

The Effect of Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) and Electronic Reputation (eReputation): An Online Shopping Application

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Abstract

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is the digital heartbeat of online shopping, influencing consumer decisions based on shared experiences. This investigation evaluated the effect of eWOM on eReputation in the realm of mobile application-based shopping. It incorporated key marketing frameworks: relationship marketing, Social Exchange Theory (SET), and co-creation theory. The collected data highlighted the interplay between eWOM constructs and eReputation, and the moderating effect of review helpfulness on the relationship between valence and eReputation.

A total of 594 usable responses were analysed by using exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression analysis to predict the relationships between the eWOM independent variables and eReputation as the dependent variable. Valence had the strongest effect on eReputation, followed by content quality, degree of influence, and the moderating effect of review helpfulness on the relationship between valence and eReputation. The findings indicated a positive relationship between all of the tested hypotheses, and would equip mobile commerce stakeholders with valuable insights into the role of eWOM and eReputation, thus aiding an understanding of consumer behaviour.

1. Introduction

Consumers frequently look for additional information to mitigate the uncertainties and complexities involved in making a purchase decision (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). This pursuit of additional and supplementary information has led to the emergence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Although traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) encapsulates information discussions among consumers, the internet has amplified WOM's reach and impact (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). These conversations often include details about sellers and usage experiences, and are typically perceived as more reliable and influential than company-generated information, thus substantially influencing consumer decision-making (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014; Nosita & Lestari, 2019). Characterised by its expansive volume, widespread dispersion, persistent visibility, and propensity for anonymity and deception, eWOM emphasises valence and fosters a sense of community engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Lee, Hsieh & Hsu, 2011; Vo, 2017). eWOM is powerful, as peer feedback and reviews can offer substantial benefits to organisations, such as increased purchase intentions (Lal et al., 2020), while on the other hand, negative eWOM can cause brand rejection, and induce adverse customer attitudes, lead to a decline in sales, and harm an organisation's reputation (Chiosa & Anastasiei, 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021; King, Racherla & Bush, 2014).

Reputation and electronic reputation (eReputation) occupy different yet overlapping spheres of importance. 'Traditional reputation' refers to the overall judgements of the organisation (or brand) that are formed over time. These are the judgements of both internal and external stakeholders about how well expectations are fulfilled and are associated with the credibility of the organisation, the brand, and the products and services (Castellano & Dutot, 2017; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001). Rust et al. (2021:22-23) define brand reputation as the "collective sentiment, dialogue, and perception held by stakeholders about a brand, typically influenced by brand-related events, which in turn impact the organisation's financial performance".

eReputation is frequently seen as a subset of reputation, specifically denoting those aspects of reputation that originate from digital interactions (Chun & Davies, 2001:316). Owing to the multi-dimensional characteristics of reputation, offering a straightforward and all-encompassing definition proves challenging (Maltese, Pons & Prévot, 2017). It is the outcome of the perceptions held by online communities, driven by their inherent motivations and their assimilation of online content (Castellano & Khelladi, 2016). These online community perceptions, or eReputation, are an important aspect of marketing as it serves as an integral element of a brand's marketing approach, enhancing production and drawing a substantial customer base (Dutot & Castellano, 2015).

The rise of the internet and social media platforms has facilitated the sharing of consumer experiences and reviews on a much larger scale (Hayes & Kindness, 2021; Appel et al., 2020). In South Africa, 48 per cent of internet users are digital buyers, and smartphones are the most favoured device, accounting for 83 per cent of online purchases (Galal, 2023; Statista, 2023a). Furthermore, South Africa's digital shopping hit an impressive R50 billion mark in 2022, a leap powered by the continued surge in home delivery orders. A study by World Wide Worx and Mastercard disclosed that South Africa's online retail industry witnessed a

significant growth of 35 per cent in 2022, propelling overall online retail sales to R55 billion (BusinessTech, 2022). Mobile commerce (mCommerce) contributes to online shopping success and is on the rise thanks to the portability and ease-of-use of mobile devices (Taneja, 2021). This trend provides online retailers with a golden opportunity to boost their brand awareness and to engage with customers through these devices and platforms (Wang et al., 2016).

Moreover, eWOM has become an essential marketing tool owing to its perceived reliability, persistence, and exceptional speed of dissemination (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; ShabbirHusain & Varshney, 2022). eWOM is a complex construct with multiple dimensions. Each dimension should be analysed independently as they may exhibit distinct behaviours (Yen & Tang, 2019). The relationship between online reviews and online comments (eWOM) and both reputation and eReputation is notable (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Online reviews and online comments form an integral part of eWOM, which can bolster or tarnish an organisation's eReputation, while positive reviews and comments can improve its eReputation, enhancing customer trust.

The reputation of online retailers is important, as it has an effect on consumer behaviour, such as reducing product returns (Walsh et al., 2016). In this context, the role of online review helpfulness as an independent variable, emerges as a critical factor, and is determined by the perceived value of a review to readers and customer evaluations, thus significantly impacting a customer's purchasing decisions. The helpfulness of reviews, in turn, is assessed on the basis of their quality and credibility, with quality reflecting the persuasiveness of comments (Pentina, Bailey & Zhang, 2018). As organisations grow their online presence, their eReputation – the online perception of their activities – becomes increasingly important (Dwivedi et al., 2021). This digital reputation directly impacts consumer decisions about brand engagement and purchases.

Various research efforts have highlighted the impact of eWOM on consumer attitudes, buying intentions, and purchasing behaviours (Kim, Kandampully & Bilgihan, 2018). However, while the literature has identified and investigated the antecedents and components of eWOM, few studies have analysed its consequences and potential effect in an online shopping application context. Sampat and Sabat (2021) investigated the influence of eSatisfaction, perceived value, trust and eLoyalty on eWOM for food ordering applications in India, and Bevan-Dye (2022) conducted a study in South Africa on online consumer-generated reviews amongst Generation Y students. There is a scarcity of studies on consumer reviews in South Africa (Bevan-Dey, 2022). Therefore, this study investigated the link between eWOM and eReputation, as well as the moderating effect of review helpfulness on the relationship between valence and eReputation in an online shopping application context.

