ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE POWER OF ELECTRONIC WORD OF MOUTH

Linguistic

Dr Janemary Thirusanku	Programme Leader for Language cum Senior Lecturer, Academic Department
Rahuoll Kumar	Peninsula College, Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

In the early 1970s, word of mouth is first utilised when consumers' daily conversations reflect their interest in a company's product or service. As a general rule, it is free advertising that is sparked by client experiences that go above and beyond their expectations. With the rapid adoption of technologies, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) has allowed humans to engage with the worldwide market by providing comments and statements via the Internet of Things (IOT). Moreover, the pandemic of Covid-19 has led to the increase in usage of eWOM. This research deals with some theories and antecedents that influences eWOM. Furthermore, the impacts of covid-19 on eWOM in the hospitality and tourism industry, importance and the impacts of eWOM are also discussed. This research analyses the drivers, importance and impacts of eWOM.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term "electronic word of mouth" (abbreviated as "eWOM") was coined in the middle of the 1990s, at the time that the internet was beginning to alter the manner in which customers connected with one another (Rosario et al., 2020). Consumers view eWOM as an objective and reliable source of product information, which contributes to its status as a major market force. For example, the #MyCalvins campaign is an example of eWOM being used effectively by consumers on Instagram. In order to participate in the campaign, customers can post images of themselves on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and the company's website while wearing Calvin Klein items and use the hashtag #MyCalvins. Moreover, eWOM includes customer feedback and opinions in social media or any other platforms.

As a result of their actions, customers are able to provide an honest assessment of a product or service to other potential buyers. According to Ruiz-Mafe et al. (2018), online reviews (a form of eWOM communication) had a major impact on the purchasing decisions of 93% of consumers in recent studies. Businesses should benefit from the insightful comments and constructive recommendations offered by online reviews when evaluating their performance. Therefore, consumers are advised to deliver a decent assessment for practically every transaction as more than 93% of buyers evaluate online reviews while making purchases (Ding and Syed, 2022). Hence, this shows that eWOM plays an important role in driving consumer buying behavior and purchase intentions. The objective of this study is to critically consider the significance of electronic word of mouth to consumer decision making in the events, hospitality or tourism sector.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The presence of electronic word of mouth has played a major role in various industries such as the hospitality and tourism industry (Buhalis and Inversini, 2014). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) creation, distribution and consumption has grown rapidly in this century as social media has become more integrated into everyday life for the average human (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). As a way of analyzing the significance of electronic word of mouth, the literature review of this paper will touch on antecedents, consequences and positive effects of eWOM that gives companies competitive advantages.

2.1 Definition of eWOM

In a broad sense, eWOM refers to the online, social media and mobile sharing and exchange of product and company information by consumers (Yora et al., 2020). In accordance with Chen and Law (2016), any non-commercial and interpersonal online transmission of information about a product or brand is characterised as e-WOM, and it takes advantage of the advantages of both mass and interpersonal communication channels. Consumers' use of digital persuasion to spread word of mouth about a product is known as eWOM. eWOM can be characterised as positive or negative communication about a brand's information via the internet based on the use of technological means. When it comes to influencing consumer expectations and purchasing decisions, eWOM is considered a dependable source of information. However, customers using technology to voice their opinions about products or services (eWOM) poses a risk for businesses since it could become a force beyond their control (Chen et al., 2017).

2.2 Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was developed by Ajzen (1988) in order to forecast the performance of a behaviour. Attitude, subjective norms and behavioural control make up the three main pillars of this paradigm. Theory offered by Ajzen (1991) states that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control are critical factors in behavioural intention. When it comes to eWOM, travellers' attitudes toward a destination and their desire to go are linked. eWOM has been shown to have an impact on the awareness of the receiver, attention, consideration, brand attitudes, intents and expectations.

