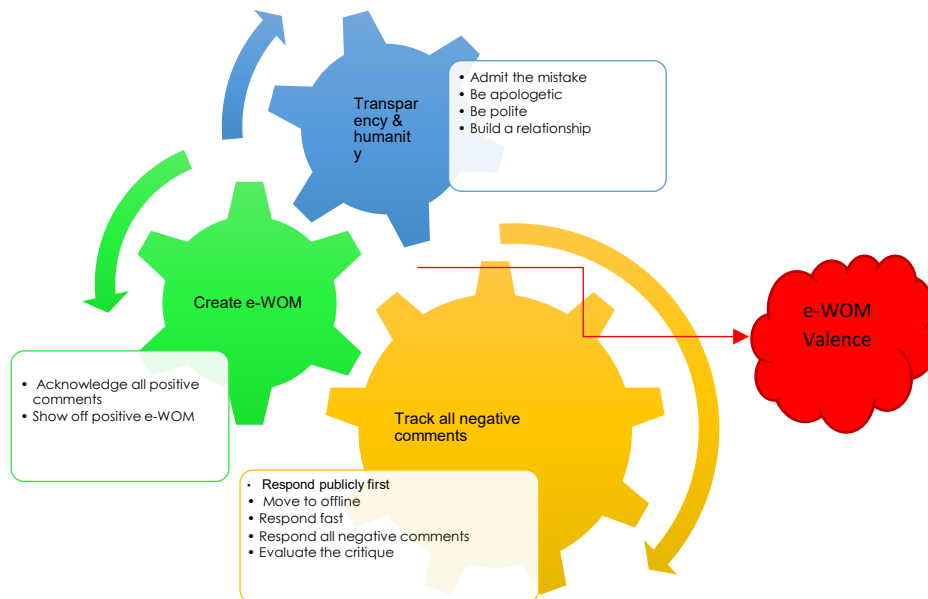


Figure 2: A proposed framework

Figure 2 depicts an e-WOM strategy framework focused on influencing online consumer behaviour. Using the research findings and literature review, the framework was conceptualised. Some consumers create e-WOM on online interactive media (OIM), whether it is favourable or unfavourable. Nonetheless, it is the digital marketer's responsibility to encourage customers to spread favourable word of mouth. Once a purchase is complete, marketers must remind the customer to leave a review of the services and items. This is required for all customers. The marketer must disclose the e-WOM to the OIM audience so that more potential buyers can see it. Marketers must make it simple for customers to post reviews on their OIM platforms. The greater the visibility of this e-WOM to the audience, the greater the impact on consumer behaviour.

Marketers can increase their e-WOM valence by asking the right questions from their customers before they submit reviews. When asking customers for reviews, marketers must first establish the type of input they are seeking. Marketers must grasp the demographics of the target group they aim to attract, the key concerns that customers have when making a purchase, and the challenges that the industry faces. Marketers will be able to collect useful and relevant testimony by aligning these inquiries.

### Addressing negative e-WOM

Dissatisfied clients occasionally publish unfavourable e-WOM. This has the potential to cause more harm than benefit. Digital marketers must monitor every bad e-WOM utilising the various apps at their disposal. It is critical to respond to all bad remarks as soon as possible (ideally within

60 minutes). To avoid a situation in which the customer shares private information online, digital marketers must respond publicly first, then offline. When the problem is resolved, the client should be encouraged to share the outcome on OIM.

Criticism is a chance for the brand to grow and improve. Any sections of their brand that have been criticised must be examined; there may be a problem that needs to be solved in order to give a better service or product. Customers may be scared away if concerns are not addressed since they will continue to see the same complaints on OIM and believe that the brand is unwilling to improve. Digital marketers must never get defensive or argue with the critic. The key to dealing with these situations is to stay calm, agree with the dissatisfied customer, and handle the matter without crossing any lines.

While a company is solving an issue, it is the ideal time to establish a long-term relationship with a consumer. Some of my most valuable client relationships originated as a result of a company mistake. When customers realise that the organisation is trying in good faith to put things right, they may withdraw negative evaluations or submit positive follow-ups. In the future, the consumer can be used to propagate positive e-WOM, resulting in many prospective customers desiring to buy from that brand.

## CONCLUSION

The recommendations in this paper explain some of the activities that could be implemented to improve consumer purchasing behaviour. In conclusion, e-WOM must be regarded as the most valuable tool in today's marketing, necessitating a thorough examination of its components and their impact on consumer purchasing behaviour. Understanding what influences consumers' intent to buy will assist academics in setting the agenda for future research directions; for practitioners, it will provide practical guidance based on detailed analysis of specific factors influencing consumers' intent to buy, which could help improve their marketing activities. This study adds to the little amount of knowledge about millennial and Generation Z customers in emerging markets that has already been acquired.

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