1.1. Problem statement

The retail market plays a significant role in the global economy, with global retail sales forecast to reach over 30 trillion US dollars by 2024 (Statista, 2023b). Online sales contribute exponentially to retail sales. In 2021, nearly 19 per cent of all retail sales across the globe were conducted online. Projections suggest that, by 2026, about one quarter of all worldwide retail sales will be executed through online platforms (Coppola, 2023). This trend has prompted both consumers and retailers to explore online shopping, and retailers to integrate online strategies to remain competitive (Huang & Jin, 2020). Certain brands have benefited from positive eWOM, which has fuelled their growth in the online market. However, a significant knowledge gap exists in understanding the effect of eWOM on the eReputation of shopping apps, particularly in the South African context. Bhandari and Rodgers (2020) argue that, while positive eWOM enhances brand attitudes, negative eWOM often carries more influence, being perceived as more credible and consequential. Reviews serve as pivotal sources for customers to form decisions, and these reviews significantly affect a customer's choice to use an app (Liang et al., 2015; Yones & Muthaiyah, 2023).

The helpfulness of reviews emerges as a critical factor in the online shopping decision-making process (Ruiz-Mafe, Bigne-Alcaniz & Curras-Perez, 2020). Understanding how this element influences South African consumers could provide retailers with valuable insights. 'eReputation', as defined by Castellano and Dutot (2017:44), is the perception that internet users hold of a brand, based entirely on online information. However, eReputation extends beyond mere online reputation, requiring additional theoretical exploration for a comprehensive understanding. While 'social mentions' facilitate the assessment of eReputation, their focus is predominantly on content analysis, capturing only a fragment of the eReputation spectrum (Castellano & Dutot, 2017:45).

This study aimed to corroborate quantitatively the influence of eWOM as a multi-dimensional construct on eReputation (also as a multi-dimensional construct) (Yen & Tang, 2019; Maltese et al., 2017), and to probe the impact of review helpfulness on the correlation between customers' eWOM's sub-component valence and eReputation in mobile shopping app usage. Valence was specifically focused on, as it refers to the tone of consumer-generated data, whether positive, neutral, or negative. Valence plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour, and generally positive feedback encourages favourable attitudes, while negative feedback does the opposite (Zablocki, Schlegelmilch & Houston, 2019). Given the limited research into eWOM and eReputation in the South African context, it was essential to investigate the interplay between eWOM and eReputation for consumers using mobile shopping apps for online purchases.

1.2. Research objectives

The primary objective of this research was to ascertain the influence of eWOM on the eReputation of mobile shopping applications, and to explore how the perceived helpfulness of reviews moderates the relationship between review sentiment (valence) and eReputation. The secondary objectives were to determine the demographic profile of the study's respondents, as well as to test the relationships between the independent

variables of eWOM on the dependent multi-dimensional eReputation construct.

The paper unfolds as follows. The next section offers a review of the literature, it is followed by the theoretical background, and then a discussion of the key constructs, the conceptual model, and the research methodology and design. The paper concludes with managerial implications and recommendations.

2. Literature review

In this section, the author investigates the literature in order to explain the constructs of this study: eWOM as a multi-dimensional construct, eReputation as a multi-dimensional construct, and review helpfulness as a uni-dimensional construct. This section also addresses the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study: social exchange theory (SET), relationship marketing theory, and co-creation theory.

2.1. Theoretical framework underpinning the study

2.1.1 Social exchange theory (SET)

SET provides insight into behaviours that are observed during the exchange of resources within relationships. Such interactions are deemed to be social exchanges, and SET necessitates a consistent and active engagement among customers. This theory has been widely used to interpret participation in social media communication (Ferm & Thaichon, 2021). In the current context, traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) has evolved into eWOM, which is highly visible on diverse social networking platforms where customers share information or feedback about online shopping apps. SET has been instrumental in explaining social concepts, structures, and processes such as social position, power, social networks, justice, alliance formation, cohesion, trust, affect, and emotion. Within the scope of this study, SET facilitated the examination of customer opinion exchanges concerning various online shopping apps, the helpfulness of online reviews, and how these factors shape perceptions about a brand's electronic reputation (eReputation) and its shopping app (Van den Broek et al., 2018).

2.1.2 Relationship marketing theory (RMT)

RMT focuses on the process of attracting, maintaining, and enhancing customer relationships (Healy et al., 2001:187). It holds the potential to foster robust relationships with online retail customers, having proven to be effective in redefining concepts such as trust, content quality, influence level, message quality, tie strength, sentiment (valence), homophily, source credibility, and review helpfulness (Verma, Sharma & Sheth, 2016). Mobile applications serve as potent instruments that enable relationship marketers to engage with their customers actively and constantly. They facilitate personalised, real-time, location-specific offers (Steinhoff et al., 2019:6). In this study, trust, a fundamental construct of relationship marketing, was employed to evaluate whether consumers trust eWOM in their online shopping experiences.

2.1.3 Co-creation theory (CT)

CT emphasises a joint process of creating value, in which various service methods work together to produce both tangible goods (material values) and abstract concepts or perceptions (symbolic values). This process is crucial, as it provides organisations with essential insights, helping them to understand and improve their value delivery (Donato et al., 2017). Co-creation also plays an instrumental role, as it enables enhanced customer interaction and assists in decision-making processes (Fernandes & Remelhe, 2016). In this study, the act of sharing opinions, contributing comments, and exchanging ideas and experiences in an online environment culminated in the co-creation of value. Customers or prospective customers engage with brands or companies via brand engagement, an offshoot of the value co-creation concept (Fu, Hsu & I-Wei, 2018). eWOM triggers customer online engagement, which ties into the co-creation theory of customer online value. Thus the usefulness of reviews is crafted through customer interaction in online reviews, thereby facilitating the co-creation of value (Frempong et al., 2020).