2.3 Social Influence Theory

According to Rashotte (2007), social influence theory refers to person's beliefs, feelings, attitudes or behaviours that might change due to social impact when they interact with another person or a group. This theory involves the influence of people on social media platforms that affects the consumer buying behavior all around the world. Research has confirmed that eWOM has a positive effect on social influences on customers (Hsu, Chih and Liu, 2016). However, researchers have argued that when opinion leaders of eWOM is compared to a controlled group, they do not have a significant effect (Tobon and Garcia, 2021).

2.4 Social Contagion Theory

The term "social contagion" refers to the spread of ideas, feelings or behaviours amongst members of a group or network. The theory suggests that eWOM spreads among customers. For example, Trusov, Pauwels and Bucklin (2013) use it to explain the emergence and extension of Facebook online communities. They explain how eWOM recommendations have a longer-lasting effect on marketing initiatives and a larger elasticity of response than is typical. Moreover, Libai, Muller and Peres (2013) have made use of

this theory through seeding programmes, which are used by marketers to propagate information about a new concept or product, can be studied using the contagion principle.

2.5 Antecedents of eWOM

E-WOM is more trustworthy than other marketing communications since it comes from customers. eWOM's wide accessibility compared to traditional WOM makes key tools like online suggestions, reviews and product ratings more potent. It's crucial to understand online users' behaviours, especially those who utilise social networks and engage in eWOM. Hence, there are several factors that influences eWOM.

2.5.1 Information Quality

Firstly, information quality plays a major factor in enhancing eWOM about a company or brand. According to Dancer, Filieri and Grundy (2014), information quality is defined as 'the quality of the content of a consumer review from an informational standpoint'. The quality of eWOM information is determined by its vividness, appropriateness, reliability and relevance (Shuang, 2013). It is the degree to which the recipients are convinced that the information provided or received from the message. Moreover, relevance of information refers to the degree to which the information being disseminated is relevant and useful to the intended audience. Researchers have claimed that argument quality affects social media message recipients' attitudes (Teng et al., 2014). Consumers will have a more favourable opinion of the products and services they hear about if they believe the online reviews and content to be true and accurate.

2.5.2 Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is known as the favourable experience received from the brand's use that leads to repurchase intentions (Cengiz, 2017). Satisfaction with products, services, and the whole customer experience is reflected in the term "customer satisfaction." In compliance with the Expectancy Disconfirmation Model (EDM), consumers are continually striving to match expectations and perceptions of a brand's performance (Sijoria, Mukherjee and Datta, 2018). Therefore, if the expectations and perceptions are matched, customer satisfaction is developed. Due to the satisfactory of customers, this will allow the customers to write a review about a product or services that is provided by a brand (Amed et al., 2019).

2.5.3 Source Credibility

In the context of a communication, source credibility refers to an individual's favourable attributes that influence their ability to convey their message to the intended audience. The trustworthiness, exposure, attractiveness, appearance, familiarity and strength of a source of information are all characteristics of a credible information source (O'Reilly et al., 2016). People are more likely to be persuaded to buy a product or service if it comes from a credible source, such as an online review. For example, Banerjee and Chua (2016) argues that customers typically publish evaluations and reviews on websites and online communities after purchasing products or services. Moreover, an appealing source is one that has been well-recognized by those who receive the message. Other than that, it has been shown that user-generated online reviews have a significant impact on other users' decisions on whether or not to accept and use online data. As a result, other consumers can benefit from reading these internet reviews (Teng et al., 2014).

2.6 Impacts Of eWOM
2.6.1 Company/Brand Image

A company or brand image is based on how customers perceive a business and the items and services that they offer. Based on their experiences and interactions, as well as how they perceive a company's mission and values, it is established in the minds of consumers. A company's ability to command respect in its field can be enhanced by establishing a strong brand image. It is necessary to acquire the trust of customers and competitors by delivering consistent quality, reliability and credibility (Törmälä and Saraniemi, 2018).