2.2. Conceptual model and supported theory

The proposed model drew support from SET, RMT, and CT, and sought to investigate the connections between these variables in the context of online shopping in South Africa, as presented in Figure 2. The primary objective, with the aid of regression analysis, was to assess the existence of the proposed relationships between the variables, specifically examining whether the independent variables of the eWOM construct had a predictive impact on the dependent variable, eReputation. In addition, the conceptual model aimed to explore whether the perceived helpfulness of reviews moderated the relationship between review sentiment (valence) and eReputation. Therefore, the next section presents the theory supporting the three main constructs – eWOM, eReputation, and review helpfulness – before presenting the proposed hypotheses.

2.2.1 Differentiating between traditional WOM and eWOM

Word-of-mouth (WOM), has been the subject of extensive investigation because of its role in shaping consumer attitudes towards a brand (Yen & Tang, 2019). Although WOM and eWOM are closely related, it was established in the introduction that WOM represents interpersonal communication between consumers or person-to-person oral communication about a brand, product, or service between two consumers who are not linked to the organisation or brand delivering the product or service. However, the internet has extended the reach and impact of WOM (Arndt, 1967:190; Huete-Alcocer, 2017). WOM, or even eWOM, distinguishes itself from marketing-driven communication because it represents an informal dialogue among consumers who share their likes and dislikes about products and services (Huete-Alcocer, 2017).

Ismagilova et al. (2017:vii) define eWOM as “the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process between potential, actual, or former consumers’ experiences regarding a product, service, brand, company, or media personality, which is available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet...”, while its digital counterpart has evolved from WOM into the electronic format known as eWOM by overcoming

geographical and temporal boundaries. eWOM denotes the interaction among customers in an online ecosystem, and refers to any online positive or negative statement made by current, potential, or past customers about a product, brand, or company and that is available to a vast audience over the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Huete-Alcoer, 2017:2-3). Given that people communicate their experiences on the internet and so influence consumer behaviour, eWOM positively impacts customer actions. Moreover, the purchase intentions of online customers are positively correlated with the perceived credibility and utility of online reviews (Anastasiu, Dospinescu & Dospinescu, 2021).

As a multi-dimensional construct (Yen & Tang, 2019; Castellano & Dutot, 2017), the elements (or sub constructs) shaping eWOM include trust, content quality, degree of influence, message quality, tie strength, valence, homophily, source credibility, and review helpfulness (Castellano & Dutot, 2017; Witvoet, 2019:15). Cheng and Zhou (2020) investigated eWOM and treated it as a multidimensional concept. However, they suggested for future research that a more in-depth detail analysis could be made – hence the need for this research. Yen and Tang (2019) also argued that eWOM should be treated as a multidimensional construct. For the purpose of this study, trust, content quality, degree of influence, message quality, tie strength, valence, homophily, and source credibility – as outlined by Castellano and Dutot (2017), and based on previous studies – were included as the components of eWOM. They are explored in more detail in the discussion of the hypotheses.

2.2.2 Differentiating between reputation and eReputation

A firm's reputation is the comprehensive attractiveness, recognition, and attributes garnered from its past behaviours and endeavours (Veh, Göbel & Vogel, 2018:316). Reputation incorporates several facets: all stakeholders' perceptions, along with the cognitive and emotional communicative dimensions perceived by the receiver. Reputation can be moulded by both manageable marketing initiatives and unforeseen public events, and it is directly connected to the company's financial stability (Rust et al., 2021:22-23). Reputation can be characterised as the perceived ability of a firm to generate value when compared with its competitors (Chalençon et al., 2017; Fombrun, 1996). Therefore, reputation acts as a significant and intangible asset that reinforces an organisation's competitive edge (Flatt & Kowalczyk, 2008).

The concept of eReputation is not often defined in the literature; and, as with Chun and Davies (2001), eReputation is seen as an extension of traditional reputation into the online realm. However, eReputation pertains to the aspects of reputation that primarily arise from digital interactions, also sometimes referred to as 'cyber reputation', 'digital reputation', or 'online reputation' (Dutot & Castellano, 2015). Consequently, eReputation can be understood as the collective perception of internet users of a brand or an individual, drawn from the information available on digital platforms where people express their opinions about the entity in question (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Thus eReputation encapsulates the image and identity of a brand as perceived through the lens of the internet (Esenyel, 2020). It influences the way in which consumers

perceive a brand, based on online interactions, feedback, reviews they read, and the overall presence of an organisation (Lopez & Garza, 2022). The benefits of positive eReputation include instant customer feedback, broader reach, and the capability for personalisation (Moccia, Garcia & Tomic, 2021). As the internet has continued to increase the accessibility and availability of information about an organisation and its products and services, eReputation seems to have played a central role in the considerations of future investors (Chalencon et al., 2017).

2.2.3 Review helpfulness

An online customer review is regarded as a form of online WOM (or eWOM) evaluation or assessment, generated by peers about products or services; and they are typically displayed on retail or third-party websites (Karimi & Wang, 2017; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). They are usually the most accessible eWOM, and many organisations use online reviews in their marketing strategies (Hong et al., 2017; Kim, 2021). These reviews usually consist of a star rating system, with anything from zero to five stars placed alongside written comments about user experiences, and critiques about specific products or service features (Hong et al., 2017). These reviews play a significant role in influencing purchase decisions (Karimi & Wang, 2017; Kim, 2021), increasing brand awareness (Chakraborty, 2019), increasing sales (Kim, 2021), and positively shaping consumer attitudes (Thomas, Wirtz & Weyerer, 2019). Popular products, and those that go viral, might generate higher revenues. In the same vein, products with more positive online sentiments (positive eWOM valence) are more likely to sell (Kim, 2021; You, Vadakkepatt & Joshi, 2015).

2.3 Hypothesis formulation

2.3.1 The relationship between tie strength and eReputation

The intensity of social bonds, or 'tie strength', represents the amalgamation of elements such as the duration, emotional attachment, intimacy, and reciprocal services shared between the information sender and the receiver (Mattie et al., 2018). Emotional intensity is a vital component of eReputation, being a direct reflection of users' emotional reactions. One of the primary advantages of social networks such as Facebook, 'X' (formerly Twitter) and Instagram is their potential for fostering connections with their audiences. Delivering exceptional service to customers is crucial for this connection to happen (Dutot, Galvez & Versailles, 2016). The power of the bond shared between consumers and the sources of eWOM communication are crucial, as stronger and more sharing-oriented relationships have a more significant impact on the customer (Gurcu & Korkmaz, 2018). Thus the strength of the online social bond between customers can substantially affect the eReputation of mobile shopping apps (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Stronger tie strength (social bonds) positively affects eReputation in the context of mobile shopping app usage.

2.3.2 The relationship between homophily and eReputation

'Homophily' refers to the natural gravitation of individuals towards others who share similar backgrounds (Khwaja & Zaman, 2020). This similarity could be attributed to their shared beliefs, values, religious views, or purchasing behaviours. The significance of homophily lies in its capacity to foster deeper engagement and stronger relationship building between like-minded individuals. Consequently, those exhibiting high degrees of homophily are more likely to depend on eWOM when deciding to make a purchase.

Customers with matching backgrounds tend to influence one another's buying behaviour positively because they are inclined to trust one another's views and recommendations. This mutual trust enhances the eReputation of brands by casting them in a positive light (Ismagilova et al., 2017). Thus, in the context of online shopping apps, the conclusion can be drawn that there is a positive correlation between homophily and eReputation (Castellano & Dutot, 2017).

H2: Homophily positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.3 The relationship between trust and eReputation

In the context of online shopping, 'trust' refers to a consumer's confidence in the ethical standards and integrity of another entity. It is a significant factor that affects online purchases, as it substantially impacts the buying decision, and can enhance positive consumer behaviour during online transactions (Alhidari & Almeshal, 2017). Trust takes on a critical role in the realm of eWOM, particularly because many customers approach online shopping apps with a degree of scepticism.

For a successful online purchase transaction, consumers must place their trust in the shopping application. This trust can be shaped in eWOM, which, in turn, affects the eReputation of the application (Di Virgilio & Antonelli, 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2017). Based on this argument, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Trust positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.4 The relationship between source credibility and eReputation

'Source credibility' refers to the extent to which consumers trust and rely on online reviews posted by others (Hussain et al., 2017). It is the credibility of these sources that often sparks customer interest in a product or service (Johnson & Kaye, 2015). Consumers value this credibility, as it helps them to make informed decisions before using online shopping apps and proceeding with purchases. Moreover, when source credibility positively affects consumers, it enhances the eReputation of a brand. This occurs as consumers gain confidence in making purchases via the online platform, based on credible reviews. Castellano and Dutot (2017) corroborate the positive correlation between the credibility of the message source and eReputation; therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H4: Source credibility positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.5 The relationship between message quality and eReputation

Message quality in an online review is gauged by its clarity, consistency, and quality. All of these characteristics play a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Message quality, as defined in the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) theory, pertains to the depth and consistency of the message's content. The mode of delivery is not incorporated into this construct (as suggested by the ELM theory); however, message quality is closely tied to the content being conveyed, encompassing elements such as the intellectual worth and depth (or richness) of the presented argument (Le, Dobele & Robinson, 2018:442). The message quality is also dependent on the message's credibility; and that, in turn, is determined by the trustworthiness of the message's sources and the excellence of its content (Cheung et al., 2009).

High-quality messages influence eReputation because customers rely on them when deciding to make purchases through an online shopping app. Consequently, research has affirmed that the quality of a message positively affects eReputation (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H5: Message quality positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.6 The relationship between content quality and e-Reputation

Content quality, representing the depth and insightfulness of data, is crucial to customers' online shopping experience, as it significantly affects the quality of eWOM information on shopping platforms (Erkan & Evans, 2016). This quality influences a brand's eReputation, as it shapes potential customers' perceptions and purchase decisions. Content quality fosters user engagement with brands on social media, thus promoting app usage and establishing its critical role in shaping eReputation (Srivastava & Sivaramakrishnan, 2020). Therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H6: Content quality positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.7 The relationship between valence and e-Reputation

'Valence', indicating a positive or negative emotional response to situations or objects, significantly influences customer behaviour (Wang, Li & Li, 2018). Preserving a positive eReputation has become a concern for organisations, leading to their increased investment in enhancing the tone of online reviews. Online valence is often used by companies as a predictive marker for product success; it also serves as a cue from seasoned consumers when they convey product quality and potential purchase value to prospective buyers (Kim, 2021). Thus valence, whether positive or negative, shapes customer perceptions about an online shopping app, ultimately affecting its market eReputation (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Research by Witvoet (2019) has affirmed the positive correlation between eWOM valence and eReputation; therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Valence positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.8 The relationship between the degree of influence and e-Reputation

The 'degree of influence' can be classified either as normative, which means that it aligns with the expectations of others' views and attitudes, or as informational, which means that it involves accepting guidance in a brand search from others who are regarded as knowledgeable. Thus social influences shape a consumer's behaviour (Castellano & Dutot, 2017). Through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly 'Twitter'), consumers share their experiences with shopping apps. Positive experiences can sway a consumer's decision-making (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Therefore, the degree of influence plays a significant role in eReputation; if customers are positively swayed, they are likely to use or make purchases on the shopping app without any hesitation. Research by Castellano and Dutot (2017) affirms that the degree of influence is a key factor that impacts eReputation. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that:

H8: The degree of influence positively affects eReputation when shopping with mobile apps.