2.6.2 Company Performance

The fundamental of corporate performance is that it facilitates the alignment of company's personnel, systems and resources, thereby enabling companies to achieve strategic objectives. For example, the most general objective of a company is to achieve profitability. Moreover, financial performance indicators, often known as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are quantitative metrics used to evaluate, track and forecast a company's financial health. According to Anagnostopoulou et al. (2019), a study was done on the online reputation of a hotel to determine the company's financial performance. The online reputation was investigated through the hotel's reviews on Booking.com. It was concluded that the online reputation of the company positively affects the financial performance of the company.

2.6.3 Customer Loyalty

A customer's brand loyalty is their commitment to buy the brand's products and/or services despite flaws, competitor actions or market shifts (Jacoby, 1971). Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty fall under "brand loyalty." Attitudinal loyalty refers to clients who believe in a brand, whereas behavioural loyalty refers to customers who are obligated to do so (Jacoby, 1971). The behavioural approach to customer retention that depended entirely on repeat purchases has been questioned since it may not have mirrored consumer brand loyalty (Al-Hawari, 2015). This study addresses both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty since they affect eWOM.

2.6.4 eWOM Gives Competitive Advantage

EWOM facilitates peer-to-peer information distribution by allowing consumers to send information to several recipients concurrently. This can be done utilising online forums, blogs, communities and social networking sites. Therefore, company marketers promote their firms on social media and derive from it (Li et al., 2021).

3.0 DISCUSSION
3.1 The Impacts of COVID-19 on eWOM

To begin with, three years after the pandemic began, practically every company in the world is still dealing with the effects of COVID-19. However, results have varied greatly, even within the same country or industry. Based on Macsween and Canziani (2021), one of the most severely affected industries are the tourism industry, which has been constrained by extreme movement restrictions. This led to travel restrictions and border closures all around the world, effectively putting an end to international travel (Mao and Peterson, 2021). Moreover, the outbreak has had a significant impact on the global hospitality industry, with hotels in the majority of countries being shut down due to lockdown measures (Farmaki et al., 2021). Therefore, the pandemic of COVID-19 has led to the increase in usage of eWOM. According to Luo and Xu (2021), eWOM grew by more than double its normal rate during COVID-19, resulting in an increase in global eWOM traffic. In recent studies, eWOM has been shown to have an influence on customer behaviour (Rani and Shivaparsad, 2019). The COVID-19 epidemic has underlined the importance of social media as a source of information for consumers and social eWOM has a substantial influence on purchasing decisions (Karjala, 2021). For example, social media platforms like Facebook, Tik Tok and Instagram allow users to influence one another during the purchasing process, making them the most socially significant (Varghese and Agrawal, 2021).

3.2 The Importance of eWOM in Consumer Decision Making
3.2.1 Trust in Message

EWOM is determined as a tremendous force in the market

because consumers believe it to be the most reliable source of product information. In comparison to traditional media, eWOM communications are seen as more trustworthy by consumers (Ismagilova et al. 2017). It is because eWOM has been determined to be more trustworthy and empathetic than commercial information offered by firms (Choi, 2020). Furthermore, Zulkiffli et al. (2017) stated that messages and reviews that is developed through eWOM comes from trusted users, unlike other sources. Therefore, increased adoption of an eWOM message is correlated to eWOM's legitimacy and usefulness and this mediates the influence of these two factors on customer purchase intention for a given product (Tien et al., 2018). eWOM's trust component is one of the most critical but least understood features. According to (Fanoberova and Kuczkowska, 2016), the communication source's professed rationale for providing accurate and genuine information. People who seek guidance are usually better prepared to judge the credibility of the sources they are considering. Research shows that trust between parties is essential for information sharing and the inclusion of experts. A person's statement that they believe in a message implies that they have faith in the information it includes (Ismagilova et al., 2019). The trust in message-buy intention link suggests that the trust in message has a positive effect on the consumer's desire to purchase the items.