2.3.9 The moderating role of review helpfulness on valence and eReputation

The usefulness of reviews, known as 'review helpfulness', refers to the degree to which consumers find product evaluations beneficial during their shopping process, while 'valence' refers to consumers' emotional reaction to a situation, which can be either positive or negative (Li, Scott & Walters, 2015; Wang et al., 2018). Votes for the usefulness of reviews play a crucial role in guiding consumers through their product research and purchasing decisions. Moreover, the emotional tone of an online review initially prompts consumers to form an opinion about the shopping app. However, this impression is fleeting owing to the effect of short-term memory (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2020). Consequently, this study aimed to explore the role of eWOM helpfulness as a key moderator in understanding eReputation within specific segments of online shopping apps. It also intended to investigate how the level of eWOM helpfulness might weaken the correlation between other eWOM characteristics, such as valence, the performance of shopping apps, and consumers' purchasing decisions (Mariani & Borghi, 2020). Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H9: Review helpfulness has a moderating role on the relationship between valence and e- Reputation when shopping with mobile apps.

3. Research methodology

This study adopted a quantitative, deductive research approach, since the theory and measurement scales were adapted from the existing literature. The aim was to test the research hypotheses, determining whether the independent variables (eWOM components) affected or predicted the dependent variable eReputation in the online shopping application (app) context (Apuke, 2017). An online survey strategy was employed (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill et al., 2016:55) by distributing the online questionnaire to a designated sample of South Africans who were aged 18 years or more, who had internet access, and who had bought goods during the previous six months by using an online shopping application (app). An online Google Forms

questionnaire link was posted on various social media platforms such as Whatsapp, Instagram and LinkedIn, and respondents were asked to forward the Google Forms questionnaire link to friends and family (convenience and snowball non probability sampling technique) whom they thought (judgement non probability sampling technique) used their mobile phones and applications to buy products or services online. A total of 594 usable responses were analysed by using multiple regression analysis to predict the relationships between the independent and dependent variables (Hair, Harrison & Risher, 2018), and to determine the moderating effect of review helpfulness on the relationship between valence and eReputation.

3.1 Research instrument

To ascertain respondents' eligibility to participate in the study, screening questions were introduced; they had to be aged 18 years or more, and they had to verify that they had internet access and that they had engaged in electronic shopping via an app within the preceding six months. The online questionnaire had the following sections: the first asked for the technological background and demographic details of the respondents; and sections 3, 4, and 5 dealt with the constructs 'eWOM', 'eReputation', and 'review helpfulness', as shown in Figure 2. The independent variables were measured by adapting pre-established measurement scales from the literature, owing to their proven reliability and validity. However, these scales were adapted to suit the specific context of this study – that is, shopping apps. Each scale item, where applicable and considering the purpose of the scale item, was adapted to suit to study, to refer to "...on my app use/app download decisions".

A Likert scale with '1' indicating strong disagreement and '5' representing strong agreement was used. This was adapted from Castellano and Dutot (2017) as follows: for the constructs 'tie strength' and 'homophily', each consisting of three items, the definitions provided by Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) and Chu and Kim (2001) were adapted. 'Trust', also represented by three items, was gauged by adapting Yeh and Choi's (2011) scale. To measure 'source credibility', comprising five items, the scales of Lee and Youn (2009) and Lin, Lu and Wu (2012) were adapted. For 'content quality', which had four items, the scale from Goyette et al. (2010) was adapted. The scales for 'valence', represented by five items, were also adapted from Lee and Youn (2009) and Goyette et al. (2010). 'Degree of influence', with three items, was adapted from Chu and Kim (2011). 'Review helpfulness' was adapted from Yin et al. (2014), and had three items. For 'eReputation' as a dependent variable, a measurement scale with four components was adapted from Castellano and Dutot (2017), as were 'brand characteristics' (two items), 'quality of website' (three items), 'quality of service' (five items), and 'social media' (eight items).

3.2 Data analysis

The data was cleaned, coded, and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28 before it was analysed. The data was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and multiple

regression analysis. The responses provided the researcher with the necessary insights to draw conclusions about the effect that eWOM had on eReputation in the context of online shopping apps. An investigation into the moderating role of review helpfulness was also conducted, as explained in the methodology section.

3.3 Ethics

This study obtained institutional approval (ethics clearance number 2022SCiiS022). Ethics were adhered to by obtaining consent from respondents before completing the Google Forms questionnaire and providing information about the study, confidentiality and anonymity were adhered to. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could also withdraw from the study at any time, without any obligation or any adverse effect.

4. Results and findings

The demographic profile of the respondents can be described as follows. The majority of the survey respondents were female (56.7%), and most had a university degree (40.3%). As for age distribution, the largest age group fell between 18 and 24 years, making up 38.7% of the sample. English was reported as the home language by the majority of the respondents (24%). Concerning technology use, cell phones emerged as the preferred device for conducting online purchases, used by a highly significant 87.23%. All of the respondents had used a shopping app during the six months before completing the questionnaire.

The overall skewness and kurtosis results revealed that the respondents largely agreed with various aspects of social media communication and engagement. The data demonstrated a general closeness to the mean across all of the constructs, indicating strong agreement. Tie strength showed that, even though most of the respondents felt a close connection to their social media contacts, there was some variation and a similar pattern was evident with trust. Although respondents generally trusted their contacts, there was some scepticism.

4.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis

The study employed exploratory factor analysis (EFA), a versatile statistical method to reduce the dimensionality of data, validate constructs, simplify complex datasets, and identify core variables. EFA elucidates underlying relationships among variables and directs to redundancies. It often serves as a preliminary step for more advanced analysis (Young & Pearce, 2013; Costello & Osborne, 2005). Generally, both Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy yield comparable results. However, the KMO Measure offers a nuanced understanding by presenting a range of acceptable variances instead of merely indicating significance or non-significance. The KMO value of 0.856 exceeded the 0.5 threshold as proposed by Wiid and Diggines (2021) and the 0.6 threshold as proposed by Howard (2016) and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.005$) (Wiid & Diggines, 2021; Howard, 2016). Principal Components Analysis was employed as the factor analytical method to assist in identifying underlying structures or patterns in the data (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2011). Factor loadings of the pattern

matrix were interpreted, and constructs (or factors) with factor loadings 0.3 and above were retained for further analysis (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Message quality had a factor loading of 0.3, review helpfulness 0.6, and all the remaining constructs (tie strength, degree of influence, homophily, trust, source credibility, valence, content quality, eReputation) had factor loadings of above 0.8. All the constructs were retained for further analysis. The initial eigenvalues were interpreted, and two factors explained a cumulative variance of 67.52%.

The reliability of all of the constructs was assessed by inspecting the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. When that coefficient is above 0.8, it is classified as acceptable (Wiid & Diggins, 2021). Table 1 shows these results, clearly illustrating that all of the constructs were reliable.

Table 1: Reliability of constructs

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach’s alpha
Tie strength	3	0.899
Homophily	3	0.928
Trust	3	0.941
Source credibility	4	0.923
Message quality	5	0.936
Degree of influence	3	0.903
Valence	3	0.850
Content quality	4	0.900
Review helpfulness	3	0.932
eReputation	18	0.948

Source: Author’s (2023) own compilation

4.2 Multiple regression analysis

A regression analysis was performed to evaluate the possible associations between the independent variables (eWOM) and the dependent variable eReputation. Initially, the VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) values are inspected to assess the extent of multicollinearity among the constructs. The variables serving as predictors in this research are message quality, tie strength, homophily, trust, source credibility, valence, content quality, degree of influence). In line with Janamrung and Issarawornrawanich's (2015:893) assertion, a VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) value exceeding 5 suggests significant multicollinearity among constructs. In this study, all independent variables yielded VIF values falling below the threshold of 5. Therefore, multicollinearity is not a concern.

Table 2 highlights the association strength between the model and the dependent variable. The multiple correlation coefficient, R, signifies the linear correlation between the predicted and the observed dependent variable values. A higher R indicates a stronger link. The R squared is a measure of how much the independent variable explains the dependent variable’s variation. The model’s R square was 42.1%, meaning

that 42.1% of the dependent variable (eReputation) could be explained by the independent variables included in the model. A 'lower' R squared is often expected in the social sciences owing to the complexity and multitude of influences on social behaviours. However, the R square value of 42.1% implies that the model still did not explain a significant portion (57.9%) of the dependent variable's variation, indicating that there might have been other factors that should be investigated in future research.

Table 2: Model summary

Model summary									
Model	R	R squared	Adjusted R squared	Std error of the esti-mate	Change Statistics				
					R squared change	F change	df1	df2	Sig.
1	.649 a	.421	.408	.45848	.421	31.845	9	394	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), eWOM, Homophily, MessageQuality, DegreeOfInfl, TieStrength, ContentQuality, SourceCredibility, Valence, Trust

Source: Own compilation

4.2.1 Correlation analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis was performed on the constructs, following Saunders et al.'s (2016:375) caution that coefficients above 0.90 risk multicollinearity and are not suitable for hypothesis testing. In this study, all correlations were significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$) and remained below the 0.90 threshold, signifying direct relationships among all the independent variables and the dependent, eReputation. All the hypotheses were accepted, while the moderating hypothesis presented in Table 3 and Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 1, was rejected.

Table 3: Correlation analysis

Hypotheses	Correlation coefficient and p-value	
H1: Tie strength predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.222
	p-value	0.000
H2: Homophily predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.172
	p-value	0.000
H3: Trust predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.268
	p-value	0.000
H4: Source credibility predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.339
	p-value	0.000
H5: Message quality predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.398
	p-value	0.000

H6: Content quality predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.676
	p-value	0.000
H7: Degree of influence predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.674
	p-value	0.000
H8: Valence predicts eReputation ACCEPTED	Pearson correlation	0.704
	p-value	0.000
H9: Review helpfulness moderates the relationship between Valence and eReputation REJECTED	Pearson correlation	0.010
	p-value	0.951

Source: Own compilation

Table 3 depicts the correlation analysis. Except for H9, all of these relationships had a significant and positive association, as all of the p values were less than 0.05, indicating statistical significance. Valence had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.704$) on eReputation, followed by content quality ($\beta = 0.676$), and degree of influence ($\beta = 0.674$). Figure 2 depicts all these relationships, while Figure 1 depicts the moderating analysis.

4.2.2 Moderation analysis

Moderation analysis illuminates subtle interactions between variables, often overlooked when examining simple linear relationships, and is typically assessed through statistical significance, specifically by examining the p values of interaction terms. Utilising the robust capabilities of AMOS, researchers can delve into these intricate associations, gaining insights into how external variables influence the strength or orientation of links within the model. A p-value below the commonly used significance level of 0.05 suggests moderation exists, indicating that the effect of one variable on the outcome varies based on levels of the moderating variable. In this study, the moderating role of Review helpfulness on the Valence-e-Reputation relationship was evaluated using AMOS version 24. The findings are summarized in the table below.

Table 4: Moderation analysis

Moderating effect	t-value	p-value	Moderating (interaction) effect	Decision on hypotheses
<i>Interaction</i> Valence x Review Helpfulness → eReputation	0,062	0,951	0,010	There is no moderating effect

Source: Own compilation

The analysis found that Review helpfulness did not significantly moderate this relationship ($t = 0.062$, $p = 0.951$). However, there is still a positive link. Figure 1 shows that higher Review helpfulness amplifies the positive link between Valence and eReputation. In essence, positive reviews have a greater impact on e-Reputation when also deemed helpful. This suggests that helpful reviews not only improve reputation but do so more effectively than equally positive but less helpful reviews.