3.2.2 eWOM Exposure
The association between consumer exposure to firms, products or even other advertising inputs such as trademarks, labelling or brand positioning and customer decision is recognised by marketing channels. Repetition of advertisements in traditional media, for example, is a frequent method for influencing consumer perception by improving customers' ability to remember details (Ananda et al., 2019). According to Srivasta and Sivaramkrishnan (2020), eWOM has a significant impact on sales activities, consumer decision-making and the company's reputation. EWOM can be encouraged through increasing interaction with the product or a focus channel, according to current studies. For example, eWOM has generated a lot of customers for the nightclubs and bars sector through promotion on social media platforms (Cardona et al., 2019). First Chapter Speakeasy Bar located in Malaysia has recently been one of the top bars to go to for the tourists and locals due to its labelling and brand positioning that is developed through promotion on social media platforms using eWOM.

3.3 Comparison between Social Contagion and Social Influence theories
3.3.1 Social Contagion Theory
Social Contagion Theory refers to the spread of behaviour, emotions or situations within a group, community or network. When making decisions or confronting challenges, individuals refer to the experiences of those who have been in similar situations. Contagion is said to occur as a result of closeness between members of a person's network and the individuals they communicate with, leading to converging of ideas among those who are socially connected (Christakis and Fowler, 2013). For example, Discord, Telegram, Facebook groups and Tumblr are applications that are used amongst members to socially interact and network. Moreover, Lowyat, an online community platform is used by the people in Malaysia to express their opinions and reviews on products and services produced by companies (Beng, 2019).

3.3.2 Social Influence Theory
On the other hand, Social Influence Theory (SIT) refers to a change in an individual's thoughts, feelings, attitudes or behaviours as a result of an interaction with another person. Liu, Min and Han (2019) claim that users' experiences on social media were much enhanced by the power of social influence. However, SIT influences customers' viewpoints as they came to trust that someone else possessed reliable information (Tuncgenc, 2021). For example, customers view

information through social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok that could affect their purchasing decision for a product or service. Additionally, there are various ways in which news channels like CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera will influence human behaviour and self-beliefs when making decisions. In the tourism and hospitality industry, using social media sites such as TripAdvisor, guests can publish User Generated Content (UGC) about their dining experiences, including whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied (Cassar and Caruana, 2020). Thus, this content can affect the purchasing intentions of other customers.

3.4 Impacts of eWOM
3.4.1 Company/Brand image
EWOM is an effective and influential instrument that has a favourable influence on brand image and consumer purchase intent. eWOM contributes to the development of a positive brand image and has a direct impact on it (Tariq et al., 2017). The influence of eWOM on the image of brands and companies is that consumers have brand-related information from online WOM. Thus, eWOM has an effect on brand image in the physical goods market. This demonstrates that eWOM can influence consumers' perceptions of a specific company or a brand. A better brand image can be achieved by reading more customer evaluations about a company or a brand, as customers will be able to identify the company or a brand with the most positive feedback through reviews (Yodpram and Intala, 2020). For instance, according to Arif (2019), eWOM has had a big and favourable impact on the brand image of Citilink, a low-cost airline operator in Indonesia in the transportation and travel sector. Citilink Indonesia's prior customer's favourable eWOM has a significant impact on consumer repurchase intentions. However, e-commerce company brand known as Na-kd was negatively impacted by eWOM through bad reviews by influencers. Negative eWOM generated by the influencers led to the discontinuation of prior cooperation between committed influencers towards Na-kd (Melander and Dyrelov, 2021).