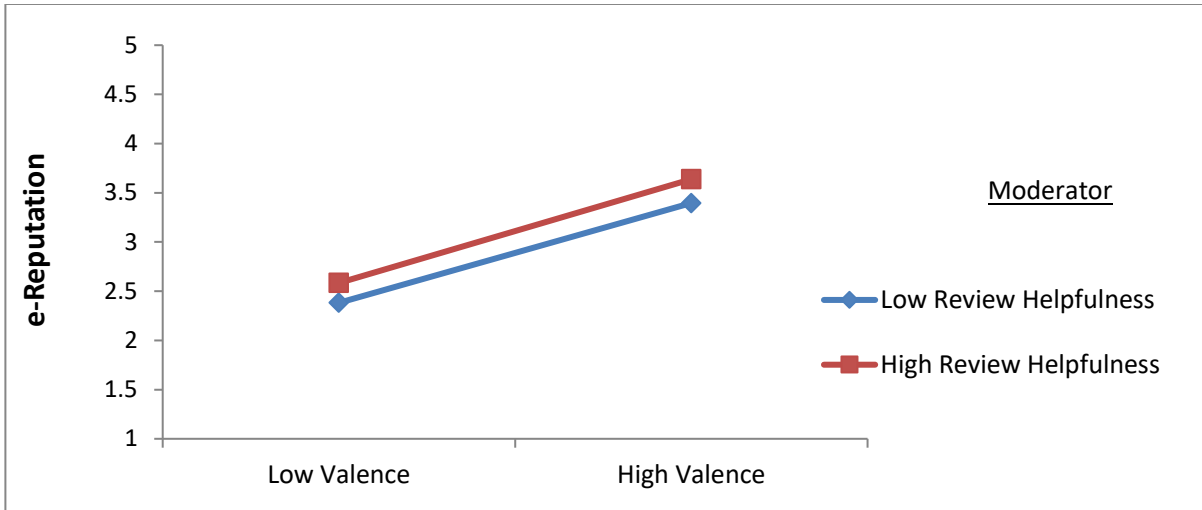


Figure 1: Interaction plot for the moderation of Review Helpfulness on the relationship between Valence and eReputation.
Source: Own compilation

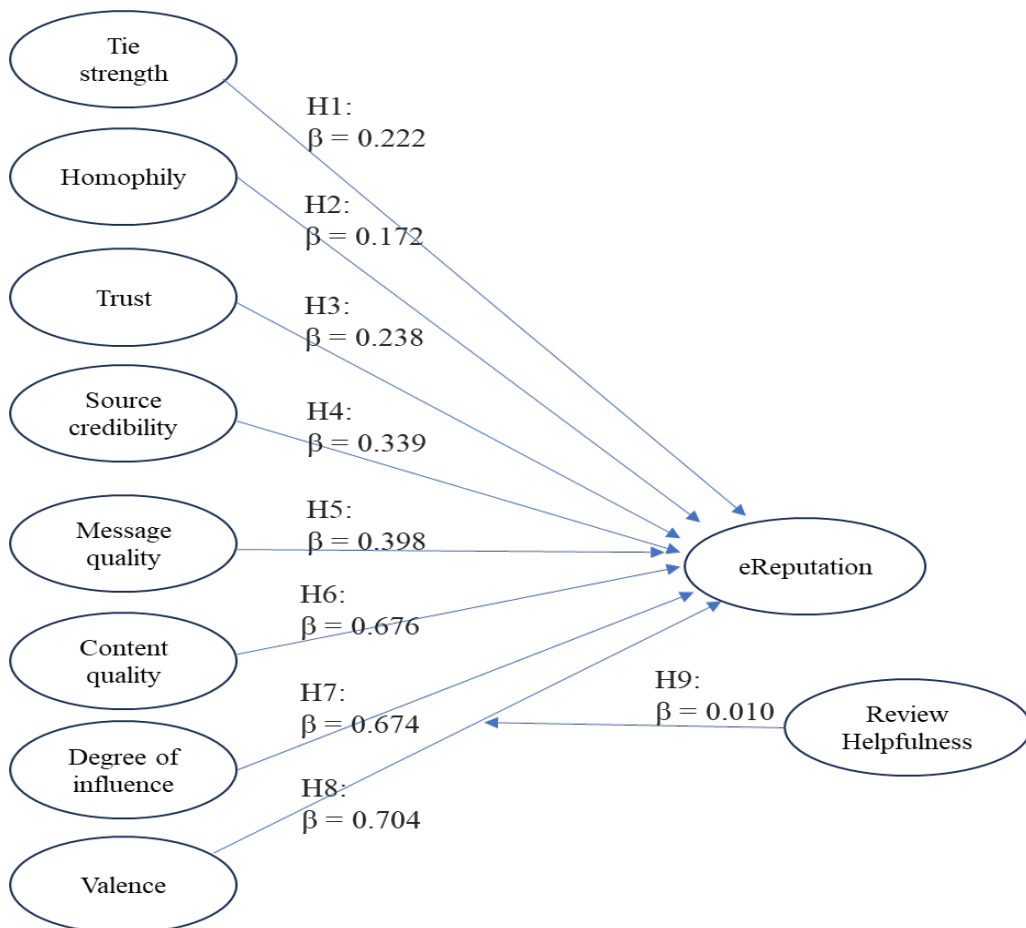


Figure 2: Conceptual model with beta value results
Source: Own construction

Figure 2 shows that all of the hypotheses could be accepted, and that valence had the strongest effect on eReputation, followed by content quality, degree of influence, and the moderating effect of review

helpfulness on the relationship between valence and eReputation.

5. Managerial implications and discussion

This study underscores the increasing attention given by scholars to online shopping as a result of its growing relevance in contemporary society. This study has emphasised the significance of users' engagement – specifically in an eWOM and review helpfulness context – when they use mobile shopping apps (Yakasai, Almunawar & Anshari, 2021).

The next section addresses the managerial implications of and recommendations from the key findings of this study.

Valence strongly predicts eReputation of shopping mobile applications

This research investigated the notion of valence, which is commonly seen as either the positive or the negative elements of emotion or of any emotional characteristic (Li et al., 2015). In the realm of eCommerce, valence positively influences a brand's eReputation, and it is the most powerful predictor among all the elements of the eWOM construct that this study tested. The lack of physical indications in online shopping highlights the importance of a customer's emotional response, whether positive or negative, in shaping a brand's reputation (Witvoet, 2019).

Consequently, nurturing positive emotions towards eCommerce/mCommerce applications and promoting favourable eWOM is a vital approach to enhancing a brand's digital reputation. Thus fostering positive consumer sentiment towards online shopping applications and encouraging positive eWOM becomes a critical strategy for improving a brand's online reputation. There are several strategies that retailer marketers and online shopping application developers could employ to enhance positive valence and foster a favourable eReputation. App developers could design apps that are easy to navigate, quick to load, and visually appealing. This would improve user experience and the likelihood of positive reviews. Strategies through which consumers could experience personalisation based on their user preferences and purchase history could enhance their perception of the app, leading to increased satisfaction.

Furthermore, excellent customer service would provide immediate help in solving any issues that users might encounter. This could greatly affect user sentiment towards the app and so contribute to positive eWOM. Retailers should take care that the products sold through the app are of a high quality and match the product description accurately, and that they avoid imposing hidden costs and fees, and so reduce the chances of negative reviews and enhance positive sentiment. Easy and secure payment options, together with prompt delivery, could ensure a smooth and secure payment process that contributes to positive user experiences.

Content quality strongly predicts eReputation of shopping mobile applications

To increase the content quality in shopping mobile applications, which strongly predicts eReputation, marketers should consider the following strategies. Include multiple high-resolution photos of each product

from different angles to help customers to see what they are purchasing, thus reducing the risks of disappointment or negative reviews. These images should be accompanied by detailed product descriptions, such as their functionality, and should provide avenues to answer any questions about the products or services, in order to reduce returns or negative feedback. Accompanying video content could be more engaging than static images and provide more comprehensive information about the products. Video content could be enhanced by augmented reality features that let customers visualise products in their own home or give them options to customise or personalise products.

Another strategy could include encouraging customers to share their own photos and experiences with products, as this would provide buyers with 'real-world' examples of the product and build a community around the brand. Linking with review helpfulness, customer reviews and testimonials are also content that could strongly impact eReputation, as it is viewed as more trustworthy and as unbiased. Good reviews would have little impact if the content were not updated regularly and if customers or potential customers could not find these reviews. Therefore, search engine optimisation should be integrated into any online strategy, as it would improve further the user's experience. The creation of content in South Africa specifically should mostly be localised, and include language options and content that is relevant to local tastes and customs.

Degree of influence strongly predicts eReputation of shopping mobile applications

Given the context of an online shopping application, marketers could use both normative and informational social influences to shape consumer behaviour and drive purchases. Normative influence strategies include social proof in displaying customer reviews, ratings, and testimonials. Customers align their behaviours with what is considered popular or the norm. If a product is well liked by others, customers might be more inclined to purchase it. Furthermore, brands could collaborate with influencers who align with the brand's values and have a significant following. In practical terms, brands should make it easy for users to share their purchase choices, listing their favourite items on their social networks. This action could spread awareness and create a social norm around using the specific app. Informational influence strategies could also include expert reviews and guides, educational content, Q&A sections, and community forums.

Expert reviews and guides incorporate content from industry experts who review products or provide shopping guides. Other informative content such as tutorials and how-to-use guides would aid as educational content. Q&A sections could include a feature that allows users to ask and answer questions about products. In community forums, users could share tips, advice, and experiences that provide a platform for other users to gain and share knowledge. Prominent displays of products' credentials, such as receiving awards or certifications, should be displayed prominently. This would demonstrate industry recognition and provide informational influence.

The importance of review helpfulness

Enhancing the helpfulness of reviews in an online shopping context could greatly increase customer trust and satisfaction, leading to higher sales and retention. Strategies to achieve this might include encouraging

customers to provide comprehensive and detailed reviews, and structuring reviews to cover different aspects of the product or service. Implementing a voting system to highlight helpful reviews, incentivising high-quality reviews with rewards, and promptly responding to all reviews could also foster trust. Moreover, creating a user-friendly interface for leaving and reading reviews, verifying the purchase status of reviewers, and allowing users to sort and filter reviews could make the review process more reliable and user-centric, thus boosting its overall helpfulness.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This research aimed to deepen our understanding of consumer behaviour in the mobile commerce market and to identify the factors predicting eReputation. Each hypothesised relationship was rigorously tested to yield reliable findings. The study's multiple regression analysis confirmed all of the hypotheses, signifying that all of the investigated constructs – tie strength, homophily, trust, source credibility, message quality, degree of influence, valence, and content quality – had a positive relationship with eReputation, the independent construct. Furthermore, although review helpfulness did not moderate the relationship between valence and eReputation, Review helpfulness amplified the positive link between Valence and eReputation. Positive reviews have a great impact on eReputation when deemed helpful. It is thus recommended that, in further research, the questionnaire be kept short to avoid having respondents who might not have the patience to fill it all in, leading to incorrect data being entered and possibly having a negative effect on the study's results.

The questionnaire's wording would need to be kept simple so that respondents would not have to search for certain words to gain an understanding before responding to the questionnaire. This research's findings should also yield increased insight and help organisations and brands to have a better understanding of how their consumers behave and what influences them. Online shopping platforms should build relationships with their consumers in order to earn their customers' trust in them and in the content provided on social platforms about their products or services. Trust is an important dimension that generates confidence and influences purchase behaviour, and trust is more likely to increase consumers' confidence. This study has shown that trust contributes significantly to eReputation. However, valence – followed by content quality and degree of influence – had the greatest predictive power in influencing positive eReputation.

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