3.4.2 Company Performance
EWOM can deeply affect a company's performance with improved sales. According to Nisar et al. (2020), eWOM may have an effect on the long-term earnings and cash flow of a firm, as well as on the willingness of consumers to pay premium prices, decisions about mergers and acquisitions, stock prices and the capacity to sustain a competitive advantage. This is due to the fact that eWOM is an effective instrument for boosting a company's business on digital channels like social media. A company's online presence can be enhanced by including user-generated material, which attracts customers and encourages natural dialogue about the company or brand (Mihardjo et al., 2019). For example, a cruise liner company in Spain has benefited through eWOM. As soon as the lockdown on the Covid-19 outbreak was lifted, this company began leveraging social media sites to spread eWOM about cruise liner services. Since then, the company has received numerous attentions from tourists and residents on social media, and it has also gained a lot of customers. As a result, eWOM has had a favourable impact on the performance of the cruise liner company (Zinko et al., 2021). In addition, images that are posted along with reviews in Trip Advisor has boosted fast food, hotel and cruise liner companies' performance (Chavez et al., 2020).

3.4.3 Customer Loyalty
EWOM may have an impact on brand loyalty and repurchase intention since consumers are satisfied with the brand. The influence of electronic word-of-mouth and social media marketing on brand loyalty and ultimately, purchase intentions is felt by customers. According to Jiayu et al. (2021), studies have determined that eWOM had a 95 % confidence level effect on purchase intention through brand loyalty. Among the characteristics that influence brand loyalty are customer satisfaction, product trustworthiness, the company's

image, the significance of relationships, product involvement, perceived quality and brand trust. With these elements, customers establish repurchase intentions and brand loyalty. This is supported by the results of a study by Silvia et al. (2017) which found that users who have access to a brand's Facebook fan page are more likely to engage with the brand. As a result, brand loyalty in Facebook fan pages is positively affected by eWOM, as Chen et al. (2017) discovered. According to the research on brand attachment, clients who are emotionally attached to a brand are more likely to spread favourable eWOM.

3.4.4 eWOM Gives Competitive Advantage
Essentially, seizing eWOM enables firms to create capabilities that lead to a sustained competitive advantage in the digital age. In today's digitalized era, eWOM gives competitive advantage to companies that utilizes strategies to promote themselves through eWOM. One of the strategies is content that has been created and posted by unsponsored consumers is known as User-Generated Content (UGC). All of these kinds of UGC may be found on the internet. Publication of UGC is most often done via an internet medium, such as a social networking site (Liu, Jiang and Xhao, 2019). Moreover, eWOM allows the transmission of information through customer ratings and reviews based on a company or brand. Besides that, influencer marketing is a joint effort between a business and an influential individual to promote a company or brand (Ong and Ito, 2019). With these strategies, companies will be benefited with utilization of eWOM. For example, Tony Fernandez, the CEO of Airasia, an airline company based in Malaysia, has hired Leona, a famous influencer in Tiktok to promote the company itself. This allows Airasia to have a competitive advantage among the other airline companies in the industry.

3.5 SWOT Analysis of Genting Berhad
A Significant Representation in the Hospitality and Tourism Sector
Strengths
In the hospitality and tourism sector, Genting Malaysia, a subsidiary of Genting Berhad, manages the company's leisure and hospitality operations. Theme parks, hotels, coastal resorts and entertainment are among its offerings. In 1965, Tan Sri Lim Goh Tong started the Genting Group with the construction of the Genting Highlands Resort, a stunning highland resort. It is possible to stay at any of the resort's five hotels in whatever order you like at Resort World Genting. There are more than 8,000 rooms, 50 rides and 200 restaurants and shops can be found at these five hotels. On top of that, First World Hotel has 6,000 rooms and is the world's largest hospitality facility. The resort's primary attractions include its casino, theme park, concert performances, food and beverage and retail shops (Musthafa and Abdullah, 2019).

Weaknesses
Seasonally, Genting Berhad's major business, the hospitality and leisure industry, undergoes significant shifts. It can handle a lot of people during the busiest times of the year, notably around the holidays, but only a small number of people during the slower months. Plantation, oil and gas, information technology and energy are just a few of Genting Berhad's many diversifications in order to smooth out revenue fluctuations (Shirin, 2021). The hospitality and leisure industry, despite its diversification, is unable to generate profits. For instance, a 2.8 % drop in income from the previous year was blamed on a decline in the leisure industry in Singapore.

Opportunities
To replace the previous theme park at Resort World Genting, Genting Highlands, Genting Malaysia Berhad has spent over RM400 million to develop the world's first Twentieth Century Fox Theme Park with 25 movie-themed rides and attractions that has just been opened in 2022. CEO of Genting said the theme park investment was part of an RM3 billion rehabilitation initiative that included the construction of an extra 1,300 hotel rooms adjacent to the First World Hotel (Hashim et al., 2020). The tourism sector is on the rise, and the government of Malaysia is actively pushing the tourist industry, all of which should give Genting Malaysia Berhad with a fantastic chance.

Threats
For its part, Genting has to contend with an increasingly competitive tourism and hospitality business in the region, including Macau and Singapore, to name just two examples. There is a risk that Genting could lose customers in both Malaysia and Singapore if it does not win the bid for a Singapore integrated resort, such as Marina Bayfront or Sentosa (Vong, 2022). Genting Malaysia, on the other hand, generates most of its revenue from the market sector at Malaysia, which is less susceptible to competition than the international market.

4.0 CONCLUSION
To sum up, this essay consists of the importance, impacts and drivers of eWOM. The theories applied are based on the theories that are relevant and correlates to eWOM. WOM has been around for a long time, but it's now being applied to the Internet (eWOM). The growth of social media and online forums and communities has given consumers more authority over their own lives. EWOM is used by many buyers before making a final purchase. Post-purchase customers turn to eWOM to share their thoughts and experiences with the products purchased. Customers participate in eWOM for a variety of reasons, including helping others, discussing the pros and drawbacks of a product and sharing information. In addition, consumers are fiercely defending their brand allegiance on social media. Therefore, marketers are encouraged to utilize eWOM to raise consumer awareness of their products, increase sales and other performance metrics and build customer loyalty (Mishrah and Satish, 2016).

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS
5.1 Visual Marketing
First and foremost, digital marketers must encourage customers to post their trip photos on social media to create a co-created picture of the area (Liu et al., 2021). Visual marketing is a good way to promote a business to show prospective customers how family-friendly or crowded a location is by having them read feedback from other customers. Customers want to know that the reviews they read are based on factual information, which is especially important for tourist attractions. Gavilan et al. (2018) asserted that reviews are an excellent method to generate social proof and attract new consumers and digital marketers should encourage customers to post visual images through reviews on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Trip Advisor and more.

5.2 Creating Awareness of Social Media Platforms
Besides that, modern day customers follow their preferred brands on social networking sites in order to stay abreast of the most recent product releases and to take advantage of unique discounts and promotions. With the utilization of promotional activities on social media, it aims for customer experience, public awareness, design and development and brand recognition (Wibowo et al., 2020). It contributes to the enhancement of the brand's customer reputation, hence increasing customer loyalty, impacting customers' purchase intention and influencing buying decisions to meet the consumers' genuine purchase intention (Seo and Park, 2018). Therefore, promotion activities must be done to create awareness on social media platforms.

5.3 Creating an Impression of Trustworthiness in the Minds of Customers
According to Ngarmwongnoi et al. (2020), consumers'

impressions of eWOM are highly influenced by the reliability of the source and the inclusion of personally identifiable information (PII) increases eWOM's credibility even further. Anecdotes in customer reviews that are well-written help to build customer confidence in the hospitality and tourism industry. In addition, customers are aware that no vacation is perfect and a small percentage of negative reviews will negatively impact the credibility of eWOM (Hong and Pittman, 2020). More effort will be spent meticulously analysing negative material than positive content because it is believed that negative eWOM has a greater impact. Therefore, customers are recommended to post legitimate and honest reviews in social media platforms and companies must provide the best product and services in order to achieve great customer satisfaction which allows customers to post great reviews about the companies.

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